

On being wrong

by Alison Clement
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Years ago, I wrote an essay that appeared in The Sun magazine, entitled "Being Wrong." I wrote about all the mistakes I had made in my life. I said I was tired of looking back and feeling embarrassed for having been so wrong in the past. I listed some of the things I had been wrong about: the drummer, Marx, cocaine, Arnold Erhart's mucusless diet. At the time, Chuck and I had just moved into a half-built cabin in the woods, in a community at Tenmile Creek, and I went on to describe (a little smugly) how right my life was now - how, despite all those earlier mistakes, I had wound up exactly where I belonged.

Five years after I wrote that, we left Tenmile. We left like people fleeing a disaster: boxes of our things all over the floor, books still in their shelves, the garden abandoned to wither.

Why did we leave? For a while, I blamed it on the long drive into town, or on the collapse of our Tenmile community, or on the local planning commission, which harassed us over building permits. I said we were being forced out because of the controversial nature of Chuck's environmental work.

In private, I blamed Chuck, who could live in a car if he had to. I blamed him for caring more about Spotted Owl habitat than our own. And he blamed me for not becoming a different person the day we moved to the woods. We blamed each other because the things we'd loved about each other in the city weren't important anymore at Tenmile, while the flaws that hadn't seemed like flaws at all now made life impossible. Instead of choosing a life that brought out the best in us, we'd picked one that magnified our inadequacies.

When we met, I fell for Chuck because of his ideas and the way he talked. But having interesting thoughts and saying interesting things didn't matter at Tenmile. Those things were eclipsed by the fact that he had built us a house with no closets, no cupboards and no toilet.

Chuck and I worked and saved for eight years before moving to Tenmile Creek. Everything we did during that period was for the land. We put our life on hold, waiting for our real life to begin.

But after we got to Tenmile, we were still waiting. We were waiting for a driveway, for a kitchen, for an outhouse, for electricity, for a floor, for a roof, for cupboards. And while we were waiting, our lives were passing and our kids were growing up. We were living according to a principle we had rejected: we were sacrificing the present for the future. Our lives had all the busyness, delayed happiness and distractedness of the culture we had rejected, but none of the amenities. It was the worst of both worlds.

When we moved to Tenmile Creek, it was a community of seven households. There was a weekly sauna and potluck. We had a community orchard and garden. We helped build each others' houses, took care of each others' kids, canned, baked, played music, danced and ate together. We had great parties. People came from all over the country to visit. And in the early '90's, we organized to stop the logging of National Forestland at Tenmile and succeeded in shutting it down.

But then two relationships broke up. Some people moved out and new people moved in. Two of the households engaged in a bitter battle for land. One of the men of the community died. The community unraveled.

The end of our life there was hard to accept. For one thing, Tenmile is about the prettiest place you could imagine. The forest there is mostly intact: a mixture of young and old spruce, cedar, hemlock and fir. Elderberry, huckleberry and swordfern grow on the forest floor. In spring, trillium, columbine and wild irises bloom. Kingfishers and marbled murrelets soar over the creek, and sometimes owls. Hummingbirds fly in open windows. The kids caught snakes in the grass and crawfish in the creek, while the men reeled in steelhead and grilled them over a fire. In the morning, the meadow outside our bedroom window might be full of elk or deer. Black bears and cougars prowled the woods, and at night we could hear coyotes. It was a hard place, but unbelievably beautiful.

All the while, my family was living in a tar-paper shack without closets, because Chuck thought closets were a bourgeois development. We couldn't keep track of anything. Library books, the checkbook, mail, homework, our driver's licenses, tools all disappeared into the chaos of our lives. The kids went to school with dirty clothes and uncombed hair. Our yard was filled with broken toys and tools, and everywhere you looked projects lay unfinished and abandoned. "We've rejected our middle-class heritage only to become white trash," I said.

We were not lazy. We each drove an hour to work and an hour home, every day. Evenings and weekends, we split firewood, worked on the water system, fixed the truck, repaired leaks, drove the laundry to town, did endless chores. There was no time to visit friends, take walks in the forest, read to the kids, go to the beach, or rest. We never quit working, but life only got harder. Every effort we made was swallowed up, every task we began doomed to incompleteness or failure. Our house had plywood floors, exposed insulation, doors without knobs, a temporary roof, temporary floor, temporary everything - all thrown together, half finished, half baked, and hopeless.

My New Age friends - women with closets and drawers and cupboards and balanced checkbooks - told me the house wasn't the problem. It was something deeper than the house, they said. But they didn't understand how deep a house can go, how it lives in you as much as you live in it.

If we only worked harder, Chuck and I would think. If we only organized things better. If we had a closet, some shelves, a desk, a kitchen table. If we completed one project, it might tip the balance. But each small gain was never enough. We had imagined we were rejecting our culture's materialism when we moved back to the land, but now the material world was our obsession. There wasn't time for anything else.

"Charlotte," I said to our young daughter one day as we drove home through the forest, "your dad could have been anything he wanted. He could have been a lawyer like his mother wanted him to be, and we could have lived in a big house in town and had lots of money, but we chose not to. We chose this way of life because we thought it was a better one."

She looked out the window for a long time, then said, "Do you think it's too late for Chuckie to change his mind?"

We moved to town that June, to a small house by the ocean. I painted the walls and planted flowers. Our lives were simple and calm. We had closets and drawers and big windows that let in plenty of sunlight.

There was time to read books, visit friends, and walk along the beach.

We didn't go back to Tenmile for a long time. When I finally did go back, I went alone. I stood in the garden and looked around at a landscape of abandoned projects: the solar shower, shiitake mushrooms, the overgrown vegetable beds. Packrats had moved into the cabin and the walls were starting to mildew. Just inside the door was my collection of Sun magazines. I picked up a familiar copy and opened to the page with my essay "Being Wrong":

"Sometimes my past seems like a map of wrong turns. And yet, how is it that so many confused, misguided and flat-out foolish choices have brought me here, to a life that is so good, so right for me? That is the mysterious beauty of being wrong."

Wrong again! Looking back, I see that my life has been full of wrong turns, wrong decisions, wrong ideas. I regret a lot of what happened at Tenmile. If I had it to do over again, I would do it differently. But the point of a thing is almost never what we intend it to be. I don't know how Tenmile has changed me, but I do have two children whose lives were formed by it, and a partner who is an environmental leader because of it. Maybe the point of moving there was so that Chuck would find his real work. Maybe it was the friendships we made there. Maybe the point was to develop our children's love of the natural world.

Sometimes what we imagine is a mistake is just something we have to get through to get where we belong. At least, that's what I think. But what do I know?

Alison Clement is a would be novelist who lives in Corvallis, Oregon with her family, in a normal neighborhood where she continues to second guess her choices.



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