

Forgiveness

FARMING

by **JOEL SALATIN**



This notion is comprehensive, encompassing many aspects. A farm must be successful in many areas in order to have forgiveness, or resilience. Let's look at ten key components of forgiveness farming.

1. Relationship forgiveness. All businesses, including farm businesses, can only be as successful as their personal relationships. You can't have a thriving farm when members of the team don't communicate. It's hard to pull together when you're pulling apart. Agreeing on a common mission statement is more important than anything else — even ecology. Even an eco-farm can only be successful if its team members feel comfortable in their roles. That includes knowing what each other's dreams are and working together to realize them.

In *7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, Stephen Covey addresses this as an “emotional equity tank.” We all make withdrawals on those closest to us. We lose our temper, say an unfit word, or act selfishly. It just happens. But if we've deposited enough emotional equity in the other person's tank to withstand such withdrawals, we can weather these storms without blowing the relationship apart.

The beauty of eco-farming is that it creates a safer environment in which everyone can spend more time together. We don't have to worry about the children finding the pesticide room and splashing around in a deadly liquid — they can splash around in some fish emulsion or guzzle some liquid seaweed without killing themselves. How many industrial farmers look forward to taking their toddlers up to the confinement poultry house with them to check the 15,000 birds crammed beak-to-toe in a fecal pall?

Just as industrial farming compartmentalizes food production, it also segments the farm team and creates myopic specialists rather than eclectic participants. With softer, quieter tools and infrastructure come more opportunities to talk while working — and to let the children be intimately involved without fear that they will be gobbled up by noise, dust or machinery.

Relationship nurturing requires fellowship, and fellowship rarely happens when the working environment is noisy, stinky,

Salmonella. *E. coli*. Avian influenza. Pfiesteria. Campylobacter. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Hoof-and-Mouth disease. As recently as two decades ago, who among us had ever even *seen* most of these words? Add to these a nationwide obesity epidemic, massive fish kills and air pollution from concentrated animal feeding operations, and failing farms leading to a population of farmers smaller than that of our nation's prisoners, and any thinking person must ask: “How can we turn this around?”

Two words: *Forgiveness Farming*. Our culture has not practiced forgiveness farming for a long, long time — perhaps never.

dusty or dangerous. Working with nature rather than against it turns our farm environment into one that better stimulates healthy relationships. That's forgiving.

2. Emotional forgiveness. Ever notice how paranoid industrial farmers are? Attend any conventional farm conference and nearly all the lectures and all the impromptu hallway discussions center around "things that are coming to get you." Diseases. Low prices. High costs. Imports. Bankers. Lawyers. Organic farmers.

Industrial farmers are fixated on bad things. From soybean rust to avian influenza, their whole lexicon concentrates on things to fear. They walk around every waking minute emotionally drained. Rather than having a focused attention on success, they look around timidly, furtively, to see what goblin from "out there" may be lurking to doom their farm. Constantly complaining and never praising, they drive away their families and finally, their joy.

A factory farmer who escapes the pathogen goblins one more time breathes a sigh of relief that he may live to stand another day. But he won't be victorious. He will only be undefeated . . . if he's lucky.

An eco-farmer once told me that he quit industrial farming when he realized that his first waking thought every morning was, "I wonder what's dead up there in the hog house today?" He couldn't hear the birds chirping. He couldn't enjoy the sunrise, or the rainbow after a thunderstorm. And his kids wanted nothing to do with the farm.

But after this epiphany, he closed down the pig concentration camp and devoted himself to pasture-based farming. Suddenly his children wanted to be involved. His thoughts turned lofty. He developed a can-do spirit. His emotional zest returned.

The sheer mystery and majesty of heritage wisdom, contained in each cell, each mitochondrion, instills in the farmer who respects and honors the pigness of the pig a daily emotional high. The satisfaction of being nature's nurturer always trumps the short-lived adrenalin high of being nature's conqueror. Such an attitude offers spiritual ascendance

over physical domination — which can never really be imposed, anyway. That's why the industrial farmer, for all the smoke and noise and horsepower, never feels in control, but always on the verge of being drowned by the nature he thinks he's controlling.

Ah, what emotional forgiveness awaits those of us who marvel at the food web's intricacies and the compost pile's miracles! Every day is a day of discoveries, satisfaction and fulfillment as the Creator's design endorses our efforts, gently nudging us with a "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

3. Infrastructure forgiveness. Capital-intensive, single-use infrastructure is extremely hard to retrofit when it is no longer financially or emotionally profitable. Multiple-use machines and buildings, on the other hand, can be adapted to the next production permutation without jeopardizing the farm's viability.

As pasture-based livestock systems become more widely utilized, large confinement dairies and large feedlots will be the last to join the new paradigm. The sheer emotional and financial investments in these structures require 24/7 throughput, even if farmers see a better way.

That is why anything you build or buy today should be multiple use, adaptable, and as simple as possible. That's one reason I like pole buildings. They have fairly open spans and can be outfitted easily for different kinds of animals and uses. The more concrete you pour, the less likely you are to abandon the structure if and when that production model becomes obsolete.

I knew a fellow who started a pastured poultry enterprise on a nearby rented piece of land. Everything went along great for two years, and then the landlord decided to sell the property. No problem. The farmer found another piece of land to rent just up the road, loaded his portable shelters on a lowboy trailer, and hauled them over to the new place. How many farmers can do that with their Tyson chicken factory structures?

Perhaps the greatest aspect of infrastructure forgiveness is how it liberates the next generation to pursue innovative interests. When a farm child grows up

beholden to single-use, capital-intensive infrastructure, he feels enslaved by that farming model. The first reaction to feeling enslaved is to cut and run. And that's what farm kids do — in droves. In fact, many times the parents, themselves feeling overwhelmed by unsatisfying entrapment, actually encourage their children to flee.

A compost pile is far more forgiving than a manure lagoon. A handful of electric fencing and a Rubbermaid water trough for cows on pasture are far more forgiving than a \$120,000 combine and all the equipment that goes before it (and the feedlot after it). The farm simply cannot afford to owe its soul to some monolithic piece of infrastructure if it is to be free to adapt to tomorrow's new farmer and new information. Forgiving infrastructure offers adaptability and freedom.

4. Landscape forgiveness. Large-scale monocultures are an assault on nature. Period. End of discussion. Natural systems enjoy a degree of diversity, even within apparent sameness. The undergrowth beneath an arboreal forest of Douglas Fir is amazingly varied. But beyond the diverse species, the buffering of open land, forestal and riparian zones creates checks and balances within flora and fauna.

This ecological tapestry encourages hydrological cycling, predator balance and controlled wind patterns. Native prairie contained some 40 plant species per acre. The corn belt obliterates these life forms on a massive scale. Nature builds soil by gently laying carbon such as mature grass, dry leaves and needles on top of the soil and letting the earthworms plow it under. Nature does not "knife in" carbon or other nutrients.

Thus, when *we* decide to knife in soil amendments, we denude the earth of its protective vegetative blanket and expose it to pelting rains and swirling winds, creating erosion. Even with all the money expended on soil conservation programs in the United States, we are still losing soil at an alarming and escalating rate. We are literally raping our landscape rather than building forgiveness into it.

A forgiving landscape is one in which water can never build up velocity and volume at the same time. It is an envi-

ronment that supports a plethora of varied species closely interrelated in a mosaic of forestal, open and riparian environments. It is clothed with vegetation and rarely unclothed. The old seven-year rotation of five years in grass with two in row crops is probably about as unclothed as any landscape can afford to be — including an organic one.

Every time we violate these landscape principles, we create more risk for erosion and imbalances. On our farm, we've planted forestal zones within 200 yards of all open land to give insect-loving birds protection and friendly habitat. This is simply a practical application when we begin building forgiveness into the landscape.

5. Health forgiveness. Nature sanitizes in two ways: rest and sunshine; and virulent decomposition. The first is typical in a rotated pasture and grazing model. Animals move from paddock to paddock so that at least a 21-day host-free period exists between visits. This breaks the pathogen cycle and keeps the bad bags under control. Obviously, a dirt loafing yard is not forgiving.

In the second model, deep bedding with a 25:1 to 30:1 carbon:nitrogen ratio and enough moisture will stimulate virulent decomposition. This activity encourages beneficial nematodes and enough good bugs to hold the bad bugs in check. Furthermore, insuring at least one or two 30-day host-free cycles per year, preferably with a different species on the bedding, will create pathogenic cul-de-sacs.

On our farm, we move the rabbits and chickens from their house to tall tunnel hoophouses in the winter. Pigs move into the rabbit-chicken (Raken) house for the 100 days between Thanksgiving and March 1. Any animal confinement facility could drastically reduce its pathogen load by vacating the premises for two months each year. But in industrial agriculture, structures aren't designed to accept different species. And there is certainly no thought of vacating . . . ever. Therein lies the dependency on stronger and stronger concoctions from the Devil's pantry to fight the building pathogen load endemic to these non-rested structures.

The same protections occur in orchards that graze sheep or poultry underneath the trees, in small mono-cropped fields that rotate to other crops each year, in cropland rotated to pasture, and in animals fed and treated with respect for their physiological distinctiveness.

For four decades the USDA has been romancing farmers to freebie dinners in order to teach them how to feed dead cows to live cows. Now everyone is breathing a collective "oops" as we wres-

10 COMPONENTS OF FORGIVENESS FARMING

1. Relationship forgiveness
2. Emotional forgiveness
3. Infrastructure forgiveness
4. Landscape forgiveness
5. Health forgiveness
6. Weather forgiveness
7. Price forgiveness
8. Marketing forgiveness
9. Product forgiveness
10. Neighbor forgiveness

tle with Mad Cow disease. I don't know if this feeding practice was or is in fact the cause, but the point is that cows are herbivores, and herbivores in nature do not eat dead cows, chicken manure, grain, or fermented forage. Instead of creating the National Animal Identification System, perhaps we would be better off putting our collective minds to the task of building health forgiveness into our production systems.

6. Weather forgiveness. Drought, flood, cold and heat will be with us until the end of time. Part of the farmer's ministry is creating forgiveness for all of these anomalies to minimize their damage and maximize resiliency. That means farmers should be far more interested in building ponds to collect flood runoff for dissemination during drought than they are in lobbying for crop insurance

and low interest loans to protect them from crop failures.

This really came home to me during one of the many Mississippi floods when the TV news showed National Guard troops removing half a dozen pigs from atop an Iowa hog factory into a 12-foot skiff. Unlike most viewers, I happened to know how many thousands were down below that roof, all drowned. At the time, I had about 100 hogs in various pig pastures, scattered around the farm. If we had had a flood, I could have just herded them to high ground — and they would have known how to find and survive on some roots and acorns until we could get to them again. My goodness, I suppose our hogs could swim away!

That was like an "aha" moment, in which I realized that perhaps the single most important component of stewardship is to make the farm more capable of withstanding the vagaries of nature. The fact is that weather extremes, from blizzard to tornados, will visit us once in awhile. No government program can protect us from that.

When we have a portable production model, with a higher gross margin so that we don't need millions of units for a profit, we can salvage things easier in a crisis. Imagine a 1,000-acre commodity cornfield in a drought. Not much you can do. But imagine a five-acre cornfield supplying a value-added, family-owned milling and cornbread baking enterprise. That family can go out there with five-gallon buckets and water those five acres to salvage their livelihood. This is the kind of forgiveness we need to think about.

7. Price forgiveness. Which brings us to the price question. Industrial agriculture and its ugly cousin, cheap food, work together to shove product margins farther south every year. The only farms showing a profit are the huge and the tiny. *The huge* because they can spread their overhead across more units, and *the tiny* because they don't have any overhead.

Creating price forgiveness requires us to build higher quality into our products and demand compensation for that quality. Dad used to say, "You might as well do nothing for nothing as something for nothing." Why do farmers abide the an-

nual assault on the value of what we've produced? Because we don't let ourselves think about alternatives — including the alternative called: *do nothing*.

One of the best ways to create price forgiveness is through some sort of specialty differentiated product and/or direct marketing. This differentiated product can be organic, low cholesterol, or whatever. The point is to find a *niche that is underfilled*, for which people are willing to pay a premium, and then fill it. Producing the same-old same-old for buyers who haven't had a new thought in a decade is not the way to command a better price.

With the information network and superhighways now at our disposal, many, many more farmers could begin marketing directly to their own foodshed than currently do so. I don't have the answer for every ranch in Montana located 100 miles from a Coke machine, but I know that if every farmer who could touch his foodshed directly with his wares *would* do so, we couldn't even conceive of the new opportunities that would spring up for those who don't have population bases nearby.

Owning your price, and pricing to value, is the way to build forgiveness into the pricing equation.

8. Marketing forgiveness. In the industrial farming sector, farmers are beholden to a handful of buyers — and that includes the organic industrial sector. Organic Valley and Horizon are practically the only game in town if you want to sell organic milk any way except directly to the consumer.

Building market forgiveness requires having a diversified portfolio of interest. That might include community supported agriculture, a couple of farmers' markets, on-farm sales or roadside stands, Internet sales, restaurants and buying clubs. The greater the mix of these venues, the more stable your marketing portfolio will be.

Remember, customers are portable. They will follow you. Look how they follow Wal-Marts when the mega-stores abandon one facade and build a new structure across town. You can start farming on rental land, and if you lose that piece, move to another. Your customers will follow you to the new place. This builds tremendous forgiveness in the farm — not even to be tied down to a place. And it's made possible by an extremely close contact between producer and patron.

The industrial food system is wringing its hands trying to figure out how to export more product to far-flung countries, most of which now show declining populations. What is a food system predicated on an ever-increasing world population supposed to do when the population flattens? That is exactly what is happening now, and why the commodity farm sector is in such a state of duress. Last year the United States only exported about one million beeves, but we imported 7 million. Looks to me like we have plenty of domestic demand to consume everything we produce.

A close-to-home market, within the farm's foodshed, is much more forgiving than one controlled by capricious global cartels and international intrigue. An outsourced decision structure is a hard market taskmaster. When we own our customers, when we know our customers and they know us and respect us, we have market forgiveness.

9. Product forgiveness. "Faster, bigger, cheaper" is the slogan of the industrial food movement. Pushing every

plant and animal to its biological limit makes everything vulnerable to culling by nature for being unbalanced.

Pushed by sedentary confinement and starch-laden diets, animals become flabby and grow into weakness. Consider how quickly dairy cows burn out in milk factories, or how breathing in fecal-particulate air creates lesions on the mucous membranes of chickens. As a result of these practices, milk must be pasteurized to kill all the pass-through pathogens from an improper production model. Chickens must go through chlorine baths to kill the heavy bacteria load on and inside the carcass.

Now we hear of bacteria-laden spinach and lettuce. The nutrient devitalization and pathogen load carried into the modern food chain is horrendous. More and more charts showing the diminishing nutrients of today's produce and fruit as compared to 50 years ago graphically illustrate the demise of food quality.

A forgiving farm enjoys animal and plant production that is not pushed to the extreme. Intuitively, we all know that nothing operates most efficiently at full throttle. Even machines don't enjoy being run at their maximum potential. Plants and animals don't, either. If that were a noble goal, we would all aspire to be the fattest person in the room. Is it any wonder that a food system predicated on faster, fatter, bigger, cheaper would create an ignorant, duplicitous, harried, obese citizenry? A culture's people carry in their heads and physique the manifestation of their food system's objectives.

If America has a health crisis, perhaps it is time to identify and admit to our *food crisis*. If everyone asking for nationalized health care would first demand product forgiveness on the farm, perhaps we would empty half the beds in hospitals. Researchers at Cornell proved several years ago that feeding cows forage for two weeks before slaughter would practically eliminate the *E. coli* problem. How did the industry respond? It vilified the study rather than adopting a new protocol.

A pasture-based livestock farm maintaining happy animals is simply not as vulnerable to pathogen attack in or on what it produces. A vegetable operation maintaining high-organic-matter soils

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creates a natural buffer against anything that could taint the produce. While the rest of the world stays awake nights wondering whether their food will hurt somebody, a forgiveness farmer can sleep like a baby, resting assured that eco-principles in the fields encourage healthful, pathogen-free products.

10. Neighbor forgiveness. Pick up any conventional farm magazine and you will find numerous articles and editorials about those nasty neighbors who don't like the smells and unsightliness emanating from farms. Ditto the animal welfare crowd that is trying to put factory farms out of business.

If we had never stooped to factory farms in the first place, the virulent edge of the animal rights movement would probably never have surfaced. In fact, militant groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals do not represent a new spiritual state of cosmic awareness, but rather the inevitable result of our society's extreme disconnect-ness to the living world. When the only other living thing a person encounters is a house plant or a pet cat, it kind of jaundices their view toward the natu-

ral world that lives and dies, that decomposes and springs to life.

If they are to be regenerative and sustainable, therefore, our farms must be forgiving to our neighbors. That means our operations must be aromatically and aesthetically pleasant. It means our workers should not walk around in hazard-protection suits looking like they are walking on the moon instead of our friendly planet. And it means the animals should be happy, busy, cooing, content.

A Virginia subdivision now has restricted deed covenants against "farming and other nuisances." Can you imagine? In our culture, we are actually labeling farming as a *nuisance*. What have we done to ourselves, that the oldest and noblest vocation on earth, the educated agrarian proletariat envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, has been reduced to nothing more than a nuisance?

This has not come as the result of eco-farming. It is the direct result of an anti-human industrial food system that divorces food courtship from dinner and turns the populace into farm-haters.

That is a tragedy of epic proportions. We must devote ourselves afresh to

building neighbor forgiveness into our farms, to rekindle an enthusiasm for the agrarian arts. Building beautiful farmsteads with diversified species on verdant pastures with dancing animals is the way to draw in our neighbors, to reconnect, and to build forgiveness.

Forgiveness farming encompasses everything we are and do. It includes how other people see our farms as well as how we want to see our farms. It's abundantly practical. And it's totally opposite to the industrial food system. Forgiveness farmers can lie down at night knowing we have not violated creation, we have not raped the earth, we have not angered our neighbors, and we have nurtured our families.

Let's get to it, shall we?

Joel Salatin and his family raise grass-fed beef, pastured poultry, rabbits and more on Polyface Farm, a model diversified farmstead in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. He is the author of many books on sustainable farming, all available from the Acres U.S.A. bookstore.

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