

Time, Soil, and Children

**Conversations with
the Second
Generation of
Sustainable Farm
Families in
Minnesota**

Beth E. Waterhouse



Acknowledgments

Cover:

Brandon Rutter (L)

Ariana Lentz Andres (R)

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Of course, thanks must go to the School of Agriculture Alumni for their foresight in creating this particular endowed chair. “While it embodies the values and traditions of several generations, the Endowed Chair is clearly focused on the future.” These words from their brochure speak to the long-range vision of this alumni group, which we hope has been given life in this writing project.

My thanks to the families of those interviewed for their support and for the loan of their beautiful family photographs, which grace these pages.

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—Beth Waterhouse, July of 2004

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Thanks to the families for generously sharing their photographs. The Van Der Pol family photo on page 8 by Doug Beasely, Beasley Photography, reprinted with permission by Renewing the Countryside (www.mncountryside.org)

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Autumn in
the pumpkin
patch: Connie,
Craig and
Katie
Fernholz



*“... the source of
creativity for the society is
in the person. Renewal
springs from the freshness
and vitality of individual
men and women.”*

—Wendell Berry

Introduction

Rich Barley in the Corn

Tucked into the corners of Minnesota are many green jewels. Amid biologically simplified acres of corn and soybeans in the southwest, on the steep karst slopes of the southeast, or perched on thin rocky soils near Duluth are the gems of small creative farms. Some call themselves *sustainable*, some “CSA,” some *organic*. Some farms sell shares of vegetables. Some are creameries or dairy farms where cows eat grass. Most families on such farms, however, would agree about one diverse crop they have raised in the past twenty years—their children. The children of those families who have made the shift to sustainable agriculture reflect the plant varieties, the soils, and the imaginations of their parents. These are the young people about whom (and *with* whom) I write.

I met their parents first, and I met them mostly in the meeting rooms of St. Paul or Minneapolis. Patient men and women, they explained the choices made on their farms and they taught hundreds of us—urban workers in an agriculture movement—about farm economies and farm life. Endless meetings (and uncounted hours on the road surrounding each meeting) might have sucked the creative energy right out of this group of individuals, but not so. Now, at least a quarter-century after the words “sustainable” and “agriculture” were put together in Minnesota, many of these farmers are thriving. They sell quality yogurt at farmers’ markets in the Twin Cities. They sell squash stored for winter to members of a community-supported agriculture (CSA) group. They distribute quality meats directly to local restaurants or



even through churches. All the while, they have created a movement and helped to sustain the land while they create and sustain a half dozen distinct nonprofit organizations and an institute sitting on the University campus. And all along for the past couple dozen years, children of these leaders were growing up, making hay, arguing at dinner tables, and forming lifelong values.

Deb Lentz

Who are these children? I asked myself this past year. Where do they now live? Did they go to college and what did they make of that experience? Did they stay with the principles of sustainable agriculture once preached around their kitchen tables or did they reject them? Did they burn out on farm chores or do they want to farm as adults? Do they live in the country or in cities? Perhaps they took their values and mixed them in a whole new alchemy, as each generation is bent on doing.

One thing becomes quite clear, after fourteen interviews and hundreds of miles traversing the state of Minnesota. The crop of children raised by these creative farm families mirrors at least one of the principles of sustainability—diversity. They are a testament to diversity, and a testament to fair mindedness, foresight, thoughtful transitions into and out of college years, and leadership—yes, the clear beginnings of a diverse new leadership in our state.

A Sustainable Agriculture Movement

For the past two or three decades, individuals on the land, in towns, or within organizations have been creating and then working inside a movement that verifies the word “sustainable.” To clarify this term, I quote Paul Gruchow, a Minnesota writer who died in February of 2004. Said Paul, from *Minnesota: Images of Home* (1990):

“It is no more possible to plunder the earth, as we now do, and to make a home here in the long run than it would be for us to heat a house by burning its shingles and its siding and to stay warm and dry for long. Our farming has to be sustainable—it has to honor, to preserve and protect the biological house in which we live—or it cannot possibly sustain us in the years to come.” (page 82)

Farmers and farm organizations, butchers and grocers, academics and scientists have taken on the principles of this movement for sustainable agriculture. As urban eaters we also have recognized—shocked one day looking in the mirror in the morning—that our *own* lifestyles must change. Our own eating habits and buying habits

must change if we are to stop burning the shingles off of our very own homes.

It was in the 1970s or early 1980s that the words “sustainable” and “agriculture” were first put together. This phrase basically means farming in ways that don’t burn those shingles one by one, that don’t foul our own nests—choose your metaphor. It means farming (and eating) with the health of the land in mind, leaving it better than when you started, farming (and eating) with the future in mind.

A belief that this style of farming was preferable followed land reform and back-to-the-land movements that spoke of “regenerative agriculture” and began with the words of writers such as Liberty Hyde Bailey, Louis Bromfield, or Rachel Carson. The movement was later spurred by writers and leaders such as Wendell Berry, the Rodales with their *Organic Farming* magazine in the 1970s, and Wes and Dana Jackson at the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas.

By the time I entered this movement, a cadre of nonprofit organizations was forming, fed on abundant local and regional philanthropy of the 1970s and 1980s. Included were the Land Stewardship Project, the League of Rural Voters, the Minnesota Project, the Minnesota Food Association, Organic Growers and Buyers Association, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, and others, some that did not fall in my path, or some I may have forgotten. Then MISA (the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture) was crafted as these organizations strode into the halls of the University of Minnesota asking for new research and curricula. There

were joint programs like the Sustainers' Coalition representing the community side of MISA, and projects that became organizations, such as Clean Up our River Environment (CURE) with its focus on the Minnesota River, or the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota with its focus on quality small-scale farming.

Because of the location of funding or research or an educational audience, this was sometimes an urban-based movement that demanded much time of Minnesota's farmers. Overlapping segments of the movement needed farmers who would listen and lecture, design and advise. It requested field trip experiences for students, trips to Washington, DC, and on-farm field days teaching other farmers. Within a decade, more was probably asked of Minnesota's creative farmers than ever before, and their farm operations, their chore schedules, even their kitchen-table conversations reflected these demands.

Who Were the Children?

I worked in St. Paul during the 1990s, often calling meetings that required farmer involvement. We tried to consider harvest schedules and daytime driving schedules, but few of us asked about the children. We were ever so appreciative when Dave Minar or Dwight Ault or Ralph Lentz or DeEtta Bilek or Carmen Fernholz would show up for a meeting, speak wisely as always, and still be able to get home to do chores. But how many of us actually imagined families eating dinner with one parent while the other one drove dark highways? Did we imagine hungry animals or chores done at ten o'clock? How many of us actually considered who *was* doing the chores? Was it a spouse or sons and daughters? In short,

the sustainable agriculture movement demanded a lot from farm families and may not have given enough back.

The *Time, Soil, and Children* project idea was born in late 2002. I had had the pleasure of writing a chapter for Dana and Laura Jackson's book, *The Farm as Natural Habitat* (Island Press, 2002). My chapter (16) is called "A Refined Taste in Natural Objects" and it addresses the underlying issue of motivation—why some restore the land while others do not. When reading from this one evening at a public gathering, I was asked about the next generation. It all comes down to loving the land, I dared to state in the final paragraph of that chapter: "Can we refuse to diminish this powerful word (love) as too soft? Can we nurture elements in our own lives or our children's lives that become the foundation for a loving attachment to the earth?" A colleague then asked a question that took it deeper: "What about the foundation under that attachment? What *about* the children of the sustainable agriculture movement," he asked. "Do they carry on their parents' commitment and creativity with the land? If they do, why do they? Is creativity something inherited or contagious?" We talked about the ways that children were motivated by or maybe were motivators *within* the movement, and I determined this would be a key question for the future of the land, and one to explore further. The next January, with the help of the MISA grant through the Endowed Chair project, this book idea was born.

"MISA" is the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. The School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems was created in 1995. The Chair

identifies major issues in agriculture and selects individuals and teams to occupy the chair for varying lengths of time. Actually, it's more of a "bench" than a chair each year. During 2003/04, the group included Jim Riddle, working to address challenges faced by organic livestock producers, Debra Elias Morse and Steve Morse, working on perennial cropping systems, and me.

The Families Involved in This Project

The following list evolved naturally from my own Rolodex, with generous help from Dr. Mary Hanks of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program and other colleagues. In each case, a family made choices to stay on the land and farm it sustainably. I met with the second generation of these farm families:

✧ **Audrey Arner and Richard Handeen**, organic beef farmers on Moonstone Farm, Montevideo, Minnesota. For two decades, Audrey also worked with the Land Stewardship Project in Montevideo. I interviewed their daughter, Malena Arner Handeen and Malena's husband, Mike Jacobs. They run *Easy Bean Farm*, a CSA near Milan, Minnesota.

✧ **David and Sally Anne Benson**, organic crop farm called MeadowLark Farm, Bigelow, Minnesota (near Worthington). David has been County Commissioner for Nobles County for some time. I spoke with their daughter, Heather Greeley Benson, now teaching environmental education and gardening to children in San Francisco.

✧ **DeEtta and Tom Bilek**, Aldrich, Minnesota. DeEtta spent years as the sole statewide staff member of the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota. Theirs is a diversified crop and livestock farm, certified organic. I interviewed their daughter, Amanda Bilek, on staff at the Minnesota Project.

✧ **Carmen and Sally Fernholz**, Madison, Minnesota, organic small grains and farrow-to-finish hog operation. Carmen was the first chair of the MISA Board, and is a leader in the organic certification realm. I interviewed Carmen's two daughters, Katie Fernholz and Connie Carlson, and one of his sons, Craig. Connie works at Hazelden Publishing and is starting a small theater company called Theater Liminia. Katie now works with Dovetail Partners, Inc. on sustainable forestry. Craig currently builds sets at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis.

✧ **John and Jane Fisher-Merritt** run an organic vegetable CSA near Wrenshall, Minnesota (100+ summer shares plus poultry/eggs). They are leaders in season extension using greenhouses. I interviewed their son, Janaki Fisher-Merritt, now working on the home farm and living in the area.

✧ **Bonnie and Vance Haugen**, Spring Side Dairy Farm near Canton, Minnesota. Specialty cheeses and butter. I interviewed their daughter, Inga Haugen, now attending Concordia College, Moorhead.

✧ **Tim and Jan King**, Long Prairie, Minnesota. I interviewed their son, Colin. Tim writes and raises garlic and was a founder of the Whole Farm Co-op in Long Prairie, among many other community and cross-cultural

projects in central Minnesota. Colin works as policy researcher for Nukewatch, working against nuclear proliferation.

✧ **Ralph Lentz**, Lake City, Minnesota. Once agriculture teacher, Ralph uses management intensive grazing for his beef herd, and is part of the SE Food Network. He also teaches streamside management. I interviewed his daughter, Deborah. She and her husband, Richard, run Tantre Farm, an organic CSA near Ann Arbor, Michigan.

✧ **Dwight and Becky Ault** of Austin, Minnesota. Dwight was a founding member of the Minnesota Food Association and raises hogs using a modified Swedish system. I interviewed their daughter, Melissa Ault MacKimm. Melissa, married to John, is home raising son, Ian, at this time.

✧ **Dave and Florence Minar**, Cedar Summit Farm, New Prague, Minnesota. The Minars went to grass-based dairying, and recently opened an on-site creamery. They also raise hogs for direct marketing, sell beef, and are in the process of going organic. I interviewed their son Mike Minar and his wife, Merrisue, both currently working in the dairy operation.

✧ **Phil Rutter** of Badgersett Farm (woody agriculture) near Canton, Minnesota. Phil is a researcher and farmer, developing hazelnut varieties on his farm that are more suitable to Minnesota's climate. I interviewed Phil's eldest son, Brandon. Brandon and wife, Sandra, live near Cleveland where Brandon is finishing his Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, in bio-robotics.

✧ **Jim and LeeAnn Van Der Pol** of Kerkhoven, Minnesota. Pasture farrowing, hoop buildings for hogs and a deep straw system for winter farrowing. Direct marketing through "Pride of the Prairie." I talked with their son, Josh Van Der Pol and his wife, Cindy, who live and work on the home farmstead called Pastures A Plenty.

✧ **Marge and John Warthesen** of Wabasha County, Minnesota. Diverse mid-sized farm. Marge uses a small acreage intensively to grow vegetables. Her CSA produces food for friends and family and also sells to the farmers' markets in Wabasha and Rochester. I spoke with their son, Adam Warthesen. Adam is now working in agricultural policy with the Land Stewardship Project.

**Adam
Warthesen as a
teenager**





**The Van Der Pols,
ca. 2000**

There's nothing balanced or empirically verifiable about this sampling of interviews, except that I tried to interview as many men as women from age 18-35. Of course, my main criteria was that they were children of families who made the shift from conventional to sustainable farming in Minnesota. I know my process was biased— the process of finding these interviewees likely put me in touch with those in some way dedicated to the field of agriculture.

The beauty of this list, if you're like me and know these surnames, is how they sound so good on the tongue as they expand naturally into the second generation. And it does not stop, of course! I met Madeline Carlson, Connie's daughter and Carmen Fernholz's granddaughter. There is Ian MacKimm, grandson to Dwight Ault and son of Melissa. Then there are Hazel and Arlo, children of Malena and Mike—little ones who call Audrey Arner "Grandma." Or you hear the names Jacob and Andrew Van Der Pol or Nicholas Minar, and realize we are talking about active boys growing up inside the same strong families, inside the same strong values.

Kirsten Van Der Pol, age three at the time of the interview, knows that she was born inside a unique farm family. On Kirsten's bedroom wall hangs the *Renewing the Countryside* 2003 calendar, perpetually turned to the month of October, with its color photo of her with her family.

In all, from within the 14 interviews of the second generation, I already count 11 in the third generation. I witness values and experiences—a calling and a responsibility—extending gracefully on in time.

The Meaning of Work

Certainly in the Midwest, if not all across America, our work defines us. “What do you do?” the new person at the party will be asked. We work early and often and into the late hours and late years of our lives. This theme arose in all the interviews—a theme about work—kinds of work, attitudes about physical work, and lessons learned while working. I noted that these young people, when asked about their growing up years, would begin with stories of work. It often seemed the most memorable moments were working ones.

“First thing that comes to mind about growing up in our family is all the chores we had to do,” says Connie (Fernholz) Carlson, who grew up near Madison, Minnesota. **“I remember distinctly complaining about it, and getting my siblings to do it for me. We pulled weeds, gardened, put up food . . .”** ❖

“Back then, we had an idea that you had to feed cows, fix fence . . .” recalls Deborah Lentz. **“You had to do chores or else the world wasn’t running. It was real life.”** ❖

Life on MeadowLark Farm was incredibly varied, as Heather Benson remembers it. **“My favorite times were in summers, even though it was all really really hard work. I have fond memories of when we still gathered in loose hay on the hayrack and brought it into the barn. My grandfather was working, plus the older cousins. We had a team of horses and we’d hook up this elaborate pulley system. It**



Ralph Lentz herding in the cows

was dangerous, at least my grandfather would always tell us stories about when he nearly lost a finger from a different machine. But I remember the smell of the fresh hay and the tension in our work as we tried to pull it all in before a thunderstorm. As kids, we would relay instructions from the inside team to the outside team. It was so great to get to work with the workhorses.

“Then I also remember riding with my Grandpa on the manure spreader. Here we also used the horses and it was so quiet and fun, even though you’d occasionally get splotched with a cow pie!”

Now, Heather realizes, **“It seems I’m always working on projects inside intense community.”** ❖

“Once you start, you finish.”

Colin King reflects on the meaning of work. **“It’s more of an ideology, and the core of it is—once you start a project you have to finish it.”** Growing up on a farm and often with three generations on the land, work and learning



**Heather Benson,
age 4 or 5, on
Meadowlark
Farm with
father David and
workhorse
Percherons,
Molly and Nellie**

new skills went hand in hand. Colin continues, "In varying degrees my grandparents influenced my concept of work and what 'good work' is. I spent a lot of my childhood working on my grandparents' dairy farm and watching my Grampa work with his hands. I learned a lot. It took awhile, but as a result of watching him and being around a person who had the confidence to take a machine apart, I taught myself auto mechanics." ❖

Brandon Rutter's folks brought two boys up in their own back-to-the-land lifestyle of the mid-1970s, in southeast Minnesota. Brandon describes differences in their life and how work wove its way into all of it. "Well, let's say it was a while before we discovered Saturday morning cartoons. We were rather off the grid. We had kerosene lamps until I was three or four and by the mid-1980s we had solar panels on the roof with lights and a TV—a nine-inch black and white," Brandon recalled. "We learned the trade-offs. For

instance, if you watched too many cartoons on a cloudy day, you'd have to go to bed early because you had run the house batteries down too far. We pretty much worked together outdoors. I remember when I was quite young playing in the dirt near the garden while my parents worked. Later, we weeded and we were always helping out. I loved everything and I worked a lot. We were quite grown up by the age of 14 or 15, compared with my peers." ❖

Farm life has a way of redefining ages and stages of a child's development. Craig Fernholz spoke at length about the work he did on the Madison, Minnesota farm. It both taught him and had the potential of driving him away from farming. "Well, I was the youngest, so basically I could let everyone else go before me, and see what they'd done. My brother, Chris, worked on the farm . . . Chris and I . . . well, I first started working out in the barn when I was six. Chris and I worked together in the barn for about two years only, and then he graduated, so then basically it was Dad and I. By the time I was eight I'd really been involved in the whole goings on about the farm and everything. In fact, when I was nine, Dad took a job down in St. Paul as committee administrator for State Representative Glen Anderson so Dad was gone during the weeks and came home on weekends—for a whole year—and Chris was gone and my two sisters did not do barn or field work, so . . . sometimes I look back and ask, 'How did I do that?' Nine years old and here I am making sure everything's going through the barn all right.

"I didn't really have to worry about crops all that much, but the pigs . . . at the time we had a 60-sow farrow to finish operation. I think there's a reason why I never took a job out in the real world until I was a sophomore in college,

because it felt to me that since I was eight I'd been working the whole time! Looking back, I wonder how the heck I managed to get through all that.

"The hardest thing was to guess when to bring the pregnant sows in . . . you had to closely watch them. Dad had taught me that they start making their nest and such. As soon as they start doing that, you get them into a pen where they can have the piglets by themselves. I'd say 75 percent of the time I was right on. I'd put them in and maybe two days later they'd give birth. But there'd always be a couple times where you'd finish up chores that evening and the next evening here's all these little piggies running around and 'Oh no!' And there's the rush to grab them all and put them in a bucket and put them in the pen and get the mother in there . . .

"Sure, we lost some pigs that way. Some would get stomped on . . . a little piglet about this big among 400 pound sows and boars? That's why you'd always want to watch them really closely.

"I actually did come to hate it. I dreaded going out there every single day. I remember one time, for some reason I didn't do chores until after dark, and heck, I was nine years old, still kinda scared of the dark you know, and I did not want to go out there at all because in one section of the barn none of the lights worked, so you had to go in there with a flashlight. There would be all these pigs running around making noise . . . your mind starts working overtime. I did not want to go out there—fastest chores I ever did on record.



**Brandon and
Perry Rutter
digging in field,
summer 1989**

"But looking back, it's really not as bad as I remember. If anything, I'd say . . . well, I was nine and already learning about responsibility. If it needs to be done, get it done. Maybe I had to grow up a little bit quick?" ❖

Melissa
MacKimm
and her
cousin Sue

“One summer we did almost a thousand chickens.”

“We’d get up and get started on Saturday about seven o’clock in the morning,” remembers Amanda Bilek, “and my dad was always the executioner, I guess you’d say. He had a contraption we called the ‘Wheel of Misfortune’ with ten metal cones hanging upside down. You could put the chicken in there and the opening at the bottom was wide enough so their head and neck fit through. All you’d do is just slit their throats and the blood would run out of them a lot quicker; we felt it was a more humane death. My dad also has a chicken plucker and we’d do the wing feathers and my mom would do the pinfeathers. We had about three or four stations set up. My Great Aunt Ida would dress and gut the birds and then they’d soak in a bulk tank full of cold water. One summer we did almost a thousand chickens, which was bizarre for that time. We didn’t have to pay help, the Great Aunts seemed happy to just come over and visit and help out. This was nice for me too because my grandparents on both sides died before I was five, so it was nice to be around those elderly people who had ties with my grandparents and I really got to know them.”

Amanda remembers more hard work: “Baling hay was a lot of hard work,” she recalls. “One summer I remember we put up about 10,000 bales of hay!” ❖

Inga Haugen’s Saturdays on Spring Side Dairy farm were workdays too, but like Amanda and Heather, Inga speaks of them fondly. “A typical Saturday always involved work, determined by that day’s weather. We would have breakfast together as a family and plan out the day. Was it time to make wood or time to plant? —lots of communication as



we ate. I was often the one to make runs to town and pick up all the stuff needed for that weekend’s projects.” ❖

“I couldn’t go to school smelling like a barn.”

“Mornings were madness,” remembers Melissa MacKimm of her years growing up near Austin, Minnesota. “I’d be complaining that it was 6:30 and we had to get up in the middle of summer to go bean-walking. Furious that it’s summer, and the kids in town get to go swimming and this is what we have to do. There also were often chores before school started in the mornings. I remember that I had to make sure I had enough time, because I couldn’t go to school smelling like a barn. My world would fall apart if that happened.”

Remembering the summers— "I'm the youngest and only girl with three older brothers." Melissa continues, "We were closer to Austin and 15 miles away from Blooming Prairie where all my school friends were, so when school got out for the summer, I didn't see them for three months. Oh there might be a miscellaneous birthday party or something, but for the most part, I didn't see my friends for three months. For that period of time, my brothers were my family and my playmates, and that was unique, I think. We just entertained ourselves. And summers were not all fun; they were a lot of work. That's when a lot of stuff happened."

Like Amanda, Melissa remembers haying: "The hardest work was baling hay, yet we still do it. It is still fun, hard, and sweaty—long days and you feel so good when you're done. Walking beans was hell, everybody just hated it. Walking through fields and pulling weeds. And we were pretty old fashioned in that I probably got off fairly easy being the only girl in the family. I helped my mom with a lot in the house. There was a lot of cooking to do for four kids and usually a farm hand or two.

"Once in while I had to put up fence. That was hard. Oh, and castrating pigs. Before we made the transition into animal welfare protocol we had to castrate pigs and that was hard work. It's a unique experience, especially being a kid and not really fully comprehending what's actually happening to that poor animal. Just last weekend, my niece who's twelve was down there. My brother and I were laughing about when we used to have to do that, and she said, 'What's castrating pigs?' And Dave looked at me like . . . how do I explain this? So we changed the subject." ❖

"We had a car seat on the fender of the tractor."

The stories about work went on in some detail. Maybe it's unfair to ask a young person to reflect on the meaning of their lives—have enough experiences and comparisons gone by to make it possible? Yet I firmly believe it's equally unfair that our culture *forgets* to ask young people to reflect on the meaning of their lives. They are close to the memories, and meaning comes in the telling. At any rate, on the question of work, some of those whom I interviewed could barely imagine the boundaries around that issue. Says Janaki Fisher-Merritt of Wrenshall, Minnesota: "Farming is such a frame of reference for me. It's hard to call it a value or even an occupation. A lot of what I do applies to living here. This is what you do.

"At about age 14, the farm became my positive obsession. I've been totally curious about this for as long as I can remember. It's hard to imagine something else. This is land management in the personal sense.

"When I was younger, my parents both worked in town. But all my life it's been this—we had a car seat on the fender of the tractor. I'd fall asleep there.

"I don't know what it is, but I've totally bought into the whole thing. I've taken ownership in that sense. It's hard to separate me *buying into* Dad's vision and me *affecting* his vision or this operation. It was not an intentional plan by my parents to involve me. But my parents did a good job of minimal affirmation." ❖



**Inga Haugen
and dog in
pasture**

I'm sure Inga Haugen would agree that she also both bought into and affected the whole thing about Spring Side Dairy Farm: "I take pleasure in reading," says Inga, "but I must have dirt and animals. I must have my hands in dirt. I can feel the effect of the weather. You need to know how to work with the seasons. In town you get so disconnected. I'm into the smell of green growing things, a responsibility and respect ingrained . . . it makes me feel good." ❖

Work: One Rhythm in Our Lives

A small and less known book by Wendell Barry has stuck with me for over a decade. In the early 1990s, I picked up a copy of *The Hidden Wound*, then lost it. Recently, I bought a replacement. The message that sticks in my memory is Berry's way of talking about work.

In the late 1960s, Wendell Berry wrote this small book to trace, from the influence of two black people he grew up with, the development of his understanding of the damages of racism. He names one such damage as our separation from work and the meaning of work. I quote here from his Chapter 12:

"As the white man has withheld from the black man the positions of responsibility toward the land . . . so he has assigned to him as his proper role the labor, the thousands of menial small acts by which the land is maintained, and by which men develop a closeness to the land and the wisdom of that closeness. For the lack of that closeness and wisdom the white man has suffered and is suffering more than he has admitted, more probably than he knows . . ."

Berry continues to describe the dual relationships to the land and to work. One was abstract, the other physical, and the laborer "developed the emotional resilience and equilibrium and the culture necessary to endure and even enjoy hard manual labor . . ."

Those passages stuck deeply with me, and I have dog-eared the pages and underlined the words that first surprised me. I had not fully understood what we gave up as a race when we gave up menial work. Much of our culture systematically lost the equilibrium of work and the culture to endure manual labor. Had we given up one of our deepest connections to the land itself? It seems we not only gave that up, we institutionalized the disconnection.

Seeing Changes on the Land

As I relate this to Inga Haugen's words, I'm struck that the farm families whom I was privileged to meet this past year have *not* forgotten that culture of connection to work or connection to land.

An idea coming to me in part because of Berry's book and in part stemming from my own life experience is that this connection is not intellectual, but is one that is buried somewhere in the body. By putting the rhythm of real work—farm work—back into the picture, we restore one honest body connection to all life. We create muscle memories. The hands know how to hold a hoe; the feet know how to spade soft soil. It is possible that the work itself—the rhythm of daily chores, seasonal rhythm of planting or harvesting and birth to death rhythm of the animals—creates in a young person an inner reality that must then *always* be dealt with. Later, those urges we refer to—the seemingly inexplicable urges—may instead be simply the harvesting of this muscle memory, an inner connection ensured by work.

"If I don't have some connection to the dirt, I'll go nuts!"
declares Inga Haugen. ❖

Paul Gruchow, hailing from Worthington, Northfield, or Two Harbors, Minnesota, once painted the picture of rural education and "what we teach rural children." An essay by this name, first a 1990 lecture at St. Mary's College in Winona, was published as a chapter in *Grassroots: the Universe of Home*.

"The point is that rural children have been educated to believe that opportunity of every kind lies elsewhere and that the last half century's rural experience of failure and decline has been largely due to the incompetence, or irrelevance, of rural people."

Gruchow wrote against "any economy that sees people as an expendable resource," and exposed any number of myths driving such an economy. He may have shocked the audience at St. Mary's College in 1990, saying "These are lessons we teach our rural children today: that their parents were expendable and that their duty is to abandon their dreams and become cogs in the industrial machine . . . [furthermore, that] if they expect to amount to anything, they had better leave home."

If Paul Gruchow were still alive (and how I wish he were!), I'd call him up and see if he still believes this, or how he'd apply his theories to the population of this set of interviews. Without him, I am forced to draw my own conclusions.

First of all, I assume that this movement adding creativity on the land in the 1970s and 1980s created a different set of expectations for those who farmed sustainably. They began to know, indisputably, that people on the land were *not* expendable, that labor and ingenuity were key to sustaining the soil, and that imagination is the grist of the creative mill of land management.

Katie Fernholz reflects on the beginnings of her dad's (Carmen's) commitment to organics on their Madison, Minnesota farm. **"Well, our farm was conventional at first. The story goes that one year there was not enough money for chemicals, so Dad just tried it without them. Back then he was going organic without a peer or mentor. It was his own idea."** ❖

Carmen's son, Craig, talks about how he and his father would watch the neighbors plow. **"There's a family out our way [who own] about 2,000 acres and they have a big eight-wheel humungous tractor and I often saw him going out. Usually if it had rained, the next day you'd get up and look out and you could see where they'd gone the day before because the tractor had packed the soil down so much. Those little details differed from the way we did things, so we'd ask. At the end of the harvest season what others usually did was till up the soil using a moldboard plow, and what that did is take the earth and furl it up, flip it upside down. What Dad always uses is a chisel plow, and**

that makes grooves in the soil. You can see the difference because we kept the corn stubble on the ground so that during winter when you have these 40 mph. winds coming from the northwest, the snow is stopped by this crop trash. I remember once when I was ten or so, a person with a snowblower was down in his ditch, snowblowing soil back onto the field because the ditch was so black. That's those moldboard plows! We never had that problem. Never like that." ❖

Creativity thus caused new expectations on the land. Second, I know that the generation of parents who farmed in curves and new crops or cows on grass were bucking not only the accepted scientific research about efficiency, but also the local culture of their towns and valleys. Since they were already change agents, their children (my interviewees) were buffered by a generation and shown courage. They watched changes on the land, learned from them, and came to believe in them by example.

Melissa MacKimm recalls that her dad, Dwight Ault, made changes on their Austin area farm that actually made her feel more secure. **"I was in my early teens, you know, a time where most kids aren't paying attention to much outside their own circles. I can remember thinking all my friends' farms were bigger and more progressive, but then in the 1982 farm crisis, thinking 'whew,' we're not like that, our place will be more stable."** ❖

Rebels in Farm Country

Whether it was determined by chisel plows, chore schedules and daily decisions about the land, or food choices made at home, there was a difference in these sustainable farm families. The children knew it, and being different was not always easy.

Heather Benson, who recalled working with horses, again reflects on community: **"There was this intent in the Benson family—to stay with community. Maybe it was an economic factor in that we didn't have the money for separate machinery, but also the camaraderie and bigger meaning of it."** ❖

"We were not afraid of being poor," remembers Connie (Fernholz) Carlson. **"We never had *stuff*."** ❖

Connie's sister, Katie Fernholz, reflects on the whole picture of work, resources, pride, and what makes a family believe in itself. **"There's an obstinance to it. Mom sewed all our clothes [in the 1980s], and did our haircuts . . . and we grew to believe it to be the best. It's not different, it's *better*. We ground wheat into flour in our own basement! Picked strawberries, washed and sold eggs . . . It was a different world and we were raised to believe that this life was something to be proud of."** ❖



Says Malena Arner Handeen: **"I knew by our foods and such that they were so different from mainstream culture that I didn't know what was going on [outside of that]."** ❖

**Tom Bilek,
son, Joe and
daughter,
Amanda**

Amanda Bilek, the one who helped butcher 1,000 chickens one summer, simply understood a farm-based reality. **"At home there were always conversations about things like why was dad having this soil test done on the fields. I remember when I was in college and we were talking about the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico and why it was a problem with all these fertilizers running off. There were about seven people in my class and no one got it, no one understood why or how it could be that fertilizer in which we grow our food could be causing such harm. It didn't make any sense to them. For me, it was just obvious. I've always known that fertilizers overused and not used properly are disastrous to the environment."** ❖

**Young Adam
Warthesen,
splitting
wood**

Early in life, Brandon Rutter learned about soils. "My parents' noting of the soil erosion on our land was one of the main things that led to the woody agriculture concept. They looked at USGS soil survey maps [mostly made in the 1950s], which reported around 12 inches of topsoil on some of our hills, and as they compared soil depth in the late 1970s, an alarming portion of that topsoil was gone. Then it seemed by reading later USGS soil surveys that, officially, soil loss was almost acceptable. When I found that out, we were appalled all over again; this showed a lack of thinking beyond the next 50 years, as far as our food supply is concerned." ❖

Craig Fernholz, the one who did farm chores at the age of six, describes his family's farm: "Even though organic has turned really big now, that farm is still unique. If you drive from Minneapolis out to Madison along Highway Seven, you see corn and soybeans, corn and soybeans, along the whole way. As soon as you get to about a mile away from our house, you see corn and soybeans, wheat, barley, flax, oats, corn, soybeans, wheat, barley—and alfalfa fields. And it is so different. I look for the change when driving home." ❖

Melissa MacKimm also notes the difference of her (Ault) family's land and lifestyle: "When our farm changed into a sustainable farm, there were hard moments . . . I remember initially when the crops didn't look as nice as the field next to them because of our different methods. Of course it was all new, the equipment was new, and the methods had not been tested all that much, and there was peer pressure coming from the outside. I know it was hard on my one brother [Grant]. That was tough on him for a long time; he wanted to be proud of what he was seeing. He was proud



of the sustainable part of it and didn't want people to say, 'see, it's not working.'

"And like I said before," Melissa continues, "being the rebel in this really conservative farm community . . . my dad always asked questions, and sometimes would do things, I think, to spite the conventional farming community. And now I so appreciate that, and I have that in me too. All of us have a little piece of that, I probably have the most. But at the time that was hard." ❖

Say Katie and Connie (Fernholz sisters) about their growing up years: "We've never given in to peer pressure.

We couldn't afford the latest clothing styles, but we had our way of doing things and never were much impressed with name brand items. We do what feels right." ❖

In every case, this difference led to a family pride. Adam Warthesen said it well when I asked him about his hopes for the next generation. **"One of the things I always think about as we bequeath this world on to the next generation, is it in a more positive light than the way we received it? You know what? On my mom and dad's farm, it is. On a factory farm in SW Minnesota? I don't think so." ❖**

Katie's voice again: **"We knew it was stubborn. Was it noble? We had a sense that our dad was a hero [his stories of France in 1987 . . .] Back then, we resented much of that, but he certainly gave us the idea that there were bigger causes out there." ❖**

For the record, Carmen Fernholz was part of a delegation of farmers traveling to Geneva in 1987. They met with a consortium of European farmers while the GATT talks (General Agreements on Tariff and Trade) were going on. Later Carmen also went to Brussels for a conference on biotechnology and to Paris, France.

Craig Fernholz reflects about changes in his family over time. **"I've been noticing in the last couple of years how our family members differ. Katie and Dad! Oh man, the discussions. Watching them talk about politics and forestry is like watching two boxers who really respect each other but have to fight it out 'til someone wins. Now it shifts some. Dad goes to Katie for tips about forestry, Chris about cars, and he talks to me about carpentry or furniture . . . or theatrical sets." ❖**

The Power of Leaving

**Janaki
Fisher-
Merrit
working in
field**

In fourteen interviews, I did not meet a population of young people eager to leave the countryside in order to make something of themselves, as Gruchow once predicted. I did learn that, to a person, they left home. Many left with the sincere desire to return and many will return, yet they all, for varying lengths of time, left to feel the outer world and to test life and educate themselves, in part, by being away from the home and family structure. Maybe this runs counter to the idea that to populate the countryside we must keep the children around. Maybe there is a leaving and returning, a cycling of energy that must naturally occur.

I can see in these cases that there was a perspective gained in the leaving, an empowering of spirit in the very going away and 'making it' off the homestead. This may be a universal need for any generation as they differentiate from their parents.

Plus for every young person leaving home there's a set of parents who let go. In this population of families, parents clearly opened their hands—in every case. I ponder this wise openness even with the added pressure of needing their labor, energy, and congruity on the newly sustainable farm operation.

"My parents were always very supportive of Perry's and my choices," says Brandon Rutter, who grew up on Badger-sett Farm. **"We could do anything we wanted to do. Now I**



see that is both blessing and curse. I mean if you love everything and can do everything, it's hard to choose!" ❖

"The longer I lived in the city, the more I appreciated space."

Malena Handeen speaks of this and about Montevideo, Minnesota: **"From about high school to age 21, I had no long term plans of any kind. I pushed against anything there was! I had to push off and away from my parents. I knew by our foods and other things that they were so different from mainstream culture—and I didn't know what was going on outside of our family. My dreams seemed so unattainable. I only ever thought of being an artist, and I figured I couldn't do that out here. There was nothing happening out here. But the longer I lived in the city, the**

more I appreciated space. I was in a colony of visual artists [at college] and I was glad about that, but I knew I wanted a garden, a cat, and not a house cat, a country cat . . . Later, I realized more and more that I could trust my parents' advice. As I became a friend with them, I saw their predictions come true. I was really way luckier than I had thought." ❖

Malena Handeen went away to identify herself as individual and as artist. She was not alone among those I interviewed. Several I talked with spoke clearly about this measuring of home against an outside world.

Janaki Fisher-Merritt now farming near Wrenshall, Minnesota found his environmental studies at Carleton **"wishy washy."** (That is a statement measured by home if I ever heard one.) He found that he kept wanting to make his studies relevant—this comes from one who has worked on the land and learned from the daily relevancy of growing or storing vegetables. **"I don't know how many papers I wrote about farming [at Carleton]. The more other things I did, the more interested I was in farming."** ❖

Some in the group of interviewees at first wanted nothing to do with farming after leaving the farm. Amanda Bilek is one. **"When I graduated in Staples, MN, the last thing I ever wanted to do was anything with agriculture or the farm. It took being out of that environment to appreciate the value of the farm. You come to college in St. Paul and are around all these kids who grew up in the suburbs and who don't even think about where their food is coming from."** ❖ It was natural for Amanda, after slaughtering all those chickens on Saturdays, to want to know the source of her chicken sandwich!

Melissa MacKimm would agree about wanting to leave the farm, and she traveled farther to find the connection back home. **"When I graduated from Blooming Prairie High School, the only thing on my mind was to get as far away from the farm as I possibly could. Not looking back, I came up to Hamline University for that reason."** Some time later, she lived for a half-year on a farm in Switzerland, and that's when she thought, **"OK, wait a minute . . . I know what I want to do. That's when it kind of all went 'duh!' When I returned to school, it was much easier, I was older and I knew what I was after. I think it was in Switzerland when I just realized that I was a much simpler person. I figured out I was thinking too hard, that I just needed to go with my instincts, to see that yeah, this is really what I'm passionate about."** ❖

Josh Van Der Pol went to Willmar for two years taking classes, thinking about other careers, and even considering a job in accounting. He then came back to Clara City where he worked in his future in-laws' floral business. Finally it became clear to Josh that he just couldn't work inside. That's when he started reconsidering what the home farm offered him.

When you leave and gain perspective, even the scale of things back home seems to change. For Craig Fernholz, this has already been true. **"I went home two weekends ago for my five-year high school reunion, and I showed up on the farm when Mom and Dad were gone. Got out of the car. Walked into the house, went back outside. And the first thing I noticed was that everything (the height of the tractor, how big the shop was, how big the lawn was . . .) everything was a lot smaller. Almost manageable in my eyes. Almost. Like maybe a couple more years and maybe I'd come back . . ."** ❖

"I must see the stars at night."

It is in the leaving that we know what we miss. Craig Fernholz now lives in the Uptown area in Minneapolis.

"One thing I do miss, living here, is the stars. Coming to the Cities—well, I finally saw my first shooting star last night after about a year and a half down here. Out near Madison, Minnesota? No place compares. Well, maybe Scotland; I was way up in the Isle of Skye and we were staying where it was completely pitch black except vast stars everywhere."



Inga Haugen is attending college at Concordia in Moorhead, Minnesota, and working at a garden/nursery. She dreams of getting her master's degree in Library Science, maybe in Fargo. But she left the farm with a clear intent to return one day. **"I refuse to live in a place where I can't see the stars at night,"** stated Inga.

So when these young people leave home, they immediately measure their new lives against their lives back then. Who doesn't? And city people can be pretty uninformed. Once while driving, Inga Haugen and a friend passed one of those boldly painted Land O' Lakes semi-trailers showing cows grazing on grass. She ranted at that, calling it false advertising, and her friend was surprised, asking, "Aren't all cows raised on grass?" Far from the truth, explains Inga. **"It was naïve of my friend to think that all cows live on beautiful green pastures."** ❖

Recalls Katie Fernholz, **"I remember one time being home-sick in Alaska because the wind started to blow. And it was the wind that I remembered from Madison, Minnesota. It was always windy out there, and the openness . . . I laugh at the hill-country people talking about going 'to see the**

sunsets' in this location or another. [At home] we could always see every sunset."

More from Katie: **"Alaska taught me the value of stability. Alaska was exhausting, cut-throat, and competitive. Everything in Alaska is gone tomorrow; there is no stability, no stable social structure. I longed for predictability and I learned that Minnesota is a place to put down roots."** ❖

There are those phrases again: "I longed for . . . and I learned." Is it through longing that we do finally learn? And how do you "long for" anything without leaving it? How can you seek to close a gap until you feel the gap?

These do not sound like young people who believe rural life is expendable nor does it sound like youth who have abandoned dreams in order to become cogs in any sort of industrial wheel. They see farther than that, and one might ask why this is true. Maybe the freedom to leave home is part of the reason they can imagine this larger picture? While leaving home did not make all of these young folks immediately desire to return to rural America and live on the land, the contrasts they see in life most definitely call them to value the land and their growing up years on the land.

The Power of Knowing What You Desire

I'd avoid making generalizations about this group forever, yet if there's one thing that has impressed me about these fifteen interviewees, it is that this group of young people know who they are. They know what they want. Malena Handeen and Mike Jacobs now on Easy Bean Farm near Milan, Minnesota, have bought land and are acting out their own dreams with a CSA. Craig Fernholz is building theater sets at the Guthrie. Colin King went to his own kind of Liberal Arts College and is working hard on the nuclear freeze issue. Heather Benson teaches elementary kids about gardening in urban San Francisco. Katie Fernholz knew she could not work with agriculture but is dedicated to sustainability for the trees. Differences? Absolutely! But they know who they are in the world and what they desire.

"I want every minute of my life to be true to myself," declares Katie Fernholz. "Then I will be content." "I really have strong feelings and desires to work with social and economic justice," states Adam Warthesen. "I must have stars," says Inga Haugen.



Josh and Jacob Van Der Pol in hoop-house

Adam tests this "knowing" against the various work options he might encounter: **"I know that this work at the Land Stewardship Project might not be forever, but in some aspects I made the right decision because now there are certain places that will never hire me. For instance, [he laughs] now I can't go to work for Smithfield."** ❖

Josh Van Der Pol likes the hours of his work and likes having the kids with him all day. He knows he's made the right choice to stay on the family farm. So does Janaki Fisher-Merritt, calling it **"the most interesting and fulfilling and hopeful work I can think of."** ❖

"Knowing how to grow stuff or kill stuff is at the root of our confidence."

Connie (Fernholz) Carlson and her sister, Katie talk about confidence. **"Just knowing where your food is coming from [is security] and knowing how to grow stuff or kill stuff is**

**Inga Haugen in
Renaissance
costume**

at the root of our confidence." Connie is quite sure she will run her own theater company one day, and says she could probably work around any barriers. "This is something that I think is unique to our family. We know what we like and dislike, almost instantly. There are few gray areas. It's gut instinct." Her sister Katie added: "People that are wishy-washy astonish me. Indecisive people teach me . . . I guess we have these high ethics of self-respect and knowledge of what is right and wrong." ❖

Colin King talks with the same kind of confidence about the concept of *place*. "Understanding a concept of place is critical," said Colin, "Without that, it's hard to go forward. Lacking place is almost like lacking family—you have nothing to give and no reason to give." These were words spoken with certainty. ❖

Inga Haugen also epitomizes this confidence. "Mom always told me I'm special. Once when I was little, someone chanted at me, 'You go, girl!' and I called back, 'I'm not a girl, I'm an Inga! I want country life; I don't need the convenience of town life. I will have animals (thinking of hair to fiber) and food animals. And I will have land and flowers and . . . It'll be great to travel, but if I don't have some connection to the dirt, I'll go nuts!'" ❖



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



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

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, NM) 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 twenty 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—that we're able

**Deborah Lentz
with Ariana at
organic
farmers'
market**



to keep evolving and figure out our personal needs."

In August of 2003, Easy Bean Farm was looking at its fifth season with the CSA and its seventh season growing vegetables. In 2003, there were 128 families in the CSA—about 350 people, so " . . . **there's a lot of traffic coming through Easy Bean.**" ❖

On their 40 organic acres called Tantre Farm, Deb Lentz and her husband, Richard, started a CSA in year 2000. It allows them more diversity in crops and they've added the practice of selling to restaurants and various local stores. The first year with the CSA they had 40 members, three years later 130 members. When their daughter, Ariana, was born, Deb quit teaching to do the marketing and business management. Now she names the time-pressures of this work and the issue of labor. **"It is a lot of personal work and really limits one's personal time."** Deb wonders if Ariana benefits or loses in this scenario? Children come to the farm and Deb meets with young moms. This activity would not have happened without the CSA, **"Yet our time is really trapped. Farming**

can be a burnout career from 6:00 AM to 9:00 PM. Just to be gone for five days in the summer is really hard—a summer family vacation together is impossible from June 1st to October 31st . . . "The pressure to do conventional farming is just so real. Organic vegetables are a lot of work!"

Deb continues, **"It's hard to hire reliable help. Workers come and go and the labor force is inconsistent. They do work long hours, and we provide a big lunch, so once they're here, it's fine. Our workers are good people, but they lead such busy lives—there are always weddings or conferences or travel schedules to work around."**

Yet she and Richard are still happy with their choice of community supported agriculture. **"We have much more support because of the CSA. We have the support of nearby farmers who started at a similar time. There is a community of them—in their late 20s, early 30s—especially three specific people nearly daily. One farmer is a lettuce man, and we barter lettuce for squash and potatoes. He started a CSA last year, and this allows us to share produce to fill more of the needs of our members."** There are two farmers' markets as well. Deb met a young farmer and encouraged him, teaching him that the initial dollar support from the CSA allows you to actually do what you want. **"It's a sure thing."** ❖

Starting as a U-pick operation, the Fisher-Merritts of Wrenshall, Minnesota now run a CSA their own way on 200 acres. They raise summer vegetables such as beans, broccoli, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers . . . and they recently added a root cellar. Financed by CSA members who loaned money for the root cellar (many at zero percent interest across seven years), the cellar is a cool,

vented underground storage system where foods are layered with peat moss, plastic, and burlap. It allows for monthly winter shares of carrots, potatoes, beets, rutabaga, parsnips, cabbage, or squash.

"A few years ago we offered members the chance to volunteer instead of raising share prices," remembers Janaki Fisher-Merritt. **"Nope, they came back, 'Raise the prices. We are busy people.' Our operation could grow,"** said Janaki. **"We are actually struggling to stay at this plateau of membership."** The philosophy has been to diversify the product to members instead of growing in member numbers. **"It is a fairly stable CSA membership base now; many families have been with us since the very beginning eleven years ago."** Janaki clearly sees the CSA program as **"the difference between my parents paying themselves to farm or not making a living."** And he remarks that the farmers' market option would be too slow for them. **"You find yourself sitting all day Saturday at the market when you could be working on the land."**

Janaki challenges himself to improve the CSA on a regular basis. **"We want to start new things,"** he says, **"like more livestock. We currently have chickens and turkeys in this amazing intensive grazing set-up, but this place needs large animals as a part of the biological cycle. Many of our CSA members also want raw milk, and it's one of our dreams to sell it to them and not be dependent upon a large milk-processing company. All it would take is three or four cows."**

"Farming in the CSA style allows me to experiment and solve problems. I use my curiosity. The CSA is a connection to people—a responsibility to them," says Janaki. **"I saw this as the power to influence the way I live." ❖**

"This hasn't been the easy route."

On-site processing is no easier, and there, too, balancing labor with growth is a fine art. Mike and Merrisue Minar (along with many Minar family members) say that jointly creating Cedar Summit Farm, although rewarding, was not the easy choice. The day Merrisue gave birth to Nathan (15 months old at the time of this interview) Mike had to go in to work. The work that first year was so constant. By early 2004, the work was easing up a bit, and Merrisue said, **"Last October, we even left for a week's vacation."** ❖ Mike Minar figures he puts in 55-60 hours a week, down from an intolerable 80-hour week at the beginning. Their goal is to get the working day to a manageable one, while keeping it flexible.

Josh Van Der Pol chooses similar words, and weighs and balances his thoughts when asked about this goal of sustainability. **"Well, it isn't any easier, that's for sure,"** he states. His dad's farming practices made it possible (there was room, economically) for Josh to farm and he wanted this to be clear. Still, says Josh, **"It is actually harder to be marketing as well as farming. Yet the direct marketing customers are loyal; we want to keep them happy, and we see a future in it."** ❖

Currently the Van Der Pols market pork, beef, and chicken. They have dairy cows on the land (Minar's cows part of the year) and grow crops to feed all these animals. Cindy Van Der Pol manages the marketing relationships for Pastures A Plenty, and regularly e-mails customers about the week's happenings on the farm. Many customers remark that they love this detailed written connection to the land. Cindy also sends along recipes for vegetables.

Later in the interview, Josh Van Der Pol added, "When I was thinking about this interview and the feature article in the *Star Tribune*, the Food and Wine Expo of 2002, and meeting with Chef Andres about this year's State Fair . . . all this attention . . . I figure I must be doing something people are interested in." ❖

"There is the room and space and time."

What about the isolation of farming in this day and age? Thoughts came through in a few of the interviews. First, Malena Handeen was articulate on this topic: "I like that it can get isolated [out here]. You have room to believe what you want to believe. You make your own reality. You have to draw from somewhere, so either you are creating your own community, or you're not. If I'm with people too much the same [as me], I don't have to discipline myself—I can go on 'cruise control.' Out here, I really have to communicate. I'm surrounded by people who are not interested. I can't pick out people who are just like me. But also there is the room and space and time, so I'm not turning into them. You can find your own identity." ❖

Even with his New Jersey roots, Malena's husband, Mike Jacobs, seems to be a match to his Milan location, and he speaks about living in community with a small number of people. "If you take on a person's personality one at a time, with fewer people," he says, "it opens me up to express more of my true self." ❖

Craig Fernholz would probably disagree. He thinks the Madison, Minnesota area needs people. "I think Dad's a little worried that none of us are going to come back to the farm. I mean he's really happy for us that we're all

doing what we want to do, but at the same time he's done all this work on the farm . . . So every time I go home . . . That's why I had those thoughts the last time I was home [finding it 'almost manageable']. I want to explore more, but I do enjoy coming home. I do enjoy the calmness. Out there you can be who you want to be, I guess. But maybe I could convince some friends to move out there first. It needs people." ❖

"That's nice, but you're not my constituent."

Amanda Bilek, who now works at the Minnesota Project, names one challenge for her generation as they delve into policy work. "If it was my choice tomorrow, I would start lobbying for sustainable agriculture, but I can't do that because I don't have the experience. I think you need a certain amount of experience or understanding before you just go in and start doing it. If you're a college student going in and meeting with your representative or senator, they think it's 'nice that you're taking an active role.' Going in at my age, one response might be, "That's nice, but you're not my constituent, and you're not a professional, so . . . *why* will your opinion matter to me?" ❖

Katie Fernholz finds her own challenges in the world of sustainable forestry, and must strike a balance. "I feel some conflict between how much is work and how much is living. I don't want to work too hard and forget to enjoy. I could try too hard. But I focus on just doing better, not to let life control you, but to live fully engaged. I can see there's an art and science to all of this—there is certainly an art to forestry." ❖

“You never know when you’re gonna learn.”

Inga Haugen names education as the best strategy, and local education is best. Visit a farm, she says. **“Sit down with a group and say, ‘This is what I see and how I’d fix it.’ Then talk it through. That’s the best kind of learning—examining things from different viewpoints. It’s important to work in a group or team because someone will see if something’s gotten out of kilter—the team sees something one person didn’t notice. Then you sit down and ask, ‘Tell me how you see this situation.’ You put people first and grow food for them. Oh, and”** Inga adds, **“you also have to include *play* in the cycle of work and play.”** ❖

Heather Benson, who teaches environmental education and nutrition in an inner-city school in San Francisco, would likely agree with Inga’s style of learning. The community school has a rooftop garden and a ground-level garden, and the program also attracts kids from nearby apartment buildings. **“Education is key,”** says Heather, **“Some children know that chickens lay eggs and some do not have a clue about food or farming. I like it that here I can call on my background growing up on the farm”** ❖



**The Rutters
in the
greenhouse,
summer 1993**

A Few More Stories

Colin King in squash patch, 1986 or '87. He still wears the blue ball cap.

There were stories braided into these fourteen interviews, and a few of them simply stand on their own. I do them more justice to let them be, rather than creating a literary thread to pull through them. Here they are, simply by the speaker:

Inga Haugen (remember, “I’m not a girl, I’m an Inga!”) had the experience of representing her peers as a 17-year-old Dairy Princess in Fillmore County. She was a spirit of truth even then—lobbying the association to let the princesses sit on hay bales and wear bib overalls. She could not really imagine wearing a dress for this function. “I’ll even throw these bales and show you what a real dairy princess does,” challenged Inga. Yet they rode, instead, on the back of a hay wagon on plastic lawn chairs, even down the steep roads into Lanesboro. Luckily the chairs were duct-taped down, but there were times when she nearly leapt off the trailer to save her skin. I can truly imagine Inga in a dress and heels ready to leap!

This Inga is now up at Concordia College in Moorhead, representing through story and persuasion, the whole big issue of cows on grass. **I had the opportunity recently to talk about dairy farming and agriculture, something I never pass up. It was a Friday night and I had two graduation parties to attend, as two of my friends had graduated this last semester. I went to the first one and was introduced to my friend’s parents (who’d come up from Chicago to see their daughter graduate). I was then**



sucked into a conversation explaining about the dairy industry for a whole hour. The funny part was when my other friend called me and asked if I’d gotten lost, since I was over an hour late. I apologized and said that after the conversation was done, I would come. I told her I was ‘talking cows.’ She interrupted me and said, ‘So we won’t see you for a bit, huh?’ And she didn’t ask for any other explanations. When I finally got to the second party, I had to tell them all about the cows as well. Yep, on a Friday night, at two separate parties, I’m talking agriculture.” ❖

Colin King made me laugh with a story about geese weeding strawberries. This was a part of his youth in Long Prairie, Minnesota: **“My parents had an acre and a half of U-Pick strawberries that were weeded by domesticated geese. [How did geese know the weeds from the strawberries?] Well, they don’t like the leaves of the strawberry plants, but it was a real problem when the green fruit started coming on, because they loved the green fruit, which ultimately led to us stopping that practice. As soon as you saw the first berries come on, you**

Influences of Their Own Children

had to herd the geese out of the berry patch into a fenced off area. So they were great fertilizers, but they weren't great weeders . . . you couldn't tell them "that spot is really weedy over there." ❖

It was mid-August 2003, and Josh and Cindy Van Der Pol and I were standing in their chicken barn. They have three small corrugated huts inside the barn each holding over a hundred chicks (428 in total at this time). Maggie, their aging Border Collie, was watching the chicks closely, especially as Cindy put feed in their feeders and water in their watering canister. Cindy explained that soon the chicks will go out into the pasture with a large fenced off area (5' high mesh electrical fencing). Each evening, their dog, Maggie (12) and their son, Jacob (8) will go out to herd the chickens into the huts for safety during the night. Maggie is arthritic yet can still herd hundreds of chickens into housing each night. And Jacob has learned by watching that the chickens respond to both the sound and shadow of a hawk. To hasten the process of herding chicks, Jacob knows how to make the scream of the Redtail Hawk. ❖

The image of Jacob Van Der Pol screeching like a Redtail brings me back to the concept that the second generation is impossible to feature here without talking about the third generation. It all keeps going! Melissa MacKimm listens to Ian in his upstairs crib as we talk in her dining room. Connie Carlson hands crayons to Madeline at the coffee shop. Merrisue Minar notes how the Minar grandchildren work around the creamery, and a playpen was often seen in the main salesroom of Cedar Summit Farm. Josh and Cindy Van Der Pol have moved a house onto Pastures A Plenty, and recently their son, Jacob, asked, "Where will my house go someday?"

As I stood in the yard at Pastures A Plenty, Andrew Van Der Pol (then five years old) walked through our conversation toting half of a five-gallon bucket of water, headed out to some pigs stuck in a certain part of the pasture. Andrew could hardly lift the bucket, but no one stopped to help him; he was doing fine. He would carry and stop, carry and stop. His mom watched and remarked, "**Andrew sees a job and does it.**" ❖

"I wanted to give him the life I'd had."

It becomes apparent that each generation puts its hopes in the next one, and not so much on specific behaviors or dreams of that next generation, but simply on their presence. Even operational changes on their home farmsteads are made in the name of the next



**Merrisue and
Mike Minar,
Nicholas,
Natasha, and
Nathan**

generation. In the Van Der Pol clan, this seems to be true. I remember Jim standing in St. Paul in the Minnesota Project office, one day in 1997 or so, saying that if he hadn't gone into diverse and sustainable operations, Josh might not want to come back to the farm. Now Josh does not so much talk about the opportunity for *himself*, as he speaks of the opportunity to have *his* children there. **"When Jacob was born, I wanted to give him the life I'd had,"** said Josh. ❖

Cindy Van Der Pol talks about sustainability, about how you "live off the land you have." When Cindy is canning, the children come right into the task, and just love it. Hopefully, they will come to love this farming life, and by the looks of it, they already do. [At that moment, Jacob and Andrew were trying to

douse each other with the hose off of the watering trailer.] **"The sustainable part is to keep going and keep our kids in on the operation,"** said Cindy. ❖

Cedar Summit Farm is a study in three generations. Mike and Merrisue's oldest son, Nicholas, always talked about "doing something with Grampa." The underlying question has been, "What to do on Cedar Summit Farm that the children can be part of?" As Dave and Florence contemplated changing their relationship to the work, selling the farm was simply not the option anyone wanted—they wanted something that would pull family back to the farm, and provide work for the kids and grandkids.

Finally Dave Minar asked the key question, "Why have a middle man?" and he and Florence began the initial design establishing a creamery on their farm site. All the kids, spouses, and farm partners came together and each was asked to write down what they wanted to do or what they were willing to do, if they could work together in a creamery business. From those notes, it looked like there would be enough interest (the needed labor) and Dave and Florence went ahead and did the financing options. They thought about used equipment at first, and then decided on state-of-the-art small dairy equipment purchased from Israel. Cedar Summit Farm has a complete line of dairy products from their own cows, including cheese, cream, yogurt, ice cream, and, of course, 1%, 2%, whole, and skim milk.

Mike Minar (Dave's son) talks about his motivation to leave the corporate world and come manage the dairy. **"Those jobs called for 12-hour days with the commute and all,"** and Mike found he wasn't home enough with his children. At this point, Mike says his motivation was **"mostly personal . . . I had grown disillusioned with corporate America and didn't enjoy my jobs. I wanted to be part of a small company and be closer to home—nearer to the kids. I wanted to be able to go to lunch with my kids, or go to their school functions. Yet I didn't want the farm side of the creamery business. I wanted to manage the plant."** His wife, Merrisue, couldn't be clearer on this point. **"The flexibility, a job close to home (I even originally brought the kids to work), and I guess I just wanted to be part of all this."** ❖

"Mom, I'm gonna buy a creamery."

It's entirely possible that the family's desire has spread to Nicholas Minar, age 11. Recently his class was assigned "the million dollar project," a simulation where students learn about economics and investment and real-life scenarios. Each student had to pick an industry or project focus, and Nicholas declared, **"Mom, I'm gonna buy a creamery."** His mom says he did a ton of Internet research and learned that you have to budget things and make smart decisions. Nicholas often speaks about, **"when I'm old enough to work at the plant."** And Merrisue reiterates: **"Having something for my children to look forward to, to be part of, was my highest motivation."** ❖

Yes, the children are influenced and motivated by their parents, yet the parents are also continually motivated by their children. Nicholas' desire to be part of Grampa's creamery helps motivate his dad, Mike, through a 60-hour week. All the while, Dave and Florence are right in the middle of their kids and grandkids every day. It goes around, and, in this case, smack in the middle of it all are 150 head of healthy cows eating grass.

As Ian MacKimm talks to himself upstairs in his crib, his mother, Melissa, beams with the pleasure of being home with him and says: **"My family is hugely important to me. It's my top priority. I can't even say enough about how important family is to me."** ❖

Our talk of children leads us directly to hopes . . . hopes for the land and children and the next generations in agriculture.



**John and Melissa
MacKimm with
son, Ian**

Hopes for the Future

What is this commodity called “hope”? I recently happened upon quotes from John Gardner’s book, *Self Renewal*. Here I bring in passages from a foreword written for the 1981 edition. Gardner founded Common Cause, and was a driving force in both the volunteer sector and urban renewal in America. (It’s no coincidence that words like his fall in my lap at the right moment.)

John Gardner wrote that “renewal depends on many factors” but that motivation is uniquely important. He goes on, “If people are apathetic, defeated in spirit or unable to imagine a future worth striving for, the game is lost.” In explaining how we might spare ourselves such a collapse of the spirit, Gardner writes:

“First, I would stress the importance of tough-minded optimism. Both the tough-mindedness and the optimism are immensely important. High hopes that are dashed by the first failure are precisely what we don’t need . . .

“But to say that there is no assurance of success is one thing: to give up in despair is something else. The future is shaped by men and women with a steady, even zestful confidence . . .

“Second, I would emphasize staying power. Stamina is an attribute rarely celebrated by the poets, but it has a good deal to do with the

history of humankind. And with the life history of each person.

“ . . . it is from just such individuals and groups that one may expect emergence of the ideas that will dominate our society and our world a century hence . . . But the capacity to germinate is in the individual seed. And the source of creativity for the society is in the person. Renewal springs from the freshness and vitality of individual men and women.”

I was struck by Gardner’s language, which could describe many of my friends from the sustainable agriculture movement—“tough-minded optimists” and “men and women with steady, even zestful confidence.” And staying power? Who trying to hold a farm together and make a living off the land in this time does not exhibit staying power?

I have enjoyed exploring, in the last several years, where hope comes from. Can it be given? Is a person simply born hopeful? In turn, can a hard life kill a sense of hope? You will answer those questions for yourself, but two things become clear for me today:

First, I had not previously understood how this generation of children, the children of those who made the switch to sustainable agriculture might be *the source* of a movement’s hope—their very existence brought hope to their parents. Jim and Lee Ann Van Der Pol changed things on their farm in part to keep it open, inviting, and financially viable so that Josh may want to farm, or so that there would be a farm for Josh to want.

Melissa MacKimm reflects that for her dad (Dwight Ault) **"the land and his family are tied together in such an important way."** Minars built a creamery, in part inspired by their children and grandchildren. Thus the young men and women that I interviewed were, in themselves, sources of hope for a movement, even though like every farm kid alive they griped about chores.

My second thought, inspired by John Gardner's words, is that tough-minded optimism seems to have transferred across these generations all right, transferred to an urban garden in San Francisco or to Easy Bean Farm, transferred to sustainable forestry, transferred backstage at the Guthrie, transferred to evening arguments about cows on grass or more organized arguments about rules for the Conservation Security Program. Tough-minded optimists, all, as you'll see in their statements of hope.

"What do you hope for?"

As a final interview question, I asked each person about their hopes—hopes for themselves or their family or hopes for the land.

Deb Lentz articulated some of what I might also say after working in the sustainable agriculture movement for two decades. **"I'm optimistic,"** she says. She sees the organic and sustainable views growing, and says, **"There are a lot of deterrents, but I purposefully encircle myself with people in the movement. I hope Ariana is part of the movement in Ann Arbor, of course, and I hope we'll have an influence on it. It's necessary for future generations to think like this, because our planet is not going to survive with anything else."** ❖



**Deb Lentz,
Richard, and
Ariana**

"Everybody needs to be involved in the operation of society and the operation of community, on up to the state as community," declares Colin King, who grew up near Long Prairie, Minnesota. **"I think that's key to our survival, the continuing evolution of human ideas, and culture. It's key to the existence of Whittier neighborhood, of Minneapolis/St. Paul, to the existence of Minnesota, U.S., the world . . . So however people figure out how to do that, be it starting farmers' markets in Long Prairie, or documenting the children of the sustainable agriculture movement—people need to be involved."** ❖

Adam Warthesen considered potential grandchildren. **"What would I tell them? There's a bumper sticker that says, 'Speak Your Mind Even if Your Voice Shakes.' Maybe I'd tell them to do that, because some of my values will be in their lives. Don't let yourself be oppressed, I'd say, whether it's socially or economically, politically . . . or environmentally."** ❖

**Amanda
Bilek and her
mom picking
apples**

"I hope to be able to continue to make good choices," declared Katie Fernholz. "Yes," said her sister, Connie, "and I hope that my kids are as happy and satisfied with their life as I feel right now. I hope they will know what makes them happy." ❖

"The biggest thing would be that the farm is healthy and I want it to be the same to my son's children as it is to me," said Melissa MacKimm, "because it's been my biggest teacher in life. I hope people realize the *value* of 'the farm'. It's not just about the methods (though sustainable is so much better for the earth) but the *value* of the farm. I laugh at our children's books—how many baby books there are about the farm, and the way the farm is depicted in them as small, diverse, in a nostalgic way that isn't realistic. So the value is still there. The world needs to see that it's going away and if it goes away, we've lost [a whole way of life.] So that's my big hope for the world—that they will realize what they're losing." ❖

Heather Benson, teaching many cultures in San Francisco: "I hope that the kids in school can transition into this culture with an understanding of their own culture and roots . . . that they can come to know the universal truths. I have faith that I'll keep teaching and gardening. And I hope to return to Meadow Lark Farm in Minnesota again someday. I want to return in some way, some day. Plus, I hope my kids will share my love for the natural world—to see how all things are connected. To be happy and follow our hearts." ❖

Brandon Rutter answered, "I hope (personally) to live where there is green, to raise some kids there, to be able to spend as much time with them as my parents did with me. I want to help them be as happy with that as I am with



my raising. I also want to make sure that the idea of woody agriculture does not die with the spring frost. It leads us toward a stable ecology, a CO₂ balance, plus it makes it possible for a family to live off a family farm." ❖

Inga Haugen spoke about the food system when answering a question about hope. "I hope more people become more aware of where their food comes from—from origin to plate. I hope people learn to buy locally and in season, and learn to feed themselves well without shipping mangoes from Florida to Boston to Tucson to turn into fruit puree so you can have a mango smoothie four years later!"

We all give each other hope when we work for sustainability and renewable energy. "I honestly think there is hope," says Inga. "Have you seen the new windpower projects in the Fargo/Moorhead area?" ❖

"I would still like to see a clean environment for my grandchildren," says Amanda Bilek. "To have places like the

BWCA and not just big parks but to keep what we have and not destroy any more. When I was in seventh grade, I did a speech on the ozone layer, at that time [1991, 92], thinking about how our behaviors with aerosols or refrigerators were starting to change. It was a hopeful speech. I would also like to see a good energy mix, when my grandchildren are my age. To get rid of this [dependence on] coal."

Amanda drew a pie chart of an energy mix with 25% wind, 15% solar, and 5% coal, with biomass, natural gas, and some nuclear power still in the mix. "Sixty years from now?" She added, "If we are not there in 60 years, we're in trouble." ❖

Adam Warthesen, these days enmeshed in agriculture policy, reflected that in his hopes. "I would like to see agriculture fundamentally changed, so that you'd no longer subsidize the production of row crops, where the taxpayer dollar is more tied to what the public actually wants rather than what corporate America desires" (a policy leader speaking). And Adam added, "We need a migration from the cities to the rural areas. There are a lot of things that could be done to put more people on the land." ❖

Craig Fernholz thought for a while about hope: "Hmmm. I've got it. Well, I'm only 23, so it's really a general statement, but I think it is key. I'd say to my grandchildren, 'Harm none. Do what you will.' By harming, I mean not just physically but verbally. If your action leads to five families being thrown out of their houses, really know that. But do what makes you happy." ❖

"Our hopes for our children?" Malena Arner Handeen and Mike Jacobs ponder the answer. "I hope I can set an example for them—one that was set for me—the belief that you can leave things better than you found them. I

hope they are lucky enough to have that desire—to be plagued with those ideals. I hope they get a chance to fix a little piece of the world. I hope they can live without fear, see each other as equals, hold those ideals. I hope they don't lose that." ❖

Janaki Fisher-Merritt also turned the answer toward his farm. "I hope the world will continue to be a place where the world can farm something like this, not exactly, of course. One of my biggest hopes is that my kids and grandkids can have the experience of growing up and doing this kind of work. It is the most interesting and fulfilling and hopeful work that I can think of."

The Fisher-Merritt farm is a hopeful place. And as Janaki said earlier, ". . . it all has to do with caring—with the willingness to go out on a limb, to create with the land." ❖

That's something—that the land is not only our teacher, but that the land with our caring attention can give us hope. Fertile land plus creativity is something alive and hopeful.

Katie Fernholz was particularly articulate about her hopes for the land community: "Our land is a living entity, with its own ecology and destiny. The land is free. My hope is in the land, the free land, and in natural cycles—that we can liberate the land, allow it to express itself, and help restore those cycles. We need to remove the human domination over what the land is allowed to do.



Katie Fernholz

"For example, there is a difference between a garden with its straight rows and a circular patch put in [a certain location] because that's where the sun is. Each piece of soil and land has its assets and its weaknesses.

"Land will not naturally recover, but humans in tune with the land can watch the indicators on the land." Says Katie Fernholz, "Humans need to carry three cultural values:

- Our happiness is directly related to the health of the land
- The land has rights, and it needs freedom
- We need cultural icons like company songs that talk about people on the land working with the land. We need popular culture celebrating on an intimate level with nature.

"We must reverse a trend and have young people willing to say they are committed, invested, that now is the time and that we should get out of the current patterns. The environmental movement has not come to terms with the health of humans, nor has it come to terms with young people and what they need or are calling for." ❖



I'm taking notes at Cedar Summit Farm on a snowy February morning. The phone rings. The door jangles. Within a few minutes there is a call for several cases of yogurt from Mississippi Market in St. Paul, and the mother of a one-year-old comes in for two gallons of milk and six cartons of yogurt. Over the phone, Merrisue Minar discusses the benefits of lower-temperature pasteurization with a consumer. Florence drives off to get a birthday cake for one of their employees. Their hopes? Mike Minar says it's "**to sell a quality product, to work fewer hours and get Cedar Summit Farm running smoothly.**" Seems direct enough, but what Mike may not realize is that Cedar Summit Farm gives us all hope. Just the taste of their excellent yogurt is hope for healthy futures.

Epilogue

I went into this project with a fair understanding of the context and history of the sustainable farming movement in Minnesota. For 20 years, I matured within its context and it helped me recognize and name the ‘disconnect’ growing in mainstream society. Yet success stories abound and new names begin to pop up. My goal with this writing was to hear boldly from this next generation. It was not to arrive at *answers*, but to assess and compare differences, name influences, find themes, and put their words in front of you. I especially wanted to seek out any factors that spoke of an element of creativity, since I expect that it is the creativity—the informed imagination—of this next generation that will pull this human population back into sync with our planet.

The interviews were their own joy, and my challenge was to get enough of the same questions into each conversation so that there would be threads to pull in the total fabric of writing later—all this while listening hard to each unique life story in front of me. As themes fell out of this body of writing, some planned and some surprising, they influenced my own reading and study. I took off, for instance, on the *meaning* of farm work in a young person’s background. I’d love to write more on that topic.

I went into this work eager to meet a new generation—hoping they would want to talk through this publication. Granted, the interviewees were hand-picked by leaders in sustainable agriculture, yet it is still a gift that this group was so articulate. Again and again, I heard what I knew



The Lentz children, 1970s

were absolutely fresh words come up from absolutely fresh thoughts.

So I went into this work eager to meet this generation and now feel that I do know many of them. The name Katie Fernholz is as common on my tongue as the name Carmen Fernholz was ten years ago. If I think of the name King, I now think of Colin as well as Tim. And in meeting this new generation, I could immediately see that one thing could be said—the farm is in their blood. Inextricably. These young people responded as eaters, parents, gardeners, teachers, or policy makers, and many of them have chosen to stay in “the field” in some way as farmers or CSA owners.

The biggest surprise, however, in meeting some of the second generation of sustainable farm families, was to meet a few of the *third* generation! Jim Van Der Pol ~ Josh ~ Jacob. Dwight Ault ~ Melissa ~ Ian. Audrey Arner ~ Malena ~ Hazel. Carmen Fernholz ~ Connie ~ Maddie. Ralph Lentz ~ Deborah ~ Ariana. Dave Minar ~ Mike ~ Nicholas. The perennial nature of families on the land is in

itself an enormous sense of hope. These values are not dwindling; they are multiplying.

What effect did my interview questions have on these individuals? Or what effect might this small book have on them? This is impossible to name, and probably minute in the scheme of things. But everything touches everything, and hopefully good listening always opens new options. In at least a couple instances, I know my call instigated good conversations at home.

“Wouldn’t it be something to get this group in the same room?” asked Heather Benson, a lover of community. And she is so right. Maybe that’s one power of a publication. Whether it is through MISA or the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota or another venue, I expect that people will want to hear more of these conversations, host panel discussions, and help raise this new crop of leaders.

Finally, I went into this project wondering about this generation’s incentive to remain on the land. Immediately the questions became more complex than that, and I could see that it is not an easy answer. Some already have made farm-centered decisions (Josh Van Der Pol, Janaki Fisher-Merritt, Malena Handeen and Mike Jacobs, Mike Minar, Deb Lentz) yet some have only inklings of an urge to get back to the land, others are drawn to policy work and a few to distinctly different careers. A pull to land and land issues will somehow be known in all their lives, in one way or another. It is inevitable.

One further reflection, looking back on their hopes— This group of people have been handed a deeper-than-

ordinary knowledge about the land and its ills and losses. This knowledge could have buckled the knees of these young lives, yet it did not. To a person, they meet their knowledge with enthusiasm and resolve. Let me refine statements from their longer messages of hope so you can see exactly what they are calling for:

- ❖ Citizen awareness about food, from origin to plate
- ❖ Citizen involvement in the operation of community and society
- ❖ A clean environment for our grandchildren, and their grandchildren
- ❖ A mix of energy that swiftly increases the percentage from renewable sources
- ❖ Kids who know what makes them happy
- ❖ Children who can live without fear, and who refuse oppression
- ❖ Healthy farms and a society that values the farm, both as source of food and way of life
- ❖ Children who are “plagued with ideals” about their own piece of land, who get to fix their little piece of land and make it richer and healthier
- ❖ A third generation (and beyond) who share our love for the natural world, who see all things as connected
- ❖ A new generation that can farm creatively, paying close attention to and creating with the land
- ❖ Land, as a living entity that is free to heal itself.

In these hopeful words, you find the guiding principles behind a hundred potential policies in agriculture, education, and environmental protection. If you have read this book this far, you’ll agree that it is all of our responsibility to hear these dreams and use our power to



help them come true. We must hold our government accountable to the democratic values it still professes. And here, in these young people and their children, is our template for the new society that we know we need.

These are solid, sustainable hopes for a better world, spoken at a time when young people could very easily become hopeless. They have not, and therefore *we* should not—there is work to be done and now is the time to get deeply into it. Let's join our wisdom with theirs, add our experience to theirs, and whenever possible, enliven what we are already attempting with their energy and leadership. Or conversely—enliven what *they* are now attempting with our experience and encouragement.

In that spirit, I will give the interviewees the last word. This is their story, after all, and with due respect to the whole group, I will highlight moments from four last conversations. In a few interviews, we arrived at a point of magic—where neither parents nor politics nor direct

experience could explain why they are as committed as they are to these issues, or why certain doors have opened for them. In moments like this, I felt I had stepped inside a force boldly existing, already moving souls, and already active on behalf of this planet Earth.

"This is our hope against hope, that your efforts on behalf of our planet are not ours alone but that the source and power of life in the universe is working in and through us for the well-being of all creation, including our tiny parts in it."

—Sallie McFague, *Body of God*.

Says Janaki Fisher-Merritt: **"I have no illusions about how lucky I am to be able to do this. Things have fallen into place, and it wasn't just me or my parents. It was my responsibility to be open enough—to allow it rather than to force it."** ❖

Melissa MacKimm wondered at the way in which she found her first job at the Minnesota Food Association. **"I started reading this proposal [of MFA's] and I'd just finished my degree and I thought, 'OK . . . I have to! Something put this in my lap!' It was so unlike me to do anything like that, but . . . it was divine intervention."** A match happens—where the soul starts searching, shaking off ego or fear along the way, and stuff just starts to click. ❖

Colin King recalled serendipitous events: **"I look back at my life and see how spontaneity has come into play—when you are free to recognize the opportunity to do something**

**Richard Andres
and Ariana
bagging
potatoes**

really neat with another person. What may appear at the moment to be spontaneous, does seem to be leaning in a direction; there is a distinct path." ❖

Sometimes the path has less to do with serendipity, but is just boldly present during a whole young lifetime. It may later weave its way toward a lifelong commitment. Such a path is apparent when Brandon Rutter reflects on the nature of his dad's work, and draws upon a vivid memory of life on their land with his brother, Perry. "I guess it's a unique situation. What Dad [Phil Rutter] is working on—woody agriculture—makes a very big difference and takes a lot of work. At this point, things are starting to take off. Without Perry or me? Well, let's say this—if Dad were to die tomorrow, there would be no choice for me but to go pick up that work, because it would be utterly stupid to do anything else.

"When Perry was ten and I was thirteen, we were both standing on what we called 'the practice rock.' This was a big rock overlooking the valley by our house, and the acoustics were really good in that spot so we'd practice our musical instruments there. Anyway, on this particular morning, we were looking out at about 40 acres of woods and noticing some tall trees across the way. That day on the practice rock, Perry and I swore to each other that we would not let the farm be lost. We felt good about it. And it's still true." ❖

**Brandon
Rutter,
1996**



Those Interviewed:

**Malena Arner Handeen and
Mike Jacobs**
Milan, MN

Melissa Ault Mackimm
Minneapolis, MN

Amanda Bilek
St. Paul, MN

Connie Fernholz Carlson
Center City, MN

Craig Fernholz
Minneapolis, MN

Katie Fernholz
Crystal, MN

Janaki Fisher-Merritt
Wrenshall, MN

Heather Greeley Benson
San Francisco, CA

Inga Haugen
Fargo, ND

Colin King
Minneapolis, MN

Deborah Lentz
Chelsea, Michigan

Merrisue and Mike Minar
New Prague, MN

Brandon Rutter
Cleveland Heights, OH

Josh and Cindy Van Der Pol
Kerkhoven, MN

Adam Warthesen
Minneapolis, MN

About the Author

Beth Waterhouse directed The Minnesota Project for seven years during the 1990s. She then followed her love of the earth and words and launched a career in writing and editing as well as the teaching of business writing. Two current books which Beth has been a partner to are *Renewing the Countryside--Minnesota*, a collection of stories about ingenuity in rural and farm places (2001), and *The Farm as Natural Habitat* (Island Press 2002). She also teaches Environmental Ethics at the University of Minnesota.

Contact Beth at:
818 Third Avenue # 305
Excelsior, MN 55331
(952) 401-0591
or beth.waterhouse@usfamily.net

If you want to learn more about this project or the people interviewed, contact the MISA Office, 411 Borlaug Hall, 1991 Buford Circle, St. Paul, MN 55108; (612) 625-8235 or (800) 909-6472; www.misa.umn.edu



MISA is a partnership between the University of Minnesota's College of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Sciences and the Sustainers' Coalition, a group of individuals and community-based, non-profit organizations. MISA's purpose is to bring together the agricultural community and the University community in a cooperative effort to develop and promote sustainable agriculture in Minnesota and beyond.



The School of Agriculture

Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems

This project was undertaken during Beth Waterhouse's tenure as the School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems. The Chair is filled on a revolving basis, and provides a forum for farmers, consumers, business people, students, educators, legislators, and other stakeholders in agriculture to help sustain the dream that the School of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota (SAUM) began more than 100 years ago.

In 1888, the School of Agriculture was established on the St. Paul campus to serve the state of Minnesota as an agricultural high school. During its 72 years of existence, the School fostered the development of many outstanding state and national leaders in agriculture.

Thanks to the dedication of its alumni, the SAUM legacy lives on today. Together with the Minnesota State Legislature and the University of Minnesota, the SAUM Alumni Association created the Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems in 1995. Their pioneering spirit flourishes in the Chair's continuing quest for new and innovative approaches to producing quality food and fiber while sustaining the environment and rural communities. For more information about the Endowed Chairs and their work, contact the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture, (800) 909-6472 or look under Programs at www.misa.umn.edu