

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Community Supported Agriculture

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Dear Peter,

After having begun my fellowship in a rather unconventional fashion, that is, beginning in the USA, I am finally having some feeling of relief that my out of the ordinary start has begun to pay off...I have found some valuable connections to what I have been experiencing in Japan.

When I was working with organic farming groups in the Tokyo area, I often had in the back of my mind an attempt to draw the co-partnership model of mutually beneficial direct linkages between farmers and consumers into some kind of package for export. Doubts occasionally surfaced about how other cultures would manage with these arrangements that seem to rely on a high degree of cooperative spirit and mutual understanding; doubts were particularly strong about such an approach taking root in the homeland's "Live Free or Die", independent-minded culture.

The search has produced some unexpected answers...not only does the idea make sense for some groups here in the U.S., but they have started to act on the idea and are operating in "community supported agriculture" arrangements in a number of places (including New Hampshire). Alas, I may have dallied too long in doubt, for these "CSA's" have been inspired, not by the Japanese example, but by European sources, and through people who have consciously transplanted the model from places like Switzerland and Germany.

The discovery began with mention from a friend that I ought to visit a farmer in Wilton, New Hampshire, who had some novel cooperative arrangements with his local community. I went there in late November to meet this man, Trauger Groh. Kazari and Regina stayed warm inside his beautiful farmhouse, and shared toys with his little girl, while I visited with farmhands and took in the fields and animals on the place. We met with Trauger on the second day, upon his return from a lecture tour in Quebec:

"You know, the Quebec-qua, they have a different tradition than the colonial British...they have the peasant tradition and it shows in the farms...they are neat, well organized..."

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Arthur Getz is an Institute fellow examining issues in agriculture and human values from a cross-cultural perspective.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Groh is fresh from the farmlands of northern Germany, probably in his late forties, with a farmer's ruddy complexion and field walking sincerity. Speaking with him is a pleasure of rare intensity, as his interest in the subjects he is practicing and writing about are enhanced by his imaginative and forceful way of drawing parallels in history. Our conversations made visits to numerous junctures in the past when agriculture might have taken a different turn. The Germanic influence in his deep voice coaxes the listener to feel the interrogative 'ya?' as naturally as if English should have the same conversational device.

Trauger was a biodynamic farmer in Germany for many years, selling his produce under the biodynamic "Demeter" label. The biodynamic approach was originally outlined in lectures given in 1924, by the Austrian philosopher and clairvoyant, Rudolph Steiner (1861-1925). His name is probably better known for the Waldorf philosophy of education, but these are both aspects of his overarching weltanschauung of Anthroposophy.

Biodynamic farming has become a unifying spiritual orientation for farmers and gardeners in several parts of the world who seek an articulated philosophy and methodology that blends some of the cosmic with the mundane; aspects of composting, the timing of planting, and observances around the seasons offer opportunities for rituals that reinforce thinking beyond the borders of reductionist science, and broaden the circumference toward a "spiritual science".

Trauger is married to Alice, an American who shared an interest in Biodynamic farming, and in Anthroposophy, having studied in the mid-Seventies at a center for such interests, Emerson College, in Sussex, England. She also completed a degree in International Agriculture at the University of California at Davis, and owns a farm in Wilton.

Wilton was also the site chosen by Beula Emmitt, a woman of some means who in 1942 was inspired to start a boarding school based on Steiner's ideas about education.

The school prospered and the faculty started having children, and eventually needed a primary school for the new crop. What emerged was an attractive alternative educational system close to Boston, Nashua, Manchester and other Yuppie fiefdoms, and the community expanded with families who were drawn toward this combination of rural setting and special schooling.

The setting provided the conditions for a biodynamic agriculture as well, although the soils and climate were not particularly favorable. Because there was some unity of purpose in the community with the school, the idea of a collective risk-sharing in the operation of a farm was in some ways more approachable... In what has become a pattern for some CSAs, the recipe of a Waldorf school, and the collective concern for children's nutrition, food safety, and the educational benefits of working contact with Nature have created the right mix for an experiment in the community's collective support of a farm.

In a section entitled "New Roads" in his book The Biodynamic Farm Herbert Koepf has given his view of the principles that are guiding some of the individual initiatives that are in progress biodynamic movement:

"..Land can be used by human beings, and we have the possibility of maintaining or destroying it in the pursuit of our economic goals. The power of the authorities of older times who used to regulate land use has now been taken over by money, by individual rights, and by governmental objectives. The modern ecological crisis is partly the result of this change. There has rarely ever been harmony between the requirements of sustainable agriculture and the demands made by society. Yet in our time, more than ever before in history, it has become obvious that the people who actually take the necessary steps to preserve or improve long-term fertility should be those who cultivate the land. In place of the authorities of the past, the free decision of individuals or groups must now put this basic principle into practice. In the larger context of the situation, the success of such farmers will ultimately depend on the relationship other sections of society find to the land."

Koepf continues, that the initiatives are "putting into practice the idea that tillable soil should not be a commodity. The land they hold is no longer treated as a private asset. It cannot be sold, inherited, or even used as a security."

"...The farm as an individuality, in the social as well as the ecological sense, is the underlying image. The emphasis is on bringing farmers and nonfarmers who share spiritual and social goals into a working relationship. These people are jointly responsible for the capital and the means of production that are then put at the disposal of those who work on the farm."

Land trusts are a common element in the CSA theme, although there are some arrangements that involve private land, under lease or loan, and others that combine the two. The Wilton example is such a hybrid. Two farms essentially donate the use of their lands for the the community's use. One is in a land trust, administered by a foundation which houses a care center for handicapped persons, and allows the group to use some of the acreage for crops. The other is Alice and Trauger's farm, which privately owned and loaned to the CSA for the project.

The latter includes about 40 acres of pasture, some forest, and 4 acres of vegetable crops. There are a variety of animals as well, apart from wildlife there are ducks, chickens, some sheep, and small herd of milking Devons. The normal culling of the herds and flocks provides some meat to the community, with the butchering done locally.

The operating costs of the farm are entirely supported by the pledges of the 75 member households, who make regular payments in return for food that is supplied to a small store which serves as the hub for distributing the produce. The only additional charges at the store are for some processed items, like butter, or the soft cheese that they produce in small quantities.

In early December, I met another person who was connected to this concept of community supported agriculture, while attending a conference of the Organic Farmers Association's Council in Leavenworth, Kansas. Rod Shouldice, executive director of the Biodynamic Association of America, was there as were many other

representatives of organic farming organizations.

Although that conference was to establish a common marketing definition for "organic", Rod and I shared a strong interest in the other route to promoting alternative agriculture, through establishing direct connections between consumer and farmer groups. He had been a key figure in the startup of a CSA in his area. Meeting him was one of those serendipitous connections, because at the time he was organizing a workshop on community supported agriculture, and extended an invitation for me to come and meet several people from around the country who were already practicing or were soon to get started in similar arrangements. It made for some mid-course corrections and a shift in plans, but I knew I had to meet this group of people.

The workshop was held at the end of January in Kimberton, Pennsylvania, a small village in the vicinity of Valley Forge, in some of the most lovely pastoral landscape I've seen on the East Coast, the northern part of Chester County.

It was a very stimulating gathering, for it brought me to the heart of a community of interest that I hadn't known outside of Japan. Here was an assortment of Southerners, High Plains farmers, New Englanders and West Coasters, who were familiar with many of the same core ideas, and who are experimenting and evolving specific solutions for their local situations.

While the event was sponsored in part by the Biodynamic Association, it was not limited solely to groups connected to the philosophy or the movement. Something does unite these people in their common projects, however, which if not the Steiner inspired vision, had to be some form of shared spiritual or philosophical belief; participants in the workshop identified this as critical to the success and sustainability of this level of community involvement.

Trauger Groh was a key contributor at Kimberton, because of his long experience working with the same concept in Germany, and he shared many of his thoughts with the group. I have tried to transcribe some of them here from the taped sessions, but the charm and power of his words, in addition to his accent and flavorful intonation, are difficult to capture on paper. What follows is a sampling of some of the exchange:

"The only thing that you can work on is to build up a core group that naturally consists of mostly of your friends, if you have some locally...for whoever wants to start something, I recommend always, "don't go anywhere where you think there is good land, go somewhere where you know there are some people"; where there is, so to say, a nucleus for some community, otherwise you go into the desert, and you disappear somehow for mankind. I've heard many such cases, people just disappeared in the deserts of the Midwest, that has beautiful land..."(but not any people close to each other)

"If we want to offer something we have to realize that people live today under very special extreme conditions...all these people that are part of our community farm, or many of them, they go with a little briefcase and a car, and they commute, often a

hour to find their workplace, 90 or 95% do a work that they do not like -- that's **terrible**, but people have to live though, that is the reality, and I always feel that as farmers and gardeners, we are enormously privileged, because usually we do something that we like to do, that **most** of other people cannot do and for that sort of privilege eventually we can allow ourselves to have a little bit less money..."

"If now if we approach other people we have to see that we offer something that is **absolutely unusual**, and that **cares and meets** some of their innermost needs. Now we live in a civilisation that is coined...**shaped** by a principle, that you do something, and because you do something you get money...this immediate exchange of money, for what you bring, what you work on to create a product...in some way people **suffer** from that, they suffer! In some way most of the people in our society have to sell their labor, they have to be somewhere for certain hours or they have to produce certain pieces, and then they get a certain amount of money...and deep in their hearts they feel that this is something that has, that is not really human; that **what I do**... out of my interest, out of my innermost being, is something that is not a tradeable good: it is a spiritual quality that I cannot really sell. And if we create community farms we should have that in our consciousness, that we could create such opportunities where people can **work for nothing**...that's an enormous chance!...people don't do that and they have very visible tensions...they can **donate their labor**. And this is so to say, a new principle, and we should speak about that and think about that."

"...the first step is that we, if we start a community garden, have a community that has a feeling that ya, that's worthwhile to support. that we make it clear that they realise they cannot **exchange money** here on that farm **against produce**...we should **eliminate** this idea...it **doesn't carry**- it doesn't carry spiritually in the community. We have to realize that the farm organism is a very very..., a **thing full of wisdom** where we can learn, where we can contribute something, and that's a value in itself beyond the produce that we get. And we have to want that farm organism, so we have to train ourselves to **explain!** explain this wonderful thing that we have in our hands and that we want to share with them. And then, they have to come to the conclusion ya, they have now to **provide our living** so that we care for their farm...because they all cannot care for their farm...and someone has to care for it...so that in our relationship with the larger community we...have to **eliminate the idea that they give money and we give produce**.

But what really should happen is they provide, they carry the cost of the place, to **set us free, that we can create and form a farm organism out of our most inner spiritual ideals**... to make it possible that someone else works out of his ideals, that he doesn't think of anything..."

"I sometimes... a very funny thing, you see this working with nature is something really very joyous and...farmers can be very

nice people...some gardeners?..eh,...I always talk about the fact that farmers because they work in nature they have this privilege that can really give certain joy, and...**gardeners are sometimes so very grumpy people!** And why is it so?

Because in normal market gardening, whenever they bend down to pick a lettuce they have to think of money?!... either you have it or not... and this is a bit farther back for farmers...but the real market gardener has a different relationship with his produce...so we have to somehow eliminate that... and to see that what the community really provides is the support that we can, out of our **ideals**, now form this farm organism **without** thinking of money. And the **less** we think of money the **more** eventually Nature can respond... because we now just bring in and work with Nature, with Nature's intentions and Nature's wisdom."

"Now our civilization, **America is extreme in this**, in this exchanging labor against money, and that makes it very very difficult to work with school classes, because from early childhood children are taught: you wash car, you wash the dishes and then you get some money, it is **an accepted practice**, ya? and that **spoils**, I think that it's a miserable thing on our education, that we cannot raise our children in a way that they work for the **sake of the matter**, but they work for money... And when they come to our farms, we have to deal with **this** problem first, especially little children! The parents are in that point easier, they are already **so fed up** with working for money, so that having the chance for working **without** money can be a great privilege for them. But you see that we have ourselves the right attitude in these things is very important, otherwise the other people who come to the farm cannot get the right feeling for this..."

Trauger proposes five stages farmers and consumers must go through to make the idea of a community supported agriculture a reality: Vision, plans, financial support, communication, and review:

"...how does this community and this farm work together? ...if you look at the farmer and the community in the year, what really happens? how do they **interact?**"

"...the first thing is that in winter, when you meet with this community and the new members, that you try, as good as you can, to make them understand **what that farm organism is**...to give an idea, people come together to understand what is the farm organism, **for this special place**, not the farm organism generally, but here...why is that so? we have this line, and these trees here, and this and this can grow and certain things cannot grow...everything that we know. And this we should share with all the people...and the second set, proceeding from this is discussion with the farmers, what is their plan for the year. See, one has to **develop the ideal**, you have to always develop the ideal, you paint a beautiful picture, with all your customers and all your friends, how that place should be, thirty-five years from now: "there should be...several apples trees planted and this and this"...so that they can **share the vision** that's very

important. . ."

[when pronounced by Trauger, "vision" you also hear "wishin'"]  
"...and then the next step is this: you tell people "what do I do this new year with your help to come closer to this vision?"

"That is the annual plan, and that, distills down, or boils down to the budget. The budget is so to say, **the realization of our spiritual ideals in this world**. That is the budget. We realize our spiritual ideals by spending money...you know? We cannot do that without spending money...but we have to know that, so to say, that this is the source. That is the second step.

The third step is that now that this group, because it shares the vision and it knows the steps, and now they can by **physical labor** and by **money's support** that this can happen...But if you don't have the preparation for that, they cannot really, with their emotions, enter into that process. so the third step...is helping, participating by supporting expenses to implement that plan of the year.

And the fourth is that during the year people learn the details that occur in the year for a better understanding of this farm...so one has to come together, and we have mentioned that before, one has to have **farm walks**...one or two or three per year, that people really see..."

"We had terrible trouble in our place, that we planted potatoes, and we didn't harvest any, ya? But people eat permanently potatoes, and they **pay** every month now they have to understand why that happens. If they cannot understand that, they cannot tolerate it...so you **always have to explain**, you have to give reasons, you cannot work with other people financially if you are not giving reason for everything you do...that was the fourth..."

...The fifth is that you create a situation looking back on the achievements and the failures, and measuring them on the ideal that you have..."

These five steps ... we really have to go through with the new community..."

What I really wanted to say is... that we have to **express** and **offer** is something **entirely radically new** ...our civilization is so fouled, and people are so fed up, ya? Could we not, out of our knowledge of Nature and our working with Nature present something new, we cannot attract people to share costs, of labor and everything else?"

"...then come all these problems with labor, ya? How do you make people help physically, hmmm? We made regular work days, and some people came for a while...and people didn't take that...people didn't stay...And so something was wrong, and so now what we do on our farm is we make 'emergency calls'. People love that. They love to go extinguish a fire...that burns somewhere, ya? But to go...(Emergency bug squishing parties, another CSA veteran chimes in) ...you call them and say, "**if not a few of you come for two days, then there will be no carrots...**" And they come. It seems to be a psychological thing, ya? One has to find out what is really attractive, ya?"

Response:" But it still comes down to the financial thing...I mean, ideally, wouldn't it be great if everybody comes and does it for nothing?..."

Trauger:"We are dealing with people covering costs, and those people who have to pay, and cover costs for the farm, they have to know why these costs arise. **And why do costs arise?** That is very interesting, that we see if we look at Nature, and we have this concept of this biodynamic farm organism, then we can find out that **Nature reproduces itself**...it even has a surplus, for the seed of the next year...without **any** input...we needn't buy **anything**, and have so to say, full production that we can live on, and have the seed for the next year.

And then we have another factor, some people have to work, this is the human being, the human being regenerates itself too: First of all, when I sleep, in the morning I am fresh again...Children, I have eventually, two...so we have two factors, Nature and Man that regenerate...**totally**, we can say. Theoretically, when you bring two such factors together, then the food would be **free of any cost**. That's very important that we understand that, because this is so to say, **the secret of economy in farming and forest**...but industry doesn't have that. In industry that does not happen, but **food doesn't cost anything** if mankind and Nature would cooperate properly. And people if they understand...I can explain that, I can say "well, we need about a hundred man-hours, ya? per week on that farm, in vegetables, in summer. Winter we do not, less ya? we have a community farm with about seventy families, that makes about a hundred and forty adults...if these hundred and forty adults come, ya? for a hundred man-hours...they needn't come more...and spend just two hours everyone...then every work would be done. Someone has to be there to show them what to do. **We wouldn't need machinery**, because they could do it with a spade...a spade would be a much lower investment...if you have a hundred forty people digging... very fast! an acre and a hundred people digging... So, we could eliminate cost, and without spending too much time people could have their **full job, their full income outside** and donate these two hours a week or three hours a week, most of the work would be done, and... no, hardly any costs would remain on the farm.

People don't do that...**they shouldn't do that**, ya? People... we are **free**, but we have to see that the reason that there are costs are...that is, **ourselves**...because we don't go there. We have to pay, that other people are supported, those people that **cannot go earn money**. We have in the community farm a community where 80% ...where so to say nearly everyone has an income, and there are two people, or three people on the farm working, they have no income, because they have no business...**they have to live on the income of the others**."

"So I just wanted to excite you, make you a bit excited, about a **new way** of thinking and looking on things, and people are very grateful, if they get a **few new ideas**...how look on their own neighbor, how to look on the costs of the farm..."

NEXT: Community Supported Agriculture:Nuts&Bolts