

(The Sacred Business of Tending the Land)

October 2002

It froze last night in central Minnesota. It was the season's first frost. First frosts mean change. They mark the end of the growing season on a sustainable farm. The maturing process in the grains and vegetables had slowed considerably, with the fading daylight and last week's cooler temperatures. Now it is over. There are only so many "first frosts" of the season in a person's lifetime. That fact leaves me with a sense of sadness. It won't be until next spring that the abundance of life will be back in our gardens. All during the growing season, our farmers have fought to protect their crops from invaders. Weeds, insects, and assorted mammals; Now they prepare to secure the remnants of their crops, and they begin preparing to secure healthy, protective environments for their animals. Winters reality is coming.

Pasture grasses on Whole Farm Co-op farms will remain abundant for some weeks to come. They are much hardier than grains and vegetables, and are barely affected by the first frost. It is a happy time for our farm animals. The insects that have plagued the animals throughout the year, have become a mild annoyance, or are gone altogether, and their struggle for relief from heat and humidity is over for the season. There is a sense of peace, contentment, and abundance in the pastures. Life is good.

This is the first of a regular monthly column on our web page entitled "Seeds of Grace". It's effort will be to help customers and farmers better understand who we are, what we do, and why we are involved in this experience. It will keep you updated with developments that are significant to our production and our market, and it will feature a profile of a different farmer and customer, every month. In this month's column, it is my intent to bring some historical perspective to sustainable farming, through my personal experience.

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I grew up in the fifties and sixties on a sustainable farm near Paynesville in southern Stearns County. We had chickens, dairy cows, beef cattle, hogs and sheep. The predominant feed for our animals was grass from our pastures and hay made in our fields. Our

world was small, and our lives were rich with community, spirituality, and family.

I was a very young teen when they rebuilt the road in front of our yard. It was exciting to watch the heavy equipment move all that dirt. They paved the road the following spring, and I was thrilled that there would be no more road dust on our lawn. What had been a country lane for eighty years, was now a modern highway. Within three weeks however, our terrier Laddie was hit on the road by a speeding truck. I heard the impact and rushed to his aid. He was alive, but his back had been broken. The look in his eyes clearly reflected the question: why? My father drove him to town wrapped in blanket, on the front seat of the sixty-one Ford Galaxy. The "good car" that Laddie the farm dog was not allowed to ride in. My father said a self-conscious good-bye to Laddie, and we went to the waiting room as the veterinarian put him to sleep. I could only work to control the sobs that begged to consume my body. We buried Laddie in the windbreak, under the tallest of the Norway Spruce that my great-grandparents had planted in the eighteen-nineties. I believe Laddie's death was a defining moment in my life, as well as the lives of my brother and sister. I now saw the highway as an intrusion into our safe and simple lives.

That was the same year my Uncle Glen drove on the yard with a large barrel on the back of his ford tractor. Atrazine, he said. It was a chemical that would kill the quack grass but not the corn, and he was on his way to spray his fields. There would no longer be a need to "check" the cornrows for cross cultivating, and I was elated. I hated the dust from cultivating corn. My father however, said no. He was concerned about what the chemical might do to the well water. He resisted agriculture chemicals for many years thereafter. However, he eventually gave in to peer pressure, and the easing of the workload that comes with agricultural chemicals. But several years later, he stopped using them for good. By then, information on their environmental risks was becoming part of public debate, and his initial concerns were being validated. That time was the beginning of the end of sustainable farming in much of central Minnesota. Five and ten acre fields were giving way to forty, eighty, and one hundred and sixty acre fields. With the increase use of chemicals, came larger and larger equipment for farming, and with

that larger equipment went the fence-rows and the thickets. That meant farms expanded in size, and with the help of low crop prices and government subsidies, the larger farmers were able to out-stay the smaller farms, only to be outstayed a few years later by a still larger farmer. That cycle continues today. With the loss of farmers, our small country church could no longer sustain a pastor, and the religious and social center of our community had its doors closed to regular Sunday worship.

When I reflect on my childhood years on our sustainable farm, I see the richness of family and shared community was powerful metaphorical soil. It was the substance that nourished our existence. Whole foods, prepared from scratch, served as family meals, brought full circle our connection to the land and to each other. Our keen understanding of our dependence on the will of the weather and its effects on the natural rhythms kept us finely tuned to the climatic conditions around us. We were taught by our mentors, and regularly reminded of the sanctity of nature. In kind, we learned to live within its flow, rather than to control, manipulate or overpower it. We lived in a world that was full and complete. Though it was our mentors who guided us to an understanding of the pulse of life in the natural world around us, it was that natural world that provided our lessons, freely and in abundance. For sustainable farming to work, it must be practiced within the flow of the cycles of nature. It must adapt to, and merge into, what is sometimes referred to as natural law. Humans have developed over millions of years within the framework of "natural law" or, the natural cycles of life. We have been nourished and sustained by the rains that fall and the sun that shines, on an earth made fertile by the natural decomposition of organic matter, produced by the earth itself. Practical living, with our conscience based in that reality, is our hope for the future. Our opportunity, as customers of the Whole Farm Co-op and its partner organizations, is to stay perpetually conscious of how we make our buying decisions.

Outside of those with a vested interest in "corporate agriculture", I have heard no dissent in the assertion that chemical free and grass fed livestock production is significantly healthier for the eco-system. It is simple. Chemical free pastures that are properly grazed create clean watersheds. Clean watersheds improve

the quality of ground and surface water. Fence rows and plant diversity provides habitat and nurture life. On the other hand, pesticides and excessive fertilizer applications destroy it. Protecting the land from the encroachment of corporate agriculture can be a lonely business. I am acutely aware of that from twenty years of personal experience. Each one of the farmers of the Whole Farm Co-op faces that ongoing struggle. When we repetitively buy their products, as well as the products of other sustainable farmers, we keep the pastures green and the watersheds clean. When we buy commodity foods, we support chemical agriculture and its dangerous disruption to the eco-system.

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Who makes up the Whole Farm Co-op, and who are our customers? That is something we will explore at length in future columns. I was a customer for nearly ten years before becoming directly involved with the organization. At any given time there are between fifty and one hundred sustainable farmers selling products through the Whole Farm Co-op. Some of them are fourth and fifth generation farmers, who's farming values have always met sustainable standards. Some are former chemical based farmers that could see that the destructive treadmill of commodity chemical agriculture and government subsidies would eventually force them out of business. Some are people like Tim and Jan King, who at sometime in their life have made the decision to forgo consumerism, and have dedicated their lives to social and environmental justice. I am grateful to all of them.

And our customers? There is Katie Hallstein, Merchandising Manager at Seward Co-op Grocery and Deli in Minneapolis. Katie, a vegan, understands the urgency of moving away from a corn based, commodity driven farm economy, and acknowledges the importance of pasture based livestock production. Katie, as well as the Kings, will be profiled in the November 2002 "Seeds of Grace", as will others in future columns. Additionally, there are many coordinators of the many church congregations and community organizations that accept our deliveries and see to it that orders are secure until picked up by our customers. And there are our customers and supporters, who buy our food and spread the message of direct market sustainable foods, through interactions in their daily lives.

And how can we affect change? Truly, our most powerful vote has been the vote we make with our dollars. We make it every day. In the face of sophisticated mass marketing campaigns in most media venues, and in a world where carbonated beverage companies and commodity agriculture corporations penetrate and use both public and private institutions to control the placement of their products; there are conscious and conscientious consumers who are choosing to develop habits of buying, that support sustainable farming. "Seeds of Grace": (The Sacred Business of Tending the Land), will tell you about them on a monthly basis.