

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: "HmMMM. 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

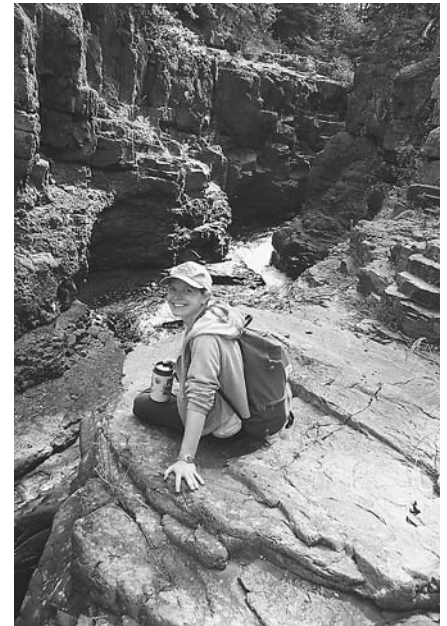
hope they are lucky enough to have that desire—to be plagued with those ideals. I hope they get a chance to fix a little piece of the world. I hope they can live without fear, see each other as equals, hold those ideals. I hope they don't lose that." ❖

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.