

Possum Living

HOW TO LIVE WELL WITHOUT A JOB
AND WITH (ALMOST) NO MONEY

Dolly Freed



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Introduction

Way back in 1978, an eighteen-year-old with the pseudonym Dolly Freed wrote a impassioned book about how to live a more simple life. Her timing was impeccable. The late '70s was a weird time: There were fuel shortages and gas lines. There was the mass suicide at Jonestown. The nighttime soap opera *Dallas* aired, setting the stage for a turn toward materialism and excess. Something just wasn't right.

But Dolly and her dad had found happiness. They lived outside of Philadelphia where they kept rabbits and a garden, and even made their own hooch. Each chapter of Dolly's book outlined a way to live DIY—food, housing, heating or transportation. The book became a cult classic. “We live this way for a very simple reason: It's easier to learn to do without some of the things that money can buy than to earn the money to buy them,” Dolly wrote. She called her way of life, and her book, *Possum Living*.

When I was approached to write this introduction for the new Tin House edition, I have to admit I smirked at the title. In my urban farming memoir, *Farm City: the Education of an Urban Farmer*, I had described, in excruciating detail, my execution of an opossum that had killed some of my livestock. Possums aren't my friends.

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But Dolly, it turns out, is. She's like a long-lost half-sister that I had never met before. As I built my urban farm in Oakland, CA, which contained honey bees, chickens, turkeys, rabbits, pigs, goats, fruit trees, and vegetables, I had consulted a great deal of farming how-to books including Helga Olkowski's *City People's Book of Raising Food*, *The Good Life* by Helen and Scott Nearing, and Carla Emery's *The Encyclopedia of Country Living*. But I had never heard of *Possum Living*. Now that I have read it, I'm honored to write this introduction and explain why people today might want to read this '70s cult classic.

Possum Living's main concern seems to be philosophical. Dolly's god is Diogenes, the ancient philosopher who lived in a wine barrel and eschewed possessions. Dolly calls him "a good old-boy, one of the first back-to-basics freaks in recorded history." Living free, without having a "real job," like Diogenes is her main pursuit. It is with wide-eyed glee that she dispenses what she has learned from living possum since she was thirteen years old. *Possum Living* includes gems like buying bags of wheat at the animal feedstore instead of at a health food store; securing land by buying foreclosed properties; and getting protein in your diet by fishing for river turtles. The fact that Dolly knew all these tricks and skills—and wrote a book about it as a teenager—is mind-boggling. A seventh grade dropout, Dolly went on to take the GED, got into college and eventually became a NASA engineer. She appeared on the *Merv Griffin Show*, and starred in a documentary about her lifestyle. Dolly eventually did give up the possum life, but as she writes in her afterword, "Just knowing how to possum live takes away a great deal of the fear brought on by the fluctuating economy, Y2K-type scares, and unstable job markets."

I'm tempted to call Dolly the grandmother of urban farming. Like urban farmers, she was focused on what we call food security or

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food sovereignty—that is, having reliable access to healthy food. She and her father had a cellar astir with meat rabbits, a metal barrel that served as a fireplace, and a kitchen that kicked out a bastard's blend of Euell Gibbons and *Joy of Cooking*. If you were invited to supper, you might have been served rabbit sausage, snapper soup, and a side of rocket pickle.

Dolly is refreshingly skeptical about trendy gardening ideas; she only writes about what works for her, never getting dewy-eyed about ideology in the garden. Her motto is simple: “don't plant it if you can't eat it.” Matters close to my heart, dumpster diving and foraging, are also discussed, with a similar focus on the practical—gathering apples from an abandoned orchard, for example, might yield more food than say, trying to make cattail flour gathered from a nearby pond like some hippies suggest. I do have to gently insert that anyone looking to re-create some of the recipes might be alarmed at the inclusion of margarine in pretty much every dish. It was the '70s after all. May I suggest replacing all calls for the oleo with good old-fashioned butter instead?

I'm not sure brewing alcohol is part of food sovereignty, but for Dolly and her dad, having alcohol on tap was crucial. As such, *Possuum Living* outlines exactly how to make a still, with a useful diagram and detailed recipes. Next time I plan on having a party, I doubt that I'm going to make a big ol' batch of sugar beet liquor, but it's nice to know that, in a pinch, I could.

Possuum Living was prescient about the current housing crisis. You must own your home in order to live cheaply. “If you are renting or paying off a mortgage,” Dolly explained, “you are locked into the money economy, period.” She recommends buying foreclosed houses or getting creative with “non-traditional” structures. I think

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of Dolly when I see punks squatting in abandoned buildings or the simple living folk building tiny houses. And I thought of her when I got word that I would be evicted from my long-time rental apartment in Oakland—it's true, that housing must come first. Farmers need land security.

Of course you have to spend money on a few things: electricity, heating your house, buying clothes, getting around, but she urges (as the simplicity movement urges today) that less is more. Shop at a thrift store, ride a bike, unplug your refrigerator, wear a sweater. These things are all better for the planet. Dolly muses, "While I'm not contributing to economic growth, a dubious good, I'm also not contributing to pollution, a definite evil."

Possum Living can be read in so many different ways. An urban farming manual. A manifesto for living a more simple life. A time capsule that shows a way of life in 1978, margarine and all. A tonic for our internet-fueled consumer culture. But a careful reader might read this as a book within a book, a story of a father and a daughter, and their struggles.

I'm sensitive to father/daughter stories because of my own personal history. Around the time Dolly was writing about her time spent fishing for turtles and making homemade gin with her dad, my parents were setting up a ranch on 180 acres in Idaho. Just like Dolly's dad, my own father wanted to give up the rat race. Like Dolly, I had always thought that my dad's need to get away from society had noble, philosophical roots. Dolly obviously idolizes her father—aka the Old Fool. He has taught her about Diogenes, after all. But as you read *Possum Living*, and experience life as Dolly explains it, it becomes clear that something's not quite right. The truth is revealed between the lines—Daddy has a drinking problem. His practice of

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making threatening late-night calls or visits to adversaries lets the reader in on the fact that he might harbor some violent tendencies. Maybe there's a reason he had to escape the "real world" that was more than just philosophical. Maybe he just couldn't function in normal society, and so he created a world where he could drink during the day, and fed that story to his impressionable daughter. It was the same for me: it was when I was in my late thirties that I realized that my dad, the mythical mountain man philosopher, was actually just a misanthropic prick.

In her moving afterword, Dolly reveals the real trouble with her father and the consequences that he eventually faced. But reading this book in real time, it is a father-as-myth story. As it is told—through the lens of a loving, brilliant eighteen-year-old girl—the reader watches the young girl adapt, make meaning from her abnormal life, and then write this beautiful book about it. And that is one of *Possum Living's* many gifts—to watch Dolly save herself.

Thank you, sister.

—NOVELLA CARPENTER

Poosum, Living

An Introduction to Possum Living

Many people, perhaps you among them, are not temperamentally suited for the 9-to-5 rat race but assume there is no other way to live. Too proud to accept charity (welfare, food stamps) and not at all interested in joining a hippie commune, or pioneering in the boon-docks, or wheeling and dealing in business, or crime—what else is there? Others are unemployed and worried sick over that. Are these thoughts and fears grounded in fact?

Why is it that people assume one must be a hippie, or live in some dreary wilderness, or be a folksy, hard-working, back-to-nature soybean-and-yogurt freak in order to largely bypass the money economy? My father and I have a house on a half-acre lot forty miles north of Philadelphia, PA (hardly a Pioneer homestead), maintain a middle-class facade, and live well without a job or a regular income—and without working hard, either. (Of course, the term “live well” is open to various interpretations. We think we do—others may disagree.)

One main ingredient in our well-being is being able to hear the financial news without supposing the end of the world is at hand.

The leading economic indicators, the balance of payments, the energy crisis, inflation, unemployment, the GNP—what are they to us? Each evening on the six o'clock news the economists, the natural heirs of the medieval scholastic theologians, trot out all their nonsense and solemnly present it as being of cosmic significance. Now, why is this? After all, mankind was living on Earth—and often living well—for thousands of years before the dogma of “growth” and the rest of our present economic catechism were invented.

My father and I produce most of our food and all of our drink (and fine food and drink they are, too, if I do say so myself) and spend only about \$700 each per year. And as I said, we imagine we live well. While not overly religious, we do heed the Biblical admonition that “every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God” (Ecclesiastes 3:13).

Notice it says “God,” not “GNP.”

We aren't magic. Neither of us does anything any other reasonably able person can't do—you, for instance.

In this book you will find much practical information for saving money, but telling you *how* to do so isn't my only goal. Frankly, I hope to inspire you to do some independent thinking about economics as it affects the course of your individual life now and in the coming “age of shortages.”

1.

We Quit the Rat Race

Do you remember the story of Diogenes, the ancient Athenian crackpot? He was the one who gave away all his possessions because “People don’t own possessions, their possessions own them.” He had a drinking cup, but when he saw a child scoop up water by hand, he threw the cup away. To beat the housing crunch he set up an abandoned wine barrel in a public park and lived in that.

The central theme of Diogenes’s philosophy was that “The gods gave man an easy life, but man has complicated it by itching for luxuries.”

Apparently he lived up to his principles. But despite that handicap he seems to have had the most interesting social life imaginable. He not only lived in the center of the “Big Apple” of his day (fifth-century BC Athens), he also had the esteem and company of many of the most respected, rich, and influential citizens, including that of the most expensive prostitute in town.

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When Alexander of Macedon, the future conqueror of the known world, was traveling through Greece, he honored Diogenes with a visit.

Alexander admired Diogenes's ideas to the point of offering him any gift within his means. Diogenes, who was working on his tan at the time, asked as his gift that Alexander move aside a bit so as to stop shading him from the sun. This to the richest and most powerful man in the Western world.

Parting, Alexander remarked, "If I were not Alexander, I would be Diogenes." Diogenes went back to nodding in the sunshine.

Diogenes was fair and just to all but refused to recognize the validity of man-made laws. He was a good old boy, one of the first back-to-basics freaks in recorded history. He lived to be over ninety. Alexander, The Mighty Conqueror, drank himself to death at age thirty-three.

Well, this "Saint Diogenes" has been my father's idol for many years. I remember when I was a little girl Daddy painted a picture of Diogenes sitting in his barrel tossing away his drinking cup. He wrote "Are You a Diogian?" as a caption and hung it on the living room wall to inspire us.

Mom wasn't inspired.

At the time, Daddy was a working stiff of the ordinary garden variety. Sometimes he made good money and felt like a big shot. Other times he was out of work and scared. Our well-being was at the mercy of fluctuations of the economy in those days, same as it is for millions of other people.

Why should this be? What did Diogenes do, besides live in a barrel, that anyone can't do today? The economy of his society wasn't as prosperous as ours, yet he didn't work and he didn't starve.

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It happens that something of a Diogian life is still possible, because Daddy and I are now living it. Here's what happened:

After Daddy painted the picture of Diogenes, we initiated austerity measures. Daddy hoped we could get some money in the bank and become more secure and independent.

Mom's hobby, candle making, came in for some scrutiny. We had candles from one end of the house to the other, and the equipment and supplies were beginning to be a financial drain. Rather than give up candle making, Mom decided to sell her candles to recoup the money she had spent.

To our complete surprise, she started making really good money at it. In less than three months, she was netting more than Daddy was bringing home from the factory. We couldn't believe it! Unsuspected by all of us, including Mom herself, she turned out to have a flair for craftspersonship and an absolute genius for salespersonship. It was a women's lib. fantasy come true—a mother and housewife suddenly discovering she had the ability to make money on her own. In short order, Mom rented a store and opened a regular business. Daddy quit his job at the factory to help run it. Being good with numbers and miserly, he took over the bookkeeping and financial chores. Having no previous experience or knowledge of the principles of business or economics, the two of them just bumbled along, not knowing what they were doing, and evolved their methods using ordinary common sense.

They made a bundle. Moreover, they cooked the living bejeezus out of the books and so managed to keep most of it. But we weren't happy, so after three years we sold the business and our home and moved out to this more rural area. The plan was to have a small shop in our home—just enough to pay the bills—and to relax and enjoy life for a change.

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Alas, it wasn't to be. Mom and Daddy started arguing all the time. About money, of course. When they didn't have any, they didn't argue about it—when they did, they did. Mom, having gotten a taste for money and wheeling-and-dealing, found she didn't want to give it up. No Diogian she. So she took little Carl, my brother, and left. Soon thereafter, she obtained a divorce.

Well, that was four years ago. When the dust had all settled from the divorce, Daddy and I found we had no car, no TV, no appliances, no job, no job prospects, and no income. Without Mom, we couldn't run the candle business, and Daddy is flat not going back to factory work.

What we did have left was this house, free and clear, and a little money in the bank.

For us emotional types, a divorce can be a very trying experience. Making decisions about one's future is difficult for some time following. So we haven't made any. The Old Fool likes to go around saying he can't decide what he wants to be when he grows up. But truthfully, not *having* to make decisions is one of the great luxuries of life—right up there with not having to go to work.

We just drift along from day to day. We have a roof over our heads, clothes to wear, and we eat and drink well. We have and get the good things of life so easily it seems silly to go to some boring, meaningless, frustrating job to get the money to buy them, yet almost everyone does. "Earning their way in life," they call it. "Slavery," I call it.

Sometimes Daddy frets and says we are little better than possums living this way. Possums can live most anywhere, even in big cities. They're the stupidest of animals, but there were possums on Earth millions of years before men appeared, and here they are—still

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going strong. Who can say if we or they will outlast the others in our good green world? They're all fat and sassy and love life (or so I like to believe), and nothing you can do will persuade one to work in a factory or office. Possum living is what we call our life here now.

So we live like possums? Good! Let us do so even more.