

Planet Diversity

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May 2008, Bonn, Germany

I come to you first and foremost as a farmer and as such diversity for me begins with the soil. One pinch of living soil can contain millions of different forms of life, and yet we too often treat it like dirt.

In the aftermath of the world trade center attacks I gave a speech in San Francisco in which I proposed that we build an urban farm on that site in NYC, that it become a model of diversity and local economy on the grounds of what was once a monument to uniformity and global economy. I proposed that people from all over the world send handfuls of their local soil as a way of honoring those who perished, thereby creating a farm that would be built from the soul and the soil of the world.

Catastrophic events like that one have an evolutionary role: they bring people together, force them to re-evaluate priorities and create new perspectives.

We are experiencing one right now, we just have not fully recognized the full scale of it. Those of us whom have been addressing these issues for sometime must be very careful, it is too easy to feel smug, to even welcome and feel validated by world events, to want to say "I told you so", but we cannot. We must instead increase our efforts and how we communicate them.

My sense about how to communicate our message is changing. I now spend less energy on what I am against, and more on what I am for. For me it's all about creating and putting forth the living working models, that's my job as a farmer and that's my job as a communicator.

I used to think that if I could just tell folks why it was important to consider another way, if I could be more eloquent in my expression, if I could just convince them, beat them into submission, that things would change. Now I think if I could just grow the best tomato.

I've realized that pleasure is a much greater motivator for change than guilt.

Think about it; how successful has the last thirty years of the environmental movement really been? There has been some really good work done by many of my friends and colleagues; battles won, pristine places preserved, a greater awareness of the awesome threats to our biosphere instilled in the minds of many.

But most of the messaging has been all doom and gloom, and while folks have come to understand the problems, they too often feel helpless when it comes to the solutions, paralyzed in the face of the enormity of our modern dilemma. Clearly all the well planned environmental campaigns, all the creative strategies, all the books and organizations have only succeeded in preserving and protecting and restoring a few bits and pieces and specs, isolated victories, all while the world's natural systems unravel at a staggering rate.

So how do we provide an invitation rather than a harangue?

Well I got it standing on my farm last spring. I was out there with the deafening sound of thousands of frogs fornicating in my ponds, earthworms doing it beneath my feet, mason and bumble and honey bees fighting to stuff themselves into every flower in sight and I suddenly realized that I'm not farming, I'm presiding over one big giant orgy.

I realized that every form of life on my farm is absolutely immersed in this incredible humming, buzzing, and vibrating vortex of lust.

All this time I've had it wrong. I've been trying to entice young people back into agriculture with all the wrong messages when all they really need to know is that there is all this sex happening on farms.

Fairview slides.

This is where I farmed for 25 years.

Twelve and a half acres, One hundred different fruits and vegetables, thirty staff, food for 500 families.

Living diversity floating in a sea of sterile uniformity.

Often described as the "little farm that could", it is the twelve and a half acre remains of what was once a much larger farm now floating in a sea of tract homes and shopping centers. Against all odds we raised the money to save that land from development, placing it under one of the first active agricultural conservation easements in the US, one that not only preserved that land in agriculture, but required specific social and ecological principles for that agriculture and goes even further, requires that land be used for community programs and place based education as well.

It can be done.

All of this happened before these ideas had moved as they have today into the mainstream, and as such our process was not easy. That little farm required more than agricultural skills to keep it going. As the rich land around us was planted into housing developments and shopping centers the attitudes of those who moved into the new housing developments were more urban, less accustomed to the smells and the sounds of a farm.

Sadly, instead of rejoicing that the most incredible fresh food was growing and available right in their neighborhood, they complained about the signs advertising our fresh products, the crow of our roosters, the sweet smell of the mounds of compost that recycled vast amounts of organic matter that used to clog the landfill. And so I was threatened with jail time over the compost and over the roosters. Each time we used those challenges as a way to educate a population that was ever more disconnected from the land and from the source of their food.

During the years when the rich land surrounding that farm were being paved over and built on I watched folks in that neighborhood, heads down going about their daily business; the years clicking by, and then one day looking up and around to discover that everything had changed, everything had in a sense become the same. Except for that little farm. Sound Familiar?

Those dramatic changes that you saw in those slides, changes that are happening everywhere took place over a relatively short period of time, they took place in broad daylight. 47 acres every hour...

Farming is challenging enough, but to constantly have to defend that farm's right to exist was hard. It wasn't just the public battles over roosters or compost or even having to raise a million bucks to save the land from the developers. Those challenges were not small but they were clear and easy to grasp.

It was the internal struggles of farming in a suburban environment that eventually got to me. I found myself longing to live and farm some place where folks still took time with each other, where conversations amongst neighbors might be about soil or crops rather than just movies or fashion or computers or cars, where one's sense of responsibility extended beyond the edge of the lawn.

So we moved 1400 miles north to a small farm on an island in BC Canada, and more recently moved again to a historic 120 acre place that sits in the heart of the island's watershed, with forests and creeks, a pristine lake, fields and pastures, a beautiful blend of farm and ecosystem.

Historically it has been called the Foxglove Farm for the wonderful flowers that are so prevalent in that region. As you may know Foxglove or Digitalis is used in medicine to restore human heart function. We inherited that farm name and we intend to keep it, as it is places like it that are helping restore heart function to the world.

That land has some unique advantages. Our farm fields are surrounded and intersected by swaths of intact forest. And my sense is that the fields and forest are wired together, connected in ways that I am just beginning to understand.

When the fall rains started the entire place became transformed into this magic world where chanterelle and shaggy parasol and hedgehog and cauliflower and fairy ring and elfin saddle mushrooms popped up everywhere. I imagine this vast network of mycelium, miles of tiny threads moving from forest to field, providing the underpinning for soil and plant health.

Our first season produced spinach with leaves the size of dinner plates, raspberries and asparagus planted in June that looked like three year old plants by September, potatoes and tomatoes and French melons and strawberries showed no humility or self control, producing in obscene volume and size. I felt like the ring master of some sort of fruit and vegetable circus where all the performers have gone off on their own tangents. At the local farmers market I was accused of operating a secret genetics lab on our place.

But the most wonderful part of our first year on that land was the quiet glimpses into the past that appeared in unexpected ways, the sense that we are a part of a long chain of human on that land, from the native people who fished its creeks and lake to those who built the homestead to ourselves each link has been informed by the past and by the land itself. I believe that land chooses and dreams us as much as we choose it.

Everywhere I worked; rebuilding a fence, restoring an old building, preparing a field I realized I was taking apart and building on someone else's dream from some time in the past bringing forth my own. I have always talked about the importance of land tenure as a critical principle for creating a truly sustainable food system, but now I wonder what land tenure really means. After all we are just passing through, temporary tenants and caretakers of a larger natural force. All that will ultimately remain is the land, and the best we can do is to leave it more fertile, more alive, more biologically diverse than we found it. And to use our brief time on the land to feed and to nourish and to inspire.

A couple of summers ago I was taking the mower off the tractor. As usual my mind was working a few steps ahead, to the next implement that I was about to attach, to the field where I'd be working, the crop that will be planted, even who will be eating it.

So my brain is chattering away and I reach down and grab one of the snap pin retainers that keeps the implement from coming off the three point hitch on the tractor. I'm not sure why I never noticed it before but there boldly stamped into the top of this retainer pin (show) is the word INDIA. India.

I'm standing behind a John Deere tractor on an island in British Columbia, Canada. The sun is shining, the sky is blue, I've just stuffed myself with figs off a nearby tree and the branding on this little pin brings my mind to a screeching halt. Then I start to get this image of this person on another continent, spending their days cranking out these little retainer pins. I try to imagine what this person's life is like, what the conditions are in the factory where they work, what their hourly pay is. I consider what I paid for my John Deere tractor and I wonder whether this person in India manufacturing retainer after retainer could ever afford such a thing.

Now I don't know why I never noticed India stamped on that pin before, but it sent my mind whirling into a world of relationships and interconnections.; where the steel came from for the tractor, what pristine place was mined for the ore. I start to consider the source of the fuel, the tires, my hoe and shovels and forks, the hoses that we use, the bags and boxes that we pack our produce in, the pipe that brings us water, the water, oh the precious water.

I turn off the machine and walk away to a nearby strawberry field. I reach down to pick one, then another, then another. Every one is hollow, perfectly excavated out from the bottom up with the shell left so that from the outside each and every one looks perfect. It's been only two days since the last harvest, yet almost the entire field of ripe fruit hollowed out. I've never seen anything like it. I walk around more in awe of this feat than upset by the loss. I want to know what creature did this. I get down on hands and knees and look closely, place myself on eye level with plants and soil and remaining fruit.

There is a buzzing, a hovering, yellow jackets. I watch one land and methodically work its way into a ripe fruit. When it's had enough I try to follow it to the nest, as now my awe has turned to revenge. I hope no one is watching as I race about like a madman darting left then right, crazily looking up into space at apparent nothingness. The yellowjacket darts and dodges and fly at speeds I cannot keep up with, and eventually it loses me.

Walking back to the tractor I consider my options, how I will outsmart these critters; do I continue to find their nest and make a strategic strike, harvest more frequently, exclude them by covering the rows. I come up with a plan and file it in the back of my mind.

Then I stop, look around and remember how totally and inextricably I am tied to a whole web of interconnections. My life could not be more different from the person in India making parts for that John Deere tractor or from the yellow jacket eating my strawberries, but on some level we are so completely interconnected, each unknowingly affecting each other and the planet we share. And I begin to see myself as one tiny spec in a complex whirling sea of life.

Pause

This past winter I was in Jamaica working on a sustainable agriculture project. I was last in that country when I was sixteen years old helping my brother develop a small piece of land he owned outside of Negril. At that time we were taken in by Gretel Hilton and her partner Uncle Will who patiently instructed us in some basic survival; how to sharpen a machete, open a coconut, what herbs to use if we were injured or sick, how to cook breadfruit and fish from the cliffs along the sea. They must have felt responsible for us; two young white boys not particularly well adapted to Jamaican bush life.

Gretel Hilton and Uncle Will were still immersed in the natural history of a place we call Jamaica and they were not alone. At that time most rural families were fairly self sufficient, still had chickens and goats, a breadfruit tree, coconut trees, mango, a little cultivated yam and greens, and if they lived near the coast or a river they fished.

Returning to Jamaica after thirty seven years made the changes in that country especially obvious. Most profound was that natural self sufficiency that was so much a part of my experience as a young man is now the exception rather than the norm. The potential for abundance is still there, supported by a tropical climate, rich soils, and plentiful water, but that self-reliance especially in regards to food, has been replaced by a total dependency on imports from abroad.

Taste and smell have an uncanny ability to form the basis for memory. Prior to my return to Jamaica I looked forward to the taste of a nation that had so acutely lodged in my subconscious; the intense rich flavors of real banana and pineapple, oranges so ugly but so incredibly rich in flavor, and mango like dirt mon. And while poverty in the economic sense of the word was endemic then as it is now, this diversity and food quality was a form of national wealth embodied by rural communities that prided themselves on the variety and quality of their fruits, and a knowledge and an intimacy with a place. Sadly I have not rediscovered the tastes of those foods, so much of the fruit I find there now is not that different from the exported tropical products you find sitting on a shelf in some store in Toronto or Los Angeles or Frankfurt.

It matters not where I go, every aspect of life has been sterilized and standardized, manipulated and modified. Ultimately diversity cannot be controlled, it cannot be suppressed. Nature will always support differences, nuance, inconsistency, and diversity as the basis for health and survival. Traditionally farmers have always known that diversity is a form of security and survival. I remember in Peru in the early 80's seeing fields of potatoes the size of a suburban front lawn with some 30 varieties. I also know that millions of people perished in Ireland in the 1800's as a result of a single variety of potatoes succumbing to blight.

We are in the midst of a global version of the Irish potato famine, we just have not fully recognized it. There are two fundamental differences between now and then; number one; the crisis today goes beyond just the lack of genetic diversity, it is far more deep and systemic, and as such requires that we rethink our entire food system; and two: we are so fortunate that there are both old and new models growing and working that can show us the way forward. The biggest challenge in the part of the world that I live is not in preserving land, or genetic material but in preserving farmers.

So those who have maintained an intimate connection with the land, whose daily work is inextricably tied to biology and botany and animal husbandry, those who know how to restore and nurture soil, care for animals, coax food from the earth will now become very important.

I've watched chefs receive mythical rock and roll status, it's time for farmers to receive that same attention.

So when I'm on the road I tell folks to "make friends with a farmer, your going to need them". For I am certain that as the current global industrial experiment continues to unravel, agriculture will once again return to it's rightful place; to the heart, the center of our society.

The leadership that is going to make this happen is not going to come from government, it will have to come from folks like you sitting here in this room.

And I don't believe that the kind of major structural change that will be required will happen until it has to, until the impacts become personal. I know this is not a particularly hopeful thought. But the hopeful piece is that humans have an incredible capacity for compassion, ingenuity, creativity, and resourcefulness, qualities that come out especially under duress and crisis. There are many historical examples of this when normal day to day reality is suspended and people come together.

What will be missing when we can no longer rely on all the technology, all the infrastructure that brings us basic transportation and food and shelter, is the knowledge, the wisdom, the basic skills required to live ON THIS EARTH.

And so our job, those of us who are here today, and all those around the world who are re-educating ourselves, re-discovering our place in nature, is to continue to refine our skills and diligently work to create the local and regional models. For I am sure that the day will come when we will be sought after, looked to for leadership and guidance, when our farms will be the living models, the repositories that kept this sacred and essential knowledge alive.

So I want to close by introducing you to some of the people and cultures who have been holding this knowledge. The idea of diversity, both in nature and culture, coupled with an insatiable curiosity to see what other farmers around the world were doing was the basis for travels I took throughout the 1980's through five continents during my winter breaks from farming culminating in my first book *From The Good Earth*. I went into the deep recesses of my photography files, dusted these off, as they haven't been shown in years, in honor of the theme of this gathering "Planet Diversity".

Slides

Michael Ableman is a farmer, educator, and founder of the Center for Urban Agriculture at Fairview Gardens where he farmed from 1981 -2001. He is the author and photographer of *From the Good Earth* (Abrams, 1993), *On Good Land* (Chronicle Books, 1998), and *Fields of Plenty: A farmer's journey in search of real food and the people who grow it.* (Chronicle Books 2005). Ableman is the subject of the award winning PBS national broadcast *Beyond Organic* narrated by Meryl Streep. He is currently farming on an island in British Columbia with his wife and two sons.