



BIODYNAMIC
ASSOCIATION

RETHINKING AGRICULTURE

The Farm INDIVIDUALITY

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In biodynamic agriculture, each farm or garden is viewed as an integrated whole, as a living organism in its own right.

Like a human being, a farm is made up of many different organs and systems. When these are managed and brought together in a dynamic way, they interact positively with one another to support the health and well-being of the whole. And like a human being, each farm is unique, with its own personality and identity. The holistic expression of a farm's unique potential is referred to as the "farm individuality."

The farm individuality encompasses soil types and characteristics—such as mineral content, organic matter, and the mix of sand, silt, and clay—as well as forests and meadows, wetlands and cultivated ground, flowering trees and shrubs, domestic and wild animals, buildings and equipment, and human beings living and working on the land. It also includes the history, character, and purpose of the farm as well as more subtle, energetic aspects of the region and landscape.

Biodynamic farmers strive to develop an intimate understanding of each element of the farm, and the creative potential of the farm as a whole. From this understanding they work to bring the elements of the farm into right relationship. This process allows the farm individuality to express itself continuously over time and share its gifts of health and vitality with the local community.

Biodynamic farmers and gardeners work toward balancing the soil and creating a farm individuality that is a self-sustaining whole, where fertility and feed come from within the farm rather than from outside. A closed-loop system has environmental and economic benefits, but there are also more subtle ways in which this approach enlivens the health of farms and gardens.

When manure is used from our own livestock to fertilize our crops, we are keeping nutrients within our farm, as well as creating a feedback loop of subtle communication. The animals and plants on a particular farm share the same environment, the same ecosphere, and the same influences—cosmic, earthly, and human. As an animal eats, she senses and takes in substance from the plants on the farm where she lives, and sends this substance through the complex, living system of her body. In the process, she adds enzymes, bacteria, and other living organisms. She then releases a digested form of the plant with a dose of her own essence, as well as a "message" about what is needed to bring that field into greater balance and vitality.

We can then take this manure—this already digested plant material that has now been infused with animal life and an animal's sensitivity—and further develop it through composting. By creating compost and adding the biodynamic preparations, the whole process is taken to the next level of life, stimulating the vitality.

"Now, a farm comes closest to its own essence when it can be conceived of as a kind of independent individuality, a self-contained entity. In reality, every farm ought to aspire to this state of being a self-contained individuality. This state cannot be achieved completely, but it needs to be approached. This means that within our farms, we should attempt to have everything we need for agricultural production, including, of course, the appropriate amount of livestock. From the perspective of an ideal farm, any fertilizers and so forth that are brought in from outside would indeed have to be regarded as remedies for a sickened farm. A healthy farm would be one that could produce everything it needs from within itself."

—Rudolf Steiner in the Agriculture Course,
June 1924

"I believe that building the 'farm organism' and incorporating compost are essential foundations in which the biodynamic preparations can reach their full potential in weaving together the material (earthly) and cosmic (planetary) influences. The farmer or gardener's spiritual development consists in working within these realms as participant, observer, and orchestrator. I feel I'm co-evolving with the farm as I develop the sensitivity to understand what is needed and what to do, abandoning the failures and creating new solutions to adapt to an ever-changing environment."

—Janet Gamble, Turtle Creek Gardens



“I have a feeling that I, as an aspiring human being, will get a better and better sense of who I am as an individual the more I can really be connected to the rest of the world. The same could be said about a farm: the more completely and deeply it is tied into its environment (cosmic and terrestrial), the closer it will get to becoming a farm individuality. Many of the biodynamic practices support that—especially the preparations, livestock, and compost.”

—Steffen Schneider, Hawthorne Valley Farm

“When we saw an infestation of thistle in our pastures, we asked: Why is this plant here? What is this plant trying to communicate about the soil, about the way we graze our cattle, and about the way we are using the biodynamic preparations, horn silica in particular? We also asked: What is this plant indicating about the way we are interacting with this land and with each other?”

We studied the plant itself, physically, artistically, meditatively. We studied the soil, the field history, the folklore around the plant. And we also studied ourselves. A year later we have changed our land management techniques and, upon reflection, we have also changed our selves.”

—Laura Riccardi Lyvers, Foxhollow Farm

As the composted manure is returned to the fields, the soil receives both nutrients and valuable information, which brings enhanced vitality to the food grown on the farm.

When seeing a farm as a whole organism, the view of weeds, pests, and diseases changes. Each of these becomes a valuable messenger, revealing an imbalance in the farm and inviting us to correct that underlying imbalance. A weed might tell us that our soil has become too compacted; a fly infestation in our cow herd might tell us that we need more wild birds on the farm. Although short-term solutions to manage these problems may be necessary, the biodynamic approach emphasizes learning from these problems and changing management practices to increase the health of the garden or farm as a whole.

To create a healthy farm individuality, it is also crucial to work with the plants and animals towards adaptation and localization of a given place. The aim is to save as much seed as possible, so the expression of the place is embodied by the plants. Another goal is to “close” a herd of animals so that the genetic base is improving in relation to the place where the herd lives. When animals eat crops from their own farm, out of a soil and mineral complex that has received enlivened fertility through compost and manure from the farm, a subtle but real connection and communication among all the parts of the whole can be noticed. In essence, the natural landscape has been guided towards the creation of an organism that has to some extent the ability to be self-regulating.

As the human population has grown and technology has increased our ability to extract resources from the Earth, many of us have deep questions about how humanity can continue living on our Earth in a healthy way. The art of working with the abundance and limitations that exist within a closed farm organism is a microcosm of how we might live within the abundance and limitations of our planet.

While a biodynamic farm strives to be self-sustaining and in some ways self-contained, it is not closed to the world. Tremendous energy streams into the farm daily from the sun and stars, and rain and wind bring water and minerals. A similar generosity and abundance is expressed from the farm individuality toward the wider world when the farm is healthy. Embedded in the farm individuality is life-giving potential, not merely to avoid exploitation, but to offer rejuvenation.



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