

Gendai Nogyo
October 2024
Belonging

Hello Ayame,

Oh my goodness! I can't believe another month has passed since I last wrote you. I want to share some things with you about belonging. Belonging has many levels of meaning. You can talk about belonging to a family and the special feelings of sharing love and feeling secure in the embrace of your mother and father. You can also talk about belonging to a place. There is security in knowing where you are going to sleep each night. There's vegetables and grain in storage and your Papa just cut up and stacked firewood for this winter. As we have taken care of this farm it in turn has taken care of us. I am thankful to God for all of you. Belonging is truly one of the true joys of living.

Not everyone has a feeling of belonging. Wars can separate people from places that they once belonged. The nuclear disaster in Fukushima in 2011 resulted in people leaving their farms and villages to which they had belonged. Hundreds of farmers on the Canadian prairies in the late 1980's and 1990's lost a place to live and belong because of agricultural policy changes and market price fluctuations. In some of these instances of losing a belonging to place family members also died. Either from an accident or suicide. So it is like a double loss of belonging. Grief blends together with the fears and insecurities of an uncertain future.

Farmland ownership is different in Canada and the US than it is here in Japan. Here only farmers or companies engaged in agriculture can own farmland. Over there anyone can own farmland. For young families who would like to farm they have to compete with lawyers and doctors and businesspeople who may want to buy a farm to go hunting or fishing a few times a year. They are willing to pay prices for farmland that are higher than farmers are able to pay. I wondered, is it possible to make farmland affordable and make it possible for farmers and rural communities to experience the security of belonging to one another and to the land. Together with my friend, Brewster, and a lawyer friend, Herb Peters, we began to think about the establishment of a community farmland trust. Land trusts are a hybrid legal structure between pure private ownership and state ownership. Political and religious leaders as well as citizens and farmers would make up the local board. They would issue the right to use the land to community members and these members would use and care for the land and would have the right to pass that right to their descendants. Land would be transformed from a speculative commodity to a place in which communities discern together how to live and care for one another and steward the land. We weren't alone in thinking about this. Native American people were also thinking about this and inner city people were also thinking about how to maintain control of land and housing for the benefit of those who live there.

We held a meeting in Brandon, Manitoba a modest city of 50,000 people in western Manitoba to discuss the idea with area farmers. When I woke up the next morning the lead story on the front page of the Brandon Sun newspaper was about the meeting we had just held the previous evening. A large color photo of me accompanied the article. National newspapers and television stations phoned me and wanted interviews. This small gathering became national news. Brewster and I believed that this was one way to fulfill the Biblical vision of Jubilee in which we can live out the belief that the land belongs to God and we are called to take care of the land and one another.

Some large scale Mennonite farmers living in Manitoba who were very generous in giving money to the church were adamantly opposed to this idea. These Mennonites had stayed in

Russia and their ancestors experienced the confiscation of land and the execution of land owners and the business elite. They had lost everything and had escaped Russia with only their lives. They wrote letters and demanded that either this program be stopped or they would stop giving money to the church.

For two years I poured my whole life into my community organizing work. I travelled alot. I met many extraordinary people who were also out to change the world. I had this feeling of confidence inside of me, that with enough planning and strategizing, that there's nothing that I couldn't do. I wish I could end the story here. But life isn't always happy. Someday you will learn of this so I may as well tell you. As excitement grew for the Community Shared Agriculture, the bakery and the community land trust work my life began to unravel. My first marriage failed. The church community I was a part of no longer wanted to associate with me. For a few days I was homeless. I even lost my job. I even came close to taking my own life because I just felt I couldn't deal with all of the pain. I was seeing a spiritual director through this time in my life and he told me I need to learn to be grateful...for everything. Even for painful experiences that seem overwhelming. His advice literally saved me from drowning myself in the Assiniboine River one cold dark night. I felt an angel came to me that night and I was changed. Something died inside me that night. All of the pain and the experiences I suffered from were still there kind of like a scar that you can see. But the pain and suffering I began to see was part of my healing. I began to see in a new way that life is a gift. The great things a person accomplishes in life comes as grace. Our work is to be thankful, always.

It was during this complicated time in my life that who you call "Bono chan" came into my life. We worked together and shared many things. We began a journey of discovering if we belonged together and if so where do we belong. I will write more about that next time.