

Growing Together- 1997 Tilth Producers Keynote Address

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Washington Tilth

Winter, 1998

Exploring a New Vision of Agriculture and Community

I like the title, "Growing Together." At least three meanings come to mind. It suggests that all of us can grow simultaneously; that we can find a way to cooperate in the growing the food that we need for our bodies, minds and souls; and that the possibility exists that people who come from very different directions can find common ground and begin to intertwine in our growth, learning from one another and becoming interdependent. We will have a lot of growing together to do to make the changes we need for a sustainable food system and to make the changes in ourselves that will reflect outwards into the communities around us. There is a wonderful quote from Ghandi who said, "You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

I come to you from Rose, New York where I live and farm. I've been farming full-time for 17 years. I've been speaking publicly on food and farming questions for exactly ten years now and I've gotten progressively less terrified.

People often ask me why I decided to farm. I was raised in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, a bedroom suburb of New York city. My parents were deeply committed to the struggle for world peace and economic justice. They were city people through and through, as were my grandparents. No one even gardened. But when I was 13 my parents sent me to a summer work camp and the seed was planted. They also encouraged my love of modern dance which I came to experience as the aesthetic of the natural combined with hard physical work.

Filtered through the experience of the anti-war movement of the 1960s, work camp, Marx and Isadora Duncan, this brought me to ecology and organic gardening. Then when my life cracked apart at the death of my husband in a car crash, I sought relief from despair in trying to heal my relationship with nature. I decided to learn how to farm.

I did my apprenticeship farming for the first eight years in Gill, Massachusetts. Nine years ago I moved to Rose Valley Farm. I didn't actually do a real apprenticeship. I learned the hard way by doing it. I don't recommend this approach.

Farming is the most basic form of production. I like the Holistic Resource Management term for us, "Managers of Solar Conversion." In cooperation with the forces of nature, we actually create wealth. Yet farmers in this country have a terrible struggle to make a living. I entered farming knowing that. My search is to understand why that might be so. Today I would like to share with you some of the things that I have learned.

What drew my attention to the food system was its unfathomable irrationality. On the one hand, the constant problem of surplus production--overflowing storage, farmers paid not to produce. On the other hand, just as constant, malnutrition and hunger. The United States exports \$60 billion worth of agriculture products. Yet we import \$30 billion worth. What does this mean for our farms and rural communities?

Some farm leaders and food industry people tell us the U.S. food system is the safest, cheapest and best food system in the world. Not only do American farmers feed the growing population of this country, they keep the rest of the world fed as well. With barriers cleared away by NAFTA and GATT American farmers will be able to out compete all others. The \$60 billion of exports last year could increase to \$78 billion in the near future as the standard of living rises in China and we put an American chicken and hamburger in every Chinese pot. Technology now available will enable as few as twenty farmers to farm the entire state of Iowa through the use of satellites and computers and they'll be able to market their crop using the internet.

How does this upbeat presentation fit with some of the other things we know about the food system?

In 1993, 436,795 people in Washington State received food stamps. Eighty-one percent of the applicants requested "expedited issuance"--they were in a hurry to get them. Participation in the child nutrition programs, breakfast, lunch and summer meals, has grown steadily. Food distributed through the Emergency Food Assistance Program increased by 78 percent between 1987 and 1991. There are approximately 300 food banks in Washington that are supported by the state and another 100 that are independent. They feed 33,000 families every month. Despite these increases in the emergency food supply, the Food Research and Action Center estimates that in Washington 90,000 children under 12 experience hunger to the degree that health and school performance are affected. Another 100,000 were at risk for hunger. The federal response to this growing need has been to reduce the funding for food stamps and to cut them altogether for legal immigrants. A food bank study for Food Lifeline in King County shows that 25 percent of the food banks in the county are facing a crisis. And beginning October 1, 1997 food stamps for King County residents will be reduced by \$30 million. Serious trouble lies ahead for food security in this part of the country.

Overall, the farm economy in Washington State does not appear to be doing badly. Measured in total farm sales, Washington has risen from twenty-third place in 1950 to sixteenth place in 1992 while my state has sunk from twelfth place in 1950 to twenty-seventh. Farms in New York are in a kind of trouble you haven't encountered yet in Washington State. Washington agriculture sales have risen by 140 percent which puts it third behind Florida and Kansas in percentage of growth.

Nevertheless, Washington has shared in the country's loss of farms and farmland. In 1982 there were 39,000 farms cropping 16,400,000 acres. In 1996 there were 36,000 farms cropping 15,600,000 acres. While gross farm sales rose from \$4.2 billion in 1991 to \$5.1 billion, net farm income dropped from \$947 million to \$914 million.

We've all heard the saying, "Farmers sell wholesale and buy retail." That's what these statistics are all about. The terms of this deal get worse and worse. The index of prices paid to farmers rose 7.5 percent between 1989 and 1993. But the index of prices that farmers had to pay for all the inputs they used rose 23 percent. Another way to come at the same hard facts: the value of the basic commodities we produce has fallen. Between '78 and '88 milk fell by 11 percent, potatoes by 9 percent, fresh vegetables by 23 percent and red meat by 37 percent. Average farm income in this country is \$37,400 per year, but only 16 percent of that comes from farm income. Most of our farms are being supported by off-farm jobs. Farmers are lucky when they have a partner who will support their farming habit.

Farmers are not the only ones in this country who are suffering from the loss of earning power. Since 1973, the average earnings for U.S. men fell by 11 percent. The median household income rose until 1989 due to the increase of women working outside the home. Since 1989 women's wages have been decreasing too, such that between '89 and '95 the median household income dropped by seven percent.

At the same time, the percentage of total income received by the wealthiest five percent in this country has risen from 15.9 percent in 1983 to 20.3 percent in 1993. Corporate taxes made up 24 percent of IRS revenues in 1960 but only 13 percent in 1996. This in a world where 97.5 percent of foreign exchange transactions are of the moneyed system. That is, they are trades of money and currency. This is trade that has absolutely nothing to do with the production of goods

and services.

In 1991 a USDA study of 11,800 farm households concluded that 84 percent of U.S. farms rely on off-farm income. Its not real surprising that four farms go out of business every week in Washington, twenty in New York. The problems in Washington State reflect the shrinkage of the farming sector of the food system throughout the country. To quote Stewart N. Smith, who is the former Commissioner of Agriculture for Maine and a leading agricultural economist, "The food and agriculture system has changed remarkably through this century under the regime of industrial agriculture especially in shifting economic activities from the farm to the nonfarm components of the system." In 1910, 41 cents of every food dollar went to the farmer compared to only nine cents in 1990. On the other hand, input suppliers increased their share from 15 to 24 percent and marketers from 44 to 76 percent. According to Smith's calculations, if current trends continue, farming as such will disappear by 2020.

The passage of GAIT and NAFTA removed what few protections U.S. agriculture producers had left to them. According to a USDA study released in September 1997, the economic impact of NAFTA on U.S. farm sales has been a negative \$100 million. While NAFTA was responsible for raising U.S. agriculture exports to Canada and Mexico by \$540 million, it increased imports from those two countries by \$640 million. In 1993, the last pre-NAFTA year, U.S. agriculture ran a \$1.52 billion trade surplus with Canada and Mexico. After NAFTA in '96 the surplus dropped to \$1.4 billion. In 1995, the year of the peso crash, the balance of trade was a minus \$81 million. The overall agriculture trade among the three NAFTA countries has been ballooning. Its grown from \$8.9 billion in 1993 to \$11.6 billion in '96. The people who are benefiting from this increase are the big traders.

NAFTA has made a small improvement to the U.S. corn market but at the cost to Mexico of 880,000 small farmers that have gone out of business; farmers who have had to sell their land and move to the city because they could not compete with the price of corn imports from the U.S. At the same time, corn prices for Mexican consumers have risen.

Fewer than five companies control 90 percent of the export market each for wheat, corn, coffee, tea, pineapple, cotton, tobacco, jute and forest products. The same agribusiness companies that control the trade in commodities also control storage, transport and food processing facilities. For grains the top transnationals are Cargill, Contintenal Grain, Bunge, Louis Dreyfus, Andre and Company and Mitsui-Cook. Incidentally, it was a Cargill executive who represented the U.S. in writing the Uruguay round of the GAIT.

The consolidation of control of the food system within the United States also increases steadily. Six transnationals account for over 46 percent of all retail purchases of food. In 1992 Philip Morris sales amounted to \$33 billion, ConAgra \$21 billion, PepsiCo \$14 billion and Coca-Cola \$13 billion. Tom Lyson, who is a rural sociologist at Cornell has calculated that ten cents out of every food dollar ends up with the Philip Morris company. Eighty percent of the flour is milled by the four largest firms; 87 percent of the pork, beef and lamb slaughter is controlled by four major packers, the greatest concentration in United States history. What does this concentration do for prices? Between '93 and '96 the prices for slaughter steers dropped by 50 percent. That is, the price that farmers got for their steers. Over the same period the consumer price also dropped, but only five percent.

We are living through the cuhnination of the era of the transnational. Megacorporations like Phillip Morris Cargill and ConAgra have no allegiance to any particular nation or group of nations. They are manipulating the rules of the World Trade Organization to increase their power; to intervene in the economy of any country they see fit. President Clinton wanted fast track authority not only to expand NAFTA but to also negotiate what are called the MIA—Multilateral Investment Agreements— which would give transnational corporations the freedom to do business as they see fit in any country out from under control of the national government. If the corporation didn't like the government's interference they could take them to the World Trade Organization court. It was a very real victory when fast track authority was stopped, at least for now. I think this is a very encouraging sign. The food system that we are living in is global and that means most food and fiber will be produced wherever in the world it is cheapest, and labor

is cheapest, and shipped wherever in the world people have the money to pay for it.

Deciding to join a movement to create a sustainable regional food system is kind of like jumping into the Skagit River, a swiftly flowing river of cold water, and swimming against the steam. As farmers, gardeners, educators, researchers and concerned food eaters, we are making the only positive statistics in the U.S. food system. Yet we have to be practical. If you plant a seed, and conditions are right, the seed grows. If conditions aren't right, it shrivels and dies. We do ourselves no favor by cloaking our real historical conditions and the realities under which we live in pretty illusions. We have to look at things pretty clearly. Understanding the direction of history and the alignment of economic forces in the world keeps us from blaming our own shortcomings for the factors that result from these mega forces over which we have very little control.

If we want to create a regional sustainable food system, to eat food that is ecologically produced, safe, nutritious; and we want all the people who work in the food system to be safe and to make a decent living, we have our work cut out for us. We need to assess what we can do to make a difference and use our scarce resources with great wisdom and to the greatest possible effect. We can't take the global market place head on. But what are the things we can do?

Rather than try to think about sustainability in broad abstract terms, I would like to tell you about what we have been doing at Rose Valley Farm as an example and think about what a farm like ours, a farm like yours would need to survive and prosper over the next seven generations.

When my partner, David Stern, started farming there were just a few big fields he had to reclear. We divided them up into 17 much smaller fields. The basis of our growing practices is careful crop rotations and building soil health. We minimize tillage by using a chisel plow for primary tillage, except when we are breaking sod. We mix aquatic weeds we receive from the county with clean out from the Finger Lakes Racetrack and hay from our own farm and make compost. We use very simple tools that many farms have--a manure spreader and a loader. We spread the compost at 14-20 tons per acre per year. We have raised the organic matter in our sandy soil from 2.5 to 3.5 percent. We use a variety of cover crops and green manures--buckwheat, rye and vetch, clover and oats. About a quarter of our ground is in sod at one time. We underseed most crops with a cover crop in order to prevent erosion and wherever possible to grow the fertilizer for the next crop.

Farming will be much easier when we understand more about the microorganisms which teem in a healthy soil. It's really the one remaining frontier and there is a great deal to be learned about what goes on in the soil. With the help of a mycorrhizologist, we are studying the mycorrhizal associations in our soil with the goal of maximizing their effectiveness.

We conceive of the farm and our crop production as integrally related to the ecology of the entire farm. Our approach to pest control is to cultivate biodiversity, improving habitat for birds, toads, snakes and other wildlife in our ponds, hedgerows, woods and in the fields. Ladybeetles over winter in the hedgerows. They come out in the spring, sun themselves and then spread out over the entire farm. You can find a lady beetle or larva on almost every crop plant.

In 1991 our small farm was named Conservation Farm of the Year for the county. That is really my definition of organic farming, it is conservation farming when done carefully. We have a lot more to learn about growing in peace with the wild critters.

We also need to understand much better how to grow for and together with the human communities near us. Since we can't afford to compete in the global market place our strategy is to find people who are willing to be our loyal supporters. We grow a great diversity of crops so we can sell as much as we can directly to consumers. Our goal is to supply them with as much as we can of the variety and quality that we value. Our Community Supported Agriculture project started with 29 members nine years ago and has grown to 160 shares. Much of the growth has been by word of mouth. To make it affordable to middle and low income people our members decided that every single person has to do some work. Their total commitment is twelve hours of work at the farm per season and four hours on distribution. We accept food stamps and we also offer scholarships so there are a few people paying as little as \$3-5 a week in food stamps. The

difference between that and the \$12.50 that the share represents is made up by the scholarship money and the sale of a book, Food Book for a Sustainable Harvest, which has a write-up on all the vegetables we supply to our members.

Being the farm for a CSA project has reduced our economic insecurity by assuring a market for nine-tenths of our production. When you're selling fresh market vegetables nobody gives you a contract. You call stores and restaurants every week. They might buy from you or they might not. When you go to a farmers market people will love your lettuce one week and the next week when you bring more, they want spinach. Community Supported Agriculture offers a cushion to all of that and a buffer of people who are really concerned with our welfare as a farm, committed to our production and sharing the risk with us even in years that are very hard. At times the total commitment to fanning and running a farm together has put a very serious strain on my life with David but the members of our CSA have stuck with us through a flood, a drought and what looks like the final dissolution of our partnership.

Our crops are certified organic by NOFA-New York (Northeast Organic Farmers Association). Both of us did a lot of work to establish the NOFA certification programs. What makes them special is that they're under the control of an alliance of farmers and consumers. In New York there is absolutely no state involvement in organic certification and no interest in doing that or support for it. Mainly its been a history of hostility although things have been warming up a little bit in the past couple of years.

Until about five years ago organic certification helped small northeast vegetable farmers stay in business. Ironically, with the growth of the organic market we are being crowded out by imports from California and points south. I'm not sure what the Organic Production Act is going to do for us or whether it is going to be helpful.

Like many other farms, Rose Valley has not tried to grow together with bankers. We do not borrow money. Our farm is in the black. If we don't have the cash, we don't buy it. This might be the most radical, or maybe the most conservative thing about Rose Valley Farm.

Since we choose not to exploit the labor of other people or to target upscale markets, our living is very modest but enough to get by on. Just about any other trade that David or I could ply would generate a much higher level of income. We have accepted that because we wanted to do this kind of food production. I think many of you understand that. There are other things you could do to make more money but this is a good way to live. We aim not for maximum but for optimum production. We give a lot of thought to the farm team and the pace of the work, to the division of responsibilities and to training apprentices, members of the next generation. In New York State Cornell, the land grant college, does not offer any kind of training in organic agriculture. If people want to learn organic farming they have to come and work on an organic farm.

For Rose Valley and farms like it to prosper Rose, the town, must not die. The quality of services in the county must improve. We need a vital, healthy community with jobs to support and interest the next generation. While the global marketplace is pitting us farmers one against the other, I feel farmers in the community really need one another. We have to have many farms, farms of all different sizes, so that we can support the infrastructure we need for our farming businesses. There have to be implement salespeople, repair shops... .When you don't have the critical mass of farms, that starts to disappear.

In Wayne County we have completed an active plan to give a boost to our local farm morale and farm economy. In the towns closer to Rochester we hope to institute a Purchase of Development Rights program to protect farmland. Out where I am, out in the boonies, there is no possibility of PDRs, there is no one who is going to purchase them.

The county has hired an agriculture economic development specialist to work with farms in business retention, in expanding their businesses, in adding value to their products so we can start reclaiming that part of the food dollar that has gone to the input people or particularly to the marketing and distribution people. We need more cooperatives and better marketing schemes

for our products.

For Rose Valley to prosper we need organizations like Tilth that can bring farmers and nonfarmers together to work for change in the food system. In New York we have the Northeast Organic Farmers Market Association which focuses on the how-to of organic production. We also have a New York Sustainable Agriculture Working Group which focuses on state and national policy and land grant accountability. When we tried as organic farmers to work on this level we got exactly nowhere. Cornell was able to screen us out completely. So we formed a coalition with groups like the Audubon Society, Church Women United, Rural Opportunities and other organizations. When we went back to Cornell armed that way they listened with more attentive ears. We also set up an effective telephone tree for legislative action alerts and our persistent calls helped restore the IPM program to the state budget and have played a role in passage of "circuit breaker" bill to provide tax breaks for farmers.

We have initiated an effort to get all the agriculture groups in the state from NOFA through the Grange all the way to the Farm Bureau to reach out to nonfarmers; to environmental groups, church groups, consumer groups, with the urgent message "New York farms," so we can work together to support local farms and farming products. This is the broadest coalition anyone in the food system has every seen in New York.

Three years ago I was the first organic farmer appointed to the Advisory Council to the Dean of the College of Agriculture at Cornell University. I felt like a real trespasser on alien territory. Under the previous dean, "sustainable" provoked the nervous titters that "organic" still produces in some places. At the last meeting of the council we discussed how to assure that the concern for sustainability is infused through all that Cornell does. At the end of the meeting a large-scale dairy farmer, a man I've met at these meetings for years now and who never made eye contact with me before, asked "What can I learn from the kind of farming you do that I can use on my farm?" We are really making some wonderful breakthroughs.

The New York SAWG is affiliated with Northeast SAWG which does projects in land grant accountability, promotion for a sustainable food system and organizing in the Northeast for the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture. The National Campaign, of which Tilth is a member, is the broadest, most diverse coalition to come together to work for changes in the food system in American history. It was created to develop policy for the 1995 farm bill but over the past two years the campaign has retooled for the long run. We need to keep up pressure for appropriations every year. We need to constantly work on the implementation of legislation once it is past.

Over the past two years, despite the really negative atmosphere in Washington, D.C., the campaign has succeeded in keeping the funding for SARE, ATTRA, Farmers Market Nutrition Program and in the 1996 bill we even added a new program, the Community Food Security Act. If we continue broadening each year I think we will write the "Sustainable Agriculture Bill of 2002."

When we are alone on our farms or in our gardens it is sometimes easy to give into loneliness and discouragement. Growing food is hard work and you don't receive a lot of recognition for it. But look around you. We have our small farms, our bigger farms, our marketing cooperatives, our value-added enterprises, our urban gardens, our CSA projects, farmers markets, food co-ops, buying clubs, sustainable agriculture networks of different kinds, extension people, research projects... We are making really positive changes in the food system in this country. We are laying the groundwork for a regional sustainable food system. This is a food system based not on hard nosed economics but on priceless values: an intimate relationship with our food and the land on which it is grown, a sense of reverence for life, cooperation, justice, appreciation for beauty of the cultivated landscape and the fitting humility about the place of human beings in the scheme of nature. What this means is profound changes in the economic and cultural system in which we live. Changes will not come without resistance So when the going gets rough, remember this quote from Ghandi: "The goal ever receded from us. Salvation lies in the effort, not the attainment. Full effort is full victory."

Marty Strange, co-founder of the Center for Rural Affairs in Nebraska, points out that the growing income inequity that divides our country and divides the total world is one of the most serious threats to sustainable agriculture. There is a great danger the food system will become a dual system with ecologically produced food for the rich purchased at premium prices and the poor eating cheap food produced by making war on the land. The goal, Marty Strange concludes, must be to raise all food in wholesome, sustainable ways while eliminating the poverty and inequity that deprive many of the ability to buy an adequate diet at any price. Food produced on prosperous and sustainable family farms should be the affordable food of choice for ordinary people everywhere. This is a vision worthy of all of us growing old together in the struggle to realize. Our lives are the process. With persistence, mutual respect and fierce insistence on learning to grow together we will survive the present era of cheap global food and bring the liberated territory into a future of peace and abundance.

Elizabeth Henderson can be reached at Rose Valley Farm, PO Box 149. Rose, NY 14S42. This article adapted from Elizabeth's keynote address to the November 1997 Tilt Producers Conference, Growing Together, Exploring a New Vision of Agriculture and Community, co-sponsored by WSU Cooperative Extension and Skagit Valley College.