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Magic Farming

by Douglas Haynes

Character names in this essay have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals mentioned.

The first time I drove a horse-drawn implement my future wife nearly got killed. It was an overcast Sunday morning in September at The Land Institute, a sustainable agriculture research and education farm just outside Salina, Kansas. Tina, one of my supervisors during my internship at the Institute, was teaching me how to drive as I walked alongside her on a plow pulled by two enormous dapple-gray geldings named Bob and Stormy. After a few rounds, she stopped the horses and asked me, to my surprise, if I wanted to give it a try. I had walked Bob and Stormy on the ground before, but driving them on a plow was more daunting. Plowing requires the teamster to drive arrow-straight, keeping the right horse in the furrow and the moldboard in the soil. I was hesitant because of my inexperience but eager for the opportunity, so I said "Sure," with the joking addendum, "but it will probably be a catastrophe."

Plowing seemed easy at first, and we cruised down the furrow Tina had already started unswervingly. Suddenly Stormy stepped up out of the furrow, so I halted

both horses and tried to steer him back down. It didn't work, and Bob and Stormy were getting nervous. I handed the leather reins to Tina. Before she was entirely on the seat with both lines in hand, they started moving forward, dragging the plow and both of us behind them. I tried to prevent the entire implement from turning over on Tina, as she was more entangled than me. But the plow was a feather weight in the horses' forward force. It flipped and whipped about while Bob and Stormy turned back toward the barn, exposing Tina to the coulter knife and the moldboard's sharp steel tip. I knew she was injured as I finally got hold of the loose reins, but I had no idea how badly. By some miracle of inches, she escaped being bloodied, and emerged from the tangle on her feet.

I gave her the lines, she coaxed the horses to a halt, and soon we were assessing the damage. Tina limped from a deep bruise on her leg. Bob and Stormy were frightened but unhurt. I couldn't see because my glasses had been thrown from my face. The plow's wooden tongue had snapped; that was the worst of it. Nothing happened that wasn't fixable, but Tina had learned a valuable lesson about letting neophytes on a plow too soon. I was humbled and knew right away I had to drive again, or I would forever be spooked by horses.

Three months later, I found myself crouched in a wagon on a snowy Wisconsin hillside steering two unflappable Belgian mares named Ginger and Maude. The horses' owner, Michael, coached me patiently. As Ginger and Maude increasingly responded to my hand movements and commands of "Gee" and "Haw," I felt awed by this art whose demand for discipline completely consumed me. I was enraptured by driving horses. After many long phone conversations with Michael and his partner Jan and this inspiring December visit, I decided to spend a season working for them and learning from them. I wanted to improve my knowledge of small-scale farming, immerse myself in a life lived mostly outdoors, and enter a relationship with these huge animals whose sentience and power intrigued me.

Michael and Jan offered me these opportunities. They hadn't anticipated having an apprentice that year—it had been seven years since anyone worked for them regularly—but they felt my sudden appearance in their lives was fated. I wasn't sure if I believed in fate or not.

On a dreary afternoon in the beginning of March, I arrived to begin work on Michael and Jan's farm. Jan greeted me inside the door of the musty farmhouse with a grizzled cat in her arms. Like the first time I met her, I was struck by her unkempt appearance. Long stringy gray hair sheltered her round face underneath

the hood of a faded green tie-dyed sweatshirt. But the warm smile that creased sunrays around her blue eyes was welcoming. She hugged me and spoke to the cat, "Say hello to Douglas, Gaiette. He's here to stay."

Michael talked on the phone on a bench by the door amidst papers, work gloves, dirty socks, and boots. He waved at me and turned away to finish his conversation. Beard tufts and greasy brown hair engulfed his profile, leaving a long hawk nose clefting out. With a black hood up and long underwear hanging on his wiry legs, he was the picture of a monkish kern just come in from chores.

Between catching-up words with Jan, I quickly surveyed the house. Cast iron pots and pans steamed and sizzled on the wood-fired stovetop. A tiger-striped cat lazed on a ledge strewn with crusty potholders just above the cooking food. Piles of split wood and cardboard boxes brimming with kindling crowded the entryway and a corner of the living room behind the stove. Stacks of books, paper, and styrofoam flats holding dried flowers almost concealed a piano against the living room's wall.

Michael and Jan moved to what they call Chrysalis Farm from Minneapolis in 1985. They didn't name the place until many years later, however, when it became apparent their lives there were unfolding in unexpected ways. A chrysalis is the pupa stage of a butterfly—a protective covering for the transformation from caterpillar into winged insect. Michael and Jan identify with this state of metamorphosis almost literally. Their land has become the shelter for their personal growth.

Like many other counterculturally-minded urbanites, they longed for a spiritual refuge—a wild place far from the maddening pace and confusion of contemporary city life. Some thirty years after "back-to-the landers" started buying cheap land in America's most economically-depressed rural areas, Jan and Michael's story is a familiar one. They fled a social order they found distastefully materialistic, patriarchal, and violent. Alienated in their own country, they wanted to feel at home on the earth, in themselves, and with other people in a way neither of them had since childhood. They did not have utopian visions of a tranquil rural commune like their forerunners in the 1960s and 70s, however. Both Michael and Jan had endured turbulent communal experiences in the radical housing cooperatives of Madison and the Twin Cities. They desired a reclusive life near people who shared

and practiced their values.

They also wanted to become more economically self-sufficient and lead a more ecologically-sustainable lifestyle. Since they shared a deep appreciation of fresh produce free of synthetic chemicals, farming seemed the way to achieve their goals. Jan grew up on a cash-grain farm in the flatlands of south-central Minnesota. She had been away from the soil for nearly two decades, though, and wanted to get her hands dirty again. Michael had never lived on a farm, but he had a love of wild things fostered by his youth on the marshy shores of Wisconsin's Lake Winnebago.

When Jan and Michael visited the many like-minded refugees from Minneapolis and Madison in the rugged country around Viroqua, Wisconsin, they glimpsed the life they desired. After fruitless searches for a small acreage, they stumbled across an 80 acre tobacco farm in the secluded valley of the Kickapoo River's West Fork. The house and buildings had seen better days. Much of the land had been neglected. The price on eighty acres, more than they thought they needed, made Michael nervous about the mortgage. But, as they walked the fence line up, across, and down the steep west side of the valley, the place felt right to them. They trusted their intuition—their sense that the worn-out farm was special-and they made an offer. By the time I came to work for Michael and Jan, their eighty acres had cast such a spell on them that they did not feel at ease anywhere else.

Their intense attachment to the farm was more than physical. My December visit with Jan and Michael made me aware of their land-based brands of spirituality. From Jan, I had gathered only vague inklings of the first kind, a fusion of Neo-Paganism with a New Age version of American Indian religion. I had seen her "smudge" the house with sage smoke; she explained to me that this act, done ritually, cleanses the atmosphere. I had also noted that Jan used the term "Great Spirit" to address the deity at grace before meals, and that she advocated what she called "the ritual use" of tobacco. She told me she grows a patch of nicotiana rustica, a strongly scented semi-domesticated variety of tobacco once commonly tended by Eastern Woodland Indians, in her garden every year. With Michael, she also often raises a crop of low-grade chewing tobacco to make into braids, which she sells to Native American-related religious groups all over the country.

I knew from Michael that the second kind of spirituality involved a way of farming called biodynamics. Biodynamics is a practical offshoot of an esoteric "spiritual science" called Anthroposophy, which was founded and popularized in the first quarter of the 20th Century by an Austrian intellectual named Rudolf Steiner.

Steiner's ideas about farming are relatively well-known in Europe but remain obscure outside of organic farming circles in the United States. This can be partly attributed to the fact that biodynamics contradicts many conventional scientific theories about how agricultural systems work. Rudolf Steiner claimed that his insights into agriculture would never contradict scientific facts, however. He derived his knowledge of agricultural ecosystems from what he called a "disciplined clairvoyance," which supposedly allowed him to make observations as objective and exact as those made by scientists. Moreover, he claimed that the principles of biodynamics could be understood by people of normal intelligence without using clairvoyant techniques.

According to Steiner, a farm is a living organism that breathes in and out like the earth once a day. Its circulatory system is the water cycle, and the changing seasons provide a pulse. A biodynamic farm should be a closed system. In other words, it should provide and recycle everything it needs: livestock fodder, fertilizer, and nutrients. The latter two come in the form of composted manure and botanical preparations produced and handled in highly specific ways. The farmer should also manage his land in accordance with celestial cycles, which dictate what should be done when.

This is all I knew about biodynamics when I arrived at Chrysalis Farm. I was curious to learn more but also skeptical, since most people I knew who were aware of it considered it eccentric. The day we met in person, I teased Michael good-naturedly about his practice of "magic farming." He returned a very forced smile.

There *is* something extraordinary about Chrysalis Farm. Part of its appeal is isolation. The white farmhouse sits at the dead end of a mile-long gravel road, which abruptly falls away from the little-traveled county pavement running north-south through the valley. Approaching the farm, the one-and-a-half-lane track goes through marshy bottomland, passes an imploding tobacco shed, bridges the West Fork, and then parallels the river as it skirts the homestead of a struggling dairy farm, passes a myriad of parked and abandoned implements and a half-acre corn field, enters a tree tunnel, becomes progressively more pot-holed, and finally emerges in an opening parking area fronting Jan and Michael's house. From there, not a single neighbor or road is visible. Arriving at the farm is like entering a world with different priorities. In summer, a cacophony of vegetation and bird song greets you. Two exhausted sedans sit side-by-side at the gravel's edge. Scrap metal, five-gallon buckets, and garden tools litter the yard around the house. But your

eyes are quickly drawn away from the immediate messes to the hill on the near west horizon.

It's nearly impossible to go anywhere on the farm and not see the hill looming like a dark fortress. Its second-growth oaks, hickories, and sugar maples tower over the open pastures and fields of the lower slope and bottomland. There are other steep hills around; the valley is lined with them. But this one has a commanding shape and presence. It rises roundly over 500 feet above the river less than half a mile from its crest. Smooth sandstone outcrops pierce the hill's sides. Its northern slope drops nearly straight down to a brushy draw that drains the farm's back forty. It's wild on the hill; deer, coyotes, wild turkeys, and a nesting pair of bald eagles all make themselves known there. Gazing up from the dead end in front of the house, you feel it's a sort of sacred grove.

Of the farm's eighty acres, only about twenty are tillable. A quarter of those twenty are too steep to work regularly without washing away, so they are kept in perennial hay crops-orchard grass, timothy, bird's foot trefoil, alfalfa, and red clover.

The most productive row crop fields occupy the narrow strip of flat land by the river. Here Michael and Jan raise, in no particular order, potatoes, onions, garlic, leeks, sweet corn, blue corn, dry beans, tobacco, winter squash, oats, and wheat. They grow everything without synthetic fertilizers or pesticides—the way farmers did for 10,000 years before agribusiness and the farm extension service started hawking chemicals after World War II. The late summer months on Chrysalis Farm are cornucopial.

Garlic is the farm's primary cash crop. Michael and Jan sell most of it as mail-order seed to market growers and organic seed companies. Over thirteen years of growing garlic, they've perfected every step of the labor-intensive process. Now they're known for their high-quality seed. They grow at least five varieties every year. One of these produces the largest, most beautiful lavender-tinged bulbs you will ever see. They call it "Chrysalis Rose."

In the rough, weedy pastures by the barn and above the hay fields, Michael and Jan keep milk goats and four draft horses. Unlike most oil-dependent farmers, they often have fresh milk without going to the store and cash-free traction whenever they need it. The horses—Ginger and Maude, aging Belgian mares, and their respective half-Percheron offspring, Patience and Patrick—are Michael's expertise. He learned the teamster's art mostly through trial and error, with some advice from

local Amishmen and the few other horse-farmers in the area. Michael uses horsepower to do most of the farm's heavy fieldwork: plowing, harrowing, planting, cultivating, harvesting (corn and small grains), and hay-raking. The horses also pull the farm's "truck," an antique box wagon, and skid logs for firewood out of the woods. On snowy winter days and moon-lit nights, horse-drawn sleigh rides charm farm visitors, too. Michael affirms what most farmers who ignore ridicule by working with horses attest: cooperating with these one-ton creatures to get things done gives an immensely satisfying sense of connection to life and history. It's also an extremely practical, economical, and ecologically-sound way to farm, especially on a small diversified acreage. I harbored a dream of having a horse-powered farm of my own one day. Ginger, Maude, Patience, and Patrick—more than anything else—are what drew me to Chrysalis Farm.

The sun didn't shine my first two days there. I went on long walks and learned the winter chore routine. The horses were fed hay and a handful of grain after sunrise, then turned out to snowy pasture at noon. The goats got rotting winter squash, kitchen scraps, and hay twice a day. I brushed Ginger, Maude, Patience, and Patrick with a curry comb while they ate every evening. Their hides were still thick with winter hair that came off the Belgian mares in chestnut bunches and in silvery tufts from Patience and Patrick. Moving between and around their burly bodies in the narrow stalls, I began to learn what tone of voice caused them to heed me.

There wasn't much else to be done those first few days, so Michael took me out to visit friends and see the area. A couple miles north of Chrysalis Farm, there's a cluster of houses and an old general store. The place is called Avalanche after an event no one there remembers. Turning west out of the village and up the steep sides of the valley, Michael drove us to Viroqua, the unassuming locus of organic food, holistic medicine, and alternative education in southwest Wisconsin.

Since veterans of the 1960s counterculture founded Pleasant Ridge Waldorf School in 1980, Viroqua has attracted a young crowd of highly educated, middle-class urban refugees. Tom and Betsy Wilson are typical of this group. They left well-paying jobs in Seattle to give their two boys the luxury of an anthroposophic education in a small Midwestern town. There was supposed to be a Rudolf Steiner book discussion group at the Wilson's house the evening Michael drove me in to town, but we arrived to find Tom home alone with his two sons.

The weekly meeting had been canceled, but Tom urged Michael and I to come in and talk with him over tea. He seemed genuinely excited to meet me and find out about "the path" that brought me to Chrysalis Farm. His questions were laced with enthusiastic comments about Anthroposophy and biodynamics. I could tell he assumed I was a Steiner devotee, one of the many who routinely appeared in Viroqua looking to start a new life. Tom's expressive blue-eyed face radiated conviction the way a talented salesperson's does. In fact, he is a salesperson, and it was obvious he had made this particular pitch many times before. His job selling tombstones is not his passion, though. What he really loves is promoting Viroqua's burgeoning community of Anthroposophists, healers, organic farmers, and artisans. Here was a man who had found his version of paradise, and his self-satisfaction tickled me more than it unsettled. Before Michael and I left, Tom shoved a colorfully-illustrated book in my hands to take home and read. He spoke of it with a passion that resembled religiousity. I don't remember the title or the author, but it was all about nature spirits—fairies, gnomes, sprites—and one farmer's success cooperating with them.

On my fifth night at Chrysalis Farm, rhythmic chants rose through the floorboards beneath my bed. I wished I had a chamber pot. Michael had repeatedly mentioned getting me one, because I had to walk through his upstairs bedroom and the living room where Jan slept downstairs to get to the bathroom at night. In a groggy haze, I descended the steep narrow staircase vaguely cautious of the cats who often waited there for someone to open the door at the bottom. The whiney cat Terry meowed as I turned the knob. Stepping into the dimly-lit living room, a cloud of strong tobacco smoke mixed with the acrid scent of burning sage dulled my senses. I paused for an instant and saw Jan and Michael sitting cross-legged by the woodstove, passing a long pipe and singing. I remembered Jan quietly saying something about a "prayer ceremony" to Michael earlier that day. They didn't acknowledge me, so I moved on deliberately toward the bathroom. On my way back through, I tried hard not to stare and shuffled quickly to the stairwell.

A roaring late-winter blizzard greeted my first glance out the window the next morning. I wondered how I would fill the hours in the day ahead, since the weather would keep us from working. Work had tempered my increasing sense of loneliness and isolation the two days before—brisk and sunny days full of satisfying jobs

outside. On Friday, I cleaned the horse stalls, built a compost pile, and walked and repaired the pasture fences. Saturday morning I dug a thirty-foot trench with Michael from the house to the dilapidated trailer we were fixing-up for me to live in. In the afternoon, I split and stacked firewood then filled in the trench (after a local handyman had laid electrical wire) as clouds rolled in at dusk.

The arrival of sub-freeezing temperatures delayed my plan to set up a bedroom in the trailer that Sunday. Even with the newly-installed space heater, the air in there wouldn't rise above forty degrees. I faced a pensive day in the upstairs bedroom Jan had loaned me for my first days on the farm.

After a late breakfast, I perused the dusty yellowing volumes on Michael's and Jan's bookshelf. Among Raising Small Grains and assorted field guides, I found a fat paperback with an intriguing red-lettered title: *Drawing Down the Moon*. I took it off the shelf and opened it, discovering an illustration of an ancient Greek ritual and the subtitle *Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers and Other Pagans in America Today*.

Back in the bedroom, a chapter called "Magic and Ritual" entranced me. I wanted it to explain what I smelled, heard, and saw in the living room the night before. The author, Margot Adler, gave me a hint of what was happening. Neo-Pagan rituals, she says, are unlike the "dry, formalized, repetitive experiences" so many Americans grew up with in Christian churches. They are meant "to end, for a time, our sense of human alienation from nature and from each other . . . [allowing] us to feel biological connectedness with ancestors who regulated their lives and activities according to seasonal observances." This notion of ritual reminded me of Jan's prayers before meals—she often mentioned honoring our ancestors. She also always asked for blessings on the animals we lived with, both wild and domestic. Adler continues: "Just as ecological theory explains how we are interrelated with all other forms of life, rituals allow us to re-create that unity in an explosive, nonabstract, gut-level way. Rituals have the power to reset the terms of our universe until we find ourselves suddenly and truly 'at home'."

A few days after my snowed-in afternoon with Drawing Down the Moon, I received my first practical lesson in biodynamics. There was a nearly full moon—time to start many garden seeds indoors. In the morning, Michael and I dumped five-gallon buckets full of compost, forest loam, sand, and leaf mold onto the root cellar's cold cement floor. We mixed it all thoroughly with hoes while walking circles around the pile. After lunch, I brought up buckets of the

seed-starting mix to the kitchen where Jan, Michael, and I worked into the evening planting seeds in styrofoam flats. We started lettuce, broccoli, cabbage, parsley, and more kinds of flowers than I can remember.

When we were nearly done planting, Michael went down to the root cellar and brought back a bucket and two earthenware crocks. The bucket contained rainwater. He poured two gallons of it into a pot on the cookstove, stoked the flames with hot-burning staves of elm, and moved the pot over the fire. About fifteen minutes later, Michael poured the blood-temperature water into the larger of the two earthenware crocks on the living room floor. He took a pinch of cow manure out of the smaller covered crock and rubbed it off into the water. Glancing at the wall clock, Michael began steadily stirring the solution with his arm immersed up to the elbow. After a deep vortex formed in the rotating liquid, he quickly changed the direction of his stirring.

Michael was making biodynamic preparation 500, also known as horn manure. He called me over to take a turn stirring almost halfway through the hour-long process. The solution was silky and warm to the touch, and I soon felt relaxed by the rhythm made by my rotating forearm. Michael encouraged me to be silent and focus on continually creating a vortex. The liquid was never to stop moving.

Preparation 500's purpose is to promote root growth, stimulate soil microorganisms, regulate lime and nitrogen levels in the soil, and provide trace elements. The beneficial properties of preparation 500, and of all biodynamic preparations, comes not from its composition but from the way it is made. Chemical analysis of the solution will not reveal how biodynamic farmers claim it really acts. Michael sprays it on flats of newly-planted seeds, garden beds, and freshly-worked fields. Preparation 500 is also called horn manure because its active component is cow dung packed into a cow horn and buried underground through a winter. Stirring the shit-solution by the woodstove in a shaft of moonlight, I remembered the words of a Neo-Pagan farmer interviewed in Drawing Down the Moon. "Magic is simply the art of getting results."

It's not easy to find cow horns these days. Most milk and beef producers dehorn their cattle at a young age to prevent the animals from injuring each other. So, the biodynamic farmers around Viroqua were very pleased when Tom Wilson found a source of cow horns in Texas. One spring morning, Tom arrived at Chrysalis Farm with a pick-up bed full of horns. He piled them in a dark corner of the tobacco shed with the zeal of a man who's found gold.

On the last weekend in March, Michael and I drove five hours south to the small town of Fairfield, Iowa for a biodynamic workshop. Michael's agronomist friend Gene had asked him to lead a session on making and using biodynamic preparations. I went along to get a thorough introduction to Steiner's agricultural ideas and help Michael with the driving. On our way through southwest Wisconsin's undulating hills, we stopped for cheese curds at one of the many small cheese factories along U.S. Highway 61. Both of us knew that when curds are truly fresh, they actually squeak in your mouth when you chew them. Flushed with the novelty of being far away from the farm together, we interrogated the clerk about the quality of the curds. She laughingly assured us (we must have looked a freakish pair—Michael in his straw hat and an unruly Amish-style beard, me lanky and skin-headed at the time) that the curds were made just hours ago. We squeaked and joked for the next 75 miles to Cedar Falls, where Michael fell asleep.

That evening in a community center on the Jefferson County fairgrounds, I sat in an audience of about twenty-five mostly middle-aged folks who call themselves "Rus." Fairfield is the home of Maharishi International University, which was founded by an Indian guru who developed the techniques known as transcendental meditation. The gurus' followers affectionately refer to themselves as "Rus." This metaphysically pre-disposed crowd patiently sat through an introductory lecture by Steven's friend Gene, who works for the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in East Troy, Wisconsin. Gene is accustomed to presenting biodynamics to all kinds of audiences, so he generally emphasizes its scientifically-verifiable content ("Biodynamics builds active organic matter in the soil by integrating cover crops into crop rotations") and vaguely alludes to its more existential spiritual aspects ("biodynamics is about learning to see"). When he finished his remarks, Gene was barraged with questions about how to make biodynamic "potions" and when celestial events influence plants. This audience did not require intellectual justifications for Steiner's more esoteric notions about farming. They simply wanted instruction on how to put them into practice. Abstractions like "preparations increase the life-force of the soil" did not bother them because they already believed they would be able to sensually experience this phenomenon.

I felt alienated by the enthusiastic conversations that followed the lecture. Everyone seemed to be saying that my desire to understand Steiner's logic was

beside the point. "The logic will reveal itself," Gene told me, "when you witness how biodynamic methods make the soil [and thus plants and animals] more alive." Why did I want proof before opening myself to the idea? Why couldn't I just let experience dictate knowledge rather than the other way around?

While the workshop members inoculated a compost pile with yarrow, chamomile, stinging nettle, oak bark, dandelion, and valerian preparations at a nearby farm the next day, I wandered around the property mulling over these questions. I felt more comfortable with the livestock than the people there. Cotswold sheep, Jersey cows, and a hodgepodge of cats, goats, and chickens all shared the same pasture with parked machinery. I envied the animals for their absolute lack of pretense and their unwillingness to intellectualize. They live without a division between mind and senses, and that's exactly what I wanted. When Michael and I drove away that afternoon, the "Rus" were skipping joyfully through the fields spraying a preparation they had just concocted—a solution that, if nothing else, made them happy.

Michael and I talked intensely most of the way back to Wisconsin. His perceptiveness often startled me in the first month or so I knew him. Occasionally, he said things that revealed he had been closely observing me in silence. Michael knew that I was very introspective the whole weekend in Fairfield without me saying a word about it.

I spilled my doubts. I doubted the validity of biodynamics because no one had been able to explain to me how it works in clear and logical language. I trusted concrete words and their power to embody truth much more than I trusted anyone's abstract personal testimony. This realization contradicted the lip-service I had been giving experiential learning for years. When challenged by a way of thinking that defies reductive description, I floundered. Our language has only foggy, abused words like "spirit" and "energy" to characterize the metaphysical realm that biodynamic farmers hone their awareness of and work in. I had already heard these empty words far too much around Viroqua. My semantic problem indicated my culture's unwillingness to fully engage the complexity of the natural world. Faced with people so eager to at least consider the possibilities for understanding nature in a deeper and more comprehensive way, I felt embarrassed.

Michael responded with an explanation of Anthroposophy's unifying principle. Rudolf Steiner's entire system of thought rests on the notion that humans are spiritually evolving over time. By "improving" our own souls, Steiner says, we can

contribute to the betterment of society through practices like biodynamics and Waldorf education. Steiner contends that without personal growth, however, people will never fully realize the potential of Anthroposophic disciplines. This is because they are inherently participatory and malleable pursuits—not prescriptive as they seem on the surface (e.g. this is the "right way" to make a preparation). Michael compared biodynamics to a set of tools and parts for assembling something. It's not the instructions. Knowing what to do, how to use the tools, comes from seeing how the parts fit together. In this way, there's nothing supernatural about it. As Michael put it, biodynamics, and Anthroposophy in general, is simply about becoming more fully human. It's a process of learning to use our endowment of senses to their greatest extent.

This rang true and wonderful, but its underlying premise disturbed me. History shows me no signs of human goodness increasing over time, particularly among Europeans, who Steiner says are the most spiritually-evolved of all people. And the belief that only a certain spiritual path will "improve" the condition of humanity struck me as elitist and reactionary. I had already sensed this ugly side of Anthroposophy around Viroqua: a peculiarly exclusive definition of community coupled with a narcissistic obsession with self-realization. There was a lot of rhetoric about community, but at times all it amounted to was like-minded people getting together to talk about their spiritual struggles or discuss Steiner books devoted to unlocking the potential of the self. I was beginning to think that this supposed counterculture was simply another brand of fundamentalist subculture, which traded individualistic materialism for an individualism based on personal growth.

I didn't say all this to Michael in the car that day, though. We were still only getting to know each other, and I was enjoying the stories he started telling about his various spiritual searches. He had sampled Hinduism, Zen, and Christianity, but nothing empowered him to act toward self-improvement like Anthroposophy. He never tried to convert me, though. Micahel is a reluctant but talented teacher; he knows that the kind of magic he believes in can't be taught.

In April, I began spending entire days at work with the horses. Michael rode along with me at first, answering my questions and helping me through difficult situations like backing up. Soon, I was confident and competent enough to take a team,

usually the older mares Ginger and Maude, out on my own. After harnessing and hitching them to a forecart—a two-wheeled seat with a tongue and trailer hitch—I drove us to the greening pastures with a chain drag to break up and spread a winter's worth of horse manure. This was the perfect job for learning to drive. I could concentrate solely on steering the team back and forth across the pastures. Ginger and Maude were the perfect horses to learn with, too: patient, calm, and forgiving.

By April 22nd, the ground was soft and dry, the horses were accustomed to working regularly again, and I was ready for a more challenging job. It was time to start plowing and working fields. As the sun peeked over the birch-covered bluff on the valley's east side, Michael and I put Patrick, Ginger, and Patience on a rusty single-bottom sulky plow. Michael drove them to a half-acre clearing between the barn and low marshy ground by the river. This field had been fallow the previous year, and it was already blanketed with wild mustard, violets, chickweed, and wild parsnip. I walked alongside Michael while he started a straight furrow on both sides of the field. Then he handed the reins to me. I felt none of the hesitation I had the last time I mounted a horse plow. I said, "Ginger, Patience, Patrick . . . Come on," and down the furrow we went. Driving a three horse hitch didn't seem all that different than directing two. Michael coached me in his gentle, supportive way for a few rounds; then he went to dig up wild bulbs in the middle of the field. I jumped off the plow once when it almost tipped over, but the horses were unfazed. It was a little reminder of what happened in Kansas. Michael just shrugged and showed me how to adjust the levers to keep the seat more horizontal. I continued, and Michael spelled me from time to time. We finished turning that field over by early afternoon.

I plowed and disced fields, prepared them to be planted, for the next three days. I was exhausted but elated every evening at finally accomplishing what I came to the farm to do. By the end of May, the oats, corn, and beans were all well above the ground and the potatoes were on their way. Then I learned to cultivate row crops and managed to sacrifice remarkably few plants. Before long, I hoped, I would be raking hay.

If there was any light left after finishing work and dinner, I sometimes took walks up the hill road or went fishing in the West Fork. I usually took a bag with me in

case I caught a trout or stumbled across morels in the woods. But my real intention was to look closely at the collage of life in the wild places beyond the fields. I began to notice things, know the place, in ways I never had before.

Going down to the river one warm evening, I spotted a great blue heron fishing. She didn't see me. I would have startled her months before, but my pace had slowed to a wide-eyed walk since I had moved to the farm. I watched the slate-feathered bird stalking a shallow eddy for maybe fifteen minutes before she flew upstream. I was close enough to glimpse one of her round black eyes. I saw a great blue heron—I thought it was the same one—many times in the following weeks, flying low with strong steady wing beats over the valley. Her appearance always struck me as significant—a potent reminder to be aware of the sky.

The way the nesting pair of bald eagles effortlessly glided above the farm seemed a counterpoint to the heron. They flew right over me once at dusk when I was sitting in the ferns, white trilliums, may apples, and red columbines of the hill's forest floor. I had never seen birds so immense and powerful move so slowly. Without stroking their wings once, they hovered like fixed constellations in the sky. At that moment, I knew the eagles felt pleasure akin to the pleasure we feel, too. All animals do. It's something you see if you spend time watching them. All summer I could sense when an eagle skirted the wind above me. While hoeing one afternoon, I followed an urge to look up to find a white-headed raptor with a fish in his yellow talons. He flew a long low ellipse over the farm, as if to show off his prize and deliberately tease a flock of crows. When the eagle landed in his wide nest on the hill, I finally exhaled.

Jan, Michael, and I often talked about the eagles—when we saw them, where, and what they were doing. Though bald eagles increased in numbers throughout the 1990s, especially along the Mississippi and Wisconsin Rivers, it was quite remarkable that a pair decided to nest on Chrysalis Farm. As far as anyone in the area knew, bald eagles hadn't nested in the upper valley of the West Fork since DDT threatened them in the 1950s and 60s. Chrysalis Farm isn't exactly ideal eagle habitat, either. There is no apparent nearby source of abundant food. Bald eagles feed primarily on fish. While the West Fork is a nationally-renowned trout stream, it's still a stream, about fifteen feet across at its widest point. Typically, eagles nest and congregate around much larger bodies of water. A local ornithologist came out to the farm one day in May because she had heard about the eagles. She was astounded to verify their presence and observe how ostentatiously they flew around the farm. Hardly a day passed when Michael, Jan, or I didn't see them.

Both Jan and Michael viewed the eagles' residence as a blessing, a highly personal emblem of spiritual forces at work. Jan called the eagles totems. She believes that when animals appear and disappear in our lives it tells us something about ourselves. Often, when she saw certain animals around the farm she used a sort of New Age-American Indian horoscope to determine the sighting's significance. When she showed me this book, I was struck by her enthusiasm for a printed authority. In general, Jan seemed staunchly anti-authoritarian and anti-expert advice, especially in her outlook on science and politics. With spiritual matters, however, she was eager for the guidance of published "healers" and "teachers."

Michael drew his own personal lesson from the bald eagles' appearance. After watching them with him one day, he told me about the first time he saw an eagle on the farm. It was the day of his goddaughter's birth. Michael has never had a child of his own, so he cherished his title and the child immensely. For him, the eagle came to mark the occasion and the new child's spirit in the world. A few months later, the child moved with her parents to Australia. Michael was crushed. He began to take great comfort in the eagles' presence, a symbol of his goddaughter far away. Twice when he thought I might have gone too close to the eagles' nest, Michael scolded me. He was nagged by a fear of them leaving, too.

I didn't think the eagles would be easily disturbed from staying. They nested on the hill because of its sheltered view of the valley. I believed the farm's wildness, lack of chemicals, and general quiet had as much to do with the eagles' appearance as anything. In this sense, they were totems: a logical result of the way Michael and Jan farmed. The eagles were also magical—the kind of magic that comes from people being keenly aware of how their actions impact the world around them. Coincidence, which is often what makes something seem supernatural, had little to do with the eagles' nesting on Chrysalis Farm. Michael and Jan's sensitivity toward their land—regardless of rituals and biodynamic preparations—had a lot to do with this remarkable occurrence.

In mid-summer, Jan's brother died suddenly in a car accident. He had recently reconciled with Jan and her mother after years of estrangement. Jan was shocked and deeply saddened. Michael and I did what we could to help her, but mostly she just wanted to sit in her room. The best thing I could do, she said, was take good

care of the farm while she and Michael were in Minnesota for the funeral.

I had never been on the farm alone for more than a few hours before. It was exhilarating. I took my assignment seriously and checked off tasks from the list Michael had made me. I milked Jan's goat Serenity at sunrise and late in the afternoon. I fixed fence and moved the horses from one pasture to another. I weeded the garden and picked produce for Jan to take to the Saturday market when she returned. I harvested, cleaned, and tied up garlic to cure in the tobacco shed. I didn't see or speak to a single person for two days. The first morning alone on the farm was one of the happiest mornings in my life.

The bald eagles circled over me as I pulled fist-size garlic from the ground. The opened soil smelled alive—like a sea of unseen happenings thrived in it. The horses grazing on the hill pasture seemed aware of me and the bond between us. My senses felt like pitchers the world poured into.

Taking a break on the house's front stoop, I opened a magazine that had just arrived in the mail to a poem by William Stafford called "Why I am Happy:"

> *There is a lake somewhere*
> *so blue and far nobody owns it . . . And I know where it is.*

A disturbingly rare calm came over me. Sunlight flashed tree shadows on the farm's face as beams broke from behind a cloud, and a head-turning buzz brought my eyes to the scarlet bee balm flowers beside me. I could have stroked the iridescent feathers on the ruby-throated hummingbird's back. He acted as if I was part of the porch, sipped nectar longer than I had ever seen a hummingbird hover in one place. The only word I could think of to describe the sound was "chainsaw." It had that kind of ferocious amplitude.

I knew then that solitude is actually supernatural, in the literal sense of the word. It does not occur in this world except as an illusion of separateness caused by a lack of perception. We have constructed solitude with buildings and retreats inside ourselves. Outdoors, awake and open, there is no lying to yourself about being alone. The creatures of this earth are like Stafford's blue lake: so colorful, so beyond human ownership that simply letting them inhabit your consciousness is immensely reassuring and blissful.

After the hummingbird flew off, I sat spellbound for a while—unknown,

uncountable minutes. Then I went back to work. The jasmine scent of flowering tobacco doused me as I walked by the garden. While I hung bundles of garlic in the tobacco shed by the pile of cow horns, I smiled.

Peace of mind pervaded my final weeks on Chrysalis Farm. Jobs I had looked forward to all summer filled the long summer days. Michael showed me how to cut oats with the horse-drawn grain binder and shock the bundles to dry. I learned how to mow, tedder, and rake hay. Making hay with horses is infectiously satisfying, even though it's hard, sweaty work. One muggy July afternoon I finished windrowing the summer's last cutting of hay with Ginger and Maude. About a hundred feet below the eagles' nest in the woods, I stopped the horses with a "Whoa." Ginger and Maude seemed thankful for the breather in the shade and whisked their blonde tails at flies. I looked out over the farm's lower half and farther to the lush winding lengths of the valley. The breeze was flushed with the sweetness of freshly-turned hay. I basked in being a part of something bigger than myself, and that was all the magic I needed to believe in.

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