

CHANGING REALITIES IN FARMING & FOOD

Northern Michigan Small Farm Conference

January 29, 2010

Grayling, MI

THERE ARE NO MAGIC BULLETS

1:30 – 2:45 PM

I. Introduction

Elizabeth Gilbert said, “You can stand anything if you can tell a story about it.” I believe in the power of stories. Stories are another way of knowing, beyond the research, beyond the data. Stories are fundamental to the human experience. The stories we tell ourselves shape the way we understand our world. It is my hope that my story will merge with your stories in a way that will change the stories our children, and our children's children, will tell themselves. Our story begins with Jamie's story.

II. Jamie's Story

Jamie is our youngest daughter. We have five children. We had just adopted our last child, who was 17 and had not been out of the state of Michigan. We bought a used motor home and headed for the Grand Canyon. It was there that Jamie was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. She was six-years-old. In that instant our story changed irrevocably. She underwent 11 ½ hours of surgery, many subsequent surgeries, extensive radiation and two years of chemotherapy. She turned 23 this summer. She will not live on her own. She is severely hearing impaired with a profound loss of short-term memory. She battles fatigue, all side effects of the treatment. She is also still with us, vibrantly healthy, and she embraces life with an acceptance and joy that is a model for all of us. We are grateful.

I began doing research on the origins of cancer. I found many contributing factors, most of which I couldn't control, but I could impact the health of our bodies to fight these onslaughts. I focused on food. First I became alarmed about what I found in our food – pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, preservatives – then I became at least as alarmed about what was not in our food – vitamins, nutrients, enzymes. By then our daughter had lost 40% of her body weight. She was dying

by inches, and I was desperate. The short version is, our kid got cancer, so we got a cow. It turns out you can't have just a cow.

III. Description of Our Farm

We weren't farming before; now we are. We have a diverse farm.

*meat: beef, pork & poultry – all pastured

~beef is mob grazed, fed no grain

~pigs on edges of pasture, fed excess milk, organic grain, scrap produce

~chickens are heritage layers, follow cows, fed organic grain (describe Dolly Parton birds)

*Little Rooster Bread Co. (named after a rooster on the farm)

*cow share program

~how it works

~reasons: pasteurization cover-up for bad farming practices (data for conventional cow vs. grass-fed cow); now a push to pasteurize eggs

~headed in the same direction as stillery dairies w/ ethanol plants

~Tibetan monks

~resistance to raw milk has become dogma (something you can believe without having to think for yourself – Jamie's cancer made me start thinking for myself)

*Cowslip Creamery – describe the herb

IV. Description of Our Food

Our food looks very different. We make our own butter, yogurt, sour cream, ice cream and fresh cheeses. We raise our own meats, milk, eggs, fruits and vegetables. We make our own sausages. I render lard and tallow. I freeze, can, dry and ferment for winter. We get our bread from the bakery on the farm. We eat locally, seasonally and organically. We don't buy food from grocery stores. We do buy salt (Celtic sea salt) and some spices from a co-op. We buy coffee beans direct from a roaster. I am standing before you as proof that it can be done. If we did it, anyone can. The redesign of your food system might not look exactly like ours, but it can be done. You're looking at a diet-coke refugee who once seriously wondered what people drank if they didn't drink pop. It turns out milk is just wonderful. The occasional non-pasteurized micro-brewed beer is pretty good, too.

The transition away from the conventional approach to food is difficult, however. Most food I couldn't find (mid-90's); we had to raise it. I didn't have my grandmother's wisdom guiding me. How does one render tallow? For the longest time "cutting the curd," part of the cheese making process, really threw me. I even bought a \$30.00 curd knife. Finally it dawned on me that you take a knife, any knife, and just cut it. In my zeal, and ignorance, I invested in a fair number of items I didn't need. I also invested a lot of time in finding sources and information that I did need. I was invited to a Pampered Chef party by a friend of mine. About 20 women gathered in the living room. We were asked to go around the room, introduce ourselves and use a word or short phrase to describe our relationship to our kitchen. I was shocked. The words I most frequently heard were "nervous, holds a wastebasket for food wrappers, ignored, has a microwave, discouraged." I felt a ray of hope when one woman described herself as a cross between Betty Crocker and Martha Stewart. She then shared her favorite recipe, which included Jello and Kool Whip. After the party my friend told me she invited me so I could see how the other side lives. It was then that I knew I had crossed over.

V. No Magic Bullets

The early stages of our fight to save our daughter's life involved a desperate search for a magic bullet. We are a culture that seeks, and expects, magic bullets. Check out the highway exit signs: food (using the term loosely), fuel, a place to sleep and, increasingly, pharmacies. I also see pharmacy signs on grocery store signs, an alarming combination. Our belief in magic bullets is rooted in the story we tell ourselves about illness. That story has its roots in a mid-1800's battle between two competing paradigms. One paradigm, supported by Louis Pasteur (father of pasteurization) said germs cause disease. The second paradigm said that disease was caused by a failure of health in the terrain. The debate was huge in its time and could have gone either way. Pasteur had financial connections and a charismatic personality. The germ theory won and has dominated our approach to illness ever since. It has been reported that, at the end of his life, Pasteur said Claude Bernard was right . . . the microbe is nothing, the terrain is everything. Thomas Edison predicted that, "The doctor of the future will give no medicine, but rather will interest his patients in the care of the human frame through lifestyle and diet, and in the cause and prevention of disease." We see where the microgenocide of "germs" has brought us – to super bugs. And we're sicker than ever!

At a conference a couple of years ago the author of *Living Downstream*, Sandra Steingraber, spoke. She had battled cancer and my small daughter had battled cancer. Our conclusions were very different. She advised eating low on the food chain and avoiding animal products, especially fats, which is essentially a focus on avoiding exposure. I, on the other hand, espouse making your body, your “terrain” as healthy as you can, which means eating lots of fats. The wild card here is the chemical exposures. They're a long way from Pasteur's microbes and many, in fact, were developed to kill microbes. The problem is that you can never do just one thing. There are always side effects. There are always side effects. My daughter struggles with many. We all have them – most are far more subtle and therefore far more difficult to name.

We have come to believe that there are no magic bullets. Hippocrates said that there is only one disease, and it is malnutrition. He also said, first, do no harm. Much, much harm is being done.

VI. Food Sovereignty

A customer described to me her frustration with the transition to better food for her family. I'm sure many of you experience this. She went one place for her meat, another for her milk, another for her produce – you get the picture. She was running all over the place since, of course, they weren't in her neighborhood. She said, “I feel like a hunter/gatherer.” It shouldn't be this hard. She should have a right to readily access this kind of food.

The resistance to raw milk has become dogma. Dogma is something you can believe without having to think for yourself. I spoke with a dairy farmer a few years ago who buys milk from the store because she wants to be sure it's safe. When we close ourselves off to new points of view and hold tight to our dogma, we become very easily threatened. Raw milk is an easy target for frustrated health officials who find themselves held accountable for an increasingly dangerous food supply without the power to change it. It reminds me of a chicken. When you walk right up to a chicken it begins very busily pecking at the ground, almost a “don't bother me, I'm busy doing my job.” There appears to be a lot of chicken pecking going on in the regulatory world. I say that with sympathy. I would not want to be responsible for food safety today. And, of course, there is Upton Sinclair's always relevant observation that “It is very difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it.” For a

really upsetting account of health officials gone amok, read Linda Faillace's book, *Mad Sheep*. I heard her speak, and I'm still outraged.

There is a law pending that requires all animals to be registered with the government and wear an electronic device to track them. There are a couple of exemptions including some religious groups and Native Americans. Some members from a local Michigan tribe attended a presentation about the National Animal Identification System, the newest cover-up for bad farming and a vulnerable food supply. They had been to see an attorney and came armed with adoption papers, willing to legally adopt any farmer who wanted to opt out of the National Animal Identification System. How cool is that? I don't want to be accountable to a government for where my cows come from or go. I want to be accountable to you, my customer, my neighbor and my friend. If I know your son has asthma and drinking milk from my farm, don't you think I'm going to take care? If I don't, you will know because you come there to get your milk. You have someone to hold accountable.

What about instituting urban homesteading? I attended a township meeting many years ago when our township was proposing minimum lot sizes at 2 ½ acres. An old farmer stood up, hitched up his pants (a sign in my neck of the woods that he is very serious), and said, "Hell, 2 ½ acres is too big to mow and too small to farm." He was right of course, and the proposal passed anyway, of course. I got to thinking, however. It's not too small to raise food for your family, or feed a cow. Imagine our suburbs now, largely dead spaces with bedrooms, including cows, and gardens, and chickens. What if you could buy your eggs from your neighbor? Make and sell sausage from your garage? What if our kids had something to do every day that really mattered if they did it, that contributed to the well-being of the family and of the community?

The ultimate empowerment is the ability to feed oneself. Annie Dillard wrote this beautiful passage in her first novel, *The Living*. The setting is the east coast in the late 1800's. A depression has begun, threatening many people with their livelihoods. Two men are sitting in a bar discussing their impending doom. "When the market hit bottom . . . John felt himself more substantial than before . . . He knew Clare was broke too, but neither man could dissimulate his own good cheer. His tie undone, drumming his fingers, John Ireland looked amused. Any why should John Ireland not be cheerful? Clare thought. John Ireland would get by, and so would he; he had a cow."

It seems to me that food sovereignty, the right to define one's own food, with access to a safe, nutritious and flavorful food that is locally and sustainably grown, is a basic human right. That right may make the debate over the right to health care superficial.

VII. Connection

A child born in 2000 has a one in three chance of developing diabetes (AMA). Also from the AMA is the announcement that this generation is the first whose life expectancy is shorter than their parents.

Cancer rates tell us that one in two males and one in three females can expect to be diagnosed with cancer in their lifetimes. The fastest growing childhood cancer is brain cancer, which leads to profound lifetime consequences. Current research is showing that 75% of childhood cancer survivors develop life threatening illness by the age of 30. That's my daughter, and potentially yours, too.

How come we're not MAD?

The missing piece is connection. Without a connection to our food and to our earth that provides this food, and to our farmers that grow this food, it's difficult to get excited about good food. Without good food it's difficult to even sustain the physical energy to bring about change. Industrial food may well be the ultimate opiate of the masses. When you take a confinement cow and put her out on pasture she has no idea what to do. She has been fed; she has not fed herself. There is a learned helplessness in confined animals. I wonder if depending on authorities to tell us what is good for us is a learned helplessness.

I once heard Gloria Steinem speak. When asked how she sustained her energy for such a long and often discouraging fight for change she responded by saying that when she was feeling burned out she did something outrageous. You could join the Red Wattle Hog Association. That's pretty outrageous. You don't even have to own a hog. But owning a hog will provide a connection.

There's an old Chinese proverb that says, "Because the peasant grew so fond of his pig he was happy to salt away its pork for the winter." The connection to the source of food ensures the goodness of the food, and goodness in the way we treat the animals and plants that nourish us. People often ask me how I can eat it if I

name it. Increasingly, my answer is how can you eat it if you haven't?

Animals have disappeared from our lives and from our view. In 1950 3.7 million of America's 5.4 million farms had milk cows, virtually all on pasture. You could drive down the road and see them. In 2000 we had fewer than 2 million farms, 105,000 of which had milk cows primarily in confinement. It's hard to connect with something you can't even see. It used to be that virtually everyone had a farm connection – grandma and grandpa, or great Aunt Tillie. We hunger for that connection. There's a reason that the book *Little Heathens*, a simple account of growing up on a farm in the 30's, made the New York Times 10 best nonfiction books of the year a couple of years ago.

What if schools required a farm rotation? The original design of a Montessori education put junior high kids on a farm. I was off the farm one afternoon when the child of some visitors was bitten by an irate tom turkey, hard enough to draw blood. I called the mother to check on her son and to apologize. “Don't be sorry,” she said. “I'm not. Duncan's been having a problem with boundaries. I told him that turkeys don't like their wattles pulled. I cleaned up the wound and sent him to the car to finish his lunch. In spite of my instructions, he had failed to close the window earlier and a cat had finished his lunch. Duncan got a lot of consequences today, and I didn't have to impose a single one.”

Ironically enough, farmers are disconnected, too. My husband and I went on a pasture walk last year. Farmers get together in groups and walk through each other's pastures to learn what works, what's a problem, to share information. We learned, for instance, that if you plant turnips you can winter graze your sheep there without having to water them. When we were finished with the walk we returned to the farm house for a snack, as is the custom. We were all lamenting the failure of people to eat local foods, while we drank lemonade and ate banana bread.

When we bought our first dairy cow the farmer told us to make sure we removed the calf from the cow within a day after its birth because it would drink itself to death. He believed this, and he ran a dairy for many years. We didn't, and we are now milking one of her offspring.

Probably the ultimate disconnect most of us experience is our failure to fully comprehend the connection between our inside processes, our very bodies, and the outside world. It's a connection we can't afford to ignore.

There's a wonderful poem by Wendell Berry that perfectly addresses the dangers of disconnection, and it ends like this,

“ . . . within things
there is peace, and at the end
of things. It is the mind
turned away from the world
that turns against it.”

VIII. Foodways

There is much in our conventional food system that turns us against the world. Barbara Kingsolver, in her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, describes the US foodway as having a yellow line running through it. The average number of miles traveled by each piece of food you eat is now 1500 miles. It's not enough that food must travel so far before we eat it. Almost a quarter of all American meals are eaten while we are traveling.

A nutritious and connected foodway looks different.

~It does not value shelf life. Milk that lasts 6 months on a shelf should be suspect. Somebody wisely advised, “Eat only that which spoils, and eat it before it does.”

~We also need to let go of the idea that we can have whatever we want whenever we want it. We are inadvertently sending this message to our kids. After a local food meeting in our community several parents were standing together sharing the various tricks they were using to get their kids to eat healthy food. An Amish gentleman listened to the discussion and then offered, “Hunger works.”

~We need to understand that the closer the food is to the original package the better. There are many reasons why soy milk is a bad idea, many of which you have no doubt read, but a really compelling reason is that beans don't make milk, cows do.

~We need to understand that the best food is from the earth where you live. The properties of honey, lard, milk and garlic change depending on their locale and on the season. That pig and that carrot are ingesting the precise nutrients from your local soils that you need to thrive there. The closer you go to the equator, the spicier the food. Scandinavian food is bland, and rich. Warm climates don't have

the freeze/thaw cycle that kills pathogens, but spices do. And those same spices grow in hot climates.

~A nutritious foodway should also treasure flavor. Our customers come to us from three different arenas. The first group are those with health problems; the second group are environmentalists looking to support local farms that don't pollute. The third group are foodies. They're in it for the flavor. I've also noticed that regardless of where people start, they all end up foodies. This may be the ultimate sustainability. If it's good for us, we go there, until we're feeling better. If it's the right thing to do, we do it, if it's convenient and we're not too busy. But if it tastes really good, we're there.

IX. Farmways

The key to a healthy, flavorful foodway is the farm. A food-connected people will know what they're seeing when they check out a farm as a possible food source for their families. There are several significant hallmarks of a real farm. Maybe we can call them farmways.

~A real farm relies on clean practices and avoids the extermination of pests. I am delusional if I believe I can use a fungicide on my corn crop without ultimately affecting a grower in Kansas or an eater in Mexico. There is now a call for pasteurizing eggs. Eggs are laid with a "bloom" on them that protects the egg from being invaded by pathogens. When that egg is washed the integrity of the bloom is compromised. Now the egg must be refrigerated. Eggs are not refrigerated in much of Europe. It is the care of the farmer that keeps his nesting boxes clean so that washing is not necessary. It is mandated here. Pasteurization is a cover-up for bad farming practices.

~A real farm would pass a biological test, not a chemical one. There would be animals along with plants and they would be healthy. The environmental field often uses frogs as a harbinger of environmental degradation. What if we used domestic animals as a measure of the health of a farm? Are their animals? There should be. Are they routinely given antibiotics or growth hormones? Are they able to breed? The average dairy cow today lives for 42 months and is then slaughtered. She's too sick to breed back. Cows treated like ours can easily live and reproduce for more than ten years.

~A real farm should be managed as a living organism. That means it can never, ever be a monoculture. We were visiting a local CAFO (confined animal feeding operation) while we were searching for a bull. A sign out front stated, "This farm is environmentally friendly." There were thousands of cows, all housed indoors. The farmer was complaining to us about the growing costs of inputs, especially nitrogen. We were standing next to an enormous manure lagoon holding untold amounts of nitrogen. There were no other kinds of animals. Only corn was grown. This is not an environmentally friendly farm and it is not being managed as a living organism. The phrase "industrial agriculture" is an oxymoron.

~A real farm embraces biodiversity in its livestock, crops, terrain, even pastures. Balances should be in place. For instance, we have Muscovy ducks on our farm because they love fly larva. We have flies because we have cows. The ducks travel every day to the barnyard where the cows congregate prior to milking and dig through the manure. Our fly population is under control. In nature you can see large herds of antelope always followed by flocks of birds providing an important worming service for the ruminant animals. Our laying hens follow our cows on pasture. The diversity of biological life forms is critical to the survival of all, including us.

~Real farms must also embrace diversity within their breeds and seeds. Six companies now control 98% of world seed sales. In 1981, if you wanted to plant a garden with open pollinated vegetable varieties, you had 5,000 different kinds of seeds to select from. If you wanted to do the same thing in 1998, 600 were available. It's getting worse. Check out the Seed Savers Exchange.

Seeds that are saved and grown in the same area adapt to that microenvironment. We are on our sixth and seventh generation of some foods, like garlic and fellschluss lettuce. Maybe we can now call it Lubbers lettuce. That is the kind of food you most want to eat. It has learned to thrive in the place where you live and it will help you thrive there as well.

The same narrowing of selection is happening to livestock as well. Check out the American Livestock Breeds Conservancy. It's working hard to preserve the genetic diversity of our livestock. I mentioned the Red Wattle hogs earlier. They are the original woods hogs that farmers would turn loose in the spring to reproduce, feed themselves and clean out underbrush in the woods. In the fall there were pig roundups, some were butchered and breeding stock wintered over in barns. The Red Wattles have gone the way of the woods.

Genetic diversity is critical to our survival as a species. We are totally dependent on the survival of other life forms. We are all in this together. Life forms are more of an integrated web than a hierarchy. Chief Seattle wisely observed, "Earth does not belong to us. We belong to earth."

X. The Real Dirt

We're in this together, and we're all dependent on our dirt. Soil problems can be masked by synthetic fertilizers, supplements and imported food, but masking is not fixing, only delaying.

As early as the 1300's, regions of England became important for dairying. Land was organized into large manors owned by the aristocracy. Small holdings were leased to individual farmers. The interesting part of this arrangement was that the land owners required that all fertility be kept on the farm. Cheese could be sold, and butter. No crops could leave the farm, no hay, no manure. Not even the whey or buttermilk could leave. Many agreements required the keeping of pigs to utilize the leftovers and process them in a way that was beneficial to the soil. They understood, probably because they lived so close to the earth, that we are connected to our soil. We are just coming to understand the importance. Soil, it turns out, is much more than N,P,K. Dr. James Tiedje says "the soil harbors the largest reservoir of undiscovered biological diversity on earth."

We need to become a people that treasures its dirt. Look around you. Is the soil treasured where you work? Where you live? At this school?

Conclusion

Andre Voisin, in his book, *Soil, Grass and Cancer*, states ,
"Remember that you are dust. This is not merely a religious and philosophical doctrine but a great scientific truth which should be engraved above the entrance to every Faculty of Medicine throughout the world."

Imagine that.

Thank you.