

Life Influences

It seems obvious that this power of knowing oneself is behind everything a person does, from here to after here. Yet I know that many climb steadfastly into their thirties or forties until they become sure of themselves or until they can articulate what it is they desire. In this project, I learned of family after family that had grown a crop of children sincerely aware and sure.

My entire premise for this book is the *exploration of influences* on this generation. Behind the influences lies this self-esteem or confident *knowing*, but then the influences happen broadly too, from Switzerland to Nicaragua.

I'll propose five life influences at this point, themes that I have seen emerging:

- family heritage/a word about moms
- direct experience
- experiences beyond the farm
- adult teachers other than their parents or grandparents, and
- the beauty of the land—the land itself

Family Heritage

Katie Fernholz notes that her dad and his work taught the whole family about a world out there. **"Our dad was gone a lot. He was a leader and a social activist in many**



**Garden Teacher
Heather Benson
with students,
Tenderloin
Community Public
School, San
Francisco, CA, 2003**

causes, kind of a political revolutionary. I think without his work we would have been much more focused on ourselves instead of this much larger picture . . . the bigger 'saving the world' issues. Anything less than this big picture felt silly, even to us." ❖

Heather Benson, who grew up near Worthington, reflects upon the fact that her mom runs a preschool and her dad farms organically. Now she sees her life unfolding in San Francisco: **"Only recently have I realized that what I'm doing is the perfect blend of Mom and Dad—plants and gardens and the teaching aspect."**

Heather also shares thoughts about the family right now and how they have made life choices. **"Just this winter a group of us rode motorcycles down into the Baja Peninsula. We had five bikes and six people (I rode on the back with Dad) and we got way into the remote desert. For two days we were on nothing but gravel roads. It was incredible to be with my dad and brother, and I'm so glad we share these**

interests and get along so well. It's also great how we fit together as a small community, I mean my dad knows mechanics—which is key to a trip like that—and Anton and I both speak Spanish. It's also amazing to me that we get that time, but then we have crafted our lives so we can do stuff like that. I know that I've made choices where time wins out over making more money." ❖

Amanda Bilek put into words how the family influenced her way of seeing things: "Messages were stressed when I was younger— not only 'be good at what you're doing' but 'let's conserve and re-use, and don't be wasteful.' That was the mentality. (We give Mom a really hard time because she doesn't throw anything away.) But even though those behaviors aren't directly tied to ways of farming, you just see it by example. And that has a lot more influence on you than anyone telling you why things are done." Later, Amanda added, "I always saw my parents as people who wanted to make the world a better place. I saw their values in practice." ❖

Family heritage is subtle. Craig Fernholz realized that it comes right down to a person's willingness or attitude: "One of my biggest values is always being willing, at the drop of a hat, to try something new. Hey, we're going whitewater rafting down the Colorado, wanna come? Sure. Or we're going to drive around Northern Minnesota and drive back down to the Cities. Or go to this bar up in North Minneapolis."

And Craig knows that his dad exemplified that kind of attitude: "I think a way that Dad really influenced me was—if you have an idea, go with it. If there are other people doubting it, just explain it to them very kindly and keep on going. Independence. Definitely a strong trait I picked up

growing up on that farm. I mean there would be times that you're sitting out on the tractor for two or three hours, waiting for the combine to go down, make a pass, get filled up, dump the grain in the gravity box. And you're sitting out there 'til the gravity box gets full and if you've got a book, okay, or you sleep or find other ways to entertain yourself. Usually what I like to do is get out of the tractor and sit on top of the cab and just watch everything. Try not to think at all. Just watch everything, see how it moves . . . that's another trait I definitely picked up from my dad—the more observant you are of details the more everything makes sense." ❖

Colin King names as part of his heritage the fact that he's so interested in civic dialogue or citizenship and public participation. "The reason I found St. John's [in Santa Fe, New Mexico] appealing and ultimately went there and spent four years of time there was that I was trying to figure out what it meant to be 'a good citizen.' That question is often a focus of the classics taught at St. Johns. That and the public policy work that I do now has been greatly inspired by that question.

"And that question became important to me because both of my parents (my mother to a less publicly apparent degree) have devoted the past 25 years of their lives to public participation—being good citizens, in one way or another. They were devoted to their community." ❖

"She was the glue."

In the families of DeEtta Bilek, Marge Warthesen, Audrey Arner, Bonnie Haugen (farmers all) it was the young person's mom who was central to the sustainable agriculture movement, and their strong feminine energy



**The
Haugen
clan**

helped frame social issues. In many cases, however, it was the farm men who were sitting in the meeting room in 409 Borlaug Hall, hashing over new program options, or attending soup lunches of the Sustainers' Coalition in the basement of a building on University Avenue. Carmen Fernholz, Dwight Ault, Tim King, David Benson, Ralph Lentz, Jim Van Der Pol, Dave Minar—all driving a hundred or more miles on either end of a long day as a movement about the land is implemented from the city—all balancing meetings with chores.

It became clear as I interviewed their children, that many women at home—the ones cooking dinner for their kids or making sure that the farm chores got done—were both holding farm families together and indirectly holding up a movement. Sally Fernholz, Sally Anne Benson, Jan King, Jane Fisher-Merritt, Becky Ault—discussion in our interviews often naturally turned toward these women.

Sally Anne Benson grew up out East, and she learned all this farm life fast. Says daughter, Heather, **"She is an incredibly patient, understanding woman. My mother grew up in a suburb of Boston, so she learned all this farm life from my grandmother Benson. We also grew up about a mile from my dad's family farm. In fact, our extended family essentially lived together on the two farms, going back and forth. My mother was right in the middle of all this—butchering chickens, taking care of livestock, canning and preserving. I am amazed when I think of this—there were all the aunts and uncles and the whole Benson clan, and there she was in the midst of all this and from the big eastern city. I guess she just fell in love with it. She laughs now about how it took her ten years to see the hills my dad could see on this flat prairie."** ❖

Craig Fernholz speaks highly of his mother, Sally: **"If I could describe my parents, I'd say Dad would be like the wind—always whirring all around, going in every nook and cranny and trying everything out. And Mom would be the**

**Craig, Katie
and Connie
Fernholz
taking notes
near Lake
Itasca**



solid rock. If you wandered out too far, she'd bring you back. She definitely kept everything all together . . . She was the glue. Made sure you always ate, stuff like that. Very practical. She was encouraging, but practical." ❖

And his sisters agree. Says Katie: "Dad dominated, yes, but the older I get the more I see our mom's influence. She is the only reason things stayed together—our mom. Dad was too busy and wasn't engaged with us. She made it all work, not compensating for Dad or diminishing him in any way, but he did his own thing, and she did everything. (Well, we did have 'family night' 'til I was 12.)" Katie later laughed, remembering how her mom biked to town in the road ditches. "She has a very creative determination." ❖

Colin King about his mom, Jan: "My father is not always a patient person, and that was contrasted by my mother who was much more outwardly patient. My mother is

classically rural—a lot like her dad, quiet, stubborn, very self-sufficient. I have a really hard time separating what I've learned from one versus another parent. I didn't grow up in a household that was run by one gender . . . my dad was gone a lot more, but this was more or less an agrarian life and my parents were both around on almost a daily basis, so there is more like a melding of a presence and influence." ❖

Janaki Fisher-Merritt keeps it simple, but pointed, "My mother (Jane Fisher-Merritt) has been so influential. She has incredible insight. Without *her*? No way." ❖

Direct Experience

Of course, heritage is hard to separate from experience. I believe this is especially true when everyone is growing and changing while they are growing crops or cows and sharing chores on a farm. Nothing is more powerful than experiential learning, hands-on learning. This is where the body learns first and the mind second—what a person remembers most. Make a mistake there and something dies—piglets are crushed.

As Melissa MacKimm puts it: "I think everyone should work to be critical thinkers. And it was the farm that taught us to be critical thinkers—you know pretty quickly how your decisions affect the Earth or the welfare of an animal. You see life and death—animals die or are being born. The farm is its own entity. It's this wise, subtle teacher." ❖

Here Melissa hits on something very powerful, something lost in closed urban classrooms. Working with living beings—animals or alfalfa—one learns from their responses and the natural life/death cycles. The impact of your actions can be seen in the following days or weeks and they teach you from the body out, teach the body first in its emotional response, then teach the brain, forever lasting. Craig Fernholz came to know if his decision about a pregnant sow was correct because he had to bury the piglets if he was wrong.

Book learning is important and may get us a great job, but I believe body learning is what springs up in moments of quiet or indecision. It is part of what dictates those inexplicable urges that later direct our lives, that push us away from a personality or toward a smell, toward a windy prairie, or toward soil. When the limits and cycles of a farm are educating you, as Melissa said so well, you are learning from a wise and subtle teacher.

“All those flies and pig shit”

Experiences are funny, though. They affect some people one way and others another. Mike Jacobs (now farming vegetables at Easy Bean Farm) recalled his aunt’s farm in Vermont. Mike came from the city in New Jersey for generations back. Once a year, he’d go to a farm near the city to get pumpkins or to work some, but he had no real farm experience. His parents are teachers, urban and suburban backgrounds. Mike’s father worked for Civil Rights in the 1960s. The family did more than its share of hiking and climbing, but the only farm experience Mike got was at his aunt’s farm in Vermont. She is a poet and writer and a lover of food co-ops—a very big influence in

Mike’s life. Although in the city it seemed to Mike that he could hardly wander across the track, at the Vermont farm, **“We ran like dogs.”** ❖ His brother, Dan, and Mike—no control! Dan Jacobs was affected negatively by that, wanting no more of it—all those flies and pig shit—but Mike loved it. Mike wanted more of it, and now lives some of this freedom out at Easy Bean Farm.

Craig Fernholz talks about how everything at the Fernholz farm was learned with that hands-on approach, and for Craig, it stuck as a way of learning through life. **“That’s another thing growing up on the farm taught me—I had to have a hands-on approach to learning something, like going out in the field, getting in grain. Dad would teach me to observe. ‘We have to do it this way.’ / ‘Why’s that?’ / ‘Well if you look out there . . .’ That process still works for me the same way today. I can pick up a book about theatrical rigging or something like that and look through it—here’s how it’s supposed to hang. But not until I actually do it do I understand.”** ❖

This Fernholz style of learning has stuck with more than one member of that family. Katie Fernholz named this well when I asked her about her focus on sustainable forestry. **“I can’t work on agricultural issues. I can’t speak rationally about family farms. Anyway I’m a generalist, and I want to do my life without an advanced degree. I learn by asking questions. I love learning and self study.”** Her sister Connie agreed, but also turned this type of learning or knowing toward theater. Says Connie, **“I want to run my own theater company. It’s gotta be my way—creativity—no strings.”** ❖

Adam Warthesen agrees that this way of learning is still his main mode, working in the policy office at the Land Stewardship Project. **"I check in with this great staff and learn something new every day . . . how to craft a press release, how to motivate people. And I don't feel, by any means, that I've learned enough. I feel like in the next five years it will just get better."** ❖

What direct experience growing up is closer to us than mealtimes? Many of those interviewed talked about food. Amanda can't eat a store-bought chicken, or chooses not to. Deborah Lentz met her future husband through the food co-op community in St. Cloud after her years at St. Benedicts. Eating that way was just the start—now they run their own CSA. Craig Fernholz talks about meat: **"One thing about the farm is that I definitely know where my food comes from. As far as meat is concerned, unless it's from our home, I usually don't eat meat unless I really get a hankering for it, just because I know what's gone into our pigs, what they've eaten . . ."** ❖ Craig learned this through experience.

Janaki Fisher-Merritt brings his experience into focus as he observes his parents' CSA farm now, **"It's cool to be able to pay attention to a place for fifteen years. Now I see so much more life here. And it all has to do with caring—with the willingness to go out on a limb, to create with the land."** ❖

"The crop duster didn't get the message."

Part of what was learned through observation on the Fernholz farm or the Ault farm, as Craig or Melissa were growing up, was learned by comparison to other less sustainable methods with the soil or plants. Craig knew

by observing the differences on the soil made by a moldboard or chisel plow. He knows about soil stewardship, not because he took a soil science class somewhere but because he remembers the guy with the snow blower in the ditch!

Since these people grew up while their families made the transition in farming practices, some of them do remember chemicals and the dangers of spraying. It strikes me that the memory was made distinct because the parent generation was more aware of the dangers of these chemicals than the general public was at that time. Craig Fernholz remembers once when he rode on the tractor with his dad while Carmen was spraying, and his dad told him not to breathe it in. Or **"Whenever we would open bags of corn feed (covered with all that fungicide to prevent rot) I always remember being instructed to take care."** ❖

Melissa MacKimm caught another unforgettable farm lesson one day: **"I remember when we were all outside on a cement lot, next to the barn on the farm. And the crop dusting plane came over. My dad had scheduled a crop dusting plane to spray for black flies, and then he thought about it and decided he really didn't want to do it, so he called and cancelled. Well, the crop duster pilot didn't get the message and so there we all were out in middle of the farm, and over the grove of oak trees came this bright yellow crop-dusting bi-plane and did a dive and started spraying, and my dad yelled, 'Run!!' And we all ran as fast as we could to the house. I was terrified."** ❖

Experiences Beyond the Farm

Many of these young people are well traveled and bring a wealth of experience post-farm-kid days. Clearly this is true for Heather Benson, who added the experience of an unforgettable trip to Leon, Nicaragua, when she was only fourteen: **"One influence that I have to talk about is the Solidarity/Work Brigade with Project Minnesota Leon. In 1987, I was in the ninth grade, and Dad encouraged me to go on this trip to Nicaragua for 2 1/2 weeks with mostly adults. The trip opened my eyes. It was my first awareness of our government and the politics of that situation. We met with grassroots leaders, educators, health care officials, farmers, co-ops. It was an incredible experience.**

"One night on the streets in Leon, there was a huge demonstration. Signs called for 'U.S. Out of Nicaragua.' It was definitely scary, yet the people supported us. They could discern the difference between the U.S. government and the American people. At least, they knew we were in solidarity with them. I'm amazed when I consider how they made this distinction, and how hard it is for Americans to do the same.

"This sparked my interest in the culture and language. It was shocking to come back. Many in my high school, even some teachers, did not understand my perspective about Nicaragua.

"One of my mom's brothers, my Uncle Warren, was incredibly supportive of me during this time. He had gone

on similar solidarity/work brigades. We discussed politics and he encouraged me to have my own opinions—my own voice—and to return to Nicaragua." ❖

Amanda Bilek had a life-changing experience also, when she and her mom went to Washington, DC. Could this have been what set her off to a career in agriculture policy? **"A lot of interesting dynamics happened in my sophomore year. I had my introductory journalism class and an environmental chemistry course, and I also went on a trip with my mom and the Land Stewardship Project policy group when they went to Washington, DC. Dave Serfling was on this trip, and Sr. Kathleen Storms, and Dan French. I remember sitting in Congressman Peterson's office, and Dave Serfling was trying to explain this whole concept of stewardship incentives (the Conservation Security Program is now the cornerstone of those incentives), and I was thinking suddenly about how farming is not just about going out and tilling your land and harvesting something off it. There are all these economic factors that farmers need to bring in. Weather . . . Prices . . . And then they have to know about policy too—different programs that could help them with what they're doing on their land. It all started to click with me. And I thought, wow, wouldn't it be really neat to work on agriculture policy?" ❖**

Memorable Adult Teachers

Adam Warthesen was articulate about the other adults who have significantly influenced his life learning. He names teachers at Bemidji State: "I originally started in aquatic biology in Bemidji, but the chemistry and physics were boring compared to when I could be engulfed in political and economic stuff involving more people and with more direct impact. I never really knew what I wanted to do with my studies there, but what I found to be most helpful were the relationships I built there, particularly with three professors: Pat Donnay in Political Science, Charlie Parsons who was a land use/geography professor, and Patrick Welle in Environmental Economics. Pat Welle really got me involved with LSP. Also my mom (who worked with LSP in the 1980s, on the insurance company land-ownership project)—that was another 'in.' And I was lucky.

"Pat Welle and Patrick Donnay were both such great leaders and teachers. I did things with them outside of class and I know they helped develop me into what I care about today. And then there's Mark Schultz—a great leader and teacher. LSP is really an organization building power within people to make changes in themselves. Of course there's also Paul Sobocinski, who was on the board of OAP. My internship with LSP was actually through the Organizing Apprenticeship Project. There I learned multicultural, social change, and democratic values across the board." ❖

Melissa (Ault) MacKimm also named teachers from her college years, as well as a couple other very important men in her life: "Cynthia Cone, head of Anthropology at Hamline, was a big part of the beginning of the CSA

movement. She was a huge influence on me, and I still call her one of my main mentors. I met Cynthia after Switzerland, the second time at Hamline. Then the family in Switzerland had a huge influence on me. They were just doing their thing; they weren't necessarily calling themselves sustainable, just a simple multi-generation family on a small farm in Switzerland. But they were just the most wonderful people. They had a big influence on me figuring out what life was all about.

"My husband . . . John MacKimm . . . I met him in the Twin Cities. He was *the* opposite of me, grew up in the city of Chicago and for many years of his life he envisioned himself living in a high rise apartment in downtown Chicago and then he met this farm girl, and somehow Our lives, aesthetically are really different, but our values are really similar. I met him in 1992, and that was when I'd just gotten back from Switzerland and was starting to figure things out but wasn't doing anything about it yet, and he really encouraged me.

"Another person . . . this is kind of odd, but Ken Taylor has been a big influence. Now, why, because I didn't know him very well at all. [Ken, who founded the Minnesota Food Association (MFA) died of cancer in 1995.] I had met him a few times and when I started working at MFA, it influenced my work because I knew I was working for an organization that meant a lot to me because it meant a lot to my family and it was Ken's baby. It was his organization and I was a big part of what was happening to it now. So I really felt compelled to do work that was worthy of him. Whatever I was doing (not literally), I felt he was watching, and I wanted to make sure he was proud of what was happening." ❖

More than one person interviewed remembered the “alphabet soup” of the sustainable agriculture movement: MFA, LSP, MISA, OGBA* . . . Craig Fernholz heard I was doing this project for MISA and he laughed, **“Ah yes, a name I’ve heard a lot growing up.. a lot . . . that and OGBA too.”** Melissa (Ault) MacKimm recalls her dad’s involvement in these organizations and the dinner table conversations that followed meetings. **“MFA and LSP were important. I have all these memories of those organizations being put together, and so many meetings, and the dialogues . . . they were huge.** [She refers to the MFA Urban-Rural Dialogues in the mid-1980s.] **And at the time, I knew that something big was happening and it was beyond our farm. Prior to that, a lot of the decisions were pertinent only to our farm changes.”** ❖

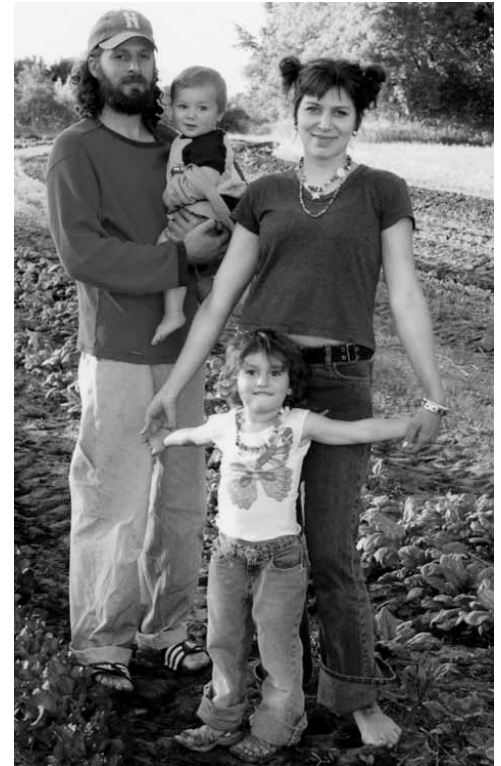
For Amanda Bilek, the answer to this question is also not so much about specific adult teachers as it is about an institution. **“4-H was probably the single best organizational influence in my entire life. *The single best.* I did so many great things in 4-H. I went to Israel. I took first place in a state communications art contest where the speech I was giving was called ‘quest for freedom.’ I also went on a trip to Washington for a week . . . So many things in 4-H. It stressed the family, the community, and learning all these different life skills like documentation and recordkeeping. I started when I was eight or nine and until age 18. You had to be in 4-H through high school.”** ❖

(*) Minnesota Food Association (MFA), Land Stewardship Project (LSP), Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA) and Organic Growers and Buyers Association (OGBA).

Beauty and the Land Itself

I have written about the influence of beauty ever since I was a high school senior and wrote an essay about noticing beauty, which won me the chance to speak to 3,000 at our high school commencement! I enjoy trying to capture in words that mysterious power of natural beauty. It has called me to write again and again. Is beauty a transcending intellectual concept or a physical impulse or both? I know that its impact on me is physical—the peach and lavender of a sunset morph magically into slate blue and violet, even as I stare at it and can see no change, the colors roll and evolve and I am left wondering and graced. Such beauty catches the breath; it calms the spirit; it lowers the blood pressure. And it motivates us, as it did these young people growing up on Minnesota farms.

“It felt so fresh!” declares Mike Jacobs about his college life learning about farmers’ markets and gardening. Later he put this to work on Easy Bean Farm, and says **“the whole thing that drives my vision of this place is its diversity. I express it in my gardens and in my writing.”** And Malena Handeen added, **“ . . . in the beauty.”** I witnessed that Easy Bean beauty in the white eggplant, the blue almost purple potatoes, the 700 striped watermelons on their CSA farm. **“This place chose us!”** declares Malena,



**Mike Jacobs
and Malena
Handeen with
Arlo and Hazel**

**Melissa
MacKimm's son
Ian with
Grandpa
Dwight Ault**

explaining that they wanted woods, river, some landscape, and found not only that but 120-year-old cottonwoods and clear springs all over the place. Then there are 20 acres across the road, all native grasses. **"When I get too tired of farming—all that alteration of nature—I go there and sit and get my mind back straight,"** remarks Mike. ❖

Beauty is a part of Craig Fernholz's connection to nature, no doubt about it. In his youth, and given the Fernholz powers of observation, this young man was motivated by slowing down. You'll remember—Craig is the one who'd sit on the tractor cab as the gravity box filled and closely watch everything "until it makes sense." Craig is also one of the people who needs to see stars at night. **"I remember once when my brother Chris was in an amateur astronomy club and he was in the front yard. I went out and, Whoa! The Milky Way was pure white and streaky. And I remember Northern Lights. One time during the winter, I went for a walk about midnight and saw Northern Lights, and it got so quiet that I could hear their static!"** ❖

His sisters speak of beauty as well, and the flat open prairie. Katie: **"We all have an attachment to the land. I think it's different growing up on a prairie. People who live in hills have a limited view of their community, limited to what you can see, to your valley. Out in big southwestern Minnesota, we have this whole huge area. It's a bigger experience."** "Yes," agrees Connie, **"The sky. The big expansive sky. We could always see the weather coming or leaving."** ❖



Many expressed the sense of connection to the land given them by their memories of beauty. **"I know as long as there's farming in southwest Minnesota, I have a home out there,"** says Katie. **"The farm is still a sense of security. I mean after 9/11 or any crisis, I know I could always go back to the farm and grow vegetables and can them."** ❖

Melissa MacKimm makes this connection now for John and herself and their son, Ian. **"I love this house, I love this Minneapolis neighborhood. But I can feel it, depending upon where our lives are and how stressful our lives are. All of a sudden I've gotta go. This last weekend we took my brother and his daughter. My brother and I were laughing about when you turn onto the gravel road just a couple miles from the farm. You might as well be 12. It's funny! The sound, the gravel under the car. It's timeless and brings just a sense of calm to you. I'm so glad we have that. Just to have that as a means of escape for our family is really huge."** ❖

Heather Greeley Benson relates to this idea when she talks about her loves in the neighborhood gardens of San Francisco. Here, from a young woman growing up on prairies: **"I lose track of time when I'm gardening in the**

school gardens, weeding on a sunny afternoon. You just prune and weed and transplant... I enjoy teaching and sharing. And daily I walk up the hill to Buena Vista Park."

Then Heather remembered another story from the recent camping trip with her dad, and her brother, Anton: "We had a kayak, and one day Anton and I took it out in the bay to see some cave paintings. Suddenly I hear this 'Ploof' and Anton looked around and hollered, 'Sharks!' We screamed, but I called, 'No, they can't be sharks, sharks don't have blow holes!' Immediately we were surrounded by about a hundred dolphins, frolicking and showing off for us. We screeched and screamed—no one else around—but the dolphins seemed to like it." ❖

Nature's beauty, whether it's the urban garden, the wide-open prairie, the Northern Lights or the frolicking dolphin, is one of our planet's greatest gifts. To me, the remembered beauty of well-known places is like a fold in the fabric of our lives. Seeing the same places in their seasonal beauties brings it all back together again—shakes out the wrinkles and knots of the fabric of our busy-ness and smooths it, puts life back in order. I can go on then, creating more wrinkles.

A Next Generation's Challenges

The ideals of sustainable agriculture, imagined in the late 1970s, must now brave their way into the twenty-first century. It is this generation that will do it. It is this generation that *is* doing it, step by step, on the land or in the policy-making halls. Part of the power of these interviews was the close-up look at how this generational transfer is being done. My question was about challenges.

"Organic vegetables are a lot of work!"

Direct marketing is one element in this century's actions toward a sustainable food system. One major challenge in establishing direct market or community supported agriculture enterprises is the issue of *labor*. Creative diversity on soil is labor-intensive; when you let the land speak, someone must listen closely. Easy Bean Farm near Milan, Minnesota, offers residencies for interns, but finding steady labor to handpick fields of vegetables or weed watermelon patches is still an issue. Mike Jacobs talks about this: "There's a great community of people out here—small but deep—based more on necessity than fun (that's a good thing). And it's multi-generational, which is also good. If we separate the ages, every generation has to re-invent the wheel," Mike remarks. "Yet," adds Malena, "I hope we don't burn out on the work and life of Easy Bean—