

I vividly remember opening the door to my bathroom and watching my friends' faces drop. A blanket of discomfort suffocated my 7th grade peers. They stood, frozen, staring at the space where a modified five-gallon bucket sat replacing a flush toilet. It was obvious they immediately regretted asking to use the bathroom.

I wasn't born in a hospital with doctors and bright lights. I was born at home on a mountain in rural Vermont in the presence of midwives, relatives, and friends. The only light was from the dozens of candles lining the walls. I grew up off-the-grid: without internet, a refrigerator, a conventional toilet, a microwave, a washing machine, a dishwasher, or a television. I grew up on a hard-to-reach, rocky dirt road with home-grown food, a woodstove and a forest for my backyard.

My family values the importance of being unified with the Earth, acquiring the skills to live off of the land, and being environmentally aware. Growing up, I spent my time in the woods carving sticks, making fairy houses, and playing in streams while my friends sat on their couches with their eyes glued to their screens, mesmerized. Mine was a drastically different experience compared to the average American girl.

I had never realized how immensely different my house was until that exact moment when I opened my home to my thirteen-year-old girl friends. I had lived without these "necessities" for my whole life, and was so accustomed to the lifestyle, that I barely even noticed their absence. It was when I entered middle school that it started becoming apparent how differently I lived from the rest of the world. I suddenly felt alienated from my peers. Everyone was communicating through social media and talking about popular television shows and movies that I was completely unaware of. I felt as though I were missing out on a part of the world that was prevalent in most of the American teen culture. This was a turning point for me; I suddenly started to loathe everything about my house. I noticed myself comparing my lifestyle to everyone else's around me. Seeing how the majority of American families lived was eye opening, and I thought it was what I wanted. I began to disregard the benefits that living my alternative lifestyle had given me. I felt so desperate to fit in that I convinced myself that my parents' unconventional lifestyle was "gross" and "weird." I would even make fun of it just so my peers wouldn't think I was strange. During this insecure time of my life, I rebelled in every possible way: I immersed myself in the culture of consumerism, ate junk food, went to friends' houses and watched shallow television shows, took extra long showers, and wore makeup. I essentially attempted to do the opposite of everything my parents had emphasized during my upbringing. I pretended that I grew up in a conventional house with an ordinary family and had a wrenching desire to be "normal."

Throughout high school my beliefs changed and evolved as I started finding myself. I realized that being "typical" wasn't my goal anymore; it had left me feeling unfulfilled. With this discovery came recognition of the value of my alternative upbringing. It had taught me skills I would never have acquired had I lived in a typical American household; it allowed me a perspective I wouldn't have experienced had I not rebelled. This denunciation of my parents' values was a critical step toward my emerging adulthood. Abandoning my parents' ideals and embracing more mainstream values hadn't worked for me. I can now confidently assert who I am and form my own opinions without fear of being judged or ridiculed. I've grown to appreciate

all I had taken for granted in my younger years; living close to the land, loving natural beauty, and the joy of living a more simple life.