

RECONCEIVING “FARMER” FOR A NEW GENERATION

by Harry MacCormack

Often it is helpful to look to our ancient ancestors to shake habits that are modern. Proto-Indo-Mediterranean Culture by Henry Heras redefined for me the notion of farmer. At least 7,000 years ago in Mohenjo-Daro India kings were called farmers. That same set of inscriptions forms the base culture-signs at the root of the Sumer digs which date almost a thousand years later. The Sumerian signs indicate what is translated as “farmers on behalf of God” being kings. Such naming allows convenience of identification of humans in community. A name is a mnemonic or memory device that summarizes what it represents. It sets up practical interaction in an apparent world based upon seeming function in that world.

Our world is in an apparent situation of enormous change. Whole paradigms accepted as modern realities are rapidly shifting. We are participants in the mutations that accompany the winding-down of all that has been developed over the last century with dependence on inexpensive oil. With those changes comes a need for a new cultural use of the name ‘farmer’.

Generally one who farms is identified in our time with rural land and ownership or lease. Use by the farmer of that land is judged by modern culture in terms of money earned through management of the land resource. Farmers are seen as successful in terms of their ability to produce product efficiently; costs-sales ending in profits. Modern farming has adopted industrial, manufacturing practices, including economies of scale and labor; whatever it takes to be ‘sustainable’, meaning to stay in business season after season. This paradigm is as true for organic farmers as it is for our conventional counterparts.

Farmer as successful entrepreneurial business person is most ordinary people’s mnemonic for those that produce food. That mnemonic replaced Old McDonald’s Farm, what is entailed in the notion ‘family farm’.

We all hear at meeting after meeting that we need to entice a younger generation into farming. But the rub is that most young people passionately interested in growing plants or animals don’t have access to ownership of land, all the capital investment that is entailed in the buildings, equipment and labor required of our conception of a modern farmer. Most are turning away from willingly becoming high-powered entrepreneurial business people. Their sense of ‘farmer’ has shifted. Where has it shifted to?

Usually they speak of a desire to participate in community. That desire translates into a feeling of resonant responsibility, not only with the elementals of pristine air, water, and uncorrupted human and other energy fields, but with soil micro organisms, the ancestors of basic fertility whose resilience must be continually re-stimulated for optimum nutritionally dense food production. A kind of Pure Land ethic guides these younger potential farmers as they struggle to enact their beliefs without succumbing to the industrial market model. They sense that we cannot

recreate the European landed farm reliant upon plowed acres. It is simply not affordable. So what is a practical alternative that would stimulate younger growers to commit for life to being a farmer?

The farmer-king designation comes from agriculture at the village scale. The farmer-kings role in the village was that of sentient transmission, of working with the primary relationships of the cosmos and earth that ensured fertility and food supply for village neighbors. Importantly, this cultural designation required a community of other humans who shared commitment to a village that was highly organized with everyone participating in the necessary networking to grow and store food. The farmer-king was in that sense a designer-creator; in the highest sense a ruler whose judgments were honored in their collective efforts. Land was 'owned' by the community. Needed tools were developed and owned by the community. In other words, major community capital allowed farmer-kings to function without all the cumbersome burdens of being a modern business person.

What about money? When a food web community works, money or trade is part of the fabric when it is needed. Economics comes to mean 'taking care of everyone'.

In our time most food is shipped into urban/suburban dwellers. The new farmers will be working not in remote areas, but close to or even within population areas. The kicker is that those populations will have to reorganize themselves as neighborhood villages where farmer-kings are honored community participants in a functioning food web system. These skilled grower-farmers will be practicing their craft on land that often resembles our current conception of gardens, intensely managed, nutritionally vibrant, square foot by square foot. Some larger parcels on the outer edges of cities will be managed with the same frugal intensity, the largest parcels being relatively small by today's mono-crop standards.

This notion of farmer-kings in community food webs is a huge paradigm leap away from local entrepreneurial business models operational in farmer's markets, CSA's, and value-added practices. It is even further away from national and international marketing as the driving force behind agricultural decision making. But as I work with the most committed of our younger growers, being woven into the fabric of such an organized food-web excites their self conceptions and their willingness to be farmers.