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Practice Makes Better

by Hana Newcomb

It is easy for people to look at what we do every day as farmers and to see how straightforward it is. It is not the slightest bit sophisticated, the daily work. You put a seed in the ground. You put a plant in the ground. You poke a hole in the plastic mulch with a stick. You pull out a weed (never just one weed). All of these tasks are familiar to anyone who has ever put a bean seed in a paper cup or who has had a little garden in front of their house.

And yet. When it is time to get down to business and do this work for real, planting for hours or weeding for hours or picking for a long morning, that's when a beginner can tell that it's harder than it looks. Yes, you are just pulling up a bunch of chickweed with your bare hands. A child can do that. But if you haven't had to clear a bed of carrots, with tangles of thready, vulnerable carrot plants in a tidy row, surrounded by grass or pigweed, you wouldn't know how much dexterity that can take. Every spring, we are in a field together, some of us are seasoned and some are new. We start together, we talk about the goals and the methods and how this all works, and we bend over or kneel down. Within 10 minutes,

a bar graph has appeared. The beginners are plugging along earnestly, very close to the starting gate. The second-year weeders are 20 feet ahead of them. And the old folks are 20 feet ahead of them. Inevitably, eventually the new people will say, "how do you do that?" And we will say, "it takes lots of practice." That's the only answer.

Every task takes practice to figure out how to hold your body, how to use your hand tool, how to move, how to use your fingers, how to work around the prickly plants. But as with almost

all physical work, the bulk of it is mental. Without focus, you can't learn. And without a positive feeling about what you are trying to do, you will despair. The tasks can be huge and overwhelming, and there is no way to learn skills if you don't tackle them with a clear mind and some amount of curiosity.

The nice thing is, it only takes about one season to get better at many basic and important tasks. And after two seasons, you are more than twice as skilled. And

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"transplanting," courtesy of rachel udall

A Strange Feeling

by Stephen Rose

I felt a strange feeling wash over me as I sat in the chamber of the Loudoun Board of Supervisors waiting to comment on the upcoming vote to preserve prime agricultural soil in cluster subdivisions. It was past my bedtime, I was stuck in a government building with shoes on, listening to the wealthiest landowners in the county complain that having to save farmland might not make them as rich as possible, and the weird feeling I couldn't shake was gratitude.

I felt gratitude for the entire process. I was in awe of the tireless efforts of farmer-citizens who drove this crucial initiative to preserve farmland. Their dedication renewed my belief in the possibility of meaningful political engagement. I felt a deep sense of pride and gratitude for the community of farmers in Wheatland and throughout Loudoun. They showed up repeatedly in large numbers, proving that agriculture is thriving and demonstrating their commitment to protecting the soil and building a sustainable livelihood.

I gained a new appreciation for county staff for their expertise in crafting a piece of legislation that balanced the seemingly contradictory needs of both farmers and developers. I also felt an uncommon gratitude for the members of the Board of Supervisors. Chair Phyllis Randall, despite her fervent claim that her knowledge of farming can fit in a thimble, educated herself on soil types and the nuances of the amendment. She was able to debunk the repeated claims of calamity from some of her wealthiest constituents. Ultimately she displayed an admirable commitment to public service by affirming a value higher than money.

I was admittedly unaccustomed to such swells of gratitude while wearing shoes in government buildings, but ultimately felt no mystery about the root of this gratitude in this context, which took me back to the fertile ground of my childhood at Potomac Vegetable Farms. From the vantage of one of the last remaining farms in Fairfax county, I witnessed the consequences of a rapidly growing county that does nothing to preserve farmland while I simultaneously lived the benefits of growing up in a community built around the fertile possibilities of good soil. My grandmother in her refusal to sell to developers showed me repeatedly that the value of good farmland cannot be reduced to monetary terms. Healthy soil produces healthy food and sustains life-giving relationships.

My parents' generation took this lesson further by preserving the farmland through the development of



Stephen, second from right, wearing shoes in a government building.

an intentional community. By creating Blueberry Hill, a 19-household cohousing community on five acres of unfarmable land, our family preserved the most productive farmland, fully anticipating the intent of the prime agricultural soil zoning amendment.

In Wheatland, our farmer neighbors followed suit, building a cluster of seven houses while preserving 35 acres of fertile farmland that offers a further demonstration of the successes this amendment may bring. Our thriving oasis stands in contrast to the surrounding farmland lost to development. As I raise my three children in this most privileged context, surrounded by a supportive community of interdependence, I feel intense gratitude for the soil and the life-giving relationships it sustains. We have been able to support our families, love our neighbors, and feed an ever-growing community.

However, this gratitude is tinged with pain. The abundance we have cultivated is built upon an undeniable exclusivity, a fundamental contradiction at the heart of the local food movement. Access to good farmland is severely limited by a market catering to the insatiable appetite for McMansions. Local sustainable farmers cannot distribute their food to those in greatest need if they are to sustain themselves and their workers must accept wages well below a living wage.

On June 12th, as the Loudoun Board of Supervisors voted resoundingly to protect prime farmland from development, I felt some of my pain dissolve into that growing well of gratitude. The possibility became palpable that tens of thousands of acres of fertile ground might be made available to support the growth of new regenerative farms, supporting more families and communities. This vote renews in me a commitment to supporting a growing, thriving web of relationships built on the fertile soil that sustains us all.

Farm Houses

by Chip Planck

All over the American countryside, solid farm houses, and their bare-bones tenant houses, residuum of a once thriving agricultural sector, remain standing and empty while the economy figures out what to do with a rural zone no longer in demand for its food production.

In the far countryside, the houses are boarded up (when not bulldozed) and planted closely around by Big Soy and Big Corn--no residents needed, just the occasional pass by huge machines. This is the polar opposite of the

outcome in the children's tale, *The Little House*, where the charming country cottage ends up dwarfed by Big Skyscrapers.

In the areas nearer cities, large-lot suburban sprawl is in the offing, but it takes time for the developers, roads, and demand to jell. Meanwhile, a mixed bag of customers for the some of the world's most indestructible shelter stock materializes: Working people always needing a cheap place to live, hippies and drug dealers, artists and other higher-toned escapists, and aspirant homesteaders and new farmers. This motley



photo courtesy of becky durst

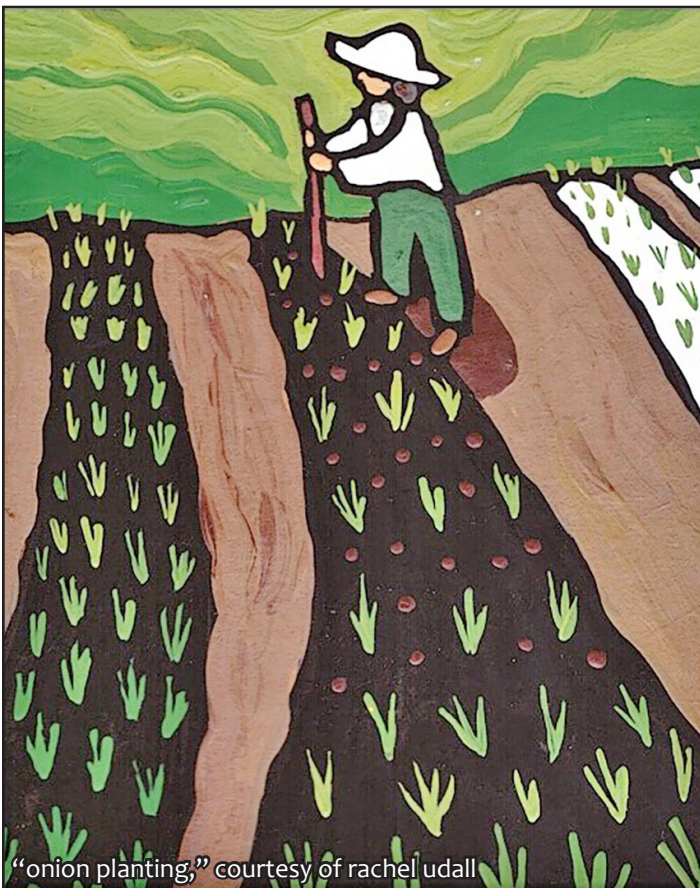
collection forms a brief but distinct post-farm, pre-suburb society. Not the "old Loudoun county" for sure, but just as surely not the culture a-coming. Not any more agricultural, but still rural.

The state of our house reflected a past of down-scale, temporary tenancy: ratty curtains had been hung across porous basement door frames with 10d nails. The kitchen sink drain pipe barely cleared the outside wall, eroding the foundation where it dribbled. Digging to improve drainage or plant foundation shrubs, we found middens of trash below each window. Some of the beer can labels from these were almost old enough to feel historical.

At dinner parties with friends in comparable dwellings, we trade stories of emergency enclosures and the launching of long-term fixes. A wonderful summary image comes

from our neighbor Phyllis Baker: waking in her ill-heated second floor bedroom, feet too numb to walk downstairs without falling, she descends each winter morning sitting down-- "bump, bump, bump". In the kitchen sits the precious wood stove, and nearby, the toilet, enclosed only with curtains for the moment.

In renovating these houses one had the advantage of beginning with serious and beautiful stone foundations, and rough cut oak framing, typically. They might initially leak and shake in the wind, but once re-sided, re-roofed, and sealed up, they would serve forever. Some, like ours, became farmhouses again. Some were given up-scale re-modeling and sold to professionals commuting to the DC job market. Still others were saved as an historic center-piece for the subdivisions built around them.



"onion planting," courtesy of rachel udall



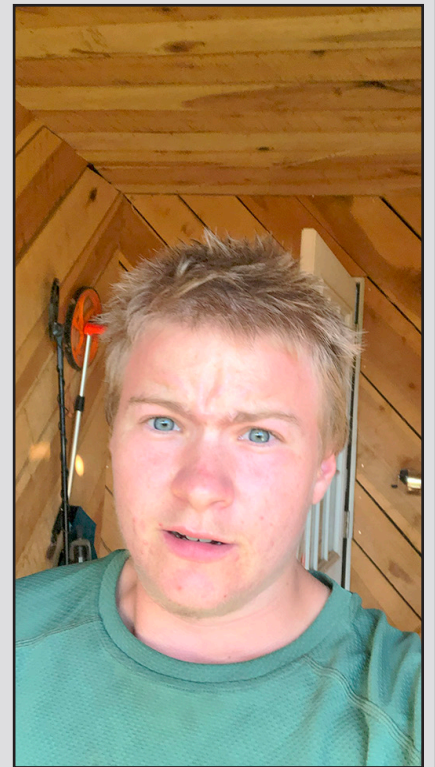
Michael Vercillo (he/him, Virgo sun), is starting his 3rd season working with PVF. He is excited about the garlic scapes that are coming in right now and plans to lacto-ferment them as a way to extend their delicious presence beyond their ephemeral window of late spring. After having procured a tomato mill (often referred to by the brand name “Squeezeo”), he is dreaming about tomato season, wherein he can make more of his strange ferments without bothering his neighbor to borrow their mill. “Conserva cruda di pomodoro” is a fermented tomato paste that has been made in Italy since the tomato arrived there. Tragically, he is all out of last year’s batch, and will have to wait a little while before he can make more. He promises he has other interests besides fermenting vegetables, he just can’t think of any at the moment.



Michael Bradford (he/him)

My sun and moon signs are Pisces and my rising sign is Libra. I’ve been working at PVF for about 20 years now. These days I’ve been listening to Kendrick’s Drake diss tracks on repeat.

Storm Ford White just (sort of) graduated from St. John’s College in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Hailing from the North Carolina suburbs, he has developed a fondness for nature and working within it (from lack comes desire). They just finished Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and are currently reading Kierkegaard’s *Works of Love*, Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Val Plumwood’s *The Eye of the Crocodile*, and Ottessa Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. His other interests: visible mending, book binding, making zines, writing, hiking, biking, and establishing a farm gym.



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in your third season, you may be as fast as you are ever going to be, unless you really pay attention to the ways you can walk shorter distances, load more effectively, make every effort to be efficient.

It takes about three years to experience

enough repetition to understand the arc of the season -- the beginners don’t yet have a vision of what it takes to be finished. The veteran is already thinking about what happens after we finish this, and how we are going to make that transition. The beginner is mostly here to survive the hours they

have planned to work. The veteran is here to squeeze in as many tasks as possible before the day is done.

It wouldn’t be nearly as fun if we all had the same amount of experience. Part of the fun of doing this work is teaching others and watching them learn and practice and get better

and better. It’s not so different from other work, but we get to use our hands and our bodies as well as our brains.

No matter how much we practice, we never get to perfect, and that is part of what makes it all so interesting. We just get better, and keep on learning.