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Brooding Over the Next Generation of Prairie Farmers

Making Space for Our Practical-Minded Youth

by David M. Neufeld

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Introduction

A Quick Tour of the Farm **Summary of the Argument**

Our farm, being far from city lights, gets a magnificent show of stars every clear night of the year. As a casual observer, the heavens look calm and orderly even though in reality we earthlings are careening through space. The planet is spinning at 1,600 km/hr. It's orbiting around the Sun at 170,000 km/hr. And our solar system is whipping around the centre of the galaxy at the phenomenal speed of 800,000 km/hr—like a six year old at the end of a crack-the-whip game. No wonder we get weak-kneed and lose our balance now and again. Given enough time, though, it seems we can get used to anything.

Most casual travelers would be impressed by how prosperous and well kept our rural community appears. On the surface all is serenely productive. But wander awhile in our fields, kitchens and main streets and this impression gives way to a more troubled story. We're careening toward our own form of oblivion while keeping a calm exterior. Our municipality has lost half its population in the last 30 years! Granted, compared to many places, we still have it pretty good. But farmers here and abroad are intimately connected by the ways in which we've lost market power over the past half century.

As is evident in northern and equatorial

areas of the earth, people most dependent on the land for their livelihood are the most affected by environmental disasters. From the perspective of a family trying to grow and source as much food locally as possible, I sense the vulnerabilities will soon shift towards those who are *least* connected to the land. I propose that human affected climate change is the dominant threat to life as we know it on this planet. And, I suggest our overarching human goal is to move as quickly as possible toward a more reasonable, sympathetic relationship with the biosphere. I further propose, then, that one of the great challenges of our time is to involve our practical minded youth in growing and preserving the most nutritious food our soils can provide and in joining a global movement dedicated to ensuring food moves from increasingly smaller scale farms to the closest kitchens possible.

The globalization of food has increased consumer options but has also increased the vulnerability of farmers. Prairie farmers have responded well to calls for higher efficiency and productivity. The *deserving* profits that should result from this effort, though, are not getting to the growers. This is in large part due to *extreme* profits taken from the system by national and international corporations. These companies, feeding off of the labour of farmers, are supported by domestic policies and international trade regimes that ben-

efit larger players in the system. The current drawn-out prairie farm income crisis has resulted in our farm raised youth seeing better options away from home. They're choosing not to farm. As aging farmers retire, farm land is concentrated in fewer hands. Farms keep getting bigger and rural areas get emptier. Will this pattern persist until few viable rural communities remain, little knowledge of the land survives, and all of us live in cities? Or, will concerned citizens around the globe reverse this trend by promoting and celebrating the skills and art needed to be successful small farmers?

Although I'm interested in any source of potential farmers—farm-raised youth, urban raised youth and young families, dissatisfied Albertans, immigrants from Europe, Africa, etc.—this paper will give special attention to urban youth. Increasingly practical minded urban youth are turning on to rural, environmentally

sound life-styles, growing quality food, and promoting food sustainability. I'm concerned, that as rural communities and as a province, we're not tuned to the potential they offer.

A few definitions:

Rural: agricultural communities that do not benefit from urban commuters or markets.

Smaller Scale Farming: I like John Ikerd's suggestion that 'If you farm 10 acres and want to farm 20, you're a large farmer. If you farm 1,500 acres and want to farm 1,000 you're a small farmer.' In other words it's a combination of head space and practice that's hard to define.

Sustainability: refers to development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. (Brundtland Commission)

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by **David M. Neufeld**

Checking the Nesting Boxes New Farmers from New Places

This paper is born out of 50 years of participation in prairie living. I'm a third generation farm boy of German speaking Russian-Mennonite ancestry. Magdalene, my life partner, is a small town girl with similar ancestry from central Saskatchewan. We've moved around Canada, worked for eight years on community development projects in Southern Africa, traveled the length and width of this continent and settled in Southwest Manitoba (my home area)—because it's a great community-minded place to raise a family and run a rural business. Our family is intimately connected to this land. We try to honour it in all we do. Our happiness is challenged, though, by attitudes and economic/political forces that conspire to undermine the potential of this place and its people.

It's certainly not all bleak. I'm most impressed with the grace with which we care for each other as a community. I'm also in awe of the many around us who can build or repair anything. We have neighbours who grow massive gardens, tend to animals, build corrals, fix motors, raise children, attend meetings, hunt deer, support local charities, hold down two part time jobs and wake up the next day to add something else to the variety of tasks. We're a practical, action oriented, problem solving people. Many are getting tired and discouraged, but rural resi-

dents remain resourceful, with values, skills and perspectives dearly needed by our gyrating world.

And yet, many of our rural children are not learning how to thrive on the land. Most of our provincial resources devoted to new farmers are still directed towards farm raised youth. As valued as this is, our communities need more farmers than we're going to get from that strategy. When the Province needs more nurses it doesn't look to the families of aging nurses to provide young nurses. But society as a whole still believes we can expect aging farm families to supply the next generation of farmers. It's not happening. When there's a shortage of nurses the health ministry is empowered to take care of it. This doesn't seem to be the case with agriculture. Maggie and I get a steady stream of mostly urban young people through our place. Many would love to grow and process food as a profession. But as a prairie society we're not providing adequate on-ramps and so almost every one of these farmer wannabes gets drawn away from the dream.

Why So Few Eggs? Rural communities Distracted

As farm folks we want to continue growing and raising quality food for ourselves and for export. But our numbers are shrinking and the goods and services we

offer each other are decreasing. The first visible effects of rural decline are the vacant store fronts in our small towns and the abandoned farm sites most obvious when traveling the gravel grid roads. We dearly want our children to stay, or to go away for a time and return, and contribute to a vibrant, productive and creative rural society. But, we're not finding it in ourselves to consistently promote the beauty around us, or to share our pioneer knowledge on how to make a living with the land. We're hesitant because of the difficulty we're having sustaining the lifestyles and infrastructures we and those before us have fashioned.

It's always been the task of agrarian societies to prepare the next generation of farmers—often against tough odds. They persisted in this task, until recently, even though, through the ages they've been easily manipulated and undervalued by those in power. Peasant revolts around the world have seen workers of the land resort to violence to protect their way of life and to insist on fair returns for their labour. Prairie farm folks seem to be choosing a different way of protest. We're telling our children not to farm. We're sending them to the cities and small towns to do anything but grow food for a living. "Why would I prepare my children to farm?" is an oft-heard quip. "That would be child abuse!"

With loss of population we're not only losing people and services. We're losing knowledge of the land and what it requires to sustain living communities, and, we're losing our will to turn the situation around. With this loss of will, we risk losing our place among keepers of fundamental values: reverence for divine and cosmic influences, caretaking of the land and ecosystems, satisfaction in reaping the best food, and a unique appreciation for how

our independence is coupled with community interdependence.

Richard Heinberg (2006) says about rural decline in the USA, "The average age of farmers is over fifty-five and approaching sixty. The proportion of principal farm operators younger than thirty-five has dropped from 15.9 percent in 1982 to 5.8 percent in 2002. Of all the dismal statistics I know, these are surely among the most frightening. Who will be growing our food twenty years from now? With less oil and gas available, we will need far *more* knowledge and muscle power devoted to food production and, thus, far more people on the farm, than we have currently."

Why are rural children learning to leave? It's tough to inspire the *next* generation when there's little profit for the *present* generation of farmers. Blame the banks, corporations and farm debt. Look to government and academic/research agencies that have tended to be seduced by corporate agendas. Or look to the farm organizations that have been slow to identify destabilizing influences. We can sooth ourselves knowing that depopulation isn't our fault. But in the end we know it's we who will turn the situation around. We've allowed ourselves to be distracted. We've turned for council to those who profit from our vulnerabilities and sought reassurance from a market place that tells us personal comfort is an end in itself. Without even trying we've been teaching our children to look elsewhere for opportunities.

It Takes Two to Fertilize Renewing Rural-Urban Relationships

About 7 years ago a regular sort of farm boy (with a particularly poor singing voice) saw the youth of his rural com-

munity around Clearwater, MB leaving to find greener pastures. He, Robert Guilford, thought the community could attract attention to the underlying causes of out-migration by organizing an outdoor music concert—in October no less. Ian Mauro and Stef McLachlin, two researchers from the University of Manitoba, were looking for a venue to preview a film they had just made about the prairie introduction of GMO canola. The two needs met and the Harvest Moon Festival was born. The first festival was, not surprisingly, cold, wet and windy. But young people, following their favourite local bands and taking an opportunity to visit a beautiful rural community, responded in generous numbers. This inspired an annual event that now attracts nearly 1,000 visitors and involves the entire community.

The Harvest Moon Society formed after that first year to organize a wonderful lineup of rural-life workshops to go along with the festival. They recycled the local primary school, that had been closed due to low numbers, to create a “healthy land, healthy community” learning centre. The many initiatives spawned from the initial idea are featured at www.harvestmoonsociety.org. The Harvest Moon phenomenon is building upon urban and rural synergies that, when combined, create possibilities neither would have contemplated if kept apart.

I believe this synergistic energy is there for all of us who like to eat and are even a little bit curious about the sources of our food. As Canadians we’ve learned to expect food to be inexpensive. Among industrial countries we spend the lowest percentage of income on feeding ourselves. Food goes through many hands. Profits are taken each time it’s handled, which drives up the cost. Over the years

eaters and growers have drifted apart—first as the Mom and Pop grocers served as go-betweens up until today when most of our food comes via huge impersonal corporate agents. Thankfully, the self-help health and local food movements and visionary organisations like the Harvest Moon Society, Organic Food Council of Manitoba and Manitoba Food Charter have stepped in to help close the gap—bringing rural and urban folks together to talk and trade. We’ve found that locally sourced food is sometimes more expensive and sometimes less. But our choices involve way more than the information on the price tag.

Although good food and celebration are at the centre of the Harvest Moon concept, the relationship is also about combining perspectives on sustainable farming practices. It’s in our common interest to preserve and build up the health of our soils. It’s natural to participate in experiments, like growing food for export or growing food for fuel. But when the drivers of the experiment coax away our capacity to function as vibrant, hope-giving communities, or when they push us to compromise the natural health of the land, we have a responsibility to look elsewhere for long-term, sustaining ways of providing for ourselves and our neighbours. Urban eaters are asking questions and offering opinions about farming methods. Those closest to the land are well positioned to share their knowledge of the land and the wisdom they’ve gained in finding the right balance between human comforts and nature’s needs. Unfortunately many farmers fear giving away autonomy to urban consumers. I suggest we consider the amount of autonomy the dominant food system has taken from us. Perhaps the friendlier and more respectful partners in fashioning sustainable, nutrient rich food systems might look

more like our urban cousins. Autonomy, in a time of crisis, may, after all, not be the highest good.

Keystone Agriculture Producers is providing much needed light for this discussion by suggesting the responsibility of ensuring the health of farmer-managed land be shared by all citizens. Through Alternative Land Use Services they're encouraging citizens, through taxation, to pay farmers to take care of public commons—biodiversity, air and water. We might be wise to include our food-growing youth as part of our common-wealth and advocate for all who eat to contribute to their training and support.

Designing a New Henhouse Re-Inspiring the Prairie Experiment

The prairie experiment European immigrants have been involved in is about 150 years young. Our grandparents (or their parents and grandparents) came to this land because they couldn't see a future for their descendants in Eurasia. They wanted 'elbow room' and were offered inexpensive, unspoiled land. Small town economies geared up to provide for their every off-farm need. The place was bustling. The potential was palpable. There was a mixed farm every half mile with children, horses, gardens and chickens galore. It was hard work, I've been told. My parents don't look back to the labours of their early years with much fondness. Most likely the end of oil will mean more physical labour but we don't have to assume we'll be more miserable. We're a brilliant species once we understand our context and can freely dream. Do we already, like our ancestors in Europe, not see a future for our children? What I'm interested in going back to is *the belief* in vigorous, beautifully diverse, cooperative

communities and that the involvements of youth and children are integral to *the practice* of this belief.

The prairies were settled aggressively to ensure the land was populated by folks aligned to Upper Canada and England. As Euro-Canadians moved over the plains they suppressed the interests of France, United States, Ojibwa, Cree, Metis, Dakota, and Blackfoot nations in order to gain access to the Pacific Ocean. They wanted to protect business opportunities served on a vast, under-explored (for commercial purposes) land platter. Early farmers settled in to sell the fruits of their labours to export markets. The export grain (and later oil seed) part of the equation was consistent with a pattern of resource extraction that began with furs and timber. It was part of the question "How can Europe and Upper Canada be enriched with the resources available in western Canada?" This colonial era question no longer makes sense to us. But we haven't formulated a replacement question. What kind of economy would suit us and our progeny well? We may simply want this to be a great place to live! We may want to exchange resources with the landscape in a way that ensures thriving, diverse communities focused on catering to our own and each other's needs. The immediate question could be, "How do we sustain a deliberate transition from an export economy to an economy based primarily on local/regional markets (with exports being secondary)? It may soon, say, in 10 or 20 years, become ridiculous, and even impossible, to affordably move heavy goods long distances.

Many who can see the sun rising on beautiful, diversified, vibrant, eco-friendly, urban connected rural landscapes are saying, let's move on—as

quickly as possible. There are established interests comfortable with the status quo who will discourage and devalue sustainability efforts. Politicians and business leaders who are now profiting from the present reality can also see the future coming. But extreme profit taking is so endemic, seductive and possible, many of these 'leaders' may need to be invited and convinced to serve the common good.

Cleaning the Old Henhouse Self-defeating Messages We Deal With

When we want to get rid of a bad habit, it's a good idea to reflect on the underlying issues or compulsions that support the habit. Following are some underlying messages, tapes that play in our heads. If left to loop, these messages will continue to hinder us as prairie citizens from developing new visions and from going out to find the farmers we need to provide regional food security and rural vigour.

The Earth is Ours to Dominate. About ten thousand short years ago our forbearers shifted away from hunting and gathering as the primary method of obtaining food in favour of more settled lifestyles involving the growing of crops and domesticating animals. This transition is pointed to as the beginning of our long descent into debilitating self-absorption as a species. Once we were able to store food in quantity, the argument goes, we were able to support cities, standing armies, and a whole lot more children. With the relative ease fortified communities offered, upper classes dabbled more in creative expression, exploration, hunting for sport and technological inventiveness. The result was ruling classes with higher consumer demands which led

whole populations to aspire to softer lifestyles. So far—totally understandable. The industrial revolution followed with conquests of people and lands in search of raw materials to feed fashion desires, exotic tastes and competition for production levels between companies and between nations. The discovery of oil reserves gave this trajectory a huge giddy-up kick in the pants. Over-population, conflict, oppression, pollution, exploitation and spiritual dullness were ramped up—all because humans thought it better to put food up than chase it down. Ok, a bit overstated, but I'm sympathetic to the argument. Supporting evidence is not yet overwhelming but I like to think we're intelligent enough as a global community to step back when we see a precipice ahead. We can decide to have fewer babies even if we can feed more. We can reconnect to the landscape—as if we need earth-knowledge to survive. Training in agriculture can involve teachings in the ways of the hunter-gatherer, to culture back a reverence for creation. Although life will surely change as oil reserves get drawn down, admitting defeat in our efforts to subdue the earth does not mean giving in to a less enjoyable quality of life. Without oil, it's estimated the earth can tolerate only two to three billion humans. I would prefer to retreat quickly to improve chances of more of us being able to retreat gracefully.

Aboriginal Economies were Backward. When our forbearers settled the prairies, they were not encouraged to look around and ask—How did Aboriginal communities form sustaining economies on this landscape? They didn't bother asking—How is God/The Great Spirit present among indigenous communities? Or, What can we learn from the governance /communication systems cultured on this land? As I understand, the Aboriginal

plains economy served its residents well for thousands of years. When export agriculture replaced the bison economy it worked for a time but lacked staying power. It might serve prairie society and our children's children well to be modest about the experiment we're engaged in; to at least be open to backing through the last 150 years as humbly as possible. A measure of humility may free us and our children to learn the lessons of the landscape (practical and spiritual) from a greater diversity of teachers.

Industrial Growth Capitalism is Still the Best System. Global industry and transportation leaders have, over the past two centuries involved the world's population in a risky experiment. We've been involved in asking, "How much of the earth's resources can be converted to human development before the earth pushes back?" Most of humanity now realizes the earth *is* pushing back—with a vengeance. This situation has in large part been precipitated by capitalist notions, one, that we can keep taking raw materials (including the natural fertility of the soil) without accounting for the earth's losses and two, that economic growth for all can be managed by profit-driven corporate shareholders. We seem to have difficulty imagining life within a planned economy in which free enterprise is discouraged. The most palatable alternative, then, is to rely on the adaptability and creativity of our business minds (including farmers) to find earth-friendly, profit-making solutions; to convert, at least as a transition step, to a green, regionally based, capitalist economy. Those of us who care not to be risk-taking entrepreneurs are obliged, then, to provide the context in which they, society and our environments can thrive; to offer regulations and incentives like buying local food and helping to pay

for farm environmental services. Renate Künast, former Minister of Food and Agriculture in Germany, suggests farmers get government assistance only if their soils have a certain level of humus.

New Market Ideas will Arise to Save Us. Industry and governments will continue to place new crops and export markets in front of us with the promise of higher incomes. Bio-fuels are the current favourite. I don't begrudge grain and oil seed farmers making added income growing for this market. But I'm concerned that other important interests—like: long term local/regional food security, opportunities for our children to enter agriculture, energy out being significantly more than the energy in, healthy emergency global food stocks, and reasonable grain prices for livestock producers—are taken into consideration when we use public resources to develop new markets. The value of promoting another easily consolidated and controlled product remains suspect. I can see land being bought up, and even confiscated, by large food-for-fuel interests as the oil squeeze intensifies. Governments could rather help find ways to quickly, gracefully reduce our energy demands and assist the development of sustainable local sources—including small scale, farmer or community owned biofuel processing.

We Work Our Way to Salvation. I enjoy working. I had to go traveling with Maggie and our children for a year to fully understand how my over-functioning work ethic was taking away my ability to relax and listen. Our society tends to be driven by aggressive personalities and workaholics. We get a lot of stuff done. But should we not pause from our labours long enough to reflect on all we're creating? Have hard work and driven-ness gotten us to an environmen-

tally sustainable, community minded, just, equitable place? Will more of the same get us out of the environmental fix we're in? Our venerated spiritual leaders consistently suggest it is our relating, being quiet, connecting, blessing and believing that present us with the right path. If we all stop, reflect on what is most important to us, and then make the important stuff central to our lives, will the world be the same? Ok, ok. Enough of that. Back to work.

A Squared Off Landscape Makes Sense.

When European Immigrants settled the North American prairies, they were encouraged to live apart from each other. Metis river communities were overrun in favour of a grid system with a separate farm on every quarter section. The more natural, historical model is for agrarian people to fit to the contours of the landscape, establish villages near to water and protection, and then farm and hunt the lands around them. The isolation inherent in the prairie grid system has made life more difficult for families and has ensured rural folks depend on more fossil fuels than should be necessary. In contrast, urban youth are attracted to living rurally in intentional communities—as in the Northern Sun, Prairie's Edge, Ploughshares and Harvest Moon communities.

The World's Poor Need our Generosity.

I was raised believing prairie farmers grew wheat for a needy world. We were not taught that the North American lifestyle severely limits the ability of the majority of the world's people to fashion even modestly comfortable lifestyles. In Africa I was taken aside and shown how the West, even as it offers aid, keeps plundering Africa—through the resources (oil, minerals, agricultural products, tied aid, expatriate salaries, etc.) we

demand. We have not, over the centuries, paid 'developing' countries living wages for the goods we've imported. Thankfully people of conscience are now supporting Fair Trade to ensure trade is good for distant providers.

Ecological footprint analysis (an estimate of the amount of land area a human population needs to sustain its current standard of living) shows it would be necessary to have four or five back-up planets engage in nothing but agriculture for all people now on earth to live a Western lifestyle. The Canadian Foodgrains Bank has, through the connections it's made in food-needy parts of the world, come to the realization that we are generous when we address power imbalances. Yes, food aid is a necessary short term solution. The long term, though, depends on us reducing the stress we place on the global food system. Every region could be encouraged, freed, and empowered to feed itself—as a front line food security strategy. As the cost of transporting food rises, the localization of food systems will become essential. If a certain area cannot feed its own people, like our own cities, there will almost certainly be added conflict and suffering, but realistically people will move toward areas that are capable of feeding more. Generosity, it seems to me, means cutting back on our needs and making space.

We Have Too Many Farmers. In the late 1800s the Canadian Government wanted to *increase* the number of farmers on the prairies. Less than one hundred years later, in 1969, both our provincial and federal governments decided to *reduce* the number of farmers. They saw export markets as being inelastic and decided that Canada should reduce the number of farmers to fit the income that was avail-

able. A concerted effort was made to label smaller, diversified farms as being inefficient and their owners as being bad managers. Banks, many government agents, industry supported media and researchers, and some farm organizations bought into the logic. We now know the bigger-is-better thinking is misguided. The National Farmers Union (Canada) made this clear in its 2003 study *The Farm Crisis, Bigger Farms, and the Myths of 'Competition' and 'Efficiency'*. The Morris Centre followed in late 2006 by publishing its findings into farm size and efficiency saying large farms are just as likely to be managed badly as small farms and suggested our governments find fairer ways of providing agricultural incentives. Over the past decade, consumers and smaller scale farmers have been making the point that food markets are very elastic and diverse, if, that is, we take on the responsibility to feed ourselves first and export our surpluses second. There are huge potentials for more farmers growing for certified organic, 'pesticide free', grass fed, '100 mile/Local Food', agri-tourism and other expanding markets. As consumers, we have more power than we acknowledge to move profits away from large corporations and towards local economies.

Industrial Agriculture is the Most Productive System. As university researchers find wriggle space around industrial funding, (see work done by Martin Entz at U of Manitoba for a local example) they're finding that organic and low petroleum fuel systems are competing very well with, and even out-producing, industrial farm systems. Researchers are also finding that food grown in organic systems is more nutritious. Organic and smaller scale farmers have long known that it is society's belief in the conventional-industrial model that keeps us from transitioning. Once more sustain-

able systems are learned, the industrial model holds no moral sway. Peter Rosset, Executive Director of Food First, says it has been repeatedly proven that smaller farms produce more food, and other societal/environmental benefits, per acre than larger farms—due to layering, diversifying and more intensive management of farms. Smaller farms are more adept at meeting niche markets. If larger scale supermarket demand persists, smaller farms can market cooperatively; to pool their production. The Hutterite experience on the prairie—although highly dependent on fossil fuels—show us that by reducing personal expenses and pooling labour, it only takes an average ¼ section (160 acres) to support each family. In world terms this is still high, but it shows we have much to learn about being efficient growers of food. Small scale farming is thought to be marginal to the agricultural economy, but it can transition to being dominant, with the benefits of involving more people and revitalizing rural communities.

It's Best to Leave Land Availability to the Market. We, as a society, protect the right of farmers to do as they wish with their land. Assuming we don't want to rattle that cage, we'll need to be creative and deliberate about making land available for the settlement of a greater diversity of farmers. One, current land owners could be shown a growing market for smaller pieces of land—a market driven in our area by retreating Albertans and European immigrants. Two, our communities could highlight the beauty of flexible farms; that it's a positive thing to down-size and intensify. Holistic Management provides great leadership for this. Three, we could take a new look at land trusts—taking portions of land off of the financing treadmill and making it available to vision-rich, support-poor

younger farmers. (Hamilton, 2005). Earthcare Connections, SK, provides a prairie model for doing this. Or Four, rural municipalities can do as their town cousins do—purchase lands to develop in specific ways.

There's Little We Can Do. We're not slaves to established market forces or established ways of thinking. We create markets and visions every time we freely explore new skills and business relationships, barter, and spend our dollars deliberately. An intelligent, intuitive and even elegant retreat from the environmental brink requires us all to change patterns of behaviour. Ronald Wright, author of *A Short History of Progress* says "Our greatest experiment—civilization itself—will succeed only if it can live on nature's terms, not man's. To do this we must adopt principles in which the short term is trumped by the long; in which caution prevails over ingenuity; in which the absurd myth of endless growth is replaced by respect for natural limits; in which progress is steered by precautionary wisdom." We have a lot of defeating messages to unwind. My sense is that citizens and local governments, because we most intensely feel the pain of a dying vision, are way ahead of our provincial and federal governments in readiness to shed these hindrances.

Fertilized Eggs & Broody Hens Potential New Farmers

Manitobans have an opportunity to culture, train and support a new generation of farmers—many of whom are urban based and keen to learn. From our experience, a high majority of urban farmer wannabes are interested in market gardening, greenhouse operation and small livestock rearing for urban organic and 'chemical free' markets. Many, though,

are also interested in living in less congested communities farther away from urban markets. I suggest our citizen-led organizations, universities and colleges engage in research, to determine if there are significant numbers of urban based youth wanting to grow food for a living, to find out if the present learning options are adequate, to determine if our governments and the general public are willing to fund creative methods of generating more farmers for Manitoba, and to find out what the public and retail business appetite is for locally grown foods—especially if grown sustainably by young entrepreneurs.

But first, let's look at potential new farmers and how they're being encouraged to live rurally and perhaps grow food for at least part of their income.

Farm raised youth are the most likely to possess the qualities and skills needed to become farmers. They are therefore the easiest to integrate into rural communities. We know from recent experience that it's best for these youth to take training in particular skills to help them offer a diversity of services to their communities. Many still attend University and College agriculture programs. But the number of farmers we need to replace the 55 year old farmers looking toward retirement is not nearly being satisfied by up and coming farm raised youth. Many farm raised youth, once enamoured with the family farm, get distracted and take employment with agricultural businesses and institutions. The farm is not likely to offer \$25/hour to start with Blue Cross and bonuses. But, they can be wooed back, especially once they've experienced the world, by a fresh prairie breeze and the sweet call of a home town repopulation committee.

Immigrants—now most often from Europe but potentially from Alberta and other congested areas—are more likely to bring trade skills, young children, capital intensive business plans, and cultural diversity to rural communities. A few communities in Manitoba—Steinbach, Winkler, Morden, Kola, Cartwright—have benefited greatly from recent immigration. Attracting new immigrants takes a deliberate community effort in recruitment and resettlement.

Young urban families often become dissatisfied with the crime, pollution, and general lifestyle prospects in the city—especially after they’ve raised their children to school age. I believe rural communities could do more to inspire and welcome young families, particularly those who still have rural ties. These people would tend to have equity to reinvest. But it would still be prudent for communities to have either jobs or entrepreneurial openings identified.

Urban Youth grow up in families and schools with little connection to the country, but, for a variety of reasons, many of the more practical minded feel called to rural life. These youth are, in our experience, not turning to traditional education facilities for the training they need. They’re looking for opportunities to get out on the land, to learn from farmers, market gardeners, and through their own daily successes and failures. For the most part they’re willing to live frugally (at least initially), take off-farm jobs, learn from us, bring new ideas and offer connections to urban markets. Recent experiences at Organic Food Council of Manitoba and Harvest Moon events have shown me (and others involved) that there’s a surprising number of urban youth keen to respond to discussions about rural living and food growing opportunities.

I want to emphasize that we can nurture more farmers from all these sources. I lift the potential of practical minded urban youth in this paper because I feel they are not being given enough attention. If it’s about cost, I believe we’re better off spending the training and support money sooner than spending more money later on both the urban and rural consequences of not rebuilding and rejuvenating our rural communities.

It’s not all about culturing soil-working and animal-raising farmers. Rural communities need creative, committed people of many persuasions—employees, entrepreneurs, trades people, service workers *and* growers. So who’s preparing and training rural oriented youth now?

Farm families, and neighbours help rural youth with on-the-farm training and support. The **Holistic Management** program includes the next generation as one of its three pillars.

4-H helps youth between 8 to 21 expand agriculture awareness, leadership and teamwork skills. 55% are rural farm youth. 31% are rural/non farm. 14% are urban based.

Agriculture in the Classroom. AitC’s objective is to enhance awareness of and interest in agriculture in Manitoba schools; to develop resources and programs with guidance and expertise from agriculture and education communities.

MAFRI Mentorship Program for Young Farmers. The program matches young farmers with elder farm mentors to provide advice and guidance.

National Farmers Union / Via Campesina. In creating policy based on cooperation between farmers rather than competition, the NFU has, for over 35 years,

taken a proactive stance for the rights of Canadian farm families. The NFU has a youth wing that functions with its own structure and is highly regarded. Together they address current issues and support research into underlying issues.

Keystone Agriculture Producers. KAP's job is to represent and promote the interests of the province's farm families. KAP is member driven and tends to be industry aligned. KAP has a Young Farmers Forum associated with the Canadian Young Farmers Association.

Assiniboine Community College. Agribusiness is a two-year program. They combine agriculture, technology and business, featuring hands-on activities, tours, field labs, and networking. Career paths are abundant and allow grads to work outdoors or indoors, in a rural or urban setting. Agribusiness graduates enjoy one of the highest job placement success rates.

University of Manitoba. Faculty of Agricultural & Food Sciences grads find careers in all sectors of the agri-food industry from food processing to finance...from environmental work to international development. There are four Bachelor of Science degrees : Agriculture, Agribusiness, Agroecology, and Food Science. The two-year Agriculture diploma combines academic study of agricultural sciences with practical activities on a wide range of agricultural subjects. The **Environment and Geography Department** has a course called Living Rural Communities under the leadership of Stephane McLachlin that is introducing urban based (mostly) students to both the challenges and opportunities of rural prairie life. The course partners with the Harvest Moon Society and holds its sessions in the Clearwater area.

World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF Canada) Travelers and farmer wannabes stay with families to get firsthand experience of organic farming & gardening by helping however needed. There are now 600 farm hosts in Canada, 14 in Manitoba. Similar small farm experiences have been offered by **St Norbert Arts Centre**.

Community Shared Agriculture Farms around Winnipeg and Brandon offer opportunities for urban based youth—notably—**Wiens Shared Farm** at St Adolphe.

Organic Food Council of Manitoba initiated the Organic Farm Mentorship Program a few years ago. It enjoyed government administered grant support for one year and then faded. OFCM is reviving the program under the name Farm Mentorship Program. The emphasis is on matching youth who are interested in growing food in a diversity of ways with farmers who grow and raise food in a diversity of ways. The emphasis will be on smaller scale operations and on organic/natural farms. A working model is being developed.

Winnipeg Humane Society, Harvest Moon Society, Manitoba Food Charter, 100 Mile Manitoba, Turtle Mountain CDC, Conservation Districts, and Heifer International are additional Non-Governmental Organizations addressing aspects of the problem and are willing to be supportive of a newly envisioned mentorship program.

Maggie and I have been involved with the WWOOF program for 12 years. We also participated as mentors with the short-lived Organic Farm Mentorship Program. On average we get 10 young people a year working with us—all ea-

ger to learn as much as possible about growing food and tending animals. Their length of stay varies from one week to a month with a few staying as long as 6 months, depending on how long they can live without an income. (We don't pay them and they don't pay us.) Over the years we've developed a reputation among Winnipeg based farmer wannabes as a place to get rural living and food growing experiences. Rarely do these youth have farm experiences from their childhoods. The ones who are serious about growing food for at least part of their living have two major concerns. One, they want to gain practical farm knowledge as quickly as possible, and Two, they want to choose a community and/or find a piece of land on which to exercise their chosen profession.

To conclude, although there are many institutions involved in supporting youth in agriculture, none are adequately helping practical minded urban youth move from the dream to the reality. I believe we're missing an intriguing opportunity.

Fresh Air from all Directions Ideas and Models from Others in the Struggle

If we agree that keen urban youth deserve a chance to explore rural (food growing and otherwise) career options, the question becomes, how do we (rural communities, farm organizations, and provincial government departments) help maximize their chances for success? Fortunately some paths going in that direction have already been explored.

The New England Small Farm Institute promotes sustainable small farm and rural community development by providing information and training for aspir-

ing, beginning and transitioning farmers. Their guide *Explorer* helps aspiring farmers learn how to start and manage agricultural businesses, and decide whether this is a path they want to take.

CRAFT (Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training) was formed by a group of thirteen organic farms in Southern Ontario. Farm interns get dedicated management and skills training on one farm and gain exposure to a wider range of practices on the other twelve farms. The interns can apply for funding to help support them to take this training.

Earthcare Connections in Muenster, SK helps potential and beginning farmers improve their income generating capacity and explore sustainable production and marketing techniques. They've received more than 3,000 acres of land, mostly donated by retiring farmers, which they've placed in a land trust and lease to new farmers. Earthcare is supported by regional churches and has partnered with Heifer International.

Sustainable Farming Program of the Central Carolina Community College. The goal is to give students the entrepreneurial and technical skills necessary to develop and manage a profitable, environmentally sound, community based small farm or agricultural business, which will stimulate the local economy and motivate others to begin or continue farming. Initiated by local growers it is now a collaboration of a diversity of community members. The program uses successful farmers as the main instructors. The classes are hands on with field trips to local farms and related businesses and are scheduled to accommodate the working student. The Land Lab has been developed as a research and demonstration facility for sustainable agriculture prac-

tices. Students have the opportunity to take University and College courses in a variety of subjects.

Other models include the Falls Brook Centre in New Brunswick <<http://www.fallsbrookcentre.ca/agriculture/apprenticeships.htm>>; FarmStart, A New Generation of Farmers—out of Ontario <<http://www.farmstart.ca/a-new-generation-of-farmers/>>; Land Stewardship Project, New Beginnings—out of Minnesota <http://www.landstewardshipproject.org/programs_farmbeginnings.html>; Centre for Rural Affairs, out of Nebraska <http://www.cfra.org/resources/beginning_farmer>; Pennsylvania Farm Link <<http://www.pafarmlink.org/beginning.html>>; U of Vermont Centre for Sustainable Agriculture <<http://www.uvm.edu/~susagctr/NFN.html>>.

Servant-Leaders of the Farmyard Suggestions for Governments

Governments should, in my opinion, play a low key but pivotal role in society. In a capitalist system, when profit taking is largely unregulated, they have to mediate between civil society and the business world. Civil society should, by theory, be the most powerful force in a democratic, green-capitalist system. Citizens should be able to articulate a general vision for society—such as environmental, social, and economic sustainability—and then expect our governments to help keep us going in the right direction. We should further be able to expect our governments to refrain from partnering with industry and transportation interests that seek to distract us from that vision. Anarchy (meaning a deliberate lack of laws and government) depends on individual and community responsibilities, respect and self-restraint to create that sweet space in which peo-

ple can support themselves and each other without fear of being hurt or controlled. Since ‘gentlemanly’ self-restraint is not highly valued in the form of capitalism we espouse, democracy depends on publicly supported initiatives and laws to curtail greed and environmental destruction. Following are some policy and action suggestions for our governments.

Municipal Governments

- Make it clear, individually and through the AMM, to the Provincial Government that they want a renewed vision for rural Manitoba that facilitates more rather than fewer rural residents.
- Encourage their communities to recruit and help settle young farmers (much as we’ve done for new immigrants) and arrange mentorships for urban youth interested in rural living careers.
- Partner with school alumni committees to give tours and vision info at 10 and 20 year reunions.
- Place the positive attributes of their communities and the services they offer on a website designed to attract urban youth and others to rural areas.
- Generate creative ways of drawing attention to the benefits of repopulation—like the Small Farms Challenge of the Turtle Mountain CDC or the Harvest Moon Festival in Clearwater.
- Modify development plans to accommodate smaller business and agricultural acreages
- Undertake to buy locally grown food when hosting official functions. Facilitate a process/program through which local growers can list the foods they have available for sale.

- Support the creation and expansion of farmer's markets.
- Encourage discussions and supportive actions with Metis and First Nations communities in their areas re. entitlements, resource management, business partnerships, protection of sites, etc. to open communication on diverse ways of matching economy with landscape.
- Provide incentives to farmers to intensify and layer their operations rather than expand.
- Provide incentives to farmers to grow for emerging markets and smaller scale management systems. Become familiar with and supportive of Holistic Management.

Provincial Governments

Provincial Governments have the greatest opportunity to formulate and implement a dynamic vision. They can provide province-wide incentives to encourage us to adapt. They can:

- Administratively and publicly affirm the need for more farmers.
- Fund research into the availability and training requirements of various new farmers—including practical minded urban youth.
- Revamp the education curriculum to encourage school boards to include materials and teachings oriented to the celebration and knowledge of local histories, economies and landscapes.
- Promote rural areas as great places to live, find employment and generate business.
- Fund research into opportunities for repopulation of rural areas. Take another look at the Ed Schreyer government's The Stay Option designed to encourage youth settlement in rural areas.
- Encourage Planning Districts to facilitate smaller scale rural business and agriculturally related land portions—to back away from the default 80 acre minimum.
- Increase financial support and promotion of KAPs ALUS program that uses public funds to pay farmers for the environmental benefits they offer.
- Encourage communities to plan for their long term local food needs by making space for youth.
- Back off large scale biofuels promotion. Support communities to make post-oil energy plans.

Federal Government

Federal Government initiatives can influence the thinking of a nation as well as provide deep pocket incentives to make practical changes in how we grow food and inspire farmers.

- Administratively and publicly affirm the need for more farmers.
- Financially support Provincial farm mentorship collaborations.
- Ensure research, income support, taxation and training policies and programs support smaller scale farmers and acknowledge the great work farmers have undertaken to become efficient.
- Encourage every region to move towards food security. Also, reduce Canadian demands on a food-scarce world while offering assistance to international grassroots community development.

- Increase taxes on corporate profit-taking in agriculture in particular while encouraging business minds to see the need for long term sustainability in our food system.
- Clearly support supply management systems while at the same time insisting that these systems budget to provide next generation incentives—to discourage sector consolidation.
- Instruct federal offices across the country to buy locally grown food for their functions.

***Non-Government Organizations,
Farm Organizations and Schools***

- Seek a broad partnership with like-minded NGOs, schools, farm organizations and governments on a province-wide mentorship program.

- Engage in research on depopulation, repopulation and next generation issues.

Consumers

We can increase our demand for food grown and processed near by, by supporting individual farmers, farmer’s markets, and regional food supply organizations (like the emerging Harvest Moon Society Local Food Initiative and Manitoba Organic Milk). A rural community of twenty-five hundred people spends about three million dollars a year on food. By increasingly directing our food budgets to pay local farmers to grow and process our food, we can repopulate our rural economies one farmer at a time. Becoming more deliberate about sourcing our food takes time and effort. Breathe deeply and enjoy the taste. We’re rebuilding a society. Let’s not tire easily or be prone to working mindlessly.

Conclusion

The Sun Rises Concluding Notes

There's a beautiful unpredictability about the universe. The speed with which we and other objects move could result in a catastrophic blind side at any time. Vulnerability of this sort is good for the soul. It helps us remain alert to and thankful for each wonderful moment. There's nothing we can do to make celestial traffic safer—so why not celebrate it. The kinds of vulnerabilities we humans create for each other, on the other hand, are more likely to diminish the soul; take away our abilities to fully experience the wonderful lives we've been given. Early in our work in Southern Africa, I learned to sleep well—even though we found ourselves in stressful situations. I learned to say thanks every night for all the opportunities I'd been given to live well and serve others; to let go of the stresses and inadequacies by assuring that if I woke up the next morning, I'd be willing to live and serve again.

The decline of the cheap energy era may hit us hard, but it can also inspire a greater intimacy with our landscape and community consciousness. The following quote is from Marcus Rempel (Ploughshares Community member) after he visited a Plain Folk (Mennonite)

farming community establishing near Gladstone, MB. "It may sound like visiting a museum or walking on to a movie set, but to be there in the midst of them does not feel like that at all. Perhaps this is because they seem so unselfconscious. Unlike a museum, where everything is about pose and display, the Orthodox Mennonites, do not allow their pictures to be taken. They also do not allow mirrors in their homes. These disciplines are to detract attention away from the individual and keep the mind focused on the good of the community. If they did allow their pictures to be taken, I would have been less interested in photographing their faces than their hands and feet. I shake thick, strong hands, calloused from hard work; earthy hands, marked by daily contact with the soil. . . ."

Rural life on the prairies, even when adjusted to be sustainable, need not be austere. It's up to us. It can be as wonderful as any other place in time when savored for what is naturally offered. As Darrin Qualman of the National Farmers Union muses, "rather than getting depressed, we can picture the 1960s—trains, few cars, love and poetry, good local bread, gardening, time with family, rich local wine, strolling down the subtler allies of life."

Blessings and Enjoy.

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