RAISING WHOLE CHILDREN IS LIKE RAISING GOOD FOOD

Beyond Factory Farming and Factory Schooling

I've been a farmer for over 25 years, more than 20 years on the same plot of land. I've spent that much time and more in education — as a student and as a parent, teaching interns and leading groups of young people on visits and live-in programs on my farm. During that time, I've discovered some amazing parallels between agriculture and education, both in their industrialized versions and in the small-scale, personal alternatives that I've given my life to supporting.

A person who's not a farmer might assume that anyone who had worked on the same piece of land for over 20 years would have it all figured out. Perhaps I am unusually slow, but after all these years I've concluded that, instead of having more answers, I actually have more questions. Each year is like starting over: the climate is different; the marketplace has changed; the condition of the soil may have improved, but in subtle and unpredictable ways.

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By Michael Ableman

Illustration by Roxana Villa
Still, no matter how long a person has been farming, it is difficult to shake off the cultural programming that we carry with us: that farms or gardens should be made up of straight rows, filled only with what we put in them; that we are somehow in control; and that good farming is about technique. But as hard as we may try to mold and manipulate our farms and gardens into our own image, nature always has another idea.

I believe that whatever success I have had as a farmer has come when I have approached my farm with what Zen Buddhists call a beginner’s mind: without presuppositions, open to seeing and learning from whatever I encounter.

Nobody ever told me about this way of learning when I started farming. Now I require apprentices to take a notebook and walk the farm several times a week, simply recording what they see. I want them to develop what I consider to be the most important agricultural skill — observation — and I want them to discover for themselves that biological systems never stay the same.

I've been hearing a lot of talk about education lately — from government officials, journalists, movie stars, political candidates. They all seem to be experts on the subject. But what does the word “education” really mean, and how much of their “expertise” comes from assumptions and how much from actually observing what goes on in our schools?

My own schooling took place in public schools in the state of Delaware. My junior high was much like a minimum-security prison, with block walls, cement floors, bars on the windows, and an atmosphere more like a well-guarded holding facility than a place for nurturing, education, and inspiration. I was attending junior high school when Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot. We had armed National Guardsmen in the hallways, and we were required to have one of them accompany us to the bathroom. My education during those years had nothing to do with math or English or social studies. It was about survival.

I decided early on that if this was education, I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I quit before finishing high school, and I never went to college. Although I hold no degrees, I have written three books, and I lecture in many of the universities and institutions that my parents and grandparents prayed that I might attend. I farm, I teach, and I consider myself reasonably well educated — though not because of the schooling I endured.

When my first son was born, I was determined that I was going to give him a different educational experience from my own. After Waldorf school and home schooling, and learning Spanish in Guatemala, and living at an orphanage in Nicaragua, and farming and cooking and taking care of animals, Aaron eventually ended up just like I had — in a public junior high school.

I remember visiting his school at lunchtime. There were no National Guard patrols in the hallways or bars on the windows, but the cafeteria had been shut down, and in its place were Pizza Hut and Snapple and Taco Bell burritos. The ladies with white aprons and hairnets and the trays with hot food that I remembered from my childhood were gone, replaced by vending machines and prepackaged corporate America.

Aaron told me about the crowd that would gather around when he unveiled the lunch that we had required him to harvest and prepare. He reluctantly disclosed that on most days he would sneak off to the restroom to eat his sandwich of homegrown tomatoes, basil, and cucumber, embarrassed to be so different.

Schools and farms have become a lot alike. They have both become factories, with assembly-line controls and engineered inputs, cranking out either grades and test scores or “food.”

The industrialization of our food system and the industrialization of our education system treat us all as if we are just consumers, passively waiting to be fed disconnected information or prepackaged food. But we cannot ensure the well-being of our children or the future this way. Raising whole young people is like raising good food. It is a sacred practice; it requires waking each day and seeing things anew, responding to the moment, listening, paying attention, observing.

Every time I plant a seed and see it emerge, it slows me down and allows me to experience one of the great mysteries of life, and each time I cannot help but be renewed. I can have this experience; I can plant and nurture and harvest and enjoy the bounty of the land right outside my back door.

But even as I am having this blessed experience, I often feel sadness. I am aware that most of our society no longer has this opportunity, no longer knows what it’s like to pull a carrot from the ground, or eat the heart out of a watermelon still warm from the sun, or munch on beans that are so fresh that they explode in your mouth.

Being connected with the land provides another kind of nourishment less tangible than the carrots and the beans and the melons, a deeper soulful nourishment that I think our society
desperately longs for. It cannot be had from food that travels an average of 1,300 miles from the field to the plate; it can’t be absorbed from a package or from the shelves of the supermarket or from anonymous ingredients floating out of context. It cannot be enhanced or manufactured or engineered. Even the most complex preparations, the most sublime sauces, cannot bring back life to what is left after the essence has been processed away.

The kind of nourishment I am describing is based on relationships — local, biological, interpersonal, ecological. It is the result of understanding connections, knowing the people who grew the food, knowing that their families were paid a living wage, knowing that the land has been well cared for and protected from development, knowing that the food has not been assaulted with an array of chemistry and that its genetic makeup hasn’t been messed with.

It seems to me that real education should be based on some of those same relationships, that what we have really lost in both our food system and our education system is context, a sense of how things relate to each other. Our children need to be fed knowledge and food in more than fragmented parts and pieces. They need to understand whole processes and the interconnection of all things.

When the food system or the education system no longer fulfills the needs of people, then people take that responsibility into their own hands. The same community-driven changes we are seeing in the food system with the explosion of farmers’ markets, community food programs, urban gardens, and small-scale regional farms is going on in education as well.

It’s taking place in school gardens, in rebuilt cafeterias, and in whole movement that is rethinking education from the roots up. This revolution is not originating in the halls of Congress or in school board meetings; it’s happening in neighborhoods and towns, and it’s being driven by everyday folks: parents, teachers, and thoughtful principals who see a need and respond to it.

Years ago, while thinking about this idea of gardens and fresh food in the context of a better way of educating, I realized I needed a young person’s perspective, so I went straight to the source — my son Aaron. I thought I knew what he’d say. We’d taught him about the importance of good food (his first word was “peach,” before “mom” or “dad”). He’s the one who has always known, out of thousands of plants in a field, exactly where to find the first ripe strawberry or, out in the orchards, which part of the tree has the sweetest plums. But when I talked to him I found out he’d been paying more attention than I really knew, and that somehow the concept of process — that food doesn’t magically appear on the store shelf — helped him to understand other things as well.

Aaron really wanted me to talk about the bigger picture — he had heard about kids like Felipe Franco, who was born without arms and legs because his pregnant mother was working in the fields being sprayed with Captan. He remembered the children in Guatemala we had visited, seven and eight years old, carrying backpack sprayers that weighed more than they did, wearing no masks or protective clothing, spraying crops that would end up on Northern tables. I remember his puzzlement that — with all the technology, cleverness, and scientific and technological prowess we have mustered to create a food system supposedly designed to feed and nourish people — 25,000 children around the world still die each day as a result of malnutrition and related illnesses. My son understands, as he should, that we live in a world that is nutritionally divided: some of us are overfed and others are underfed. Let’s face it: kids are worried — they worry about crime, global warming, hunger, war, a whole unsafe world that they feel is growing and consuming their future. Food is one of those areas where they can feel empowered to do something for themselves and for their families. Aaron told me that part of what knowing how to grow good food means to him is that some of the worries are set aside. It’s something he can control.

The process of growing food is setting. It provides a clear and immediate sense of how one’s actions affect the world. Gardens provide great metaphors for life, the circle of birth and death made palpable because it is seen firsthand, year after year. Working with the soil offers a sense of accomplishment and personal power. Talk and explanations become unnecessary as kids instinctively understand what they are learning when they grow things. I am always amazed at the response from young people when we offer a handful of living soil to examine and smell. Some are afraid to accept it, others squirm or hesitate, but when they learn that a single teaspoon can contain millions of different forms of life, when they realize that there is a whole world beneath their feet, they begin to
see how much their lives depend on it and know viscerally that they shouldn’t treat soil like dirt.

For many young folks, especially those living in the urban world, gardens may be their only connection to the natural world. Those gardens are not just places to plant a few vegetables or flowers; they are not just a little break from the endless, mindless stretch of pavement; they become gathering places, sanctuaries, cultural and social centers, and they are as important to the health of our civic life as are art museums, symphony halls, theaters, and great restaurants. They are part of a city’s soul.

We all need to ask ourselves about the soul of those places where we send our children each day to be educated. What does education mean, who and what are the teachers, and can we rely solely on a few individuals housed in a cluster of buildings to adequately educate these young people, who are our future?

What do our kids really need anyway? I agree that they should probably learn to read and write and know how to add and subtract. But do they all need to do it in the same way and at the same time? Some may be like my boy, who didn’t read till the end of the third grade and wouldn’t read a book until high school. Now I can’t drag him out of his books; he loves literature, and by the time he was 18 he was writing and performing his own plays and poetry. But he was given the space to develop naturally, not by some factory blueprint mass formula.

We can push our kids, and grade them, and judge them, and try to fit them into boxes, just as we design tomatoes more so that they will fit shipping boxes than for taste or nutrition. But real learning and education will only come, I believe, when they are allowed to develop at their own speed, given good nourishment, and provided with a sense of belonging and place and some connection to the natural world.

Imagine what kind of world we could create if every junior high school student in America learned about soil, about health and nutrition, about the physical environment in which they live. Shouldn’t they learn to grow their own food, make their own clothing, build a structure, and cook, and shouldn’t their education include community service?

These skills are not just about developing physical self-sufficiency. They provide young people with a sense of being rooted in the real world, not just hooked up to a computer screen. Most of all, their minds and imaginations and creative spirit will stay alive when we, each of us, whether or not we teach and whether or not we have kids, treat them with respect and give them love. Maybe we could start using the word “love” more in talking about education — and about growing food.

Now I have a second son. Every evening, we wrap him in his favorite wool blanket and ever so slowly walk the length of the farm saying good night to the chickens, touching the leaves on
the asparagus, rubbing our faces on various herbs and flowers, and quietly sneaking up on the thousands of frogs that inhabit our pond.

It's the same routine each evening, but every walk reveals something new. Most nights, just as we reach the farm-gate and turn to walk back home, young Benjamin's eyes have started to close as he is lulled and calmed by the life on the farm, which is also drifting into sleep.

These walks include no talk, no explanations; there is no reading or study required to understand and learn from our experiences. But I am sure that young Benjamin is absorbing it all, even when his eyes are closed and he is asleep.

It has never been my goal to raise my children to be farmers, although I would welcome that. Nor has it been to turn them into farmers all of those thousands of people who come to us to have a different educational experience.

But just as I immerse my young son in the natural cycles of the farm, as I give him responsibilities to care for some of the animal and plant life that exists on it, and feed and nourish him from it, our society must find ways to offer similar experiences to all our families and to the communities in which we live.

As we bear witness to the disappearance of nature, and the disconnection of our society from it, we also see an increase in confusion, an extreme lack of compassion and understanding of how to care for each other and for our world, a loss of understanding with regard to cause and effect.

We have to deal with the world of worry, in which so many of our young people live, and the constant struggle between hope and despair, by focusing on the small successes: on local and incremental change; one handful of seeds, one child, one garden at a time.

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