
MLT NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2019



Cultivating Resilient Communities

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It is with sadness that we learned Rita Bober passed on February 24, 2019. Rita has been a long time board member of MLT along with her husband Norm. All should be familiar with her writings being a very frequent contributor to this newsletter along with another local periodical, The Lawton Free Reader. Her series on the botany, culture and usefulness of selected plants were especially prominent, as is her native american spirituality in her writings. After retirement from social work, she continued to enrich lives, by working to protect mother earth through this organization along with local transition groups. For years Rita and Norm offered educational and enrichment programs at Stone Circle Farm & Learning Center on their farmstead outside of Lawton, MI. Rita will be missed by Norm, her family and friends. The earth has lost a protector.

Norm provides the following book review with assist from Rita and elaborates in a beautiful way the the beneficial connections in the community of life.

Relationships II

By Norm Bober

Sometimes a book just shows up. A recommendation from a friend or a link from an internet search can bring an “Aha” realization. So it is with a book entitled **Braiding Sweetgrass** by Robin Wall Kimmerer. She appreciates the plant world both in its beauty and complexity, and she helps us know there is something more, something beyond the human realm. She weaves the strands of scientific study and indigenous thought to help us understand the teachings that are ever present in the plant world.

We start with relationships, the idea of working together for the greater good. Did you ever look at lichen and wonder how this primitive plant can survive? Lichen has two parts. It shares its algal self with its fungal self so that the whole may live. Fungi seek out and glean minerals from the face of a rock while the algae manufacture sugars to feed itself through photosynthesis. The two different skill sets work together so that the whole plant can survive. What if one part of this plant chooses not to follow its “original instructions” for symbiosis, for living together and supporting each other?

Here’s a big picture thought. The Earth supports us and gives us all that we need. A loving mother does that. As we grow we separate ourselves from Mom and go off to “do our own thing.” Yet, there were some basic rules that were ingrained: “share your toys; follow the rules; remember your manners saying ‘please’ and ‘thank you’; help each other.”

Kimmerer, a botanist, a mother, a professor, and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi nation, reminds us that the plant kingdom gives us similar teachings if only we would listen. What if a plant chooses to withhold its fragrance, or its fruit? How would bees know where to go for pollen? How would possum find food for her young? What if a two-legged spotted a patch of ginseng and swiped up huge handfuls of them while trudging through the woodland? The ginseng would cry out: “save some, take only what you need, don’t be greedy, if you take too much, you are killing us and we won’t be able to give you anymore.” These are all the little voices that few people hear.

In another vein - what would it be like to sit outside in the rain and watch with rapt attention how a droplet moves on a leaf or flower petal? With wondrous curiosity, would you notice the differences in how the drops form, pick up dust particles, and shift until gravity brings the congealed water molecules down to the soil. How quickly would that liquid be swallowed by the life forms below the surface?

Asking questions is the mind of a scientist or an inquisitive child, but Kimmerer looks beyond the individual. She tells us about traditional indigenous thinking that all of creation has a life that deserves respect, and that we humans are a part of that beautiful circle. Humans have elevated themselves to a superior status or separateness from other living beings. The Native way considers all of creation as people. There are the tall ones, the tree people, the winged ones, the bird family, the four legged people, the creepy, crawly, and even the less visible microbes.

The Lakota nation has an expression in their prayers that includes “mitakuye oyasin.” In the Potawatomi language it could be “jayek nde wemagnedok.” Both languages recognize “all my relations.”

The community is more important than the individual. We give thanks to the plants, the animals, and the elementals (water, wind, sun) because they help us to live. In order to keep the circle of life moving, it is important to give back to the land. To take, take, and take some more depletes finite resources. We find that the myth of “perpetual growth is not compatible with natural law.” The community suffers as inequality and poverty become real in the midst of ego based power struggles.

At this point I will add some words that Rita wrote at another time..

“The jeweled crown of the whole book for me is the section where Kimmerer tells the story of one of her graduate writing workshops. Most of the students professed a profound connection to the land, they assured her that they loved the land. Then she asked them: “Do you think the land loves you back?” Dead silence followed the question. They were shocked and speechless. They could only respond when the question was posed to them

hypothetically. After lots of discussion, one student proposed a summation: “You wouldn’t harm what gives you love.”

Until we experience that heartfelt knowing with utter certainty that the Earth is both lovable and loving, we won’t achieve the reciprocal, loving relationship necessary to fuel and sustain a life of cooperation, thankfulness, and partnership with our greater selves -- Mother Earth.”

Much of the pernicious CO₂ in the atmosphere came from degraded soils and forests. Maynard makes a powerful case for sequestering carbon in soils and forests through organic agriculture and permaculture. This article was originally published in the recent MOFFA newsletter. Michigan Organic Food and Farm Alliance is at <https://www.moffa.net>.

HOMESTEADING IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

By Maynard Kaufman

It was surely a prescient decision by the board of MOFFA and the editor of its newsletter to focus on homesteading in this issue. This little essay will explain why homesteading, which can be defined as living in a household where the goods consumed are also produced, is important in our time. On a more general level, homesteading is thus an aspect of the agrarian ethos as it tries to avoid dependence on goods produced with industrial methods. The leading agrarian thinker and writer in this country, Wendell Berry, emphasizes that the small farm should raise food for use in the household first and then also for the market. Since the word “homesteading” was popularized by the Homesteading Act of 1862, which offered land on the Great Plains to people who settled on it, homesteading was considered a rural activity, although it could also be practiced in towns or cities. The August 2018 issue of Acres USA: The Voice of Eco-Agriculture was devoted to homesteading and included a feature article on “Urban Homesteading.”

Different socio-economic conditions have provided different incentives for homesteading. After the country was settled and most people lived in cities, the automobile opened the possibility of country life. This was promoted by Liberty Hyde Bailey as he proposed “subdividing the land” for rural residents and it was supported by President Theodore Roosevelt as the Country Life Movement in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The emergence of a strong environmental awareness in the early 1970's shaped the homesteading movement of that time as people tried to live in a more ecological manner. This was also the time of a decisive back-to-the-land movement when, for the first time in our history, populations in non-metropolitan areas grew at a faster rate than populations in metropolitan areas.

Now, as we move toward the 2020's, the awareness of climate change (also called global warming) is finally filtering into public awareness. For many people this is a new and unfamiliar phenomenon. It is caused by the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The environmental awareness of the homesteader is still strong enough to recognize greenhouse gases as pollutants and resist them. Although climate change began many years ago with bad farming practices and deforestation, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere grew rapidly with the burning of fossil fuels in the last century. That amount is now over 400 parts per million as compared to 280 ppm prior to the industrial age. Carbon dioxide, along with methane, is called a

greenhouse gas because it retains more of the sun's warmth in the atmosphere and thus causes global warming.

Because oil companies spent millions to deny climate change, it had become a debatable issue for many years. The fact that it thus became a political issue rather than a scientific reality inhibited actions to curtail the burning of fossil fuels. Scientists knew that the climate was changing since 1988 and in 1997 the nations of the world signed the Kyoto Protocol as they agreed that the planet should not get more than two degrees Celsius warmer. But in the twenty years after 1997, despite some concern and climate advocacy, there were more emissions of greenhouse gas than in the twenty years before.

The Paris Accords, signed in 2016, also established two degrees as the upper limit of warmth. Our President withdrew from that agreement early in his term and has done much to increase the burning of fossil fuels. And, of course, emissions of carbon dioxide continue to rise—up to 411 parts per million in 2018. As I was writing this essay I received the May 6 issue of *The Nation* magazine which featured a long article documenting the poor reporting on climate change and resolving to promote more honest reporting. Americans produce more greenhouse gas than any country but our leaders seem unable to take action to curtail it.

This issue of *The Nation* also reported on the Green New Deal which is being promoted by left-leaning Democrats, led by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and co-sponsored by Senator Ed Markey, as a program to finally deal with climate change. The publicity generated by this program will reinforce the concern that nearly three fourths of American citizens already feel about climate change. It will not be surprising if people begin to express the need for a change in our lives of affluence to a way of life that generates less effluence of greenhouse gases.

The fact is that climate change has already begun and is very rapidly getting worse. This is the emphasis in a book just published early this year, *The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming* by David Wallace-Wells. The book opens with the following words: "It is worse, much worse, than you think. The slowness of climate change is a fairy tale. . ." He then proceeds to list a few of the many catastrophes we learned about on the news during the past two or three years. "In the late summer of 2017 three major hurricanes arose in the Atlantic at once. . . Hurricane Harvey, when it struck Houston, delivered such epic rainfall it was described as a '500,000 year event'." He goes on to list such disasters for two pages, and mentions the California wildfires in 2018, "including the deadliest fire in history—the Camp Fire which scorched several hundred square miles outside of Chico, killing dozens and leaving many more missing." These disasters, along with record-breaking temperatures of 121 degrees Fahrenheit in places which also killed many people, led Wallace-Wells to conclude that "climate change is here." (*The Uninhabitable Earth*, pp. 1-18.)

Climate change is emerging as the biggest issue in our time and it will be worse than we think. It is likely to be the incentive for the next homesteading movement as at least some people want to withdraw from complicity with it. This is a strategy of withdrawing from the industrial reliance on fossil fuels. This may be inadequate by itself, but it could be seen as an exemplary strategy which could lead to legislative actions.

Homesteading can help to reduce the pollution produced by burning fossil fuels, but there is also a need for "negative emissions," for removing the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. In *The Uninhabitable Earth*, Wallace-Wells mentions "negative emissions" at various points and

distinguishes between natural and technological strategies. But he is not confident that either strategy would work. The technological strategy, sometimes called "geoengineering," is very expensive and might have bad side-effects. He also admits that he is unfamiliar with natural strategies, but does mention that they include "revitalized forests and new agricultural strategies" (p. 169, also 45-46 and 107-108) and worries that they may take a third of farmland. He apparently fails to see that these strategies can sequester carbon as they raise food.

As a native of New York City, Wallace-Wells does not seem to know much about organic methods of raising food and does not mention the word "organic." But organic methods do thrive by using photosynthesis to take carbon from the air and sequestering it in plants and, eventually, in soil as humus. The formation of humus is enhanced by mycorrhizal fungi which secrete a protein called glomalin that builds humus in the soil and makes it more stable. This data is gleaned from a paper published by the Rodale Institute: "Regenerative Organic Agriculture and Climate Change." The paper argues that it is possible to sequester as much carbon as is emitted—eventually. It provides data to support this from studies in several countries, but it is dependent on a transition to regenerative methods of organic farming, which is very slowly happening. The value of the Rodale paper, which is highly respected, is that it shows that global warming can be slowed so that other strategies to combat it can be developed. Other studies corroborate the Rodale conclusions.

Since homesteaders tend to use organic methods to raise food, it is here that they can make a second contribution, beyond using less fossil fuels, toward the sequestration of carbon. By heavy mulching to control weeds they add fertility to the soil, conserve moisture, and avoid tillage which allows for the oxidation of carbon. It is necessary to increase organic matter in the soil because chemical farming practices have depleted it in soils. Fifty to eighty percent of the carbon in the soil has escaped into the atmosphere. Cropland, which should have around 5% organic matter, is down to 1 or 2%. Undisturbed prairie soils can contain 10 to 20% of organic matter, which was put there naturally by photosynthesis using carbon dioxide and water, but was lost by repeated plowing.

Another practice that helps to retain carbon in the soil is through permaculture. It could be seen as a version of what Wallace-Wells called "revitalized forests." This is a food producing technique that relies much more on perennials, including trees. Many homesteaders find permaculture very congenial, partly because it avoids the need for tillage and tillage equipment which uses energy. This also conserves carbon in the soil, while tilling the soil allows carbon to oxidize. Also, the deeper roots of trees can help them grow through droughty periods and still produce food. The wood in trees is 50% carbon and can be stabilized as biochar when it is past maturity or harvested and preserved as lumber.

Homesteaders have always kept a diversity of livestock on their small farms. The manure from the livestock was used to maintain soil fertility in farms and gardens and some were butchered to provide food in addition to milk and eggs. In these ways homesteaders were able to bypass the food and fertilizer that was made available through industrial methods. They may also learn from Amish communities that it is still possible to use horses to help with farm and garden work and for transportation. Some Amish communities may permit the use of stationary engines, but in general their use of fossil fuel is very minimal. Of all existing communities, the Amish live in a way that may be most suitable to minimize climate change, but their religious doctrines may not be acceptable to most secular folks. We can, however, all learn from their practices.

It is urgent that policies to mitigate climate change get started. To begin with, this country needs a

carbon tax to pay for some of the damage caused by a changing climate and to penalize fossil fuel use. The longer we wait the more it will cost. Global warming will soon be one and one half degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels. According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, we now have only twelve years to cut emissions in half if we hope to keep global warming below two degrees. And the longer we wait the worse it will be. According to a team of scientists who tried to quantify how much worse 2 degrees would be over 1.5, 150 million more people would die from air pollution alone at 2 degrees (The Uninhabitable Earth, p. 28). It is also important to bear in mind that the costs of the damage caused a changing climate already exceed billions of dollars, and these costs will increase rapidly. Energy companies that want to make money now by burning more oil are likely to lose that and much more later. We are on the verge of a new era of Hard Times.

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This essay is not proposing that homesteading is the only solution to the problem of climate change. But it is one solution and it is easily available. Given our cultural history it is very likely to be adopted by at least a few people who are already inclined to do it. As climate change makes it harder to raise food and food prices rise, more will try to raise their own. If early adopters show they can enjoy life with less fossil fuels, others will follow. Organic farming may not be trusted by policy-makers, at least not yet, but if it is seen to work it could be one of our main defenses, and certainly safer and cheaper than geoengineering projects for the sequestration of carbon.

Mike submitted this description of his family's exploration of what happened to a 19th century utopian approach. At the same time, he noted the power of the then recent California fires.

In [New] Harmony

By Mike Phillips

In 1975, there was a do-it-yourself guide to building idyllic backwoods homes. Five years after Earth Day, *In Harmony with Nature* was one of many picture books intended for aspiring rustic types wanting to live simple and simply live. The book contained inspired drawings, diagrams, and plates with basic instructions on how to build small—idiosyncratic—dwellings out of logs, rough-hewn boards, and an old metal chassis a from late-fifties Ford Galaxy—imagine wood chisels made from the steel leaf springs of an old car. Back then, getting close to nature was an imperative for young, over-idealistic bookish types.

Forty years later, I mostly go through life expecting to be set upon by natural phenomena. Nature is labile and scary, and sometimes terrible. It merits constant vigilance and a wide berth when agitated.* One early evening last summer, while kayaking with family and friends on a nearby lake, dark thunderheads were spotted slowly rolling in out of the southwest. As lightning flashed far on the horizon, I urged my companions to promptly turn around and make for the boat launch—a thirty minute paddle. We got back with just hours to spare before the storm hit.

Nature had to have been considerably more daunting on the early 19th Century American frontier. Still, people went west. Remnants from one particular settlement still stand in New Harmony, Indiana—in the southwest corner of the state. For two years in the 1820s, it was a small utopian community in the edge of the wilderness that fostered education, scientific research, social justice, and gender equality. We visited there late last summer.

On a warm, sunny Saturday, New Harmony was both placid and macabre. My wife and I, and our son and daughter in-law, arrived mid-morning. The village is tidy: well swept streets and sidewalks under thick green canopies of tall trees; old wood and brick 19th Century buildings in good repair with good paint that still manage to look, well, decrepit. And its mid-19th Century town hall has very clean public restrooms. The village residents know a thing or two about historic preservation. But its population is dwindling and it seems occupied by only a sparse contingent of very old folk. All was quiet and still. It was like an abandoned movie set on a Hollywood back lot. At a used bookstore on the main drag, I found a clean hardcover first edition of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*—which I immediately pressed into my son's hands urging him to read it as a cautionary tale on the nature of random mayhem beneath the veneer of civility—and a softbound pamphlet about some of the notable buildings left standing in New Harmony; the juxtaposition being Midwest gothic horror amidst Midwest gothic architecture. Then we traipsed. The museum was interesting and included an almost two-hundred year old collection of stuffed birds, mammals, crayfish and mollusks, and gem stones and fossilized trilobites gleaned from the immediate area. Many of the oldest restored shops and dwellings rest near to the Wabash River. Its waters were brown and muddy and lazy—only a single great blue heron was spotted on the far shore after scanning hundreds of yards in both directions. At the visually confusing Bauhaus-inspired visitor's center we met an interesting elderly docent. She provided an overview of village's brief stint as a secular utopia. She emphasized the settlement's tenets concerning gender equality. But when queried as to how African and Native Americans may have fared in the community—what with it all going down in the early 19th Century [forty years before Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation], she seemed taken aback as if no one has ever asked her this before. Then she mumbled something to the effect that African Americans were simply not to be found in New Harmony as the Underground Railroad ran many miles to the east of southwestern Indiana. (I later learned that by the early 1820s, the indigenous peoples had ceded the entire region and slipped away.) The docent was mostly informative and gracious and let it slip that she was preoccupied with having to deal with a slew of Indiana U. humanities majors about to set upon her visitor's center.

There was a trickle of tourists until mid-afternoon. The quiet and stillness gave way as a wedding party and guests converged on the village's renowned Roofless Church. Then there were the seniors citizens suddenly arriving in two big motor coaches—unloading and checking into a rustic wooden lodge next to where we sat alone on a tavern veranda sipping fruity vodka concoctions and being pleasantly engaged by an affable hipster bartender, who also happened to be an *X-Files* and *Twilight Zone* aficionado. This made for apt conversation.

*This missive was submitted for consideration a week after California burned.

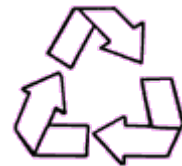
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