A misty, foggy landscape with silhouettes of people working in a field. The scene is dimly lit, with a soft, greyish light filtering through the fog. In the foreground, a dark, textured field stretches across the bottom. In the middle ground, several figures are visible, their forms softened by the mist. They appear to be engaged in agricultural work, possibly tending to plants or soil. The background is dominated by a dense line of trees, their outlines also softened by the fog. The overall mood is quiet and contemplative.

Scale, The Heart Of Darkness
and My Aching Back
(Musings of an Aging Veggie Farmer...)

Paul Burkhouse
Foxtail Farm

Who Am I??

- Both a proximate and an ultimate question
 - Provides a reference for you listening to me here today.
 - Ultimately provides a framework for you to begin farming.
 - Unlike conventional farming, there are many ways to farm in the organic/sustainable arena.
 - Do you like to sell, grow, process, manage, do physical labor? What you like should determine how you farm.

Foxtail Farm

- 65 acre, former dairy farm in Osceola WI
- 19 acres in vegetable production.
- Market through CSA with 317 summer shares and 80 winter shares.
- Paul and Chris, 1 Full time employee, 6 summer interns, 2 winter interns.
- 230,000 lbs of produce.



Gardening vs. Farming:

- “Gardeners have unlimited amounts of water, compost and time”
- “Farming is a business (large or small), the product is food and its survival is based on sound decisions leading to a profit”. (sounds cold huh?)

Not Too Big...Not Too Small...

- To be sustainable a farm must stay in business...and yes it is a business!
- Small enough to avoid “macro-economics”
- Big enough to protect ones assets! My aching back!
 - Machinery
 - Employees
 - Cash flow

Scale Goals at Foxtail Farm

- Resources to do it right. (Cash flow)
 - Tillage, Cover crops, Post harvest facilities, greenhouses etc.
 - Can sell big or small.
 - Labor to keep one sane, cover us when we are not there (sick, talking to WUSA etc).
 - Not having to work off farm.
 - Not too big to be direct managers. (no assistant mgrs.)
 - Will support retirement, health care, a vacation to chalupa-land etc.



Achieving Scale Goals



- How much do you need to make for you to live the lifestyle you want to live? Really, pick a number!
- $\text{Profit} = \text{Margin} \times \text{Units}$
 - You can work with either or both to maximize profit.

MARGIN

- Margin is determined by your fixed and variable costs.
 - Keeping costs low allows you to meet your profit goals while staying small....unless....it makes you less efficient....or you go crazy...or get sick...
- A gentle reminder
 - Profit = Margin x UNITS
 - If you can't produce enough units....you fail

It's All About the Margin...

Whatever size you choose to be, maximize use of your infrastructure and resources



- *Refrigeration
- *Machinery
- *Delivery vehicles
- *Labor
- *Management
- *Land

Heart of Darkness

AKA “JULY”

Can last from mid June through mid August

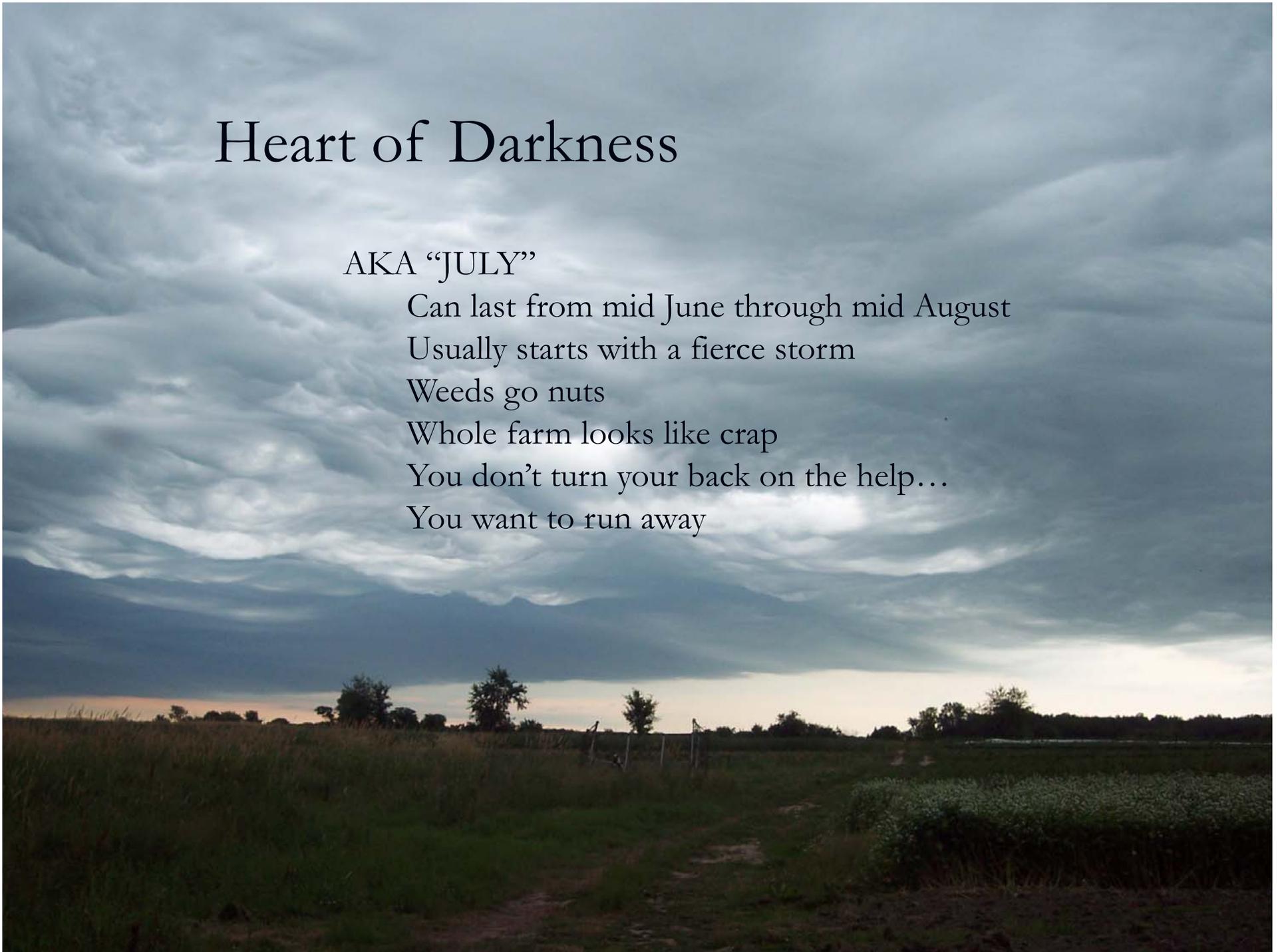
Usually starts with a fierce storm

Weeds go nuts

Whole farm looks like crap

You don't turn your back on the help...

You want to run away





Keeping
Your
Sanity...

- Accept the FACT that you will be lower middle class...Everyone you know will out-earn you!
- Accept that nobody ever bats over 450
- Understand that ultimately, you are doing it to yourself. You can change it if you want to.
- Know that you get a redo next year
- Treat your employees well, they can make you happier.
- Work on the ability to rationalize!



Be careful what you get yourself into!

What keeps me farming:

Watching yet another pair of boots bite the dust and thinking that I'm still on the first pair of feet.

Driving a tractor in second gear instead of third and taking the long way around the field so that I can look it all over.

Being here and working the same land from the first turning of the ground in April to the last winter rye in October. Looking ahead, being in the thick of it, looking back.

Walking out the door at dawn with three shirts and a coat on and feeling the air hit my lungs.

Chewing on grass, can't do that in an office.

Coffee break...sitting on my ass, completely relaxed, eating a donut and drinking a cup of coffee with really dirty hands.

Thinking of the people that have worked here with us and even before us. I've got a lot of still frames of you all working here. It is not just me.

Generations of red tailed hawks have screeched at me here.

There were dozens of goldfinches in the sunflowers this year. We have rarely seen one in the past. We have never planted sunflowers before.

Getting on a tractor and having it start.

Flailing done crops and their accompanying weeds.

Covering peppers and tomatoes by the light of the moon. After you have finished freaking out and after you have given up the idea of going to bed any time soon.

Realizing that July is over and that we survived it again.

Cracking melons in the field.

Being done picking three hundred pounds of beans.

Every Thursday evening after the delivery is done.

November 1 through April 1

Knowing that I am responsible for what happens, the good, the bad and the really weedy.

Thinking about farming in the winter.

Talking to other farmers who have been there.

The last 15 minutes of the day.

