

Healing the Land and Healing the Self: Stonehaven Farm

Morning sunlight softens the sky, a baptismal dew settles in the air, and Cindy Thornton rises to feed the animals. With each step, her rubber muck boots disappear into the marshy grass, a methodic squish and pull from the front porch to the barn. Stonehaven Farm is nestled between neat fields of corn and soybean on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, but contrary to the neighboring rows of yellow and green, Stonehaven exists in diverse abundance. Cardinals fly between forsythias, spring peepers create a chorus of croaks throughout the swampy meadow, and the resinous smell of pine needles carries through the air. At Stonehaven, the animals eat first. The miniature pony stomps her hooves, the chickens scratch the ground, the heifers buck and run along the fence, and the dog jumps at Cindy's feet while she prepares a big, farm style breakfast.

Cindy is a wire-thin, but strong woman. She wears a light-grey t-shirt that reads "Live Simply" across the chest and her camouflaged baseball cap is well-worn. Her hands are bony and dexterous from years of milking cows. Blue veins pop and swim down from her forearms to her knuckles, creating a pattern that resembles the venation of insect wings. Her skin smells like sweat, sweet oats, and lemons. The bottoms of her jeans are dampened by wet grass as she briskly walks from farm chore to farm chore.

Her body is mapped by memory and nature, old pains and happy beginnings. For twenty-five years, it seemed as though Cindy was stuck inside her body. Or rather, she was stuck inside a psychologically and physically abusive marriage that made it seem like there was no hope. For twenty-five years, Cindy lived in a suburban house in Clarksville, Maryland with her husband and two children, Kathy and Steven.

Cindy doesn't like to talk about the past. She remembers feeling like a shell, stuck inside a hopeless house and admits that she can't drive through her old neighborhood without feeling physically ill.

"I know that I stayed in that house too long," Cindy admits.

"But I couldn't leave. Not until I knew my kids were grown and safe on their own."

In the house, Cindy used to sit at a grand piano and allow her fingers to dance across the keys, but as her husband became more controlling, he forbade her from playing at will. He told her that she could only play "if she was certain that she wouldn't make any mistakes." Cooped up in a house where mistakes were forbidden, Cindy searched for a way out. In 2003, she began working at a conventional dairy farm located about fifteen minutes from her house. Cindy didn't come from a farming family, but when she was seven years old, she confidently proclaimed to her parents that: "someday, I'll be a farmer."

At the dairy farm, she worked a round-the-clock schedule: milking cows, mucking stalls, and driving tractors; it was grueling. The work got her out of the house, but the farm wasn't the escape she was expecting. Her boss worked her to the bone, and it seemed like she and the cows were being beat down by a mechanical, patriarchal system.

Physically exhausted from work on the dairy farm and mentally spent over her marriage, Cindy filed for divorce in 2014. In 2016, she purchased land in Millington, Maryland. She found her "safe place on Big Stone Rd." and named her new home "Stonehaven."

Cindy purchased roughly twenty acres of degraded, lifeless land. The barn's roof was caving in, there was a wrecked shed, and the ranch-style house was full of mold. The previous owner, a woman in her late seventies, had exclusively grown soybeans, and this lack of diversity made the soil hard. When asked why she didn't rotate the crops with corn to help heal the soil

structure, the woman said she was “afraid of strange men hiding in the corn stalks.” This was the land that would break Cindy out of her shell. The land at Stonehaven was abused, but Cindy felt that she could heal it, and she thought this therapeutic process of regeneration would help her reclaim her independence, her confidence, and her happiness.

The pond at Stonehaven vibrates with wildlife—from frogs and turtles to the occasional blue heron. As Cindy admires the purples and yellows of snakeroot and goldenrod that border the pond, she notices the shadow of a large beaver gliding across the water. Cindy’s neighbors warn her about beavers’ destructive habits, how they will ruin the water and the pond’s structure. They tell her to shoot the beaver. A few days after this interaction, excessive rainfall washes out part of Cindy’s pond. A few days after that, Cindy finds a dam built over the damaged part of the pond, essentially mending the broken structure. She admires the beaver’s handiwork and gives a low whistle. “The beaver fixed the pond.”

Back with her husband, Cindy was forbidden from playing the piano because “of the possibility that I would make a mistake.” Hypothetical imperfection left Cindy feeling hollow and silent. Now, in her house at Stonehaven, she sits down at an old piano and plays without thinking. The wood-paneled walls warm the room and absorb any missed-notes that she plays.

Leaving any long-term relationship is easier said than done. Cindy remembers weighing her options the day she left her husband: “If I stay, I’m not going to make it. If my plan to leave doesn’t work, I’m in big trouble. I’m terrified but leaving is my only chance.”

“My mom is the strongest person I know,” Cindy’s daughter, Kathy, says. “Through healing and caring for others, she has begun to recognize this amazing power in herself and she has started to heal herself too.”

Cindy prefers not to talk about the past in detail. She has trouble putting into words what it was like to be in an abusive relationship, but when words fail to describe her pain, nature speaks for her. The land absorbs her wordlessness. Its vocabulary consists of the winds’ sharpness and the insects’ buzz; these things reverberate through the land and remind Cindy that she is alive.

Cindy watches sunlight capture and spin drifting horsehair and feels the steam from the compost pile. Stonehaven is home to many animals. Amongst her farming friends, Cindy has gained a reputation for adopting miscellaneous barn animals. From Ginny the unwanted pig to Ivy the unsocialized goat, she has a soft spot for neglected souls. While her farm provides a safe haven for animals, she dreams of eventually “bringing abused women onto the land.” So many women face countless societal barriers when escaping an abusive relationship, such as feeling fear and uncertainty when navigating the outside world. Cindy could provide them a safe space to heal. She imagines Stonehaven Stepping Stones: “a healing program to help women get back on their feet.” The land has given so much to Cindy and she wants others to share in its reciprocity.

In the darkness of early morning, the moon clinging onto remnants of night, Cindy sees the whites of her pony’s eyes and feels the glow of new beginnings radiate onto her skin. When she realized that nature could provide an alternative form of therapy, she sought out Christina Canas-Stinchcomb, who owns Airy Hill Stables in Chestertown, Maryland. Christina practices

the Equine Gestalt Coaching Method, a healing method that invites horses to be our partners in the process of personal growth. Christina's voice is raspy and purposeful, it's the kind of voice that could lull you into meditation. She describes horses as "the lightworkers" that "pull energy out of the person" and ground them in the present moment. This grounding moment aligns our bodies in the physical *now* and creates moments of release. When asked what is so special about horses, Christina sighs and goes silent for a while before responding. "They are not tied to time. Horses exist in the present moment, there are no hypotheticals."

Cindy visits Christina and stands in the middle of a fenced arena with an untied horse. The horse ignores Cindy and walks to the edge of the fence, gazing longingly at the other horses grazing in open fields. For years, Cindy felt "isolated from the outside world;" she was "trapped inside and looking out." Christina says that horses offer up their own wisdom, and that humans simply need to "breathe, listen, and allow the body to receive." In that moment, Cindy learns to embody the horse. She unties herself from time, steps towards the horse, and receives.

Holistic healing and nature therapy are often dismissed as unconventional or illegitimate practices, but studies have shown that nature can help us tap into our true awareness and reconnect with our bodies. This method of therapy has been explored by scientists, philosophers, and writers for centuries. Christina has spent years studying the Gestalt Method and notes that horses are "very much in their bodies," and that they help us access our parasympathetic nervous system, which is "where the healing happens." Modern medicine, specifically when it comes to mental health, often values the fast-acting results of a simple pill, valuing results over progress. This mentality discounts our natural connection with our bodies, whereas nature therapy values the body's inherent wisdom.

When Cindy moved to Stonehaven, she was afraid of failure. She knew that healing the land and healing herself would take a lot of work. She learned how to drive a tractor, haul a trailer, bush hog a field, wield a chainsaw. The more she tried new things, the more empowered she felt. The more she listened to the land and facilitated biodiversity, the more attuned she felt to her own self.

“Every woman should drive a tractor at least once,” she says with a dimpled smile and hands on her narrow hips. Goosebumps pattern her bare arms as she gestures to the space around her, as if to say, “Look at where I am. How could I not be at peace here?”

She looks up at the sturdy woodlands and swaying grasses that surround her home, and her blue-green eyes steal solace from the trees.