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After spending most of 1989 as an intern at The Land Institute I returned to Canada to find there was a job opening with a Church organization that was trying to find ways to address the farm crisis in Manitoba. One of the leaders of the Catholic Church in Winnipeg said, 'we can be counselling people until we are blue in the face and nothing will change. We need to know why the troubles are happening and do something about it.' Here was an opportunity to converge all of my interests of service to others in need, peacemaking, food and farming. For one year I travelled around the province providing the time and space for people to talk about the farm crisis. What is going on in their lives? I wanted to learn why is this farm crisis happening? What are people doing to break free from this system? And to learn what are the barriers that are keeping people from making changes. I listened. I wrote down their ideas, their hopes and their fears. Making changes in established routines whether its a personal change or a change in farming or marketing or politics is disruptive. There is no guarantee that the change will be for the better. For some the old patterns even though people may know the habit or pattern is harmful it is a habit that is familiar. The unknown, although possibly better, is scary. Fear for your own survival crushes the imagination.

What I learned is that people when they have a safe place to reflect on their experience they have a pretty good idea of what is going on and what needs to be done to bring about change. What I also learned is that the biggest barrier to change is personal— a lack of self worth or a fear of what others may think. People need to feel that they belong to something bigger than themselves. But when the system that they belong to is hurting them or making life more and more difficult where do you go? I renamed the organization I was coordinating. I called it Stewards of the Land. Its mission was to awaken and then nurture a vision that everyone has a part to play in caring for the soil. I wanted everyone to understand that eating is a part of agriculture. Where our food comes from and how it is grown shapes our health and the health of our land and community.

Three topics kept arising in our community gatherings. People wanted to be part of food systems that treat people fairly. Farmers wanted to learn more about farming practices that are both ecological and economically sound. Lastly, farmers needed access to affordable land.

I knew the stresses that farmers were under as some began contemplating a new path. I decided that I too would join in the risk taking by joining together with four other families to start a neighborhood bakery in the neighborhood where we lived. We prepared by taking business classes and making a plan. The instructors at the business school thought we were doing everything wrong. Our business name was too long. We didn't have a parking lot. We didn't have a catchy phone number and the building we were wanting to rent had seen two bakeries fail there in the past 3 years. So in spite of doing everything wrong, Tall Grass Prairie Bread Company opened its doors in September of 1991. I was given the task of delivering a short speech introducing the owners and why we wanted to open this bakery. The grains of wheat that we milled at the bakery every day were grown by farmers that we knew. We wanted to pay them a fair price so that they could live and also afford to take care of their land so that we could have wheat in the future. We wanted to pay a living wage to our workers so that they too could live without fear. We also wanted to provide people who entered our bakery with good tasting, nutritious baked goods. Our why was clear. We wanted to transform Manitoba agriculture by paying farmers a fair price so that the land could be cared for and farmers could afford to care for the soil. We wanted to treat our workers fairly by paying a living wage. Finally, we wanted to

provide our neighbors with good tasting and nutritious baked goods made with fresh ground flour milled on sight at the bakery. On the opening day of the bakery I was asked to give a brief speech in which I told those gathered that without farmers we would have no wheat and without land well cared for the land would not produce our daily bread. All of us need to work together to make a more livable society. As a symbol of this joint work I wanted all of those gathered that afternoon to share a loaf of bread together. As I asked one of the owners to get a loaf of bread from the bakery they came back and told me that all of the bread had been sold. There was none left. For a moment I didn't know what to do. Out of the awkward silence a man who had earlier bought a loaf from the bakery said, "Here you can use mine." This man whom I had never met gave up his loaf of bread that he had bought for his own family to be used for the neighborhood to celebrate the making of a caring economy and way of living. I will never forget that.

I learned some valuable lessons from starting this bakery. One, the importance of appropriate scale technology. We had our own flour mill that we milled flour for our neighbors. Because of its low cost we could pay farmers a much higher price for the wheat and we were making our flour for much less money than the large scale flour mills. The big mills need big trucks, big warehouses and they have to travel long distances to sell their flour. We had no truck, only had enough grain for two weeks of use and the flour was milled and used to make bread every day. Our flour tasted better and the nutritional quality was higher because of its freshness. I spoke of our small scale flour mill as the Canadian equivalent to Gandhi's spinning wheel. It brought back local control to the people to help promote connections between people, keeping money in the local economy and providing benefits to personal health. I also learned that buying grain directly from farmers was against Canadian law and that the interpretation of laws could change. In the 1930's grain companies collected grain from Canadian farmers promising them that they would pay them after they sold the grain in European markets. They didn't keep their promise. Farmers organized cooperatives and the government required grain buyers to buy licenses to purchase grain from farmers. The license was expensive. It provided protections for the farmers. We couldn't afford to pay for this license and we thought this law was keeping us from treating farmers fairly. For two years we bought grain directly from farmers paying them cash on delivery. We were paying them four times the market price. The farmers were happy. The government eventually found out about our activity through reading articles about Tall Grass Bread Company in the Winnipeg Free Press. One day I got a letter from the Canadian Wheat Board. In the letter I was told that I was buying grain from farmers in violation of the Grain Buyers Act. I phoned the office and asked if I could come to talk to the government official in person and he said, "Sure." I stopped by the bakery on the way. As I entered the office I saw a man sitting behind a desk the size of a football field (it was big). He asked me some questions. How big is your elevator? I said, "we don't have an elevator." He looked at me with a puzzled face, "How do you get the grain in your mill?" I shrugged my shoulders and made the motion of scooping grain out of a bag and dumping it into a hopper. He held his forehead in his hand. He continued, "What is your ultimate product?" I knew that he meant what is your final end product but I pretended to think that what he meant was what is your best or most popular product. It was then that I reached into my bag and said enthusiastically, "some people just love our cracked wheat bread. Others think our multi-grain bread is the best as I pulled out another loaf. But, I think our ultimate product is our cinnamon rolls. Would you like one?" After a brief moment of silence we both reached our hands across the desk and he took the cinnamon roll from my hand. I reached in my bag and pulled out another one. Together we shared cinnamon rolls. As we ate I confessed that I knew that I was breaking the literal translation of this law; I did not have a grain buyers license. I was not, in my opinion, breaking the spirit of the law which was created to protect farmers' livelihoods. We desired to treat farmers fairly. Before he was done eating the cinnamon roll he unilaterally

changed the law. "You don't need a grain buyers license." He told us that we needed to put a sign in the bakery informing farmers that we are not covered by Grain Buyers Act. By doing what is right it is possible for laws to change. It was accomplished through cinnamon roll diplomacy. It wasn't just my actions that led to this change. I believe that there was also an invisible spirit at work in our encounter that helped to make the lives of people in Manitoba a little bit better. In the following year's a few more local mills were opened enhancing the lives of farmers and strengthening local connections. I will tell you about the community supported agriculture project next time.