To the memory of my paternal grandmother, 
the Hocher (Tall) Channa. 
Oh, what you could have taught me!
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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to A Householder’s Guide to the Universe. This is a how-to book, a cookbook, a getting-back-to-basics-in-the-city book. It is a book on home economics and systems analysis, physics, linguistics, and housekeeping. It is part gardening journal and part food-preservation guide. It is part protest and part celebration. It is domestic in its expression and global in its reach. It follows the seasons. It follows the soul. It follows the unfolding of a life.

If today I call myself a householder, it is with the hope that you might do the same. With all the obstacles currently facing our planet, householding has given me a way to understand—and challenge—the quagmire of contemporary society. It has turned my frustration into action and my problems into solutions. Perhaps it will do the same for you.

My idea of householding emerged over time and through a number of significant events in my life. To know what came first is difficult for me to figure out, but these events rocked the foundation of a life that had previously been aligned with business as usual. It is remarkable how these things happen, although I believe all change has its roots in discomfort. That was certainly true for me. After many years as a small-business owner on Main Street, I had grown increasingly dismayed with the way conditions were changing in line with the logic of “market forces.” Small businesses, once friendly and cooperative, had begun to apply a new ethic to their efforts—a business ethic
With all the obstacles currently facing our planet, householding has given me a way to understand—and challenge—the quagmire of contemporary society.
(WTO) conference in Seattle, this symposium introduced me to an unfamiliar world. It was a revelation of sorts. Learning about U.S. global development policies caused a fissure in the way I saw the world. Perhaps I was misguided, but I used to trust, or simply accept, the fundamentals of our economic policy. I take no pride in saying so, but for most of my adult life you could not take me for a radical girl—odd and alternative, certainly, but radical? Not so much. In fact, as the daughter of a sample tailor in a high-fashion designer salon in New York City, I’d had a clear moment of grief when the possibility of visiting a Paris salon to buy my spring, fall, or winter wardrobe faded from view. Fantasizing about the world of Paris fashion felt entirely discordant with what I was hearing at the symposium. Which is why I cannot overstate the importance of that moment. It offered me an entirely new lens through which to look at my world. Over the years that followed, I became more and more unsettled by the way in which the world of Main Street was developing, and this was due in large part to the things I was learning. By 2004 my participation in the ongoing displacement of local communities was making me more uncomfortable than I could bear, so I left the business world and started hacking up my backyard.

It was while working in my garden that I received my second revelation (though revelation is maybe too strong a word), in the form of a huge, old pear tree that for years had simply been a nuisance—dropping too many pears into the yard, attracting too many fruit flies. Now it was as if a pear had fallen on my head to wake me up (I call it my “Newton moment”): If food in the form of pears was a resource, an original “asset,” so to speak, how had I come to take them for granted and leave them to rot? What had turned them into valueless objects? What had happened to my understanding of supply and demand, surplus, resources, stewardship, labor, value, time, and equity? I wondered how the rotting pears in my backyard
were connected to the dead-earth systems of mountain-
top removal, or the disheartening consequences of global
trade, or the workings of agribusiness—because some-
where, somehow, each is connected in its own way to an
economic logic that favors industry’s worldwide systems
of resource management over the values and systems of
a local and natural economy. Each, in its own way, sug-
gests that someone else should supply our needs, design
our systems, steward the earth, and define the models of
efficiency that govern our economy. I was still unsure of
the deeper connection, but it was that unsettling moment
(not some country-comfort ethic) that encouraged me to
take my pears to heart.

Over the next few years I became a backyard food
grower, gleaner, forager, and preserver. I began to teach
others. Slowly I traded in the store-bought for the
homegrown, and in the process I found myself living
more in the natural world than the industrial one. As
it turned out, the more I sidestepped that industrial
world the happier I became, not only because of my
changed shopping habits (though not having to go into
grocery stores made me very happy indeed), but also as
a result of my baptism into the illuminating, complex,
and humbling systems of the natural world. What my
hands-in-the-soil adventure provided was the no-kid-
ding truth that it is the natural world, not market forces,
that really calls the shots. Ask anyone who grows food,
farms the land, watches the sky, listens to the wind, and
feels the soil, and he or she will tell you what we city
slickers refuse to understand: if the earth is sick, we all
will be sick, and no amount of market manipulation
will change that. If this foray into backyard gardening
was inciting a revolution in my mind and soul, it was a
mark of how far I had strayed. Born and raised in the
Bronx, I was a city girl, to be sure. What did I really
know of natural cycles? Not much, I can assure you. So
while I am not saying we all need to get our hands in
the soil, it sure helps. It helps shift our understanding

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of our place and purpose in the world, which, given the circumstances, can be a big deal right about now.

According to those who research such matters, we are at a wholly new place in history. We are in an environmental and social endgame, although there are still a few hopeful scenarios for change if we act quickly. This makes the matter of getting your hands dirty in a garden a little more relevant. Still, I am not sure which came first for me—the call to action I was feeling from the world around me or the epiphanies of the soil. But taken together, they called on me to make a shift in my life from the intellectual to the pragmatic. It was in that swirl of discovery that I received my final revelation, from the guy most of us city slickers get it from—good old Mr. Wendell.

I first encountered the term “householding” in a book of essays by Wendell Berry entitled *A Continuous Harmony: Essays Cultural and Agricultural*. I was no newcomer to Wendell (please forgive the first-name usage, but we are old bedside-table friends). In fact, I think most of us have been looking to him for answers for some time. But at that moment the word *householding* resonated in a particular way. It brought together my wild and divergent thoughts, thoughts that had been percolating during my time on Main Street, in the symposiums, in my garden, under the pear tree, in my classes, and in my home. Slowly, I began to understand not only what I was reaching for, but also how I might get there—not as a singular act but as a lifestyle, not just as it related to me but as a way of challenging the system at large.

As I would learn, the concept of householding is hardly new. Though modern society has reduced its meaning to little more than property ownership, there are references to householding in the Anguttara Nikaya, a text consisting of several thousand discourses ascribed to the Buddha and his chief disciples that describes an ethic of responsibility within one’s household. For the early Greeks, householding was the original meaning
behind the concept of an economy. The Greek word oikonomos, from which our word “economy” is derived, translates literally as “one who manages a household,” and is composed of the words oikos (household) and nemein (to manage). That was a remarkable discovery for me. Do true economies, original economies, exist most honestly within our land, our homes, and our households? Are we all perhaps members of an “Earth Household” and a “web of life,” as suggested by Fritjof Capra, the author of The Tao of Physics? Is our participation in the earth household vital for any meaningful approach to ecological sustainability? Capra’s position is clear: “[W]hat needs to be sustained is not competitive advantage, corporate profits, or economic growth. What needs to be sustained are the patterns of relationships in the web of life.” So how have we strayed so far from that fundamental truth? What has hijacked our imagination?

I began to wonder if we had all been fooled—if we had all embraced, by choice or circumstance, some uppercase notion of an economy rooted more in large-scale global systems than the ones in our soil and our homes. Had we all been born into some wildly mismanaged system whose entrenched history had captured our minds? It sounds dramatic, I know, but it is not wholly unlikely. At times it feels as if there can be no other explanation for what we are witnessing in the world at large. Would a healthy and truly functional economic system really look like the one we have? Have we all engaged in some collective abdication of personal responsibility, and would a return to these early, scaled-down definitions of householding and resource management offer an opportunity for change? Could I, in my everyday efforts at household management—in my home, my garden, and my community—help shift the logic of modern-day global economic systems? If so, then how, exactly? Looking deeper into the most basic element of economic systems offered me a clue.
Regardless of their apparent complexity, economic systems are designed to manage the production, distribution, and consumption of resources. That’s it. Quite apart from political motives, theories, and application, economics is a system of resource management. When it is designed with the noblest of intentions, an economic system concerns itself with the equitable distribution of limited resources among unlimited wants—each want being considered, each resource being respected. At the other end of the spectrum is a system designed to manage, control, hoard, and profit from limited resources to the advantage of the few over the many. So where are we along that continuum? Well, in my eyes, we’re exactly where the system has designed us to be. Today’s expanding income gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the dire condition of our environment, are not so much an aberration in an otherwise well-designed system, but the goal of a poorly designed system. We should not underestimate the difference.

Believing that our economy is a well-designed system allows one to hope that while mistakes are made, a well-intentioned tweak here or there can set things straight. It permits those ridiculous debates in Washington and across the United States as we try to confront global warming through market forces alone (nothing else is seen as practical). It fans the faux-distinctions between the states, as if God and libertarians would prefer the continual plundering of the world’s assets for the privileged few. It takes away our capacity to envision the type of solutions we must all embrace, lest they be seen as “socialist.” It causes me no end of grief when I think how willing politicians are (as representatives of the fat cats) to sell their constituency down the river, if only because they know that voters do not understand what is really being said or done in their name. I’m sorry, but I am more inclined to think of our system as having been specifically designed to be exactly what it is—an economic system designed to give the most to a
chosen few. When it was founded, it may not have been with this goal in mind, and perhaps this is not the way its ordinary citizens have sought to live their lives, but the overriding reality is of such a system—a system that has met its final hour. At least, that is the starting point of this conversation.

Remember, I did not come to this position overnight, or as a result of some desire to run willy-nilly into a nostalgic world of urban gardens, backyard chickens, and stocked pantries. (Which is not to say that the householding life has no beauty and enchantment, for surely it does. Lots of it.) I simply want to locate my commitment to householding within the context of a global economic system run amok, because, if nothing else, householding defies the logic, the premise, and the status quo of that system. Householding promotes the revival of a personal system of resource management, founded on principles of equity, thrift, and stewardship. Householding attacks and reenvisions the systems that have betrayed us and replaces them with something that is reasoned and in scale with the world. Householding is in form and function the foundation for a home-based economy because it is in our homes, gardens, and communities that the work needs to be done. It is a move away from industry and the marketplace and a return to our homes and neighborhoods. It is a move away from a consumer culture and toward a culture of producers. It is a reclaiming of skills that were once common among people who lived off the land. It is a way to reimage our lives in the city, to take much of what we love in our urban lives and rescale it in line with rural wisdom. It is a way to take back the production, distribution, and consumption of goods from industry’s economic system into our own. It is a system that seeks to close the gap between the producer and the consumer, between the land, the farmer, and our table. In the most general terms, it is an effort to regain our labor, skills, trades, dignity, time, resources, home, community, culture, and reverence for the natural world.
But it goes beyond that. In order to be a truly effective system, householding requires the reevaluation of needs and wants, of our stuff and our lifestyles, because bound up with our current economic model are the complicated commitments, obligations, and expectations that keep us tethered to it. Certainly we can all start in small ways, and I advocate just that, but at its heart, householding implies stepping away from the modern American lifestyle that has all but defined us. And that might well be the most difficult task before us. But in its most developed form, householding becomes a model for the world at large. It shows that we care, that we are willing, that we know better, that solutions are to be found not only in the marketplace but also in our own hands, hearts, homes, gardens, and communities.

And just when I am wondering if I am no more than a cockeyed optimist, Wendell’s words return to me:

“You are tilting at windmills,” I will be told. “It is a hard world, hostile to the values that you stand for. You will never enlist enough people to bring about such a change.” People who talk that way are eager to despair, knowing how easy despair is. They want to give up all proper disciples and all effort, and stand like cattle in a slaughterhouse, waiting their turn. The change I am talking about appeals to me precisely because it need not wait upon “other people.” Anybody who wants to can begin it in himself and in his household as soon as he is ready—by becoming answerable to at least some of his own needs, by acquiring skills and tools, by learning what his real needs are, by refusing the merely glamorous and frivolous. When a person learns to act on his best hopes he enfranchises and validates them as no government or public policy ever will. And by his action the possibility that other people will do the same is made a likelihood.

So in our own homes and then beyond, let us begin.
A YEAR

of

HOUSEHOLDING
So, here we are at the beginning of the journey: the start of a new lifestyle. It is good that January is a time for reflection, because you will need it—not only because you need to think about the skills and tasks ahead, but also because you need to reflect on the emotional and spiritual reasons why you are setting out on this path. This life will be harder before it will be easier. Swimming upstream in a system designed to promote convenience and leisure is more than an intellectual challenge. There is a reason why folks do not grow and store all their own food: industry has stripped away the logic and the need to do so. Plus, it is hard work. So be prepared: there will be times when canning tomatoes in one-hundred-degree heat will appear insane, given the siren call of modernity. That is why I suggest you start with a
personal inventory, which will help you explore your reasons for taking this on. And there is no better time to do this than January, with its long-standing tradition of resolutions.

Creating a personal inventory will help keep you from abandoning your goal once you understand the reality of what’s involved. I know how disjointed and out-of-kilter life can feel at times. Modernity offers many lures and distractions—trips to faraway places, the urge to move and reinvent your life, home, and career. Fast and convenient foods have grown into a huge industry, because they serve us. Forgoing these services will not be easy unless you can recognize why you need them and accept the trade-offs involved in doing without them. You must be honest with yourself, because these are the issues that will sabotage your efforts. The biggest challenges to householding are the commitments modernity requires of us and the expectations it allows us.

**KNOW YOUR LEVEL OF COMMITMENT**

How committed are you to getting off the teat of technology and fancy living? Now, that sounds a bit harsh, particularly as there is an endless, resounding call within our culture for all things to be faster, cooler, and more artfully designed. It is not helpful to deny the call of the hip; or at least it was not helpful for me, because I was a cool-design baby. I love fashion—or rather, I love to express my aesthetic self. It’s a plain fact that silk feels better on the skin than burlap, so there is no point in denying the obvious delights of a fine meal, or clothing, or art, or whatever your aesthetic self longs for. Still, I believe we have forgotten that, at least historically, such expression has been only a small part of a life more generally defined by utility and hard work. So that, too, is a
place you can start. What is your commitment to a life more defined by hard work and simplicity than by conveniences and fine fancies? I make no judgment either way; I merely caution you that if you are not honest with yourself, it will get you in the end. I’m not saying you must give it all up, but if you are to take on the work of a householding life, some conveniences will have to be traded in. So add that to your personal inventory list: what can I do without? Be realistic, because martyrs make strange bedfellows and nobody is suggesting you don a hair shirt. Just think about what it will take. And while you’re at it, you might take on the mamma jamma of reality checks—namely, how you think you should stack up in the world.

**FACING OFF WITH EGO**

Perhaps you are a selfless soul, free of the ego that drives many of us. Me, well, I’m a little smitten with myself, so spending the majority of my days working in the garden, kitchen, or home can be a bit deflating. Yes, householding is important in a million different ways, but in the end it is a quiet and somewhat invisible life. Not to the people, soil, or universe you have taken to your heart, but it’s a behind-the-scenes affair, nevertheless. Can you handle that?

There are no right or wrong positions, really—except to say that we are used to pegging our personal horizons to the world at large. Certainly there can be an honesty to that equation, but also a grueling comparison when you set your worth against the accomplishments of your peers. So be forewarned: until we grow a like-minded movement of our peers, it can get pretty lonely and freaky at times. You might find yourself asking things like, “I went to law school to make cookies?” Or something like that. I can’t tell you how many people tell me they want my life, but they don’t have a clue.

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Through most of history, the human population has lived a rural lifestyle, dependent on agriculture and hunting for survival. In 1800, only 3 percent of the world’s population lived in urban areas. By 1900, almost 14 percent were urbanites. By 1950, 30 percent of the world’s population resided in urban centers and the number of cities with over one million residents had grown to 83.

**SOURCE:** POPULATION REFERENCE BUREAU
At times like that, I wish I had a picture to hand them of me in my bathrobe mopping up the pasture-raised chicken broth I spilled on the floor. (How did it get in the dining room?) That would slow their roll. So while I'm not saying it won't have its significant returns, I am suggesting that trading in a life out there for one in here can seem a tad more glamorous in theory than it is in practice. And that can be a major stumbling block to active householding, because much of the work required will be done in the confines of your home and garden. This brings me to another important point: before you embrace the ethic of householding, consider how you feel about being at home. To be sure, being home is a notion that has received very short shrift recently.

**WHAT HOME MEANS TO YOU**

Being home to make a home was not always seen as a form of internment, the way it is today. It was not always the place of second choices or no choices at all. Home, for much of our history (for both men and women), was the center of our cultural, emotional, environmental, and physical well-being. It was the engine of our home economy, the place to practice our skills and trades. Being home meant being in place, living on the land you were to care for, surrounded by the resources you needed. But the farther we have moved from the land, the more the arts and trades required to manage a home have lost their significance. If householding is an attempt to bring the wisdom and the systems of the natural world back into the urban environment, we need to reevaluate what being home means. Taking the time to consider our position will liberate us from the honest but somewhat intractable position that staying home, especially as it relates to women, is a trap, or a surefire road to gender subjugation. I will not belittle the concerns of the feminist movement (indeed, early
To sit within January’s silence is to witness the natural world around us.

home economists were advocates of it), since a life of no choice is no life at all. No one, on either side of the fence, should feel obliged to live a life for which he or she is not suited. At the same time, I support unapologetically the opportunity that staying home to make a home offers—not just for women but for everyone. In fact, householding requires many hands and many skills—and, as a life, offers the means for a social, political, economic, and environmental transformation. Which is to say: home is not the place where lazy minds go to die, but rather where the active mind, heart, and soul can find their resurrection. That we can practice much of householding in our bathrobes is an added plus.

ENJOYING THE WINTER’S SILENCE

With the festivities of the harvest and holidays behind us, January is a perfect time to go deep and internal, to go underground before reemerging in spring. These are the true rhythms of a life. To sit within January’s silence is to witness the natural world around us. Just as the natural world is fast and furious during the season of sowing and stowing, so is it peaceful when things lie dormant. We should follow its lead; I am quite sure our bodies would appreciate a similar cycle. Modern living requires us to accept a 24/7 existence, irrespective of our natural rhythms and seasons; I believe such non-stop motion affects our spirit and our health. Other than the greatly coveted two-week vacation (if you’re lucky) and all-too-brief weekends, when do we have the time to unwind? So I cling to January. I want it to go slowly. I don’t get bored shifting quietly from room to room, because it is the pleasure of the season. I enjoy the privilege because I have earned it. And as a result of this free time, it is quite possible you will discover the world of arts and crafts. Not as high art or as a spectator, but as a producer once more. Self-reliant societies
have a long history of creating art during the quiet times of the year. As both embellishment and tool, such work shows off the human instinct to express oneself through art. It’s funny how much collectors will pay for folk and “outsider” work when it is no different than something we might produce ourselves. So, consider this a bonus for your efforts. Get quiet and make art. Besides, who doesn’t love a clay ashtray?

So that is householding at home in January: silence, self-reflection, napping, and art. It is the time to become internal, regenerative, and personal. It is a gift of the season. It is ours to enjoy. Besides, it’s only a moment in time. The rest of the year’s work will soon be upon us.

A 2001 study at the Chicago Medical Institute suggested that sleep deprivation may be linked to more serious diseases, such as heart disease and mental illnesses including psychosis and bipolar disorder.