

TAKING LIFE SERIOUSLY

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This article is based on a presentation given by bison rancher Devon Strong at the 2015 International Biodynamic Conference in Dornach, and will be included in an upcoming book by Devon.

THE REALITY OF ANIMALS BEING FOOD (medicine) for people involves killing them, by the thousands in commercial processing. Consciousness is a physical condition related to living, and eliminating it painlessly is the point in turning a living animal into product to be consumed.

Recognizing consciousness in animals as a continuum of group soul connections, as well as the individual who is connected to family, involves the farmer looking at why animals are on the farm. Certainly for producing income for the farm, they must reproduce and live healthy lives. In biodynamics, there is the consideration of integrating the other senses. The animals' contribution is integral to the spiritual sheath that holds life forces on the farm. The grazing animals cover the farm physically in search of food, and their harvest of plants prunes the growth and stimulates regrowth, harvesting, digesting, and returning microbes, as well as essence, to the land.

The grazing animals need a family to reproduce—bull, cows, and calves, or ram, ewes, and lambs. The

conscious choices a farmer makes in selecting livestock are based on his or her lifestyle and the land's capacity to support it, while the farmer's unconscious/super-conscious is also aware of the spiritual needs, leading the mind in selecting what kind of farming we do. Our animals lead a string of annual events based on the plants, controlled by weather. We contribute as little as possible, so the decision of what animals we have is crucial to the kind of life we share. The more we interfere with the natural lives of farm animals, the more we take away from their healthy instincts.

Modern farms don't have family units. Bulls are in one pasture; mother cows are separated from feedlot calves, heifers, and fat steers—all tuned to the music of selling products. These feedlots and dairies are the epitome of modern farming, but also the source of concentrating negative life forces, creating more problems than we can solve.

The farmer chooses who lives and who dies: natural selection is now his or her option. Keeping sick lambs alive, or treating injured animals, seems to be normal



on most farms today. A healthy farm should not have that problem. Accidents are preventable, health is the highest achievement, and choosing to raise animals requires the knowledge and experience to take care of problems before they happen.

That is what we try to accomplish. I select mothers who raise their own young (ones that have problems or won't take care of babies have no place), as well as make minimal efforts to recover sick animals. Injuries are usually my own fault for not having repaired a dangerous situation. We keep the farm healthy by recycling, renewing the soil with biodynamic preps and compost, renewing the blood lines, harvesting the fruits of our labor, and culling the sick and old animals. As caretakers, it is our place to recognize disease and know remedies. The herd/flock also recognizes a disease in an individual, and our observation makes us aware that they are behaving differently towards an individual. Recognizing that individual and treating it is our responsibility, spending time and money to repair what is wrong is a careful decision regarding whether to save the individual or to take care of the group. In many cases, it is the group that needs care, at the cost of the individual life. If the healing is not extensive or expensive, the individual can return, but in many cases it is death that results.

There are the healthy young animals that stand tribute for our farms. To kill these animals is to create a space for the cycle to continue. It is like the stirring of the preps—inspiring and enlivening by our hands the spiritual elements of life to take responsible action in ending the individual life of an animal. My animals and I recognize the loss of the individuality and the emotional suffering at the physical level. When blood is spilled, the earth drinks it spiritually. With my thoughts (prayers), I call out to the generational lines of ancestors to witness, as the animal families recognize that this is not the end but a continuum of cycles. We recognize this transformation of matter into spirit as spirit is transformed into matter. I share this richness of life in the sacrifice of the individual to the spiritual. Without the pain and suffering of birth, we wouldn't have the same transformation at death. Minimizing that pain and suffering is not the point; it is about celebrating the transformation with responsibility and in honor and respect of the gift of life and death.

A blade has a simple purpose, as do pain and suffering, transformational tools with spiritual connotations. As farmers, we hold that transformative power to act as priests at this time—recognizing blood and guts as the reality of transformation, that moment of birth and death as a germination of spiritual action, like the spraying of preps. The butchering of an animal creates an impact of health and help from the farm to the people, which farmer/priests recognize when we take lives to offer that

connection to the herd/flock.

The Buffalo ceremony is inspired by Lakota sweat lodge. After being introduced to the traditional ceremony by full-blood elder, Wallace Blackelk, in the early 1980s, I felt a direct link of spiritual power and, a dozen years later when I started raising bison, used that connection to answer a prayer/question: How do I kill a buffalo with honor and respect? I was given, by spirit, a specific ritual like it was unrolled on a scroll, or a song you repeat as needed: offer these songs; make prayer ties; four days later, with no fear and no anger, smoke the sacred pipe, and the one will be ready; and use a blade. Seventy-five buffalo later, it continues to work. I have sometimes used a gun to kill buffalo when someone brings fear or anger and I am at risk. This also happens due to scheduling, when I cannot complete it later and must do it in that timeframe.

The reason for using a blade has been made clear—when those involved are involved in the celebration of the gift of life, rather than the loss of life. When a gun is used, it relates to the loss of consciousness, a tearing of the conscious life forces, in comparison to the relatively gentle loss of consciousness when a blade is used.

Most often, I have killed my buffalo with a spear in a small corral separated from the herd. More recently, I have been doing it with a bow and arrow and with the herd surrounding the animal when it goes down. I make a heart/lung piercing once and start singing traditional honor songs until I can walk up to the animal and place the prayers on it. I use a feather fan to notify the herd that I am doing this while they stand back, with the fresh blood in their noses, and it seems to calm them. The herd is a very closely tied family, a matriarchal structure that is very evident and is reflected in old tribal cultures. Older females lead the decisions except in the breeding season, and the youngest calves are the benevolent focus of the group. Motherhood is the price of admission to the matriarchal decision-making, and the young bulls and heifers are the outer circle, closest to us two-leggeds for the making of medicine that we need. This connection is honored by the matriarchs when I do the ceremony in that, during the days before the kill, the animal I have chosen is usually separated easily and persuaded to come into the corral.

The animal in physical reality does not know what I am asking when I approach it. The action I take is like the spraying of the preps—a physical presentation of spiritual powers—and germination of this energy makes the difference in producing the gift of what the animal/group soul offers, or the sadness of what the archetype/group soul loses. That is the animal consciousness from my point of view.

We all learn, more or less, about our conscious relationship with animals through interaction with pets, and

we recognize the difference in species awareness, as cats and dogs, birds and fish have such different awareness compared to our own. In biodynamic farming, the preparation sheaths hold animal energies that relate to the species as well as the organ that the sheath represents, both cosmically and spiritually. Specifically, with prep #502, stag bladder, I was much impressed with the specifics of its use. When I tried making the #500 prep with different horns from sheep and goats (male), I was dismayed that it didn't work; the material looked the same, but, when viewed with spiritual perception, it held no energy. The animal archetypes of sheep and goats are expressive, not impressive like cows—and, it turns out, like bison also, for when I made my first bison horn manure, I was excited to feel that I had an exceptional result.

Realizing the different energies represented in different species is also needed in the killing of animals. Cows and bison hold a more powerful role and responsibility on earth than do the expressive wild and domestic animals. Most pets and many domestic animals are of the nervous energy and live in physical response, rather than the seasonal response of herd animals. I wonder about the wild African herds and native culture there. The Mongolian horse culture and Tibetan yaks show our human traditional development potential, as do the sacred cows in India. So we have this potential in all places of the world, to live with honor and respect with animals.

The invitation of spiritual influences does not need to be understood. Indeed, it is not understood, as it cannot be defined by rational minds. It is the heart influence, like love, that we as humans can feel that is like the spiritual energy in biodynamics.

The spiritual is invoked, the blade applied. The animal dies consciously, bleeding out, losing consciousness. The physical body/brain dissociates, and finally the heart and lungs exhaust, and it stops. The final spasms are like an attempt at physical escape, the individual's last act. Some are quiet, some kick for a couple minutes—an individual expression given through archetypal fighting or running away. Very like the first breaths and spasms of life, there is a wonderful fulfillment at the birth/death experience when honored with respect and understanding. Then we have the vessel of life, a lifeless body—the intricacies of heart/lung, muscle/bone, hair/hide and the mysteries of endocrinology and the nervous system, blood and guts.

After I have offered song and prayer ties on the horns

with the eagle fan, I let the blood onto the ground (catching some for use) and get my tractor as the herd is also accepting the loss of the individual. I remove the carcass to my outside abattoir, raising the body by the hind legs, and start skinning by opening it tail to throat and across the legs. Once skinned with legs and head removed, I open the body cavity and take out the organs and guts, harvesting the prep sheaths and fat. I let the body cool for a few hours to overnight, and then cut and wrap the meat for freezing until it is sold. I only sell locally, person to person, as a commitment to keeping the circle of life connected from the animal to the consumer, as medicine for the people. I do not ship it or sell it through other handlers. This keeps the medicine intact from the animal consciousness to the human consciousness. Not many of the people who buy it realize the potential of what we do in biodynamics or in the process of making this way of life available, but we still do it because it is a way of life that provides all we need to survive as a species with the planet intact to share with future generations.

I do it this way to offer health and help to the people, animals, and land.

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Devon Strong was raised on cattle ranches in Nevada. He has been a biodynamic farmer for twenty-one years, a bison rancher for seventeen years, and has pursued traditional Lakota studies for thirty. Devon looks forward to his farm becoming certified by Demeter Local this year.

