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How do we learn? How do we teach? The 16th annual (and may be our last) Southern Biodynamic Conference, Sept. 30-Oct. 1, will explore agricultural education and practical training. For the past 16 years our farm on Long Hungry Road has served as a campus and classroom for several dozen interns and apprentices. We have been visited by hundreds of curious gardeners full of questions, and the farm has been seen on the Volunteer Gardner TV show by many thousands. I guess that means I am a teacher.

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Unfortunately, this may all come to an end. So I followed through on some requests to teach at colleges in Nashville. There is clearly a need for organic farming education, and I was quite well received and am respected there. But I don't want to leave my home in Macon County, and feel heartbroken at the prospect of having to move.

Old farming books are one of my favorite resources in learning and teaching. An 1897 yearbook of Agriculture says " The art of agriculture is best learned on the farm." Our market garden and organic farm has been a great place for learning, and many of my students have chosen farming as their career.

The old USDA publications promoted self-sustaining farms, integrating livestock and crop production on the same land. From the same book "Barnyard manure contains all the fertilizing elements required by plants in forms that insure plentiful crops and permanent fertility to the soil." This is a far cry from what hey promote now, which is highly toxic grain production, shipped to CAFO's (Confined Animal Feeding Operations) and results in destroyed rural communities and environments.

A seventh grade textbook, Elementary Agriculture, published in 1913, tells us “A system of farming in which the crops are sold as livestock and the manure is returned to the soil saves the soil.” When we grow our own feed for our animals, the right amount of manure is there to maintain soil fertility without having to buy it. I love the old time practices from the era before corporate farming took over, and am grateful to have witnessed it here in our country.

Communities formed around self-sufficient farms and resulted in the people I’ve grown to love in Macon County. As Thomas Jefferson said “These who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God… The corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators (farmers and gardeners) is a phenomenon of which no age or nation has furnished an example.”

CAFO factory farming is the complete opposite. Both promoters and opponents of CAFO’s agree on one thing, and that is they always create conflicts in rural communities, research has consistently shown that both the social and economic quality of life is better in communities characterized by small, diversified family farms then where chicken houses move in.

The first CAFO on this part of Macon County is proposed just a few hundred feet from my doorstep, threatening my home, garden and livelihood.

Here’s a list of some of the speakers who will be lecturing at the conference this weekend: Walter Moora, a dairy farmer from Wisconsin, who’ll talk on education and his life experiences; Mark Trela, a horticulturist from Indiana, speaking on metals; Tom Terry, an agriculturist economist and former Tyson Chicken Farmer; Greg Bran, a USDA expert on integrated pasture management; Susan Lein, a Kentucky homesteader and market gardener; Philup and Laura Lyvers, confinement hog farmers using organic practices; Karen Overton, a natural chicken and hog producer; Richard Monet, a beekeeper from Georgia; Hector Black, who has had a long lifetime of collecting rare fruit and nut trees from around the world; Hank Karczinski, a tropical spice grower from Costa Rica; and the three new farmers that I trained on the three organic farms I started in Davidson County, near Nashville.

All of the meals will be homegrown food, raised the old timey way. I realize most people in Macon County aren’t happy that Tyson is moving in here and threatening a small farmer’s business and many rural residents’ homes. Please come visit the beautiful gardens soon. Feel free to drop in this weekend and help celebrate good clean farming, and the agricultural education that I learned from traditional Macon County farmers.

For more information about the conference

See the flyer on www.barfootfarmer.com