The Good Life Study Guide

The Good Life by Scott Nearing

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Scott and Helen Nearing decide that they want to leave their New York lifestyle for the simpler life—what they call the "Good Life"—in rural Vermont. They put their hearts and souls into the endeavor, spending a great deal of time and energy creating a farming operation of which they are proud. They study and learn along the way, constructing the necessary buildings of stone and establishing good gardening practices that result in their ability to grow the majority of their food. As they search for a way to make the cash necessary to pay for those things they cannot raise or barter for, they discover the art of making syrup from trees on their property. Over the years, they earn enough money to expand their farm, establish themselves firmly in the syrup industry so that they are able to pay taxes, buy gas for their car and outlay the cash for cement and other building supplies unavailable from their land.

During their years in Vermont, they also seek to establish a cooperative community base from which the entire community will benefit. A sawmill, syrup packaging and other enterprises are on the minds of Scott and Helen Nearing, but the community never fully comes on board and the efforts all fall by the wayside. As their farm continues to develop, the Nearings find themselves in the middle of an effort to develop a ski resort in the region and their farm comes to the attention of many of the vacationers. As the visitors multiply, Helen and Scott come to the conclusion that they must move to another, more remote area that has not yet fallen victim to the tourist industry. They choose Maine and move onto a rundown farm to start over in 1952. Here they learn that blueberries can be a cash crop and, against professional advice, introduce hybrids that fund the necessities that the Nearings cannot produce for themselves, such as gas for their car.

Over the next decades, the couple plans and executes a series of building projects that include a house built of stone and a pond built on a large, swampy section of land using only hand tools and manual labor. There are some visitors who want to learn about their way of life and the Nearings help those who seem earnest in their quest for knowledge.

Through it all, their personal desire for new knowledge and their belief that their work should benefit more than just themselves drives the Nearings to greater heights. As they pass retirement age, they continue their work and their healthy lifestyles, choosing vegetables fresh from their gardens over processed foods, avoiding caffeine, tobacco and other drugs, and living as if they expect good health.

The Good Life, Chapters One through Three

The Good Life, Chapters One through Three Summary and Analysis

In chapter one, "Search for the Good Life," the authors point out their reasons for choosing to live the simple life. Questions posed before making the final step included whether age was a factor and if it was possible to make a living. An important question, according to the Nearings, is how they will react to the work of a farm and whether they will come to feel that this is just another form of "drudgery" as they have come to feel about their lives as members of the workforce. However, it is made clear that the ultimate goal is not to escape life altogether but to find a different life that will be rewarding. It is also noted that they want a life that will afford the chance to pursue more fulfilling pastimes. The Nearings refer to this as "the good life." The aims of their move include the pursuit of this "good life," to make a living and to have leisure time. They consider and reject several options, including living abroad, but choose to live in New England because the land is pretty, believe the changing of seasons to be a positive point and like the people.

The Nearings find a "run-down farm" in Winhall, Vermont, known as the Ellonen Place after the former owner, Peter Ellonen, a Finn, through real estate agent L.P. Martin. For some time, the Nearings continue to live in the city and work at their jobs, but then make the move so that they are no longer "summer residents" but join the citizens who live there year round. They soon buy a strip of land belonging to Mary Hoard, a widow who, with the one son remaining at home, is trying to keep the farm going. On that farm sugar bush are being farmed time by a neighbor, Floyd Hurd, his wife Zoe and several of their eleven children. The Nearings discover that the syrup is a ready source of cash during the summer tourist season and come up with their first real plan for a solid financial footing for their farming enterprise. They cite the fact that they have now answered two of their three questions: where to live "the good life" and how to finance it, and are now left with only the question of how they are to live it.

In chapter two, the Nearings set down in words their formula for how they are to live this "good life." The points make up a ten-year plan and include the idea that they want to be self-sufficient without becoming slaves to the need for more money. Toward that end, they use their syrup as a means of bartering when possible, sending their product to a network of people in other parts of the country in return for goods such as walnuts, olive oil and raisins. They continue to sell the syrup and set prices based on what they would be paid in "day wages" for the production process. Other points include their refusal to take out loans to pay for anything, keeping no animals, and building of native stone rather than renovating existing buildings. They also decide that they will not sell garden produce as long as the syrup is sufficient for their needs, but will instead share with

neighbors any excess from the garden. When they need gravel, they buy a prime piece of land with gravel available, build and sell part of it and retain the rest for their personal use as well as selling gravel to others.

The author talks about the role of visitors to the Forest Farm. None are merely guests but are called on to help with the chores based on the length of their stay. The rule of the farm is that for every four hours of "bread labor," the laborer "earns" four hours to do with whatever he wants. The author says this might be a walk in the woods, a time sitting in the sunshine or a trip to town. The same principle applies to vacations with equal time spent on work as away from it.

The Nearings plan to build their permanent home on the property they buy from the Hoards and decide to use stone because it is native to the area, readily available, blends in, needs little maintenance, will not burn, and retains suitable temperature better. They build first a stone lumber shed with the help of a visitor, Alex Crosby, though they encounter a shelf of rocks in the foundation of the structure. They encounter several problems as they begin building their house, including tree roots that are in the way and have to be dug out by hand, a spring that provides a water supply but has to be routed so that the excess water is not a problem to the structure, and have to haul in stone to provide a place for a gravel truck to turn around on the property. They use forms, an innovation of architect Ernest Flagg, to hold stones in place while the concrete sets. They make discoveries during their work, such as the problem that arises when a stone sticks out above the form. The author says someone has to take time to level it, which is costly in time and in the integrity of the wall. They plan to equip every room with a fireplace because of their love for a view of the open flames but use a metal insert to help distribute more of the heat into the room rather than up the chimney. They choose metal for the roof so that snow will slide off more quickly and choose a low roof rather than the typical high roofs of the region. It takes "four summers of interesting, instructive and rewarding work" for the house to be ready for habitation. The chapter closes with a thank-you to those who helped on the various building projects, including the inanimate stones, gravel pit and pickup trucks. The author says that he believes anyone with a reasonable level of intelligence and the patience to do so can build with stone.

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It is important that the reader remember that the decision by the Nearings to move into the rural area of Vermont is preceded by the collapse of the American financial system. The Great Depression impacts the way the Nearings handle their affairs. For example, they do not finance any purchases. They do buy some land but only what they can pay for with cash on hand.

The author gets into some social issues. For example, it is pointed out that the people of Winhall, Vermont, have begun to fall victim to the people who seek to change their way of life through the introduction of consumer goods. He says that the producers of these goods offer them in stores and the people naturally begin the change to consumers rather than producers. He says that the people who have traditionally produced most of what the family needs begin working at jobs in an effort to earn money so that they can

then use that money to purchase the goods they need and want. Nearing talks of this in a negative way, saying it is "parasitic" rather than productive.

The author points out that these ideas for their ten-year plan were not merely things they had in mind, but were actually put down in writing in a card catalog. While the plan was fluid and changed over the years as their needs changed, the Nearings use their plan to run their "homestead" as a business would be run. They go so far as to make lists of tasks to be accomplished on certain days, including rainy-day chores. They are also very organized in their handling of tools and the author describes in detail the way tools are placed on the walls and that all are oiled, cleaned and put away when not in use. They not only prolong the life of each tool which saves money but also know immediately where to find what is needed. The Nearings point out that the neighbors know of the Nearings' stock of tools and borrow often.

The Nearings are a bit peculiar in the eyes of their neighbors because they set routines and schedules while their neighbors tend to tackle chores when the mood strikes them. While there are deviations from the routine at the Nearings' farm, the author points out that productivity is high and that the routine works for them. Another point he makes is that there is a tendency among some, including a visitor named Jacob Aspel, to continue working in the afternoons—a time set aside for personal enjoyment. Some people have to learn the benefits of this time off.

Chapter three includes detailed descriptions of how the stone buildings are constructed. The methodology as well as their reasons for making specific decisions is discussed in detail. The chapter also includes measurements of the buildings and how the chimney mantles are constructed. This level of detail might become tedious for the casual reader because in many places the book reads more like a "how to" manual than the story of the Nearings and their farming enterprise.

The Good Life, Chapters Four though Six

The Good Life, Chapters Four though Six Summary and Analysis

In chapter four, "Our Good Earth," the author says that their food supply remains a major concern and at the center of many of their endeavors but the climate, slope of the ground available for gardening and poor soil are immediate problems to deal with. The author writes that they get a great deal of advice from neighbors but also pull from their knowledge of farming in other areas, even from other countries. With that knowledge, they begin a series of terraces and carefully create compost piles, using those and quality top soils hauled from other parts of their land to build up the land. The result is an increase in productivity. They also focus on placement, realizing that a slightly higher elevation sometimes sloughs off the cold air more quickly than their vegetable patch near their kitchen.

The rows of the garden run north and south with irrigation ditches and watering tanks for transplanting plants and for use during dry spells. Among their objectives is to have a ready supply of fresh food and to avoid canning and processing foods when possible. They achieve these things and the author notes that they tend to eat whatever is in season as it becomes available but do not buy things that are not in season. They grow some spring vegetables such as lettuce and radishes earlier than would otherwise have been possible by use of "cold frames" made of lumber and windows and extend the traditional growing season by use of a greenhouse that uses solar heat which allows them to have lettuce throughout the winter months. The author says that they have particularly good success with a raspberry patch in which sawdust is used as a mulch to keep the weeds at bay. They use a similar practice of mulching in the garden plots and say this really helps with their sweet pea production in the early spring. The chapter ends with the adage that one reaps what is sown, and the author says that the garden is a perfect example of that.

In chapter five, "Eating for Health," the author says that both Scott and Helen Nearing are in good health when they begai their lives in Vermont. It is noted that the best foods for the body are grown in healthy soil, are "unprocessed and garden fresh" because processing changes the makeup and "drives off vitamins." In an effort to keep fresh vegetables for year-round consumption, the Nearings build a root cellar. The author then describes their simplified methods for canning fruit juice, applesauce and soup stock before citing the negatives of eating meat, which include "holding animals in bondage" and "slaughtering them for food." The author says they have a formula for their diet, looking to consume half of their daily intake in the form of fruit and "thirty-five percent vegetables," mixing in some starches, protein and fat for the remainder. He says a breakfast consists of fruit, whatever may be in season. Suppers were usually

picked from the garden, shortly before mealtime, and served raw with an array of lemon and lime juice and olive oil. Through all these practices, the ultimate end is a transferring of the focus of life away from the regimented for-profit jobs and back to the land.

In chapter six, "Rounding out a Livelihood," the author describes society's expectations that an adult will work and the tendency to live a life in which trades the money earned for food and other items becoming the only recourse. The Nearings could have chosen to do so but choose not to. He points out that their purpose in living in Vermont was never to gain goods but to produce what they needed in order to live comfortably. They buy little, use furniture constructed themselves, do not purchase tea, coffee, alcohol, soft drinks or candy, and say they do not feel deprived but are liberated. The authors note that there are some squalid and run-down farms in their area of Vermont and that the farms all reflect the attitudes of the adults—whether they are willing to work at keeping the place looking good or are content to get through the days with no plans for upkeep or improvement.

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Nearing talks about the reason soil in some places has become so depleted that crops yield little, if any, produce. As a way of comparing this, he points out that a forest floor is prime soil because of the matter that is introduced to the soil that makes it richer while a garden plot has nutrients removed that are never replaced. Nearing says compost is a way to combat this. He goes into some detail about the definition of compost and the best way to create and maintain a compost pile. This is an example of the Nearings' dedication to education and shows their willingness to follow the advice of others who are more knowledgeable on particular subjects. They take this same tactic on many subjects, including their building enterprises. In the case of the garden composts, they draw from several books, however the author points out that they did not use any one book as a rule but rather took what the authors wrote as a series of guidelines to be put into practice as a plan that was workable and practical for the Nearing's needs.

Nearing is obviously a believer in the health value of whole and unproce3ssed foods. He says that the processing of flour and sugar makes a great difference in the nutritional value of those foods and that the person who consumes these foods actually harms their intestinal health. This attitude goes on to include the use of chemicals, colors and preservatives. The author then focuses on the use of pesticides and other chemicals in the production of food and says that he believes that many people may not realize the harmful chemicals that they may be ingesting. Nearing goes on to say that the effect is devastating, resulting in poor health and debilitating diseases. The Nearings say that their personal reaction to the poor practices of the food industry is to grow their own food and says that many other people could produce at least some of their own food as well.

For the second time, the authors talk about the fact that they are somewhat unusual in their neighborhood because of their dedication to a systematic approach to the farming life they have chosen. This could be a sign that the Nearings are almost ostracized

because of their choices and attitudes. It is left to the reader to decide the significance. Another important aspect of this topic is that the author says a system of bookkeeping is vital to the long-term success of the farm and that there is little of this happening on the native farms. The author has the advantage of education and travel while many of these neighbors were probably born and raised in the area without the advantage of having experienced the ideas of others.

The Good Life, Chapters Seven and Eight

The Good Life, Chapters Seven and Eight Summary and Analysis

In chapter seven, "Living in a Community," the Nearings are not really certain whether they will be accepted into the community. The author says that there are lengthy and heated discussions regarding their diet and that the result is that no one—including the Nearings—change their habits or opinions. Though the Nearings believe cooperative efforts such as sawmills and nurseries would benefit the community, there is little long-term and practical interest in the ideas. The author says there are limited incidents of cooperative endeavors and none that last. There are regular endeavors to gather for recreation that are more successful, a point the author puts down to the fact that these have none of the organizational feel of the work enterprises. Attempts at holding meetings to discuss ideas and community goals are met with suspicion, a situation that increases as the area moves toward World War II, the cold war and the war in Korea.

A man named Norman Williams arrives in the region and urges that discussion groups be dropped in favor of events that would draw the entire membership of the community on the premise that this is the only way to start a true community enterprise. Norman purchases and donates land for a community center and dances are held on Saturday nights. The author points out that there are still people who do not attend and that some bring in alcohol. The author says that the issue of allowing—or disallowing—alcohol becomes a major source of contention and the community center is disbanded. At another point, the Nearings begin a Sunday morning musical hour which is a bigger success, typically ending with a time of visiting and the Nearings sharing their produce and flowers with the guests.

During World War II, with gasoline being rationed and most of the young men overseas, the rural mail route is canceled. A community effort to get the mail route back earns the attention of some regional newspapers and the route is restarted after a series of meetings. The author notes this is one time the entire community comes together and that it garners results.

In chapter eight, "A Balance Sheet of the Vermont Project," the author says they have been asked how they chose to live their lives and how they justify the decision when others are forced to live in city slums. He says every person is responsible for making day-to-day choices, such as what to do with leisure time, and that every person has a responsibility to live their best in their circumstances. He says that if he were given the opportunity to start the entire project over again, he would do so.

The author then describes the myriad of visitors, including those who believe the Nearings less than cordial because they go about their daily routines regardless of who

is there. Those who want to lie around and be waited on leave quickly as do those incapable of helping for whatever reason. Those who do fit in well usually have other commitments which mean they do not have the opportunity to remain long. He says that a larger community of adults working toward the same goals would have made the work less arduous. There is no obvious police presence and the only real requirements are to pay the taxes, obey the laws when traveling on the nearby state highways and those rules imposed by each family and individual upon themselves and their own units. The author completes the chapter by noting that their efforts to create changes in the social network are not successful but that their personal endeavors toward their own goals are ultimately so.

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The author talks about his personal desire to establish a cooperative community but says there is little interest from the community. He says that an ideal to him would be to establish a community-based sawmill, machine shop and syrup packing house, sharing equally in the work to establish these and in their use. Their idea is a utopian society of sorts where everyone believes in the same principles and all are willing to do their share of the work. The problem is that people have a tendency to work at things that directly benefit them rather than those things that benefit an entire community. This idea works only when the community members are like-minded and have similar goals and interests. The author says that various young people come for visits of varying lengths. Many of these say they believe in the idea of a cooperative but they do not ever put their energies into making anything happen in that direction.

One of the limits of the Nearing's farming enterprise is that there is no way for parents to save the money that would be necessary to send a child away for a private education or to send a young person to medical school or for some other expensive training.

Continuing the Good LIfe, Chapters One through Four

Continuing the Good LIfe, Chapters One through Four Summary and Analysis

In 1952, the Nearings move to Harborside, Maine, and the story of this endeavor is presented in part two of the book, titled, "Continuing the Good Life." The Introduction, "Homesteading as a productive avocation," describes the similarities of the two projects, including the dilapidated state of the farms they purchase. The author notes that a visitor poses the question of what they do for pleasure and that their answer is that all their endeavors are satisfying, and that if they cease to be so they will change. It is noted that both Scott and Helen are "past the point of customary retirement," but want to remain active.

In chapter one, "We Move, Bag and Baggage, to Maine," the author describes the change of the region as developers establish ski resorts, making the "nest" less desirable to the Nearings. When visitors become the norm and there are too many vacationers for their comfort, the Nearings decide to move. They spend some time with friends who are organic gardeners, search for awhile and find a place that is rundown and neglected, owned by a woman on her own named Mary Stackhouse who had literally been drafting an advertisement for the place. They sell their own farm to a man and stay on for one last sugaring season to help the new owner.

In chapter two, "Spring and Summer Gardening," the author describes the first Maine garden which includes an incident in which the birds wreak havoc on the young garden and prompt a change in mulching methods. The saying that "nothing is certain except death and taxes" is modified by the author to include that almost every beet seed and almost every onion seed will produce. By running rows north and south, the plants will get a maximum amount of sunlight. Like-sized plants should generally be grouped together. The Nearings keep a notebook with details on the successes and failures of the gardening season for use in future plantings. Peas, a staple of the garden, are grown on stakes or trellises and the discarded brush of the pea vines are used for kindling. Side dressing or mulching, proactive weed control and careful monitoring for watering are also necessary for success.

In chapter three, "The Fall Garden," the author describes their careful use of land so that whenever a bed or row of a particular crop is harvested, something else is planted in its place. The replacement crops are chosen in such a way that they will have time to mature prior to the rigors of winter. The author points out that most fall gardens in the region are dying in the fall and dead in the winter, but that their own is thriving with young greens. On cold nights, a layer of limbs is used as protection against the weather. The author says that there is an inevitable end to the growing season and their goal is to delay that as much as is possible with what is available. Meanwhile, experiments

continue to make the garden produce hardier plants that will grow through a longer season.

In chapter four, "Wintertime Gardening," the author describes the use of glass frames as a way to make plants productive throughout the winter months. The greenhouse in Maine is built of stone and concrete with cedar timbers, and window sash for the south and west walls. Window glass is used for the roof. The greenhouse tends to be some twenty degrees warmer than the outside on overcast days and some forty degrees warmer on sunny days. Of the options for greenhouses, the Nearings propose and build a permanent structure though they say there are some proponents of other types of greenhouses, such as the "pit" in which a pit is dug as the floor of the greenhouse, putting it below the level of the rest of the garden. The author warns that drainage can become a problem in this endeavor. Another option is a heated greenhouse though the author says they prefer to depend on solar power than on the fuel companies.

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It is noted that for a time, Helen withstands the rigors of dealing with visitors but when it becomes too much for her, she begins sending them into Scott's haven, a ploy that prompts Scott to agree with Helen's decision that it is time to move from the now-crowded and well-traveled region of Vermont.

The author notes that a plastic greenhouse can be constructed much more cheaply than a glass greenhouse but that they had personally found no plastic they felt would be durable enough over the long-term to serve their purposes. This seems typical of their actions in that they weigh the options and look toward long-term efficiency. What is interesting in projects such as this is that they take an idea and put the time and energy into making this project a worthwhile, long-term investment, seeming to refuse to consider the idea that the greenhouse might not work out to their advantage. It seems that they have an advantage on this front because many who set out on such endeavors would tend to try a smaller scale or to build something less expensive and time consuming with the idea that they want to be certain it will work out. This difference in itself is a recipe for failure that the Nearings avoid, though at a cost in time, materials and labor. Nonetheless, it is an investment that seems to pay off for them.

The Good Life Continues, Chapters Five through Ten

The Good Life Continues, Chapters Five through Ten Summary and Analysis

In chapter five, "Winter Storage," the author describes their method of winter storage whereby they leave some of the hardiest plants in the ground into the winter months, mulching as necessary. There is a tendency to have cellars in most home places, sometimes under the house, but the author warns that if the heat source is located in the cellar, it becomes unsuitable for food storage because of the heat. What is stored is periodically examined for signs of rot. Soup stock consisting of tomatoes, onions, celery and parsley is canned as well as some fruits and juices, though the canning is kept to a minimum and is described as simple and casual. Though they care little for electric lighting and other electric gadgets, they find that they like having an electric freezer for food storage. Drying is another alternative for storing though the Nearings do not use this much except in the case of herbs, preferring to use what is in season and canning some necessities.

In chapter six, "Building the Soil with Compost," the author turns his attention to the soil, explaining that the topsoil contains the majority of the nutrients and that the use of compost can enhance the production of plants. The description of the compost piles are detailed and include the fact that there should be both horizontal and vertical drains. The completed compost material is used on the gardens and takes the place of both commercial fertilizer and animal waste. In the case of the Nearings, who are vegetarians, the lack of animal waste or bone meal is undesirable. The Nearing's garden in Maine is initially broken up by a neighbor because the high clay content makes it very hard. The man who plows predicts that the garden will never produce but the Nearings, after twenty-five years, have an excellent garden because of the introduction of compost and careful tilling over the years.

In chapter seven, "Water for House, Garden, and a Pond," the Nearings say the previous owner of the farm in Maine, Mary Stackhouse, shows them a spring that feeds water into the house by gravity. While that is wonderful, the Nearings also want a pond for swimming in the summer, watering the garden and ice skating in winter. There is a low-lying plot of land suitable for the endeavor and they propose to build the pond by hand. The trees and brush from the project are piled into a low-lying area and eventually rot down to ground level, effectively filling that plot. The pond includes a dam for an emergency spillway with work done by a group of people who help with the work. It is noted that the dam leaks occasionally and that Scott is reassured by engineers who say there is really no such thing as a dam that does not leak at all. It is noted that over a twenty-five year period, the pond project is still ongoing with continuous enlarging, expanding and improving as part of the project.

In chapter eight, "Our Cash Crop: Blueberries," the author describes the methods and reasons for this endeavor. The reason is that there is a need for some cash to pay for necessities, such as clothes, gas for their car and taxes. In Vermont, the Nearings sell syrup to earn the cash they need. In Maine, they decide on blueberries, specifically selected to endure the short growing seasons. In Hancock County, where the Nearings live, there are a number of blueberry farms and though they are advised that hybrids will not grow, they choose a few plants for their gardens before planting on a larger scale. Soybean meal is used to feed the plants. The Nearings pick what they sell, calling the chore enjoyable. When a buyer asks if they would be cheaper if she picks for herself, Helen replies that the cost should be higher because the picker will eat so many. The advantage of the hybrids over the wild varieties is that there is never a need to burn over the crops, meaning the plants yield year after year.

In chapter nine, "Tree Crops in Maine," the author notes that the area is good for fruit trees and they tend to use any volunteer tree that seems promising. Trees are, according to the Nearings, a good crop for many areas where farming and gardening are overly difficult. Areas that require mowing are done by hand unless a neighbor with a mower is available for hire. The author notes that they regret any land they have to clear and that the forests of the area are ultimately tenacious so that it is next to impossible to keep the trees at bay. Left to itself, the forests will take over an area of land.

In chapter ten, "Wood for Fuel," Scot describes the relief of spending some time splitting wood for a friend in England, Gordon Latto. After the hours cooped up on a plane and in a hotel room, Scott is relieved at the manual labor.

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There is a very casual reference to the fact that the Nearings go on a "transcontinental tour" that takes them from the farm for four months one winter. The story that is told indicates that there is a mouse that gets in their cellar and eats an entire crop of apples, save one. There is no more mention at this point about their tours but it is interesting that they talk at such lengths about their lives at the farm but barely mention this other side of their lives.

The Nearings tell the story of visiting a farm at which there was an extensive composting project, though the gardener offering advice had suggested dividing the weeds thrown into the compost with only some varieties being used and the rest being thrown in a large trench. By the time of the Nearings visit, the trenched material has become excellent mulch. The purpose of his telling this story seems to be that he is anxious for people to realize that their own observations and common sense should be taken into account with the advice of the experts.

As is the case in many aspects of life described by the Nearings, the use of wood as firewood is an extensive and detailed description. From choosing the wood to be used to encouraging the use of what would otherwise be scrapped, the details include how to dry wood and the amount the Nearings expect to use in a given season. Storage is

done "teepee style" to discourage dampness. There is also a detailed instruction of how the woodshed is constructed. Finally, they describe the use of "faggots," or small burnable pieces, used in the methods common to Europe where wood is scarce. The Nearings tend to use twigs and branches bound together by grass, vines or string either as kindling or as fuel for the fire. This practice is similar to the ideas the Nearings put into place in other aspects of their lives, using things that would otherwise be thrown away.

Continuing the Good LIfe, Chapters Eleven through Eighteen

Continuing the Good LIfe, Chapters Eleven through Eighteen Summary and Analysis

In chapter eleven, "Stone Walls Versus Wire Fences," the Nearings describe several incidents in which they face shortages of particular foods and other products because of the animals that forage on their plants. An example is Rugosas and their own endeavors on this front are so successful that they help a neighbor, Eliot Coleman, establish his own Rugosas plantation. However, then the deer discover the Nearings' patch and they come to the reluctant conclusion that they must use fences to keep the animals away from specific areas. They use wire fencing in some places but discover an army of slugs working on a bed of greens are effectively eliminated by the use of a stone fence instead of the wire. Other arguments made for the stone wall rather than wire are that it looks better, is made by the property owner and lasts longer. They begin a garden wall project of stone from their property that lasts for years.

In chapter twelve, "Building Stone Structures," the author describes the stones in Maine and says the plentiful supply makes rock buildings a cost effective option as it had been in Vermont. One of the first projects is an outhouse which the author points out as a necessary building when other facilities are not available. They choose the site for the outhouse carefully and use either sawdust or wood dirt to absorb moisture which results in a lack of odor. Another project is a "garage-workshop-storeroom" which the author says is necessary for the storage of lumber, which is not readily available. As they prepare to build their new home after several of the smaller buildings are complete, they find Bretton Brubaker to be a master at cabinet making and he agrees to take on that part of their project. Brett finds an old mill being dismantled and helps prepare lumber from a building there for use in the Nearings' new home.

Chapter thirteen is titled "Remodeling Old Wooden Buildings: Don't!" The chapter is dedicated to the problems a person is likely to face if they undertake a project of this kind, citing the cost which is probably about the same as building from scratch and the "clash" which results when new features are added to an old building.

In chapter fourteen, "Plans, Records, and Budgeting," the author describes the need for accurate record keeping in all aspects of the farming life, including gardening. As an example, the details of a farming endeavor is used to plan subsequent seasons and rotation of crops can be scheduled so that there is never a doubt as to when this should occur. Tracking planting dates is also helpful. Finally, the author talks about the need for accurate financial records so that expenses are covered as they occur, and he notes that even a small business enterprise should have complete and accurate records.

In chapter fifteen, "Visitors and Helpers," the author notes that those who come for a visit are usually those who are looking for alternatives to the worldly dependence on the global economic system as well as a refusal to support the world that endorses war. The Nearings sell off several swatches of land to the young people they encounter who seem promising and take in many others as visitors who want to learn from the Nearings and have an opportunity to put that knowledge into practice elsewhere. While the Nearings say they would like to help the young people as much as possible, they note that they are "nearing the century mark" in age and have been forced to limit their own activities.

In chapter sixteen, "What We Eat and Why," the author describes their reasons for choosing the healthy foods grown at home over processed foods and those shipped from other growers. They note that the avoid processed sugars, using natural sweeteners such as honey instead, and that they do not eat meat, choosing fresh vegetables and fruits whenever possible over even that canned or frozen by their own hands.

In chapter seventeen, "We Practice Health," the author says that they have always lived as if they were going to be healthy and have never had a "family doctor," calling that an expectation that the doctor would be needed. The choices to be healthy are, according to the author, just that—choices. The choices made by the Nearings mean they have distanced themselves from the common practices of friends and family, and they say it is not always easy or even clear-cut. Finally, the author points out that it is often easy for a person without their personal guidelines to simply go with whatever the crowd is doing and that there are essentials other than food necessary for good health. These include shelter, exercise, sunshine, adequate clothing and proactive attitudes.

In chapter eighting, "A Rewarding Way to Live," the author explains the "four-four-four" philosophy in which four hours each day is spent on "bread labor" or earning the livelihood, four hours on personal pursuits and four hours on activities that better the human race in some way. The author points out that bread labor should be an activity to which all are dedicated and that it benefits both an individual and a group. The author points out the accomplishments of both Scott and Helen that were possible only because of their endeavors, and adds that there was never a time when the two of them stopped, said they had learned all that was necessary about their homesteading practices, and were willing to stop their work. They conclude the chapter—and the book—with the note that anyone they have helped has returned the favor in labor and other enrichment.

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While there are not many aspects of the story in which one or the other of the Nearings are named as specifically involved or as handling a particular job, the stone laying is an exception. The "master mason" is actually Helen Nearing who it is said insists that she personally handle the stone work on their building projects and who designs the house and its furnishings. When there are extra hands on the farm to help with the work during a stone building project, someone is usually assigned the task of keeping Helen

supplied with the rocks for building. It is noted that Brett Brubaker handles all the wood himself, in much the same way as Helen does the stonework. An interesting point is made when it is said that "Scott is allowed" to mix and deliver wheelbarrow loads of concrete for the project, but that the project of building the house is really the work of Helen and Brett.

An interesting note about the Nearings and their attitudes about visitors is that they do not stop what they are doing for unannounced and unexpected guests. While this may seem inhospitable, they note that it is necessary for their lifestyle to do what they plan at the planned time. It also seems an effective way of discouraging those who are interested only in hearing the stories the Nearings have to tell though the author notes that some people find it rude.

Characters

Scott Nearing

One of the authors and the husband of the cooperative family unit that farms first in Vermont and later in Maine. Scott is a dedicated person with some definite ideas about what makes up this "good life" he is seeking. He is also very different from what many would consider the "normal man" of the period, preferring to live a life away from the materialistic world in which many people are caught up. Scott instead believes that a life free of materialistic or worldly possessions is preferable. One of his main goals in the establishment of the Vermont farm is to escape the financial aspects of the outside world in which most people are dependent on wage jobs in order to provide basic necessities. Instead, he seeks to make the farm as self-sufficient as possible with an ultimate goal of being able to survive. This seems reasonable considering the world is just coming out of the rigors of the Great Depression as the Nearings purchase and begin work on their first farm. Scott is obviously an educated man and believes in referencing the works of others. He indicates that many of his decisions are based on books and advice proffered by other people. Nonetheless, he seems to also greatly rely on his own common sense, judgment and observations. In many cases, he puts aside that advice and does what he believes to be best, admitting that in some cases the advice was correct.

Helen Nearing

The co-author of the book and the wife of the team that sets up a self-sufficient farm in Vermont and later in Maine. Helen is a self-sufficient person in her own right and it seems that Scott allows or even encourages this, despite the fact that the couple begin their farm in Vermont during an age when women are largely confined to domestic roles, usually in their own homes. Helen is referred to as the "master mason" and it is said that she personally designs and oversees the building of their house in Maine. Whether it is a hint of humor or a slight jab at the domineering ways of Helen, it is also noted that Scott is "allowed" to handle wheelbarrow loads of cement for the project. It is not explained exactly what Helen does prior to the endeavors on the farm, but it is noted that both Scott and Helen taught at various times and both were well-traveled. Helen seems to be a fully cooperating member of this family unit team. An interesting point about Helen is that when their Vermont farm becomes a focus of tourist attention because of the development of a nearby ski resort, it is Helen who first insists that it is time to find a new home. Whether Scott disagrees or Helen simply sees a way to make the decision an immediate concern is unclear, but Helen stops taking over the duty of greeting and dealing with those uninvited guests, sending them instead to visit with Scott regardless of what activity he is involved in, which seems to prompt his agreement to seek a new place for their home.

L.P. Martin

The real estate agent who sells the Nearings their farm in Vermont.

Peter Ellonen

A Finn and the man who owned the farm in Vermont prior to the Nearings. It is noted that he died in an accident and that the farm had become rundown under the direction of his widow.

Ernest Flagg

The New York architect who is credited with designing the forms used by the Nearings in their stone and concrete construction projects.

Floyd Hurd

Born in Vermont and part Indian, the authors say he can "smell a coming frost."

Jack Lightfoot

Another of the Nearings' neighbors, Lightfoot has lived in the area for some thirty-five years and offers up a great deal of advice about planting and choosing a spot for their garden.

Norman Williams

A man who arrives in the area with the idea that a true community can only exist if the entire membership of that community is willing to gather. Toward that end, Norm buys and donates land to be used as a community center and urges that community events be planned with an eye toward encouraging participation by all.

Jacob Aspel

A man who spends some time at the Nearings' Vermont farm and who fails to understand the need to take time off for personal pursuits. The author notes that it takes some time for this man to realize the positive impact of time away from the bread labor, but that he eventually does.

Mary Stackhouse

The woman who sells the Maine farm to the Nearings. It is noted that she had been drafting a notice of the property for sale when she is contacted by the Nearings through a common acquaintance.

Objects/Places

New York

Where the Nearings live when they decide to seek the "good life" in Vermont.

Winhall, Vermont

Where the Nearing's first farm is located.

Jamaica, Vermont

The town near where the Nearings buy a farm.

Pike Falls, Vermont

The town seven miles from the Nearings' homestead.

The Ellonen Place

The name of the house where the Nearings set up their farming enterprise, named for the former owner.

Forest Farm

The name of one of the farms bought by the Nearings.

Harborside, Maine

Where the Nearings take up homesteading in 1952.

Compost

A purposeful piling of clippings and other organic refuse that eventually breaks down and is used to improve the quality of soil for growing plants.

The Good Life

Described by the author as a way of life in which the participants are not tied to "bread labor" in order to purchase both necessities and those things that are useless but marketed as necessary, this is a lifestyle by which the participants have a period of time to devote to helping their fellow man and to pursuits of personal interest.

Bread Labor

The labor by which a person lives, usually involving building, gardening and similar projects on the Nearings' farms.

Themes

Independence from a World Economy

The Nearings make their change in lifestyle soon after the Great Depression. They note that the decision is made because of their desire to free themselves from the world's financial system so that they are dependent on themselves rather than on the world's dependence on money as a way of achieving and attaining goods. Toward this end, they buy a rundown farm in Vermont and set out to make it an independent enterprise that will provide them food and shelter. It is because of their desire to live this lifestyle that they are willing to make the choices that make their life possible. Their lives are filled with work, but these chores are largely aimed at self-sufficiency. For example, they choose to grow their own vegetables and to build whenever possible with materials at hand rather than buying those things. Another point made by the Nearings is that there are a great many items bought by consumers that are not necessary for a healthy, happy life, but that effective marketing convinces people they need. The Nearings purposely choose what is necessary for their lives but avoid those things that are not. This quest for independence is among the main factors that make the Nearings choose their life in Vermont and that prompts them to move again to Maine.

Self-Fulfillment

Scott and Helen believe in the need for self-fulfillment as evidenced by their "four-four-four" philosophy. They believed that for every four hours of labor spent earning the sustaining lifestyle they seek, there should be four hours spent in the pursuit of one's choice and four hours in the betterment of man. When a visitor poses the question of what the couple does for fun, they respond that all their daily activities are fulfilling, and that if that were not the case, they would change something to make it seem so. It seems likely that the pair is pleased with the completion of a job well done and with the order of their lives. They dictate daily activities which would be a constraint some could not stand but which seemed vital to the fulfillment Scott and Helen seek in their alternative lifestyle. They also note that there has never come a time in their lives when they feel they have learned all they need to know about homesteading and that they continue to learn and to grow in knowledge. This seems another important aspect of their lives and another way in which they are fulfilled. Finally, their choices are not always accepted by others, but are vital to their own happiness. In finding a place and a way to live their lives that promotes dependence on the land and on oneself, the Nearings are fulfilling their own life goals.

The Ideal of a Community Cooperative

The desire for a productive community is at the heart of the Nearing's decision to live and farm in Vermont, but they are never able to make that community spirit a reality

outside their own farm. The Nearings say that they try unsuccessfully to start a cooperative for the region of Vermont they call home. They encourage people to help them begin a sawmill, nursery, syrup packaging plant and other facilities. There are opportunities for these endeavors, according to the Nearings, but the community members never fully come on board. The reason for this lack of success seems to be that the entire community does not have a basis of the same goals and ideals. The Nearings say that this is a requirement for a successful community cooperative. Over the years they do mentor groups of young people who are interested in this ideal but note that few have the drive to make any practical steps toward making a cooperative a reality. The reader should note that the Nearings were considered odd by their neighbors because of these ideals and that there were probably some who would have termed their lifestyle as a radical attempt to flee the world for a communal cooperative society.

Style

Perspective

The story is written in first person from a limited point of view. What is interesting about this book is that the "I" is actually credited to two authors and there is no distinction made between the writers of any given chapters or on any given topics. This seems an acceptable method of writing and it is assumed that a large amount of the writing or even all of it is to be credited to Scott Nearing but the preface is written by Helen Nearing and the tone and language of that section closely resembles the rest of the writing. Whether the actual author is an important aspect of the book becomes a personal choice and it seems likely that most readers will simply assume one or the other of the Nearings as the main author. The point of view becomes more interesting when the reader encounters one of the sections in which the author refers to some particular project in which "we" participated, seeming to indicate both Scott and Helen. However, in several cases the author then refers to both Scott and Helen in third person. Copyrights are divided between the two. Some readers may find this confusing or annoying but a reader who does not allow himself to become caught up in the issue should have no trouble with the book on this point. For the purposes of this study guide, the author is referred to either as "the author" or as "he." This should not be taken as an opinion of the writer of the book and the word "he" is used only for the sake of convenience and continuity.

Tone

The story is, in most ways, a blueprint for living the "good life" as seen through the eyes of Scott and Helen Nearing. The reader who is looking for stories of their life may be disappointed as the book is filled with literal "how to" guides on an array of topics, ranging from how to create a productive garden spot to the methods for building with stone. The details are such that a person who is interested in carrying out their instructions could likely do so. These descriptions include dimensions, time tables, methodology and reasons for particular decisions. There are instructions for preserving food in the manner employed by the Nearings.

The Nearings have some very definite ideas about some issues, including materialism, war and diet. On these topics they are plain spoken, admitting that their ways are not always accepted or welcomed by others. On the topic of diet, the Nearings tout their ideas that a vegetarian diet is best but say they never convince any of their Vermont neighbors of the rightness of this, despite some long conversations on the subject. They are also very outspoken on the subject of dependence on animals, calling it bondage and are generally against the keeping of animals for production of meat or for work on the farm. They also avoid the ownership of machinery, though not for any ethical reasons. They believe their limited use of these machines does not justify the cost of ownership. Another point on which the Nearings are adamant is the need for community

cooperative efforts, though they admit that on this front they are unsuccessful is making their mark in Vermont.

Structure

The story is divided into two distinct parts, "The Good Life" and "Continuing the Good Life." The first of these is set in Vermont where the authors, Helen and Scott Nearing, go to live "the good life." "Continuing the Good Life" is set in Maine where the authors seek to continue that lifestyle. The Vermont farm begins in the 1930s and some twenty years pass before they begin their second endeavor in the 1950s. The two sections are obviously meant to be stand-alone publications and there is some repetition. For example, the topic of vegetarianism is discussed at some length in the first part and in the second part there is a note that the topic has not yet been discussed. There are some additional overlaps but the two stories each contain enough specific information to be of use to those seeking new and vital information. The first part is divided into eight chapters, varying in length up to about thirty-four pages with most ranging less than twenty. The chapters are titled so that the reader has a grasp of the ideas to be presented in that chapter. The second part is similarly titled. There are eighteen chapters in this section and many of them are relatively short, ranging from five to about twelve pages on average.

The book contains several photos, most taken by a photographer and many depicting the lives of Scott and Helen. There are photos of both through the years, talking to guests on the farm, handling daily chores and depicting the progress of projects, such as a stone building in progress. There are also a series of quotes associated with each chapter. Each set of quotes has something to do with that chapter and are taken from a great array of sources, including Shakespeare, ancient writers, Henry Thoreau, Longfellow and an array of self-help books.

Quotes

"Our new place was a typical run-down farm, with a wooden house in poor repair, a good-sized barn with bad sills and a leaky roof, a Finnish bath house, and 65 acres of land from which the timber had been cut. 'Conveniences' consisted of a pump and a black iron sink in the kitchen and a shovel-out backhouse at one end of the woodshed." The Good Life, Chapter 1, p. 17.

"Advocates of mechanization do not like to face the fact that a machine gets tired, gets sick and dies during its life cycle, and that a machine tender must be prepared to meet these emergencies if the life of a machine in much the same way that he must meet them in the life cycle of a domestic animal such as a horse or of any other slave." The Good Life, Chapter 2, p. 46.

"Some of our fireplaces were built with mantels and some without. The mantel-less fireplace is a bit simpler but more austere. A mantel, especially a low one, adds cosiness but collects trinkets." The Good Life, Chapter 3, p. 81.

"Health is one of the most important elements in the good life. The better the health, the more adequate and satisfying the life." The Good Life, Chapter 5, p. 117.

"At the outset we thought of the venture as a personal search for a simple, satisfying life on the land, to be devoted to mutual aid and harmlessness, with an ample margin for leisure in which to do personally constructive and creative work." The Good Life, Introduction, p.3.

"A customer with a ten dollar bill can get wonderful results in a department store. But put that same person in the backwoods with a problem to be solved and an inadequate supply of materials and tools. There money is useless. Instead, ingenuity, skill, patience and persistence are the coin current." The Good Life, Chapter 6, p. 158.

"As a means of providing a subsistence household with the cash necessary to buy out the market, to shop from one end of a mail order catalogue to another or to provide the family with endless comforts, conveniences, labor-saving gadgets, trinkets and habit-forming drugs, our project was a dismal failure." The Good Life, Chapter 8, p. 195.

"We were juvenile and soft-headed enough to believe that we were settled in Pikes Falls, Vermont, forever. We were wrong. There, as elsewhere, change ruled the roost." Continuing the Good Life, Chapter 1, p. 216.

"How does one go about converting an acre or so of swampland into an acre of pond? The typical American way is to call up the nearest contractor who has a bulldozer and get him to take on the job, finishing it in a few days (and leaving a mess of unsightly piles of topsoil, subsoil, rocks and roots all mixed up together). We had an alternative method. We proposed to do the job with hand tools." Continuing the Good Life, Chapter 7, p. 278.

"The total cash outlay for the garden wall was about $450, largely for the cement. If we had paid professional masons to do the job of building us a stone wall, stone-faced on both sides and three to four feet underground, the cost would have been in the thousands of dollars. And we would not have had the pleasure and experience of doing it ourselves." Continuing the Good Life, Chapter 11, p. 324.

"Like multitudes of people all over the world, we are seeking a good life—a simple, balanced, satisfying life style. Like them, our aim is to lend a hand in shaping the planet into a homelike living place for successive generations of human beings and for the many other life forms domiciled in and on Mother Earth, her lands and waters." Continuing the Good Life, Chapter 18, p. 388.

"From the earliest childhood to the final insecure steps of old age, those who put the most into life get the most out of life. This applies to quantity of life and quantity of output. Theory guides; practice determines." Continuing the Good Life, Chapter 18, p. 390.

Topics for Discussion

Describe Scott and Helen Nearing, as much as possible, from the details of the book. Include aspects of their characters as well as basic information that is not included. Would having knowledge of a broader background of the couple help understand them better? Support your answer.

What is the Nearing's idea of a community cooperative plan? What kinds of enterprises do they believe could be included in this plan? What level of success do they experience with this idea? Why?

What are the locations of the two farms described in the two parts of this book? Compare the two farming projects listing some similarities and some differences.

The Nearings are seeking an escape from some aspects of the world. What are these and why do they come to choose the farming existence as an answer to their desires? What are their attitudes about purchasing items from commercial producers? Are they correct?

The Nearings experience a series of guests, both invited and uninvited. What are their attitudes about these guests? How do they go about "entertaining" them? What is it about these guests that prompt the move to Maine?

What is the attitude expressed by the author with regard to health and diet? How does their decision to raise their own food fit into that attitude? Is there merit in their ideas on this front?

The Nearings are outspoken about several issues, including their decision to be vegetarians and to keep no animals for either work or food production. Describe at least one other issue on which they are outspoken and describe their stand on that issue.

Give your opinion on the most and least desirable aspects of the lifestyle adopted by the Nearings.