

A Natural Economy of Householding

By Cliff Boyer

Harriet Fasenfest began a journey of self-discovery about ten years ago that took her from being “a vogue girl who dreamed of shopping in Paris” and Main Street business owner to being an author and advocate for a home-based economy that she calls “householding.” Fasenfest is the next featured speaker in the Straub Environmental Learning Center’s Annual Lecture Series, and at the Loucks Auditorium at the Salem Public Library on January 26, 2012 she will discuss “Home Economics & Householding in the Modern World: What Does It Mean and What Would It Look Like?” She will speak about the importance of householding as an individual response to a changing world of environmental limits and shifting economic concerns, as well as offer practical tips and advice on how to implement the practices of householding.

Fasenfest’s transition began with her growing discontent over the displacement of local communities brought on by increased competition, particularly from large chain stores and restaurants, and the transformation of affordable housing into “fancy, high-design living quarters at fancy, high-design prices.” She started reading authors such as Wendell Berry and Vandana Shiva who articulated a new relationship to the land and a different way of doing business. But her transformation culminated with a backyard epiphany that she calls her “Newton moment.” While an apple didn’t literally fall on her head, she looked at the huge, old pear tree in her yard and instead of seeing that tree as a nuisance that left rotting pears and attracted fruit flies, she saw it as a resource or “original asset.” As Fasenfest says, her revelations “offered me an entirely new lens through which to look at my world.” It also raised some questions that focused her work: How had she come to take those pears for granted, leaving them to rot? What had happened to her understanding of resources, labor, value and stewardship?

Householding is an ancient concept and according to Fasenfest, it “promotes the revival of a personal system of resource management, founded on principles of equity, thrift and stewardship.” She has become enchanted with what she calls “the University of Grandmothers,” elders who “understand seed and soil and possess an awareness and knowledge of being that says this is just what you do.” They adapted their own ways of doing things particular to their needs, like using old vegetables as mixes in pot pies and soups, or old fruit as pie filling. In an era of fast food, microwave popcorn, and high-tech kitchen appliances that are rarely used, Fasenfest fears that this knowledge will disappear with the passing of that generation.

Fasenfest has written one book called “A Householder’s Guide to the Universe” and is busy working on a second book. She says the first book is a personal narrative about her journey and offers some practical tips on implementing the practices of householding but the second will build on the humble simplicity of the University of Grandmothers. It will be more of a “how to” guide and will also examine what a curriculum of householding economics would look like with the idea of taking it to the schools. It will help readers develop a profile in which they take an honest look at what they want in their lives. Given the extent of environmental damage and current economic realities, Fasenfest believes we must lower our cost of living and determine our needs while eliminating more of our wants. It will take deep work but “what we’re hoping for is a repair of the planet and of ourselves.”



Author Harriet Fasenfest