

THE VIABLE FAMILY FARM

This morning, my husband and I banded our last-born calf, Hunding, turning him (painlessly) from a bull-calf into a steer. We will slaughter him (in the field, without trauma) after he has fed on grass for eighteen months. He and his siblings will feed our customers and us on beef that is tender and flavorful, but has less fat than a skinless chicken breast and is free of chemicals, hormones, or antibiotics.

This afternoon, I chopped up some of our stored apples and fed them to Loveday, our beautiful Jersey cow, who is due to give birth in April. At that time, her calf will stay with her, and she will still provide us with enough milk, (and butter, cheese, yogurt, and cream) to supply our customers, our animals, and us.

On the way back from grooming Loveday, I helped my husband pen our chickens after their day of free-range foraging. He collected their eggs, and then fed the sheep and cows hay and vegetables produced from our own fields.

Tomorrow, I will pick vegetables from our 2000 square foot garden, which supplies twenty-five people year round. In the summer we raise a few pigs on vegetables and local grain, and our orchard bears fruit, berries, and flowers.

The received wisdom is that family farms are a thing of the past. But this farm has fed the family for thirty years, and in the last seven years, my husband and I have gone from two full-time salaries to one half-time salary with no change in living standards. My half-time teaching salary pays the utility bills, buys what the farm cannot produce (toilet paper and cleaning supplies, books, magazine subscriptions, gasoline and clothing). I bake our bread, and we make our own pasta. We use no machines but a small tractor, a hay rake and a mower. The farm is debt-free.

We grimace when we read that family farms have gone the way of the horse-drawn plow (as a matter of fact, one of our neighbors farms 80 acres using two teams of handsome Belgians -- *real* horsepower) and that only corporate farms can survive economically. The first fiction in that claim is that family farms were ever completely self-sufficient. Except in places where people homesteaded in isolation, there was always an outside income to provide, as mine does, cash for shoes, clothing, a kitchen stove, fencing materials. A farmer would sell butter and eggs. His daughter would teach school in town. His sons would take winter jobs in a local sawmill. But the main support of the family came from the farm. It still can. And the farm can feed its non-farming neighbors.

The other fiction is that corporate farming is economically viable. Currently, over 30% of corporate farming profits come from government subsidies. Our taxes. Passage of the Daschle-Harkin Bill would provide \$73.5 billion, over ten years, in addition to \$98.5 billion to maintain existing programs. By supporting corporate farming, our taxes also contribute to the abuse of factory farm animals, the genetic modification of crops, and a dead sea the size of New Jersey in the Gulf of Mexico, due to runoff from large-scale pig and corn farms into the Mississippi River. We also pay for the arsenic, hormones, and antibiotics fed to animals in order to increase their appetites, productivity and resistance to disease while they await slaughter in muddy feedlots. We pay taxes that fatten the pocketbooks of corporate farmers and their shareholders, and poison ourselves. Wouldn't it be better to support small, organic, sustainable farms like ours?

We follow a few simple rules to keep our farm environmentally sound and economically viable:

- We keep it small. My husband and I manage the animals, vegetables, greenhouse, and orchard by our selves. When we can no longer do that, we will cut back the size of our operation.
- We feed ourselves first, and sell the excess to our community. Even our modest production nets several thousand dollars per year.
- We incur no debt: we save money for water systems and outbuildings before we install or build them.
- We maintain a closed system: The cows, sheep and chickens are bred and raised here, and gain natural immunities from living in one place. Our piglets come from a neighbor. We do not import replacement animals, feeds, or sources of fertility. The animals fertilize the pastures, and our compost builds rich topsoil in the garden. I preserve fruits and vegetables in summer so that we have a generous supply in winter.

Our farm is self-sufficient and sustainable. Because it is organic and complex (soil organisms, vegetables, flowers, fruit and animals all thrive together and feed each other) it is free of pests and disease; it sustains people, wildlife, farm animals, birds, insects, and the microorganisms that help plants make food from sunshine. We live in a place that we have made beautiful. We have the best food in the world, perfect health, robust, peaceful animals, and the satisfaction of providing delicious, healthy food to our friends and neighbors.

In this time when foods that are nutritionally deficient, poisoned with herbicides and pesticides, travel, on average, 1400 miles from field to market; when BSE, salmonella, and E-coli threaten people's health, isn't it time to realize that the family farm is a viable prospect?

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