

From the *Concord Monitor*:

# A Post-Petroleum World

On this Andover farm, little worry about fuel or food prices

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With gas at \$4 per gallon, most people in New Hampshire can feel their wallets draining along with their car tanks. Not Nelson Lebo. He doesn't have a car. He's not worried about the cost of home heating oil either. And soaring food prices? Not much of a problem.

Lebo, 40, lives in the woods of Andover in a 1782 farmhouse that he has dubbed Pedal Power Farm. He heats it with wood cut from the property. He gets around on a bicycle. He grows much of his own food and buys locally otherwise. He gets his electricity from solar panels.

Lebo is no typical homesteader, content to stay tucked away in the woods, living off his land. He thinks he has ideas the rest of us could use. And he's ready to share them.

"I've been living in a post-petroleum world for the last 18 years," he said. "Everyone else is going to start living in a post-petroleum world next year."

Lebo has been a fixture in Andover since he was hired to run Proctor Academy's environmental program in 1991. He stopped working at the private school last year because of a herniated disk, but he still manages the organic gardens there. He was a part-time dorm parent this year.

But his teaching days are far from over. Let Lebo talk, and he will engage you for hours – he verges on ranting – about energy policy, American consumerism and the design principles around which he has built his life. One thing you won't hear much of is a holier-than-thou attitude.

He said he doesn't want to make people feel guilty about how they live. (He pointed out that he wears his hair in a crew cut and used to coach football, evidence of his own mainstream credibility.) He wants to encourage people to live differently. That, he said, is his "duty and obligation."

He and girlfriend Dani Lejniaks are moving to New Zealand this summer, where Lebo will pursue a doctorate in environmental education, looking at how to apply permaculture principles – which say that human societies can be designed to mimic natural systems – to education.

Lebo thinks people should have less of an impact on the Earth as they become better educated. The way he sees it, most people become bigger consumers as they become bigger earners.

During his last few weeks in Andover, Lebo has been holding seminars at the farm, inviting a few people at a time to see how he lives. He has gone to some attendees' homes afterward, charging \$40 per hour, to help them find ways

to conserve energy. Some of his clients have been focused on living greener. Others want to save money.

Lebo said he used to call himself an environmentalist.

"Now I tell people I'm an economist," he said. "And not only that, I'm a conservative economist."

After years of being perceived as "just the kook at the end of the road," he said, his ideas – his way of living – are in high demand.

"It feels like my whole life has come to this moment," he said.

## A "Lazy Farmer"

Modern society has been designed around fossil fuels, Lebo said as he stood in front of his home on a recent sunny afternoon. But those fuels are running out.

"We, as a culture, will look back in 100 years and curse the designers," he said.

A moment earlier, he was praising one designer: the man who built his Old College Road home 226 years ago. He noted that the house, which he bought eight years ago, faces southeast, so the first rays of morning sun hit the front windows. The chimney in the center of the Cape-style home heats the whole house and is insulated from the cold.

The road in from Route 11 climbs a hill past several large, regal Victorian homes and sweeping green fields. It turns to dirt and narrows once and then twice, becoming bumpy and dark under the thick canopy of trees. The road crests a hill and continues into the small valley where the farm sits.

Lebo said gravity does most of the work when he's hauling wood cut from the hills.

"Everything can be designed," he said.

Inside the home, Lebo has left antique wallpaper on some walls and painted others bright colors. They are hung with prints of paintings by Picasso and Warner's David Carroll. A poster of Scott Nearing, peace activist, economist, and co-author of *Living the Good Life*, a catalyst of the 1960s back-to-the-earth movement, hangs near the kitchen.

Behind the house sits a bright, clean outhouse hung with dried flowers. He built the adjacent barn for about \$1,000, using mostly salvaged materials. A few of the largest beams Lebo hand-hewed from trees on the property. He wanted to feel what it was like for the man who built his house.

Near the front of the house is a plot of garlic that he sells to local bed-and-breakfasts and gives as gifts to friends. Two old bathtubs sit uphill at the ends of the rain gutters. On dry days, Lebo runs tubing to the garlic plants and lets gravity do the watering.

Behind the house are six raised garden beds and a compost bin, which he fills with leaves, llama manure, and coffee grounds collected from Jake's Market in town.

Between the garlic, consulting, and

his work at Proctor, Lebo was able to piece together the \$12,000 or so he needed this year to pay for health insurance, home insurance, property taxes, and daily living expenses. (He bought his home for \$120,000 cash, so there's no mortgage to pay.) He said much of his wage-earning efforts are spent finding ways to avoid costs.

Lebo stores vegetables, dairy products, and leftovers in the cellar instead of the fridge. He uses the stove in his kitchen only rarely. In the winter, he cooks on a woodstove. When it's warm and sunny, he uses a solar stove that he picked up while teaching in Ladakh, India.

The stove is like a large metal bowl with a rack in the middle. Angle the bowl toward the sun and put a black pot on the rack and the pot will get hot enough to cook rice, soup, pasta sauce – just about everything.

Lebo said he doesn't have the attention span to stand at the stove for hours stewing tomatoes to be canned. But he'll set up the stove while he's weeding the garden. Each time he passes by, he will quarter a tomato into the pot. When the weeding is done, the tomatoes are ready. For the dozens of shortcuts he has like that, he calls himself a "lazy farmer." Efficient might be the better adjective.

When it comes to transportation, he is certainly not lazy. He has owned a car from time to time but rarely drove it unless he had a load to haul. Every dollar he spends on fossil fuel-powered transportation he matches with a dollar to a conservation group.

Mostly he rides his bike – to Proctor, to Concord (that's 24 miles one way), to the farmers market with a load of vegetables trailered behind him and, once, to the emergency room with a gash on his head.

The section of road in front of his home isn't plowed by the town. In winter, when he's not traveling, he skis or snowshoes out to a bike stored where he can pick up the cleared road.

When he went to Nicaragua last winter, he packed a disassembled bicycle in a duffel bag and checked it on the plane. He rides slowly when visiting a client's house to avoid getting sweaty, he said.

Lebo grew up in the car capital of Detroit. Even as a teenager, he never wanted a car.

"There's no better paradox than that," he said.

## "Ahead Of The Curve"

Of course, a family of four can't rely on bikes. But they can minimize the miles they travel with careful planning, he said. They can put up window blankets in the winter to keep heat in and close the shades in the summer to keep the sun's heat out. They can grow some of their own food and make smart choices about what they buy.

Sandee Waine of Andover recently went to one of Lebo's seminars. She made some changes at her own home afterward. She positioned some old trash barrels under her gutters to collect water for the garden. She started a compost pile. She's in the process of replac-

ing her too-big propane furnace with a smaller propane stove. And, she said, she bought a bike.

Just before taking up a scythe to cut down the dandelions in his yard on a recent morning, Lebo said his whole life philosophy could be summed up by weeding: React before they become a problem, before they go to seed.

"Eight years ago, I was reacting to an energy crisis when people were saying to me, 'What are you doing? There is no crisis,'" he said.

Back then, the idea of "sustainable living" was a radical one. Now it's an economical one. It's common sense.

Today, Lebo's thinking about regenerative living, making less power do more. It's like riding a bike, he said. Bikes are three times more efficient than walking, so a person can produce more – in this case, miles traveled – with the same number of calories burned.

Someday, depleted fossil fuel reserves will turn "regenerative living" into common sense. By then, he said, he might be onto a new idea.

He and Lejniaks, who just resigned as a Spanish teacher at Proctor, are hoping to sell the farm and someday open a school in Nicaragua that brings holistic environmental education to kids across the socioeconomic spectrum.

Lejniaks calls Lebo "Soso," which means "different" in Ladakhi. She said he's good at being the big thinker. She grounds him, she said.

"If you look at the most revolutionary thinkers, they're always going ahead of the curve," Lejniaks said. "I think this is what he's been waiting for, for 20 years."

Coleen O'Connell was Lebo's adviser at Lesley University's Audubon Expedition Institute, where he earned a master's degree in ecological teaching and learning. She said Lebo is someone who lives his ideals.

"There are Nelson Lebos everywhere, in pockets all over America," she said. "He's not one of a kind... They're there, but they're living lives and making almost these quiet contributions in ways that are unheralded."

Lebo's lifestyle certainly embodies his beliefs. But there is practicality to it, too.

"I'm peak-oil proof," he said.

## The Practical Nutritionist



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