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Summer Surprises

by Michael Lipsky

Among the reasons we are fortunate to live on the farm are the delights that come with what I'll call summer surprises—unexpected experiences that please the senses or the intellect, or both. Here are four examples.

Several weeks ago I went into the greenhouse after having been away for five days for a family event. While we were away the garlic had been dug, left to dry for a day or two, and then brought in. As in summers past, thousands of garlic bulbs were laid on the greenhouse benches, with the hard necked stalks leaning away from the center aisle.

On every bench the orderly piles of garlic were interrupted by what looked like small figures wearing flat sunhats, reminding me of Chinese dancers in *The Nutcracker Suite*. I was looking at garlic scapes (or “curls”) that had risen from the flattened

piles of garlic on vertical stalks.

This year we had once again harvested thousands of scapes, but we had obviously missed a few. And even though the garlic had been pulled more than a week earlier, those we had missed still had enough moisture in them to reach toward the light, as they do in the field.

They might have been rebuking us for leaving them in the field. Or perhaps they were helping us to see how successful or unsuccessful we were in our efforts to harvest every one. In any case it seemed remarkable that the garlic was still “alive” enough to support the scapes that seemed to want to sit up and look around.

Last summer a crew from PVF traveled to Next Step Produce in Maryland to help Heinz and Gabrielle harvest potatoes. We spent the morning and early afternoon clawing potatoes out of the



dirt, bagging them, and loading the bags onto a wagon.

At one point Heinz took me aside and encouraged me to go over to a nearby field to “listen to the buckwheat.”

As I approached the patch I picked up the distinctive hum of the bees and other pollinators that were collecting nectar from the delicate white buckwheat flowers. Everywhere my eye came to rest different insects were sampling and flitting from blossom to blossom. The hum was deep, the tones complex. I never knew that a field of flowers could make

such a sound.

Two summers ago, when Becky and Dave decided to get married on the farm, they chose as a wedding site the five-acre field we call “Parents,” on Beulah Road. The wedding would be held near the bee hives under the enormous Pecan tree in the southwest corner of the field. It is a magnificent tree, but still, I didn't think it seemed promising.

Little did I know! The day of the wedding I was amazed to discover that some brilliant person had

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Notes from the Farmer's Messy Desk: Plan B

by Hana Newcomb

It's not exactly NASA around here. We don't have rigid checklists and troubleshooting routines and automatic shut-off systems. But we do always have a Plan B for those times when the usual plan fails. Always, always, always.

On Saturday morning, when I get down to the stand to help load the trucks for market, I am already formulating a back-up plan if it feels like something is not quite right. For example, I expect to see the lights on as I come around the bend because Carrie is usually there before me, rolling carts out of the cooler. If the lights are not on yet, or I end up working by myself for a few minutes, I begin to consider the possibility that I will be going to market myself, and how that will work. Last year when Carrie was away for the weekend, her substitute did not show up, and I ended up loading the truck and driving to the Falls Church Farmers Market and setting up the tent by myself. Not the Plan B I was hoping for, but timing is tight on Saturday morning and it was my best idea. By the time the substitute woke up and called me, I had everything set up and I was ready to go home and get back to work.

On a broader scale, our back-up plan is always having plenty of resources at the ready,



Perfect example of Plan B: our trusty old 1940 tricycle Farmall tractor had a flat tire on the way to the field. So we switched to our trusty old, but much bigger Oliver tractor for a task that requires only a third the power. Ciara, planting on the left, had never ridden on the transplanter before, but since Becky wasn't here on that day, Ciara learned how to plant squash in a flash.

even if we rarely need to use them. Instead of having one reliable market vehicle, we have three vans that are good to go, even if they are all 15 – 20 years old. Over the last 35 years it has happened that one of the trucks opts out at the last minute – or on the way to market. This is to be expected, and we have unloaded and reloaded entire market loads on the side of the Beltway rather than miss a market. The key is to HAVE a truck that can race to the rescue, and to have one person who is always unassigned on Saturday morning.

You may wonder why we don't just have one perfectly reliable vehicle. You really want to know? There is no such thing. The stories are too numerous and boring to tell, but even the fancy

new Sprinter gives us trouble from time to time. We have even unloaded it on the Dulles Toll Road as it was en route to market. 1994 Ford cargo van to the rescue. Plus, we are frugal.

More important than vehicles, though, is some redundancy in the talent pool. At PVF East we have developed quite a deep bench over the years. This is easy to do when you have the same people working together for decades. At PVF West they are still in the early stages, and do not yet have the luxury of being able to call Grandma at the last minute and ask her if she can go to market (there is only one Grandma and she lives on the Vienna farm). My mother is our main secret weapon here. She doesn't do the everyday stuff every day, but she

can if she needs to. She is not the only one on the bench: we have Jon who can do anything but generally stays out of the fields, we have Michael Lipsky who can do anything but does have other work to do, and we have a number of nearby neighbors who have worked at the stand, helped with the CSA, and have even come to our rescue during times of crisis – on a farm, that can mean a collapsed greenhouse or a heavy snow that threatens the greenhouse, for example.

This is the just the first part of the Plan B story. Some time I can write about what we do when certain crops fail or there is a storm that takes out all the electricity for 5 days or the whole Newcomb/Groisser/Bradford clan leaves the farm for a family reunion...

But Only In the Mornings

by Michael Bradford

My summers have been pretty consistent for about 10 years: I do farm work, in the mornings and afternoons, 6 days a week. This farm is nice because when it gets really hot we don't do much afternoon work, or at least we take a very long lunch break in the worst of it. This year Hana actually has structured things such that pretty much every worker only works in in the morning; the farm is a hot ghost town in the afternoon.

I didn't think I would be following that pattern

myself, but this spring a job opportunity fell into my lap. A friend of my parents was looking for a technical writer to help with some minor tasks, and he felt like I was a good enough candidate. By the end of April I was beginning my first foray into corporate life, working at Virtustream inc. as a "marketing intern."

For that first month I put on nice khakis and a tie and commuted to Bethesda almost every day. Working in a new environment was nerve racking, as was the commute, but I couldn't really complain about

sitting in air conditioning all day. The difference from farming of course didn't stop there: Virtustream is a cloud computing company. Selling computers would be a far cry from farming, but this company sells virtual machines: computers within computers, located thousands of miles away from the customer. Every day I would drive for almost an hour, sit on the 11th floor of a tower, and perform pricing analyses of things that practically don't even exist.

After a month of doing that full time, I eased back into a part time schedule, working on the farm in the morning and then doing corporate afternoons: immersing myself in dirt, sweat, and sustenance, and then inserting myself into a climate controlled world, surrounded by walls, all interaction mediated by screens. As I began this new pattern my new boss remarked "that's great, you get to do your physically challenging work in the morning, and your mentally challenging work in the afternoon!" The other farmers laughed when I told them he said this.

One of Hana's express purposes in making her children and nephews work on the farm from a young age was to prepare us all for the job world, to cultivate critical thinking and work ethic. My effectiveness at my

new job is entirely due to my practice farming.

Just thinking about whether a tomato is ripe enough to pick or a squash is big enough can take a great deal of thought and experience. The decision is inevitably qualitative, unlike so many of the decisions I have to make when facing a screen. Coordinating just one other person on top of this can push the mind to the limit: I can never seem to time it perfectly such that we finish together in a similar place, and I never find just the right way to explain things so that I'm understood completely and things get done just right.

Even my most zen job, Mowing, is an intellectual pursuit. Every time I mow I am faced with an impossible task of optimizing efficiency and aesthetics without spraying grass on crops or mowing over hoses. After mowing the whole farm over a hundred times I still have not found the ideal pattern for even one field (but I'm always getting closer).

Physical vs. mental is an inadequate dichotomy to describe my dual working life right now. I would call it human vs. cyborg. When I farm I am completely immersed in human experience, challenging different parts of my body and mind, bruised, scratched,

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10 month old farm baby Rowan Durst devours watermelon while her mother bunches flowers on a Friday afternoon. Last year at this time Rowan was kicking her mom from the inside during flower bunching time. This is much more entertaining for all of us.

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and covered in the dirt I was formed from. My corporate life is intentionally disconnected from human experience; the touch, the smell, the sight of other humans is considered more egregious every year. Meetings don't happen in person anymore: I've been on a teleconference with a person in an adjacent room, and no one thought it was weird. It would have been weird if one of us proposed we sit in the same room. All interaction must be digitized, and we as workers are thus reduced to central processors, a specialized computer interacting with another computer in a progressively more rationalized manner.

Had I grown up in an office, I would never have been prepared for farming. That's why I wouldn't trade my childhood for any other: I can apply what I've learned to practically anything, and I'm in a position to savor human experience on a daily basis. At least in the mornings.

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decided that three long ribbons, hung from a very high branch and slightly separated to form a narrow, inverted "V," would turn the site into a sacred space for an altar.

A week or so ago I set up the electric fence in front of the chicken house. I opened the hatch that gives the chickens access to the fenced-in lawn and watched as they began to graze the grass or nestle down for a dust bath.

I watched as two startled birds, maybe having received a mild shock, flew over the fence in the direction of the overgrown field behind the chicken house. I caught one and put it back in the enclosure, but the other scurried under the chicken house where I couldn't pursue it.

Because it had never been outside before, I wrote it off. If you had never been outside your house, could you find your way back in? I reconciled to the fact that I had lost the chicken, assuming it would soon enough be snatched by a fox or raccoon.

The next day I looked and listened, but there was no sign of it.

Four days after the incident, as I was replenishing the chickens' water in front of the chicken house, who should I see walking deliberately toward me from the other side of the chicken house? It seemed as if it had been waiting for me to appear. It walked up to me and with the mildest of encouragement I was able to direct it toward the door of the chicken house, picked it up, and put it back with the other hens.

I was delighted.