Pride, wrath, envy, sloth, lust, greed, gluttony—the cottage can bring out the best and the worst in us.

We asked seven of Canada's top writers to come clean about their cottage sins

I Have A Confession to Make...

ILLUSTRATION SAM ISLAND

Pride

BY CLIVE THOMPSON

When I was a child in the '70s, seeing a deer outside my cottage was a treasured moment. We had a small place on Presqu'ile Point, a wooded peninsula jutting out into Lake Ontario. The local deer, easily spooked by humans, didn't venture near very often, but occasionally my mother would wake me up at 6 a.m. to whisper that a doe and her fawn were grazing in the wet dawn grass near the edge of the forest. "Be very quiet, or you'll scare them," she'd warn, as we peered out the back screen door.

Over the next few decades, though, deer became braver. You'd see them walking along the road, or even walking up to our deck. By the '90s, it was clear what propelled this change: the deer population was exploding. Soon, there were so many that they devoured the vegetation; the forest was thinning out and the deer were starving. They'd walk right up to you, ribs showing, looking for food. Once an awe-inspiring spectacle, the deer were now a miserable one.

Why did the number of deer soar? What happened? Well, we did. It was humans tinkering with nature, over decades, often doing things that we thought would help the deer, but that backfired. And it's a reminder that when it comes to living alongside the great outdoors, our chief sin is pride: we think that we can control nature, but nature has other plans.

The trouble began, really, when European settlers arrived in the 17th century. Over the next two hundred years, they cut down so much forest for logging and farming—much of Presqu'ile was cleared for farms back then—and so avidly hunted, that deer populations were wiped out in many parts of the continent.

> **Our intent was good, we were simply too confident in our ability to bend nature to our will**

By the year 1900, though, there was a backlash. A generation of people became alarmed by how profoundly we'd altered the landscape, and the modern conservation movement that was committed to restoring the wilderness was born. By the middle of the 20th century, Canadian provinces and U.S. states, for example, were actively rebuilding habitats and restricting hunting.

"You weren't allowed to hunt south of Highway Two for quite some time," says David Bree, the chief park naturalist for Presqu'ile Provincial Park. Eventually, Presqu'ile's habitats rebounded, and so, gradually, did the deer. Score one for humanity, right?

Except we'd made the mistake, over centuries, of getting rid of wolves too. So when deer rebounded at my cottage, they had no natural predators, and their numbers surged far higher than what was normal. They became a pest species, officially native, but throwing the forest out of whack all over again. "They were eating everything in sight," Bree says. "All the spring wildflowers."

Granted, we humans weren't trying to mess things up and create metastatic, runaway deer populations. Our intent was good! We were simply too confident in our ability to bend nature to our will. ››

We've done this time and time again, alas. Remember wild boar? They were originally introduced for food and biodiversity purposes, but now they're rampaging through Canadian forests and, much like all invasive species, they're eradicating diversity. In the 1970s, to clean up algae in North American waterways, we introduced algae-devouring Asian carp. Whoops: they thrived far too well, devouring not just the algae but also native species, and—with their penchant for leaping acrobatically out of the water at boats—they even endangered us directly. These are complex, gnarled mistakes, which took us decades to make.

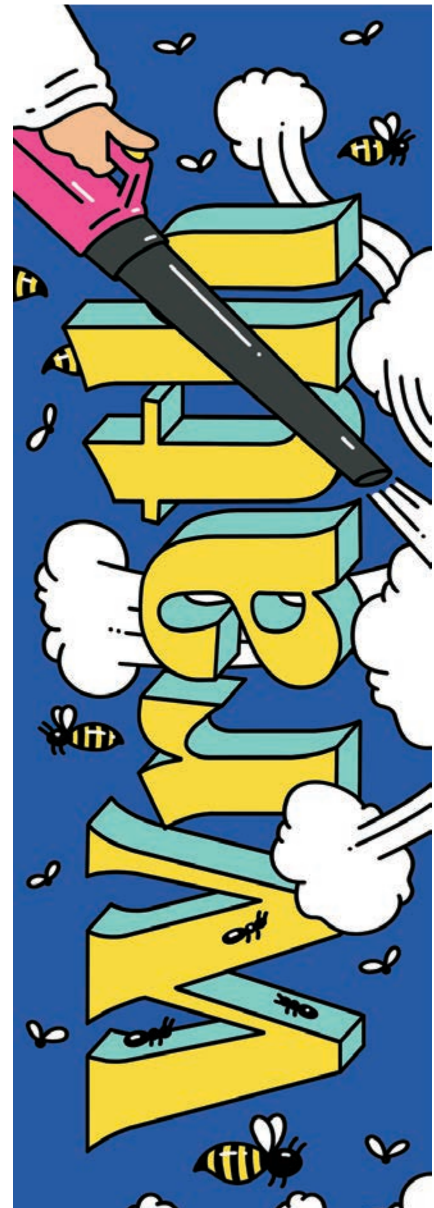
We can, though, learn from them. With the deer at Presqu'ile, the province finally set up culls by First Nations peoples to reduce the deer back down to a sustainable population.

Can we sustain it? We'll try. Bree and his colleagues are paid to try, and conservationists grow more knowledgeable every year. But as Bree ruefully tells me, nature is wily and weird, constantly throwing surprises. We can't get cocky.

These days, I'll go for a walk through the woods with my sons, and deer are once again an elusive sight; long before you can draw near, they'll hear you coming and vanish. But every so often they'll appear, hesitantly, at the edge of the woods, and my kids find those brief glimpses as soul-stirring as I did when I was young. I'm glad the mystery is back.

Cottaging means coexisting with nature. And that, it turns out, means constantly unlearning our sense of entitlement and arrogance, our sense that we can just settle in and make ourselves at home. We need to embrace caution, awe at the complexity of the wild, the limits of our comprehension. We need the opposite of pride: humbleness.

Clive Thompson is the author of Coders: The Making of a New Tribe and the Remaking of the World. *His work has also appeared in* Wired *and* Smithsonian.



BY ROY MACGREGOR

Welcome to cottage country—God's Country...which wasn't quite as advertised in 2020. If the COVID-19 pandemic was indeed the wrath of God, as some thought, then it was the Supreme Being with a leaf blower. If it was nature's revenge, as others have claimed, then it was a blue-green algae bloom on your before-dinner scotch and water.

Anger is hardly a stranger to cottage country. I can get quite miffed by a visiting PWC doing crazy eights in our little bay. I like music, but not blaring from a pontoon boat. I cannot bear campers who leave their campsite like a garbage dump. I love the four-hour drive to the cottage, but not when it takes five hours because of construction. I shake my head at the Hydro One power-outage/power-restored notifications that popped up on my phone this past year, often several times a day. I don't like blackflies in May, wasps in August, or carpenter ants 365 days of the year.

But this was a year like no other. Queen Elizabeth II called 1992 an *annus horribilis* following the collapse of three royal marriages, a fire that destroyed much of Windsor Castle, and a front-page photograph of a topless Duchess of York having her toes sucked by her "financial adviser." But 1992 had nothing whatsoever on 2020, the year where, as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau put it, *everything* really sucked.

The cottage was, at first, a most welcome refuge from whatever lockdown we were under. Arriving in early April and fearing the wrath of the locals, my wife, Ellen and I were quick to tell whomever we bumped into on our daily walks that we were, in fact, locals who had moved away from Muskoka after high school but were now back "home" in retirement. So we sort of belonged there—or so it seemed at first.

But as days and weeks and, eventually, months passed, the cottage became something it had never before been for us—a sad place. We were there, but it was somehow strangely empty. When our children and grandchildren were there without us—us and our single son one bubble, our daughter's family their own bubble, all strictly scheduled so that there would be proper disinfecting in between—we like to think they found it a bit empty as well. No grandparents to spoil them. No one to do the dishes, gas the boat, hang up the towels, and pick the dew worms. No one to burn the marshmallows at the evening campfire.

Having previously whined about noise, I now resented the quiet. There were no kids screaming and yelling as they hurtled off the end of the dock and raced to the diving raft. No dogs barking for them to come back. No youngsters screeching "THERE'S ONE!" as they collected tiny toads (scrupulously to be released to the wild at the end of the day). No little ones heading off to bed with the latest *Archie* comic.

The late King of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej once said, "We must use the wrath of nature as our teacher." He was likely thinking about typhoons rather than about pandemics, but still, there have been lessons to be found in the wake of COVID-19.

In sitting around an eerily-quiet cottage, even in sitting around at home thinking about our children and grandchildren being at the cottage when we could not be there with them, a realization grew that this cottage is not just some real estate investment—a description it far too often takes on in conversation—but it is a dividend constantly paying off in personal well-being.

There are no dollars and cents that can pay for an evening barbecue on the deck with friends from down the lake, a boatload of children, parents, and grandparents puttering back home under a full moon and a ceiling full of stars. There is no price that can be put on kayaking with a granddaughter to check out the "secret lake" that is tucked in behind the far island. There is no feeling in the world that can compare with a small hand in yours as you set off down the gravel road in search of whatever happens to be there.

If this is what the wrath of nature taught us to appreciate once again and far more, then 2020 was not a lost year after all.

Roy MacGregor is looking forward to welcoming his grandkids back to his Canoe Lake, Ont., cottage soon. In the meantime, he's working on a memoir and the next volume of The Ice Chips *series that he writes with his daughter, Kerry.*

BY OMAR MOUALLEM

My mom always has something on her phone to show me. It's guaranteed to be pictures of children, usually mine, caught looking adorable yet again. But last spring, she surprised me with a photo of a big RV.

Had my parents already reached the point of retirement when, having run out of things to do, you join a Boomer colony? Truly a shocking turn of events for two people who'd never slept in anything less than a three-star hotel.

But the RV wasn't theirs. It was my older brother's. He'd bought it used with plans to park it on his new lake lot in Shaw's Point Resort, a campsite 30 minutes outside of our hometown near Lesser Slave Lake, Alta.

I was happy for my brother's family and proud of him. Nobody deserved a big-ass RV and a leisure property more than his family. Around the time that I moved to Edmonton, he moved the other way, back to High Prairie, in order to steer my parents' diner back on track. He and his wife took the diner to a new level of success with a modern rebrand, but he was starting to lose patches of hair from managing it seven days a week. I was glad to hear that he was slowing down to look after himself and his family.

And yet, looking at that photo on my mom's phone, I felt a drop of jealousy spoil my blood. It's not that I wanted an RV myself (I'm more of a rented cabin guy). I wanted something lost and far gone: the memories that the lake lot was about to make for his family.

The only apparent travel blogger to review the rural Alberta resort where my brother was setting up likened it to a "trailer park" with golf carts in lieu of bicycles or one's own feet. But for me, Shaw's Point evokes Shangri-La.

Despite the short distance, I'd never seen it with my own eyes. I'd only heard about it in school hallways on Monday mornings when I was younger. A place of fishing tales and first kisses, it sounded like a parallel universe where only the town's most comfortable rendezvous. ››

I wanted something lost and far gone: the memories that the lake lot was about to make for his family

Not that we wouldn't belong. My parents sweat their way into the town's upper class. Their ambition allowed for many luxuries, often making me the only immigrants' kid who played hockey and took long summer vacations.

Granted, the summers were in Lebanon, and *sans* dad, who was busy running the family business back home. But we leisured domestically too, often to West Edmonton Mall, four hours away. My family relished the expensive pleasures of tropical-themed hotels and the world's largest indoor wave pool, but didn't see much point in spending weekends, and rarely an afternoon, at the lake close by.

The beach in our backyard seemed a highway too far for my parents. On a handful of occasions, their better-integrated Palestinian friends dragged us out to one of the public beaches. Our families attracted onlookers with our hookah and bedazzling music. Sandy beaches and clean swims didn't feel like a reasonable trade-off for potential teenage embarrassment, so I rarely asked to go and never lobbied for a resort lot.

I didn't realize what we'd deprived ourselves of until my twenties. Camping trips to the Rockies with my wife and friends eased me into the wild. Now I'll leap at any campfire invitation, even if it means driving two hours back to Edmonton the same day.

I also realized why my parents avoided the rugged outdoors. It dawned on me once while reporting about a free camping workshop for immigrants where the seminar used many of the same persuasive techniques as a time-share presentation, with only slightly better results. By the time the park ranger rolled out the sleeping bags and tent canvas, the room was half empty. Sleeping in compromised conditions, believe it or not, lacks cachet for many people displaced by war.

Camping just didn't work with my parents' cultural baggage. But I also realized that their baggage wasn't ours to carry as second-generation Canadians gifted a charmed life. And so, when my brother invited me and my family to the lake, this time, I said yes.

My wife and I were able to introduce our two-month-old son to the outdoors, while our daughter ran amok inside the RV with her cousins. I felt a tinge of envy when she stuck her head out to ask why we didn't have a "car house" of our own, but it was quickly inoculated by the joy in her voice and the realization that this lake lot would make memories for my family too.

National Magazine Award-winning writer Omar Mouallem is working on a new book, Praying to the West: How Muslims Shaped the Americas, *due out this fall.*

BY VICKY MOCHAMA

I have always considered myself a jack-of-all-trades of laziness. I have done nothing in every way possible on at least three continents and in every outfit I own. I can be indolent standing up and sluggish sitting down. I have achieved feats of laziness that are inspiring: for example, I have regularly taken three-minute taxi rides to the gym.

I was, I thought, more than prepared to sacrifice all activity in the service of the nation and global health. The many were being asked to give up all activity in service of the few.

Yet I, a practiced hand at eschewing work, was working harder than ever during the pandemic. I had a seemingly endless task list. One that I was deeply committed to. I need, I said to my boyfriend through gritted teeth as we strolled one night, to be more productive.

But staying at home and keeping away from other people/disease vectors had worn me out because I was working all the time; when I wasn't working, I was working on what else I could do. I had to reclaim rest. I had to be lazy again. I had to learn to be lazy again.

Sloth has a bad reputation—which is truly unfortunate because, of all the sins, it is the most enjoyable. Productivity, however, has an excellent PR firm. (I've heard that they also represent Anxiety and Peloton.) It is the most successful marketing campaign since advertising firms of the last century pitched young women on smoking cigarettes by calling them "torches of freedom." Keeping busy has become a bad habit.

And so, the scale of events demanded open skies and blue water.

Determined to get to the beach before noon to begin immediate relaxation, I would put on swimwear, pick an outfit to go over that, and pack my beach bag: lip gloss, sunscreen, moisturizer, two water bottles, a bottle of wine, fruit, an ice pack, cookies, a towel, a beach blanket, a fan, a book, a magazine, a portable phone charger and cord, earbuds, and a back-up outfit for emergencies I've never had. By the time I was ready, I was late to the beach.

The beach I chose was a profile of the city at its most insular and resplendent. Its location down an industrial road in a not-yet-developed part of the city made it effectively an island community—a cottage town with no cottages. And it didn't feel like any cottage I had ever been to because I have never been to a cottage alone; with friends or family, it has always been a group activity. One cottage trip to Tiny, Ont., was a literal multi-day group game with a games-master and a schedule; it was exhausting and awful but my flip cup skills remain unmatched.

On my little no-cottage cottage beach, however, I was alone in a crowd. Subcultures took up real estate on the sandy strip: water activities took place east of the lifeguard stand while nearby, young people in crop tops gossiped. Further west, families popped up their beach tents. There were the ravers, the rowers, the construction guys on lunch, the hapless bylaw officers trying and failing to catch drinkers. And me.

On the sand, I searched for something to do—swim, read, respond to emails. I'd long given up on reading at the beach; the books would just get sand-filled, and reading is itself a devotion to the activity of the mind, she says philosophically with, like, an Austrian accent. If anything, all I'd done was take Productivity out so it could practice its backstroke.

So, instead of looking for things to do, I just looked—and listened. Teenage gossip remains incoherent and extremely fascinating. Toddlers wobbled towards birds. The ravers knew the bylaw officers' schedule.

So, instead of looking for things to do, I just looked —and listened.

Sitting on a towel in the sun, I could finally see it. It is hard, after all the work Productivity has put in, to choose to produce nothing. I had to work on not working until I developed a new habit: doing absolutely nothing at all. I forgot about being late to the beach.

Vicky Mochama is a writer and editor. Her work has appeared in The Walrus, Hazlitt, The Globe & Mail, *and* The Washington Post. ››

BY ZOE WHITTALL

My fantasy involved vintage quilts on lumpy beds and deer peering in the window at dawn

I didn't learn about cottage culture until I moved to Toronto from Montreal in my 20s and encountered the Cottage, the proper noun. As far as I knew, the Cottage didn't really exist anywhere else in Canada. I worked in a store and a co-worker would say, "I'm going up to the Cottage this weekend." Which cottage? I would wonder, quietly. It reminded me of how in the LGBTQ+ community we say "Are you going to the Bar?" even when we live in a city with thousands of bars.

The first thing I noticed about Toronto was the wider disparity between rich and poor. I arrived during the Harris years to house-sit with a friend I'd met at Concordia University. Our class differences weren't that noticeable in our shared Montreal apartment. But in Toronto, our differences were stark.

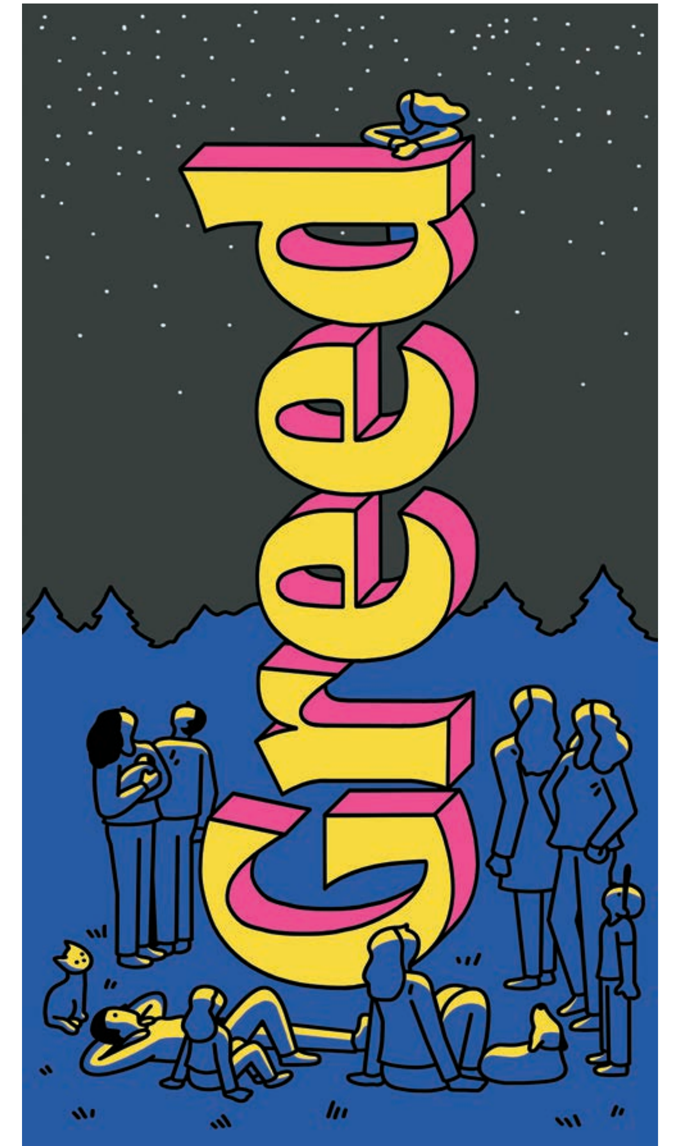
In my late 20s, I was finally invited to the Cottage in Muskoka, by a partner's friend. It was a beautiful log cabin that her great-grandfather had built himself, now surrounded by million dollar houses. Despite the permanent soundtrack of jet skis charging around an otherwise pristine lake, I sat on the dock as the sun set and made it my life's mission to own a cottage. To be able to say, "Want to come up to the cottage?" to someone. Some people who don't have money aspire to own a home, a fancy car, or to go on first-class vacations. But my fantasy involved vintage quilts on lumpy beds, deer peering in the bedroom window at dawn, softwood walks, summer salads on an expansive deck, and tan lines from afternoons reading on the dock. I began to collect things that would look cute in a cottage, like a girl in the 1950s with a hope chest. Of course, as a single writer with no family inheritance, this is an impossible dream. And so I rent cottages and pretend. And whenever a group of my friends get together I inevitably ask, so, what if we pooled our money and bought a cottage?

At the start of the pandemic, I convinced two good friends to try. But it turns out even three people with middle class incomes cannot qualify for a cottage on a lake in Ontario. Mortgage brokers humored us. But we only qualified for lake-adjacent cabins, or "tear downs" on the swampy ends of lakes too far from the city to be worth it. This is simply the plight of my generation. And so it remains a fantasy. But so much of life in the pandemic is fantasy-based—the food we'll eat at restaurants, the places we'll travel, the pleasures of life in a state of suspension.

One evening early on in the pandemic, frustrated by the lack of options on Tinder, I changed my settings from Toronto to global. By the end of the night, I was messaging with James, a handsome trans guy from Philly. I don't normally set out to have long-distance crushes, but with no sense of when travelling might be an option again, it seemed harmless to make a connection this way. Plus, I'm a queer femme, with a penchant for trans men and butches. (I once pointed to a rack of plaid shirts in a store and said, "That's my sexual orientation.") After 20 years in Toronto, I felt as though I'd already met everyone in the community. James was married, but open. I was in an open relationship too, but still so heartbroken from the break-up of a previous long-term relationship that I didn't want anything serious. Eventually James and I decided that when COVID-19 was over, we'd rent a cottage halfway between our cities. And then we spent months describing what we'd do. Fireplace. Outdoor hot tub. Summer salads. And more specifically, what we'd do to each other.

The Cottage became a repository not just for moneyed aspirations, but a site to escape my small, solo apartment in a city seething with disease and despair, with a lover who worked a frontline job, which meant that we couldn't see each other. These beautiful little cabins became the settings for a future where I could relax in the arms of someone who also longed for an escape filled with lust, pleasure, and comforts. The Cottage, then, was a repository for all the fantasies of an easier life. I'm still hoping for midnight skinny dipping, and forest fantasies, for a break in the clouds.

Zoe Whittall is an acclaimed novelist, poet, and TV writer. Her forthcoming novel, The Spectacular, *will be published this summer.*



BY EVA HOLLAND

The parcel of land was posted for sale on a small B.C. town's Kijiji page. A friend sent it to me, and I opened the email while I was riding a ferry on my way home to Whitehorse from a sea kayaking trip. I was filled, as I always am after days spent in the wilderness, with a renewed determination to build my life around the things that I love most: hiking, paddling, and being outdoors. I wanted less screen time and more starlight, less pavement and more peace.

It was a little postage-stamp lot, cleared and ready to build on, with a truly magnificent lake-and-mountains view from its front corner if you stood almost along the road, or from the back corner if you built something with a second storey. If I gutted my meager RRSPs, emptied my savings, and put the last few thousand on my line of credit, just until the next pay cheques rolled in, I could—barely—afford it.

Reader, I bought the land.

I spent the fall and winter of late 2019 and early 2020 daydreaming about the possibilities: all the things I would do

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when my little parcel had thawed out. I knew I couldn't afford to build yet, but maybe I could start with an outhouse, to make camping more comfortable? Should I buy an old travel trailer and park it? Throw up a glorified shed, a rough bunkhouse, to start? Maybe I should plant raspberry bushes, so they'd be fruiting by the time I had a dwelling put up. Or maybe all I needed was to rig up a hammock?

I imagined a life spent shuttling between a cozy condo in the city and a cabin on my land. I pictured myself becoming a person who gardens, grows vegetables, tending to raised beds in the long days of sub-Arctic summer sun. Or the kind of woman who rises with the dawn and takes a cold-water swim to start her day, instead of groggily rolling over to grab her phone and scroll through Twitter; the kind who paddles an SUP through the quiet at dusk, instead of Netflixing *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* for the eleventh time.

I wanted to do everything with that land. I wanted it to be everything.

But in March, the pandemic hit long before the frost released its hold. And then, with the pandemic, came the news stories about cottagers fleeing the cities for their rural second homes. I couldn't entirely blame them for seeking space, but suddenly my dream-future felt uncomfortable. COVID-19 had thrown so many of our societal inequities into sharper-than-ever relief. Access to land, to outdoor space, had never seemed more essential—or more out of reach for too many.

Was it greedy of me to want it all? The urban life when I chose it—with take-out dinners and fancy donuts and an ever-present selection of craft beers—and the rural life when I found time to get away? I was hardly picturing building a mansion—a one-room dry cabin with a little sleeping loft, to capture that view, was more like it. But suddenly it felt extravagant, maybe even ugly. I wrestled with my own thoughts: didn't I want the land, after all, to build a healthier, quieter, saner life? Was buying the land to change my life any different than believing a new pair of boots would solve my problems?

I don't have an answer yet—or an outhouse. I decided to wait out the pandemic before doing anything. But I've since learned that Christian teachings pair a key virtue with each of the deadly sins. Greed's is charity, or generosity. Maybe there's the seed of an answer there, about working to improve those inequities in wilderness access: that whatever I build in the end, I find a way to share.

Eva Holland is a correspondent for Outside *magazine, and the author of* Nerve: A Personal Journey Through the Science of Fear.

BY MARK SCHATZKER

Is there a more embarrassing, vulgar, judgment-inducing piece of kitchen equipment than a deep fryer? Compared to boiling, grilling, steaming or braising, deep frying is the racist uncle of food preparation.

Is it ever okay to own a deep fryer? The answer is yes—at a cottage.

Having a deep fryer in the city is tacky and also medically inadvisable, not to mention culinarily lazy. Coating your food in a high-calorie armour of carbs and fat is about as impressive as fishing with dynamite or lighting a campfire with napalm.

Yet for reasons that elude me, the rules of socially acceptable kitchen equipment change when that kitchen is perched on the edge of a deep blue lake. Our cottage cooking arsenal also includes an electric Teflon griddle, a smoker, an ice cream maker, an electric rotisserie barbecue attachment, and a sandwich press.

It didn't start out this way. For the first decade or two, the point of owning a cottage seemed to be just keeping the thing standing—staining the pump house, clearing the eaves, chopping wood, and digging-out the grey water pit—all punctuated by the seasonal ritual of replacing the foot valve. We ate, of course. But we didn't, you know, *eat*.

That began to change in the early '90s when my father, acting on some new and fabulous impulse—did he see the late night infomercial for Ron Popeil's 5-in-1 turkey fryer?—purchased the first deep fryer. Between lakeside chores, we found the time to peel, cut, and fry our own french fries. It took around two decades, but eventually the whole point of the cottage changed.

It hit me while I was sharing some cottage pics with a friend from California. "It's beautiful," he said. "What do you do there?"

I didn't know what to say. We do all sorts of things—kayak, windsurf, swim, hike, fish. But are any of those things the point of a cottage? You could go to the cottage and do none of those things and it would still qualify as a trip to the cottage. If a ski chalet is for skiing, what is a cottage for?

"We eat," I told him.

We eat things that one might well eat in the city. But the cottage features a day-to-day density of indulgence that would just be, well, wrong in an urban context. Around the middle of this past July, for example, we found ourselves in the midst of a typical run of culinary greatest hits. One night we had spareribs with Caesar salad and, what else, french fries. The day prior, we had grilled octopus with romano beans braised in olive oil, sage, and garlic. Two days prior, I spent ten hours smoking a beef brisket. But that night, it was spareribs. I pulled a chunk of meat off the bone, chewed and swallowed and then looked at my wife and said, "So tomorrow night. I was thinking we could do fresh tagliatelle with prosciutto, cream, and peas. And then we can do the chicken pot pie on Thursday, and my brother can bring up fresh sea bream Friday."

We were halfway through dinner and already we were talking about the next

There we were, halfway through one dinner and already we were talking about the next, and the next after that, and the next after that.

There is a word for this, one that's even worse than "deep fryer." That word is gluttony. The dictionary defines it as, "habitual excess in eating." Excess of any sort is bad. Habitual badness is worse. And the habitual and excessive eating of delicious food is, well, do we really need to dwell on this?

Am I a glutton? The answer, I'm afraid, is yes. Guiltily and unreservedly. But only at the cottage.

Award-winning food and travel writer Mark Schatzker's newest book, The End of Craving: Recovering the Lost Wisdom of Eating Well *comes out in November.*