

RELATIONSHIP FARMING

by Joel Salatin

Have you ever considered how many relationships a farmer manages — or mismanages? I would say that viewing the farm as a group of relationships is one of the best ways to differentiate the eco-farm from the industrial factory farm.

In a modern conventional factory farm dedicated to producing faster, fatter, bigger and cheaper, relationships hardly figure into the equation — unless, of course, it's the linear relationship between dominant human cleverness versus nature's wisdom. And that's more an adversarial relationship, not a symbiotic one.

In this context, then, I would like to articulate some of the relationships that good farmers must massage. As we examine these, I think we will come to appreciate the *art* of farming, rather than just the science — or pseudoscience, as the case may be.

SOIL

The pages of *Acres U.S.A.* have examined the intricacies and multidimensional dances going on in the soil for decades, and others have studied these interactions since long before any of us were born. They're that complex. That's a far cry from the dominant paradigm in modern American agriculture, which ultimately views soil as a simple inert substance for holding up plants. In this scenario, research is devoted to concocting new brews to put into the intravenous plant-food bag. Not much relationship there, as long as you know where to stick the needle.

The eco-farmer, on the other hand, appreciates the beauty and choreography of the entire soil food web, elucidated eloquently these days by Elaine Ingham. Captured on film at thousands of magnifications, this community of nematodes, bacteria, fungi, worms and other things we haven't even named yet actually excretes, ingests, stimulates,

represses, captures, and releases in a veritable cornucopia of busyness.

Balancing anions, cations, oxygen, hydrogen, organic matter, moisture, mineral and all the soil community is the farmer's ministry. Every single component is worthwhile. Good farmers don't look at nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium — the proverbial NPK — as being more important than anything else. Indeed, a myopic view of NPK is precisely what has destroyed the intricate relationships on the farm by disregarding the importance of every member in that community.

PLANTS

Within and above the soil, plants achieve bilateral symmetry between root and top. In an article like this, even creating these sub-topics tends to break the relationships we're discussing because plants indicate much about the soil. In fact, soil devoid of plant cover quickly succumbs to erosion and infertility.

Mainline American farming essentially views only seven plants as meritorious. At least, only seven receive subsidies: corn, soybeans, wheat, sorghum, cotton, sugar beets and rice. Every literature student knows that flat characters in a play or story are not relationally developed. Round characters are the ones you feel acquainted with at the end of the story. Folks, we have a flat American agrarian landscape.

Eco-farmers, however, create round, well-developed landscapes. We exult in species diversity. Plant communities, species complexity — these are the mantras of good landscape stewardship. Monocultures and mono-cropping don't exist in healthy farm ecosystems. Instead, eco-farmers encourage companion planting, long rotations, interplanting. Such a scheme necessarily sends us outside government subsidy programs, but earthworms love us.

Permaculturalists are probably on the cutting edge of plant relationships in their mixing of perennial and annual, low profile and high profile. On Polyface Farm,

we run all of our permanent fences along the topographic break points between ridge and slope, and slope and swale, in order to create biodiverse field, forestall and riparian edges. Straight fences do not exist because the land does not lie in straight lines. Using topographic nuances to create plant community edges refines the relationship between micro-climates.

Northern slopes are cooler and more moist than southern aspects. As a result, plant communities vary according to location, and the same species exhibit different growth patterns from season to season. Managing for optimum solar conversion into biomass requires appreciating the relationship among the plants, soil and sun on a given piece of ground.

In his classic *Fertility Pastures*, British farmer Newman Turner describes the health benefits cows experience when they can graze many different kinds of plants in the pasture. Jerry Brunetti's research showing the medicinal qualities of hedge browse is masterful in explaining what a complex menu means to the animal. Good farmers, then, attempt to build into their landscapes more and more plant relationships rather than fewer.

ANIMALS

Beyond domestic commercial species lies a whole community of flyers, burrowers, spinners, herbivores, carnivores, swimmers, amphibians and slithery cousins. From muskrats to mud turtles, this seldom-seen, fleeting, wild animal component speaks volumes about a farm's health. Are these relationships healthy, or are they out of whack?

As avian influenza paranoia builds across the land, I never cease to be amazed at the "straining at gnats and swallowing camels" mentality of the USDA. The bureaucrats demonize waterfowl, farm ponds, pastured poultry and every backyard Little Red Hen as the vectors of this deadly epizootic. Meanwhile, cattle farmers feeding grain to their herbivores — a most unnatural act — harvest and dispense it throughout the fall and winter, attracting literally millions upon millions of sparrows and starlings that would never exist otherwise.

Does it ever occur to anyone formulating policy that the majority of the trans-agricultural hygiene problem could

be eliminated by feeding herbivores their natural forage diet? I watch hordes of starlings descend on silage-feeding wagons and feed bunks during the winter, filling their gizzards with goodies and scattering feces everywhere. That's a far bigger issue than my farm pond with a couple of wood ducks happily swimming around.

The USDA voodoo scientists would have us believe that my Little Red Hen is far more dangerous than that black cloud of starlings descending on the neighborhood. Examining our farming principles in the light of their relationship ramifications helps keep us from encouraging relationships that damage the greater community. Feeding corn to cows, for example, sets up a chain of relationship-altering situations.

The industrial mentality fails to recognize relationships among animals as well as those among soil, plants and sun. The cows must be segregated from the poultry must be segregated from the hogs must be segregated from the rabbits must be segregated from the sheep. On our farm, we mix and match in a multi-speciated production model that more closely approximates the commingling of differing wild species.

The deer, bear and turkeys do not have separate ranging areas. Instead, they utilize the same range, taking and contributing different food and feces. This creates a natural pathogenic cul-de-sac since most pathogens do not cross-speciate. On the same pasture, we graze cows followed by the eggmobiles, which house free-range hens and allow them to scratch through the cow pats, eat the fly larvae, and scavenge newly exposed grasshoppers and crickets from the shortened sward.

Pastured broilers march across the field at a different time of year, and turkeys can follow after that. All of this relationship-building increases income per acre, and it's all done without concrete and steel megalithic confinement houses. The infrastructure footprint is light on the land, which brings us to the next relationship.

PEOPLE

To underscore just how anti-people modern industrial farming is, we should note that the United States now has nearly twice as many people incarcerated as the number of farmers. About 2.5 percent of the population is in jail, whereas

only about 1.5 percent of the population is farming. Doesn't it make you proud? I certainly think we should be exporting this wonderful success story to other cultures so they can enjoy this statistic, too. A little sideline politics, there, just in case you were snoozing!

The point is that official government policy has applauded every reduction in the number of farmers. That's because farming is looked upon as noisy, dirty drudgery for the dumbest sector of society that can't figure out how to get a real city job. And lest we forget to point the finger at ourselves, too many of us farmers do not massage the people relationships that are the lifeblood of our sustainability.

I've come to the conclusion that the test of a sustainable farm is the average age of the people operating it. In the business world, an economic sector in which the average practitioner exceeds 35 years of age is considered a sector in decline. True sustainability requires elderly wisdom leveraged on youthful energy. If youthful energy does not benefit from elderly wisdom, it lacks direction and focus. If elderly wisdom has no youthful energy, it cannot express itself in action, because the older a person gets, the less he's willing to risk and sweat.

I address this issue extensively in the book *Family Friendly Farming*. How to build mutually honoring relationships so the farm has a seamless transition from generation to generation is certainly as big an issue as bushels of corn produced per acre. We must structure the farm to allow for down time. My Dad used to say that nobody can handle more than four hours of chores a day (those tasks that must be done every day at a certain time). We have tried to live by that rule, and it makes all the difference.

Encouraging children to develop their own, autonomous entrepreneurial farm enterprises massages the parent-child relationship. Most farmers I know actually encourage their children *not* to stay on the farm and with their constant complaints of prices, weather and disease paint a totally negative picture. Who wants to enter a negative picture? Our farms offer beautiful places to enjoy picnics. Let's use them.

Beyond the family, opening the farm to others creates a hub of excitement. Did you know that millions of people think

what farmers do is *cool*? Building relationships with these folks can surround us with unbridled enthusiasm for what we do and help fill in the trouble spots — like when the cows get out or the clouds don't rain. Rather than being hermit John Deere jockeys out listening to talk radio in the air-conditioned cab while plowing the back forty, we farmers must embrace the multitudes for whom our vocation is new, exciting, different and magnetic.

COMMUNITY

How does a farm fit into its community? Back in the late 1980s the American Farm Bureau Federation and the industrial ag lobby pushed through "Right to Farm" legislation. Remember that? Stymied by hundreds of nuisance suits over pollution, odor, dust and illnesses related to factory farms, the industrial fraternity responded with laws that absolved them of liability as long as farms followed "Best Management Practices" (BMPs).

Of course, the industrial agriculture colleges *wrote* the BMPs to make sure that factory farming conformed. The BMP for manure handling, for example, is the slurry system. No mention of composting. No mention of pigeraators. No mention of pasturing so that manure mountains never happen in the first place. Put manure in the water, of course! Water-based manure handling requires lots of concrete, rebar, machinery and diesel fuel. Just what the doctor ordered.

I call these laws "Right to Stink Up the Neighborhood" laws. They absolved farmers of their responsibility to be good neighbors — the foundation of good relationships. As a result, farmers isolated themselves even more from their neighbors. The mistrust between urban and rural has never been greater. Farmers dismiss aesthetic and aromatic pollution with a flippant, "Oh, don't you now how good country air smells?" I submit that if you ever smell manure around a farm, you're smelling mismanagement. Rather than flipping off their neighbors, farmers should be doing whatever is necessary to create soothing environments.

A farm should be a place that any kindergarten class can come and be a part of, among the animals, among the plants. They should not be places festooned with no trespassing signs and biosecurity

signs because life there has reached such a nadir of immuno-deficiency that every other life form must be feared. Farms should be emotionally soothing places, not places that require passing through sheep dip and donning a moon suit just to set foot inside. What kind of food is coming out of that environment?

As the industrial farming sector became more noxious to its neighbors — and its own farmers — it isolated itself from communities. All the expansion in factory farming is in extremely rural enclaves, out of sight and smell. People don't want these noxious factory farms in their backyard. Zoning laws now make sure that residential is over here, commercial over there, and farming somewhere else. The butcher, baker and candlestick maker have become mutually neighbor-unfriendly. With this separation, it's easy to make shortcuts ecologically, emotionally and economically.

Part of the farmer's responsibility is to be such an aesthetically and aromatically friendly neighbor that the butcher, baker and candlestick maker can re-embed themselves in the community. Then and only then can integrity be restored to our food system. When everyone sees what goes in the front door and comes out the back door, then transparency creates accountability, which ultimately insures integrity. Integrity can never be legislated and policed from inside the Beltway. If it takes a village to raise a child, perhaps it also takes a village to create and maintain an honest food system.

CUSTOMERS

Finally, farmers should be building relationships with customers. It's a crying shame that farmers by and large distrust their customers. Farmers are rightfully dubious about the intentions

of the grain elevator, sale barn or large processor/buyer. Rather than building a customer relationship, however, farmers feel isolated from their buyers at best, and a healthy animosity at worst.

Alternative marketing offers an antidote for this buyer-seller divorce. Many relationship-oriented marketing schemes exist. From Community Supported Agriculture to farmers markets to Internet sales to farmgate sales, all of these venues and more provide opportunities for farmers to build relationships with their constituency.

The immediate feedback about product quality, product type and product quantity creates not only accountability but also immediate encouragement. How many farmers receive praise and accolades from their customers? I noticed this most poignantly when our children were small and customers would tell them what important work their family did. "We depend on you for our food," they would say.

Do you know what that does for the self-image of a child? In a day when farm kids routinely receive redneck stereotyping from their peers — farming, after all, is not cool like Dilbert cubicles — for ours to receive constant positive reinforcement was worth more than any amount of money. We don't farm because we're too stupid to do anything else; we farm because we love it and want to heal the world, and all the people in it.

Honoring and respecting our customers is part and parcel of the farm business. Most farmers do not even envision themselves as part of the food chain. They just see themselves as producers of raw commodities. Period. End of story.

And that is unfortunate. It dishonors the most noble vocation on earth, and the ultimate stewardship of air, soil and water.

Building customer relationships, although challenging at times, is critical to creating a farm that can sustain itself long term.

There we are: soil, plants, animals, people, community and customers. Building relationships is the calling, the sacred ministry, of good farmers. How we massage those relationships determines our success and the degree to which we heal all the elements within our sphere of influence.

Let's go build some relationships.

Joel Salatin raises 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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