“For there is a hidden alchemy in the organic process. This hidden alchemy really transmutes the potash, for instance, into nitrogen, provided only that the potash is working properly in the organic process. Nay more, it even transforms into nitrogen the limestone, the chalky nature, if it is working rightly. The fact is that under the influence of hydrogen, limestone and potash are constantly being transmuted into something very like nitrogen, and at length into actual nitrogen. And the nitrogen which is formed in this way is of the greatest benefit to plant-growth.” This is the nitrogen I want flowing on our farm- homegrown nitrogen, so to speak. By enclosing the herbs in animal organs and burying them, new and unique humus products are created to add to our compost piles. Alchemy refers not only to the transmutation of elements, but also to the transformations that happen in our souls. The farm offers many opportunities to work on ourselves, along with the other farm chores.

An example is a walk in the woods after being in the garden. The forest air feels thinner and the darkness is disquieting. I’m reminded that the scary scenes in the fairy tales often occur deep in the woods. Back in an aromatic meadow my senses calm down, the butterflies act tamer than the birds and the aromas are more earthly. The garden feels the most comfortable to me, it is familiar and homey.

“I do not say clairvoyant, but you can easily become clair-sentient with respect to the sense of smell, especially if you acquire a certain sensitiviness to the diverse aromas that proceed from plants growing on the soil, and on the other hand from fruit-tree plantations and from woods and forests. Accustom yourself to specialize your sense of smell- to distinguish, to differentiate, to individualize, as between the scent of earthly plants and the scent of trees. You see, the farmer can easily become clair-sentient.”

At another point Steiner asks us to think of a simple peasant-farmer walking over his fields, who meditates in the long winter nights. Two ways of looking at the world begin to merge; a scientific one and a romantic one. Without belittling intellectual consciousness or bemoaning the loss of instinctual wisdom, we can develop that latter while retaining the former.

“We go through the fields and all of a sudden the knowledge is there in us. I in my youth, at least, when I lived among the peasant folk, could witness this again and again. The merely intellectual life is not sufficient- it can never lead into those depths.”

Dad was born in 1906, several generations away from an intuitive peasant wisdom, Steiner was a bit closer. When we moved to Tennessee, our neighbors still worked horses, lived without electricity, and planted by old proverbs and moon signs. They valued livestock greatly. I could only learn from them by keeping my mind wide open and paying close attention to what they were doing. Steiner was quite the intellectual himself, so I find the comments on his own education enlightening.

“I grew up entirely out of the peasant folk, and in my spirit have always remained there. As I look back on my own life, I must say the most valuable farmer is not the large farmer, but the small peasant farmer who himself as a little boy worked on the farm. In my life this will serve me far more than anything I have subsequently undertaken. I have always considered what the peasants and farmers thought about their things far wiser than what the scientists were thinking.”

Helpful, practical advice pours forth from the agriculture course, and stellar farms worldwide prove its efficacy. Steiner loved both the simple peasant who really knew his or her own farm, and the academic scholar trying to understand the myriad processes occurring on the farm and in Nature. The two views are not mutually exclusive. Farmers and scientists can grow far more together.

“It will always be a beautiful memory to me if this course becomes the starting point for carrying some real and genuine peasant wit into the methods of science.”