

Gendai Nogyo Part IV

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Dear Ayame,

What are you making? A cake you say. That looks pretty good. I would like a piece when you are done. I look at you and I wonder what you will be when you grow up. Maybe you will be a wonderful baker and cook just like your mother. Well maybe I should say your mother and father because your dad is a pretty good cook too! But then again who really knows what kind of experiences you will have between now and adulthood that may shape you in ways none of us can even imagine. I grew up on a farm and until I was nearly 20 years old I never imagined doing anything else except farm. Why would I dream of other things? All of my Aunts and Uncles were farmers in my home town. All 53 of my first cousins went to the same church and went to the same school from grades 1-12. My entire life and history was rooted in that place. It seemed to me, as a child, that we had been there forever and I had no concept of things changing and that people grow old. I was President of our high school chapter of the Future Farmers of America and I achieved also a State Farmer degree which is awarded to only a small, select group of students every year. Upon graduation from high school I attended the University of Nebraska and was invited into the Agriculture Honors program a distinction reserved for only a handful of students every year. I enjoyed the challenges of studying and I did well. But there was something that didn't seem right about what I was being taught. I didn't know exactly what it was but I felt it in my guts. "Land, labor and capital are tools of the farm manager," Professor Hansen announced in his lecture in Farm Management. "Farming is a business and it is your role as farm managers to maximize your returns on these assets." I memorized this for the exam but the reality of what he was saying would mean that life would become unbearable. The virtues I had learned of caring for my neighbor or helping my uncle who had a serious case of rheumatoid arthritis and couldn't work would be judged as a waste of time in this worldview. Likewise, caring for the land would be looked upon as "sinful" because you are not maximizing production. Something like scales fell from my eyes and I began to look at our farm in new ways. Earl Butz, the Secretary of Agriculture, said in the early 1970's that farmers should get big or get out and that farmers ought to plant fence row to fence row to

maximize production. I could see that is what my family was doing. All the livestock were sold, the land was leveled so that we could specialize in growing corn. My dad bought more farmland and we put up more grain bins. What happens when everyone does this? Not everyone can. There is only so much land. It means that some smaller farmer will no longer be able to farm and they not only will go bankrupt but they will also have to leave the community because there is no other work for them. One of my high school friend's father lost his land and the stress of it all caused him to have a heart attack and die. He was 51. We need to think of how to share the land. Land is not only for producing food. Land is also a place to belong.

I felt something needed to change. Not only were farm sizes getting bigger the groundwater, which the previous generation discovered, was now being contaminated with nitrates and herbicide from growing corn. I thought organic farming may be the answer but discussions with my parents made it abundantly clear that organic farming wouldn't pay the bills. I felt caught. The continuation of this way of farming would end up destroying the community I was a part of while also impoverishing the soil. No matter how hard I tried to convince others of my way of thinking it didn't make any difference.

After my first year of University I returned home to farm with my brother and father for the summer months. I was having doubts about continuing my University studies so I stayed home to finish the harvest. I was 19 years old. After the harvest I noticed that there were very few of my friends and classmates still around my hometown. I was wondering what I should do. I was kinda bored. A group of members from my church, mostly farmers, decided to take a trip to Wichita Falls, Texas to help people clean up the mess and rebuild the homes that were destroyed when a massive tornado wiped out a strip of the city 1.6 kilometers wide and 10 kilometers long. We came as volunteers wanting to serve and care for those in need just as Jesus cares for us. When we arrived the local coordinator took us on a tour of the destruction. Street after street I saw foundations of houses stripped bare. My mind immediately thought of all the families whose possessions and place of belonging was literally blown away in the wind. I had never seen anything like this. I had always lived safe in secure with my family and community and I was taught by being part of this community that when someone is in need you help. That week went by fast. It was one of the most enjoyable week of my life. I returned at

Christmas and I faced one of the most critical questions of my young life. After the new year do I go back to University or do I go back to Texas to help people in need? I remember having a rather emotional discussion with my mother. I didn't know what to do. Do I go back to University? Do I go back to Texas? My mother finally said I can't help you. You are going to make a decision for yourself. I went back to Texas.

That decision one of the first consequential decisions I ever made on my own began to define who I am. The time in Texas only lasted a few weeks. Upon arriving home the United States government announced its first time peace time draft registration. The Soviet Union had just invaded Afghanistan and the US wanted to send a message that they would not tolerate Communist expansionism. This meant that all of the sudden I had to make another really big decision.