

Gendai Nogyo
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Dear Ayame,

What did you have for breakfast? Do you know where the eggs came from? How about the asparagus? What about the bread? Do you know who grew it? Do you know how it was grown? Do you know how it got from the farm where it was grown to your table? Was the farmer thinking about you as he planted the seeds and harvested his crops? Most of us don't think about these questions as long as food is abundant. As you grow up I want you to think about questions that not everyone else thinks about. I want you to be curious.

We are part of a food system in which everyone is trying to maximize their efficiency and happiness through buying and selling commodities. Companies are making machines and chemicals to maximize their production and profits. Farmers are trying to maximize their production and profits. The JA, transportation companies and grocery stores are all thinking too about their profits. You have to think about these things to remain in business. In this world(view) everyone is competing for their own survival. It is the biggest and the strongest that survive leaving the small farmers and the land to suffer. Small farmers may not much of a concern for the strong but the decline of soil health is a concern for all of us.

I had a good friend that I learned a lot from when I was in Canada. His name was Brewster Kneen. He had an interesting life. When he was young he joined the navy and while serving in the Navy he had a change of heart and he became a pacifist. He believed that you do not solve conflicts by killing those you don't like. After leaving the Navy he studied the Bible and he studied economics at University and he became a journalist. He was very interested in the food system and wrote many stories about the few large companies that dominate the food marketing and processing industries as well as the companies which provide chemicals and machines for farmers. He understood the system from the perspective of the powerful but he wanted to know what it was like to experience this system from the perspective of a farmer. What I appreciated about Brewster so much was that he didn't want to write **about** farmer's problems from the comfort of the city. Brewster decided to leave his job and become a farmer himself. For almost 20 years he raised sheep in rural Nova Scotia in Canada with his wife and family. Here he experienced the manipulation of the sheep buyers. The buyers made him feel like they were all in competition with one another because the buyers would say if you don't like my price I will just buy from the farmer down the road. I learned the importance of communication and organizing from him. He and his wife Cathleen wrote a newsletter to share their thoughts and visions and they also worked together with the neighboring farmers to create their own marketing cooperative so that they could collectively process and sell their meat directly into the retail market. He believed that rather than suffering the humiliation of the present system work together with others to make a world that you truly believe in.

I met Brewster shortly after he left the farm and began writing books about his experience. I was around 30 years old. His first book was called From Land to Mouth I guess you would translate that "tsuchi kara kuchi made." It answered for me some of the pressing questions that I had in relating to the farm crisis in Canada. Brewster liked to talk about the way systems think which shape the way they act. If you believe that in this world that the only way to survive is to be the biggest, fastest, most efficient person well then you will tend to act that way. Brewster thought we need to know how the system thinks and then, in his words, "reverse the logic". Do just the opposite! So rather than becoming the most efficient specialist

in growing one thing for a distant market. Think about **ecological balance** and **diversity** as you grow food to feed people in **proximity** to where you live.

To address the farming crisis that was gripping Manitoba I felt that we needed to think differently and act differently. I called together a group of 12 people that I knew had been talking about changes for a long time. I told them that the present crisis gives us an opportunity to actually do something to address the low prices and the social isolation of farmers. I asked, "How do we get city people to take responsibility for sourcing their food in a way that the land is cared for and the farmers get a fair price?" I shared with them a new video that had just been made about community shared agriculture or CSA. CSA's are an arrangement in which people living in the city pay for their vegetables at the beginning of the growing season and in return the farmer delivers freshly harvested vegetables to a neighborhood dropoff site every week for the entire growing season. It is kind of like paying for a magazine subscription. You get a magazine every month but you don't know what is in it. The vegetable box is the same. What is different is that city people are sharing the bounty of a good harvest and also sharing in the risks of the weather. Some vegetable varieties may be plentiful while others may be a failure. It is another reason why diversity is important on the farm.

How do you go about getting people interested in the idea? We decided that we would make a "Made in Manitoba" meal in the middle of winter for a group of people that we thought would be receptive to the idea. After the meal I gave a talk about the reasons for the farming crisis in Canada while Farmer Dan the CSA farmer gave a presentation about what we wanted to do. Diane Ray, the CBC Radio Noon farm journalist was invited to attend. She interviewed members of the audience and the following day the interviews were broadcast across Manitoba. Many farmers listen to the broadcast. The idea gained traction. Soon Farmer Dan and I were doing radio call in programs, farm journalists approached us for doing stories, as well as television stations. After three months of media interest the Winnipeg Free Press wrote a feature article in the Food Section. That day I will not forget. One hundred seventy five people phoned me and said they saw the article in the Free Press. Nearly everyone's conversation was the same. We have heard about this story all over the place. It is a great idea that I want to be a part of. Where do I send my money. In the span of four months what started as an idea turned into a 200 member CSA. City people gathered in their neighborhoods once a week to pick up their vegetables, share recipes and just got to know their neighbors. People felt safer because they knew each other and they all were receiving good food knowing that the farmer was caring for the land and receiving a fair price. Many gathered at the farm for a summer pot luck meal and concert. Children ran between the rows of tomatoes and later they broke into teams and ran relay races using a zucchini as a baton. Part of me could not believe what I was seeing. I spent much of my time immersed in the news of farm suicides and bankruptcies but before my eyes were farmers and consumers who were happy to be together even though they had previously not known each other. How could this happen and happen so quickly? I can't rationally explain it.

Ayame chan, between you and me, I think that people were rediscovering their true selves. I think that we can only find our true selves by being connected to others and to the soil. I don't know when there will be another dramatic shift in societal consciousness. But what I do know is that human beings cannot be alienated from their true selves forever. The time will come when people will discover the joy and happiness of being connected to other people and to the life force in the soil and the world will change. This change can happen a lot more quickly than we probably can imagine. It doesn't depend on us trying hard or trying to convince others to change. It is an awakening which comes as a gift. When you experience it there is no going back.