

I'm on a No. Ca. diet. That's short for Northern California, which is where I visited my family last week. Brother Mark took me on a trip up to Medocino County, complete with giant redwood trees, ocean cliffs, hot springs, vineyards, and biodynamic farms. I spent several days with my cousin, Sue, and enjoyed a meal with my niece, Bianca, Sue's son Aubrey and his new family.

The first stop was Frey Vineyard, the first organic winery in California, where a biodynamic conference was held. We learned about a method of scientific research based on observation, mental representation, silent contemplation, and data recording. The subtle processes in nature reveal themselves through forms. Clearly picturing in our minds what we observe, and then being silent, opens up pathways for new insights.

The layers in a leaf cell and the membranes of animal organs can be compared to a battery. These are made up of alternating layers of materials, creating electrical potential, which is used for energy. We learned that microcosmic forms mirror macrocosmic one, such as the way atoms move like galaxies in the same vortexes we also notice in water and plant growth.

Patrick was there; he had been to our farm and invited us to his. They grew 8 acre of fruit and vegetables near the Pacific Ocean. We could hear the roar of waves from the gardens. The soil sparkled with silica and the hills and the 200-foot tall redwoods pointed straight up. It felt very different than Tennessee's limestone soils, rolling hills and rounded oaks. California feels expansive, but home definitely feels more nurturing.

With no rain for 6 to 8 months, everything is under irrigation. It never gets much below freezing and I saw olive trees, lavender and rosemary thriving in this Mediterranean climate. The landscape looked so different, with manzanita bushes and live oaks covered in mess.

I saw lots of solar energy, windmills, bio-diesel cars and organic food. Everything was more expensive, particularly land and taxes. But jobs pay more, although they've been hard hit by the economic recession. Mark's work as a house painter has slowed down considerably, but Sue has a good job caring for an elderly neighbor, and Bianca still works with horses, at a local riding stable.

On the last day we drove to the Golden Gate Bridge. Sights like these inspire my enthusiasm for human ingenuity, artistic design and practicality. The Greeks discovered the parabola, which distributes weight hung on it evenly. The iron-age brought us steel cable, and I can't imagine the practical problems people solved to get the bridge built. I skipped going across it into San Francisco, opting for a walk on the beach instead. It's goodbye to family, ocean and golden California; I am homesick for the frozen hills and hollows, and the warm hearths and hearts, of good old Tennessee.