

WHY AM I CRYING OVER A BIODYNAMIC ONION?

JOHN BLOOM

Right, why am I, a grown man, crying over a biodynamic onion? First, this is a good sign. Onions with biodynamic vitality will get to you just as quickly as that “other brand,” but I am convinced the tears are more inspired. Actually, the reason I was cutting the onions was to make a hearty green-leaf winter soup. As I was crying, thinking I ought to be more emotional to justify the tears, I actually got emotional. It all started not with the soup, but with a meeting this last Saturday morning with Steven and Gloria, the founding farmers of Live Power Community Farm (LPCF) in Covelo, California. Much of the discussion was focused on them, the future of the farm, local economies of Covelo in relation to the distance from San Francisco, and all the aspects of transitioning the farming to the next generation. That was a whole lot for me to take in on a Saturday, even with good company.

So, if I may, I would put on the brakes and say that the emotional well-stream actually has its source nearly twenty-one years ago when I was first introduced to Steven and Gloria by a mutual friend, Kathy Gower. Out of this meeting hatched the LPCF community supported agriculture (CSA) program, with a formative (and formidable) group from San Francisco. Since then we have sorted in garages, homes, a vegetable warehouse, and now the Presidio Native Plant Nursery. This is not to wax nostalgic, but rather to indicate the quality of sustaining and the increasing complexity that have grown up in and around the CSA. The sustaining element has remained the core principle of community farming, that the members actually share the cost and risk of the farm and farmers. The relationship between the farmer and consumer is as direct and real as possible (short of living in Covelo or on the farm itself). Some of the complexity has grown as the LPCF farmers have coordinated more crop diversity through CSA shares with other farms such as Good Humus, and then also created share portions and bulk buying opportunities for biodynamic produce from others such as Filigreen Farm. One result of the complexity has been increasingly challenging sorts at the consumer end, and more coordination headaches at the farmer end—all for good purpose, right livelihood, and

nutritious food.

Back to the tears. Twenty-one years ago the central issue was how to lift the farmer out of the commodity marketplace that has spelled the end of many small family farms. The goal was to create an economic model (at that time, it was the first in California and maybe the second or third in the United States) that would free the farmers to fulfill their destiny paths of renewing the earth through agriculture and to draw economic support for that from a community which shared that vision and values and was also willing to absorb the true costs of that destiny work in exchange for a share of vegetables. Each member knew that there was no direct way to tie the value of the farming to a cost of the product—meaning that here was a pure economy with no externalized costs. I doubt that there are many shareholders, even current LPCF CSA shareholders, who realize just how precious and rare it is to be part of such a free associational economic form that has biodynamic agriculture at its heart.

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Twenty-one years ago, the CSA concept was quite new to the United States. Since then, the number has grown to something like 1,400 CSA groups in 2006. However, what is called a CSA does not have a singular practice or an agreed set of standards. It can range from the 100% “shared risk, direct connection to the farmer and farming” model, as we have in LPCF, to a “web-based, subscription to a distributor, deliver to your door” approach, as exemplified by Organic Express. So the founding associative concept of CSA, in which the farmer received direct support from the community served, has morphed into many meanings. On one hand, when you hear such growth in the number of CSAs, it could seem like a movement. On the other, it is most decidedly not, simply because CSA is now a generalized economic model that does not prescribe or cultivate specific agricultural practices, shared values, or even really require conscious community beyond that of a consumer group. Relatively few CSAs use biodynamic methods or are Demeter certified Biodynamic (as is LPCF), even fewer restrict their use of fossil fuel (as does LPCF), and even fewer than that—namely *ONE*—



Photos: CSA produce, farm equipment and compost piles, and draft horses in front of stable-mounted solar panels at Live Power Community Farm

use horses and other renewable energy sources because it is the right thing to do for the farm and the earth, not simply because it makes economic sense.

So, if we have to talk about farmer transition, what new young farmers are going to be passionate enough, stubborn enough, strong enough, focused enough, to maintain that idealism and purity (I do not know how else to name it) long enough to demonstrate that Steven and Gloria were right twenty-one years ago? Because of the direction they set, LPCF will still be operating and healthy when much of the rest of agriculture has run out of gas, farmers, local markets, and communities of support for them—and consumers are still wanting produce in quantity and cheaply.

So the onion still makes me cry when I peel back the layers, and the soup pot is getting fuller. There are lots of vegetables in there now just simmering, as I find myself doing. When I contemplate the pure simplicity of LPCF, much of what is wrong with the rest of world starts to emerge in stark contrast. Our food systems are at great risk even though the organic food industry is one of the fastest growing economic sectors. And there are biodynamic production farms, such as Filigreen, that are coming on line to meet the rising demand for good, nutritious, and safe food—food that you will not find any place else. Filigreen, for example, has based its economic model primarily on market demand for a premium product, and it is still determining the scale and scope of that approach. While they would probably not exclude some portion of a CSA share, and very much appreciate the value and values, it has not been central in their planning.

Is one approach better than the other? Is one more pure? Is one wrong, the other right? Now you might see that my soup, tear-seasoned by now, looks a lot like the rest of the agricultural world. If you take the eagle's eye view, we are all in a big soup pot

together. While the eagle may have a preference for one vegetable over another, it would be useless for the vegetables in the broth to assume any hierarchy amongst themselves. The best each can do is to recognize its own characteristics, stay intact in the soup, or contribute them to the stock. The point of this is to say that it will take many different ethical approaches to farming and the land in order to bring some health and sanity into our food-community systems. Provided there is a shared ethical basis (in this case, biodynamic practice and Demeter certification), judging one better than the other is counterproductive. We still have the privileged view of the eagle and can choose based on our preferences. Sitting here in San Francisco, I am wondering if I will continue to have such a privilege when local economies are limited out of necessity to a twenty-mile radius rather than one hundred fifty.

So the tears were not just chemically induced. They stream from the eagle's eye, from a founding CSA member's eyes, from knowing and sympathizing with the work it takes to stay true to core principles against the forces of our time. They stream from admiration, and finally from the same wellspring of Rudolf Steiner's work that brought LPCF into being in the first place. This is not a statement of nostalgia or regret, but rather one of recognition and the reality of change—and a wish for grace in all of it.

In the end, the soup so seasoned with tears at least will not be a laughing stock—though my hope would be that John's green-leaf soup is wittier than that. No, the gravity of the moment calls for the wisdom of community and brotherhood.

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