

Meanwhile Back at the Farm... October 18, 2001

Howdy,

Well I'm not going to rant and rave this week even though my prediction last week of state sponsored terrorism came immediately true in the form of anthrax hysteria. After all only a few governments in the world have actually succeeded in making high quality anthrax powder. What's more on my mind this week is closer to home and more personal. I talking about the ending of Our Farm. I spoke about this a couple of months ago during the eviction from Woodside. I told you that we had been financially ruined by a number of events capped off by the eviction.

I operated Our Farm successfully for over 8 years against all the odds. No one thought I'd get past even the second year trying to pioneer a CSA on a steep hillside on the edge of the urban Peninsula. Our Farm didn't just make it as a farm but as an oasis of reason and sanity in an area gone mad with materialism and greed. Thousands of visitors, students, government officials from all over the world, and Ag experts, passed through the farm and its tours. Thousands of kids came and discovered, many for their first time, where food actually comes from and that nature is not the enemy but a bountiful ally to be cultivated. Countless eyes were opened, horizons expanded, policies formed or changed, lives enriched, even saved, and other farms changed in profound ways after their operators came to see what we accomplished on our terraces on the edge of the city. Hundreds of people found the courage to move out of town after being encouraged by our success and have fulfilled lifelong dreams of reconnecting with the land. New strategies for land management, were developed, and taught to hundreds of Permaculture students from around the globe and many of those students now serve as beacons of hope and knowledge in their communities. Its success opened the way for me to be able to teach and speak at a wide variety of venues reaching thousands more people. I tried to carry the message that we can heal this planet, we can heal each other, and we can do it ourselves, now, without waiting for some parent-like authority to come save us.

The CSA gave me a podium to speak truth to power. A difficult and frightening prospect guaranteed to make those in control a bit nervous. It was necessary, is necessary, but isolated us from the privilege and comfort of being part of the system that seeks to keep the status quo and minimize ripples in the pond. We never were able to find our way to the troughs where other non-profits feed and had to fund ourselves all along. In some ways this was part of our strength. If no one is paying your bills then you don't have to censor yourself to meet your benefactor's approval. Somehow we always seemed to be able to persevere no matter how big the challenge. Over the years that we were in Woodside we paid over \$100,000 in rent. That in itself is quite an amazing accomplishment for a 2-acre farm.

Although we always seemed to be short of capital we essentially seemed to be doing fine but lurking beneath the surface was a truth that we had only really begun to face about a year and a half ago. That was of course the vulnerability of not owning our own land. In fact over 90% of organic farms are on rented land, an ominous vulnerability for the entire movement. Last summer we resolved to start a process to "reformat" ourselves to begin to qualify for grants so that we could find and buy our own land to remove the vulnerability so apparent to us at that time. I felt good that we were addressing this issue in advance of any threat to the organization since there wasn't

any hint of problems with our tenancy at that time.

Then, last fall, as you recall we were confronted for the first time in 8 years with a drastic downturn in the underlying source of our income, the farm itself. The now defunct Webvan with its 500 million dollars in capital, seduced almost 80 percent of our customer base away with their offer of free home delivery of organic food among all its other services. I analyzed the situation by talking with the departing customers and some of our remaining customers and quickly identified the problem and designed a solution. We needed to switch from a customer base which previously valued us for convenience to one committed to us because of underlying values of health, politics, and environmental concern. I knew this strategy would work since it had for a past business I had in the East Bay called Planetary Movers. I also knew it would take a huge amount of energy virtually equal to that of starting a new business to survive. No problem, I thought, I've started lots of businesses in my time and the path was very clear.

The problem was of course, capital. The sudden drop in customers meant that I needed to bridge the gap between where we were and where we were going by developing a new customer base. That's when I appealed to you and other members for loans to make it possible to have the time to rebuild the customer base. Several of you came through and although I knew it would be tight, I raised about half of what I thought I needed to comfortably execute my business plan. I could see that if no big unexpected blows occurred we would make it fine. After all I had made a career of substituting adrenaline for capital all my life.

I launched into our new marketing program doing mailings to politically aligned groups. I also gave lots of talks to smaller groups, went on radio and television shows, did benefit farm tours for groups, had lots of organizations promote us in their newsletters, and a host of other things. I was working six and a half days a week burning adrenaline just like I always had done when I was younger. Everything was working as planned. Our numbers went from 20 members up to 60 in the first couple of months (briefly over 80) and was continuing to climb. I could see we were going to make it.

Unlike the past however I wasn't doing so well. I started having multiple health problems and began experiencing deep fatigue, which I tried to recover from by sleeping almost the whole day on my day off. I delegated more to interns but I couldn't seem to recover. I kept pushing however because there was no slack in the budget and I was determined to keep the farm going. I started in on acupuncture and other alternatives as well as trying to get a diagnosis of what my problem was through Kaiser. It wasn't until months later that my diabetes was diagnosed.

During this difficult period the landlord decided that she wanted to cash in on what was then a nationally famous real estate phenomenon due to dot.communism. I pleaded with her to give us until the end of November 2001 so that we could finish the summer season and to give us the time to get grants to buy land. She refused but would go as far as June 30th. The stress I experienced due to this was enormous.

The timing of the eviction couldn't have been worse. It caused us to have to curtail marketing of the CSA since it would have been irresponsible to sell shares if we didn't have enough land to grow the food necessary to service those shares. We had planned to rent out rooms in the house to cut our \$1800 rent to near zero but could no longer ethically

do this with the eviction only a few months away. Grant cycles were such that we had been planning to have located a new place by November and have capital to buy at that time. But having the time shortened up to June made all of that impossible even if we didn't suddenly have the enormous task of trying to find a place and then move the entire farm during the height of the growing season. Things went from looking great, our plan coming together on schedule, to suddenly finding ourselves fighting for our very survival.

In this crucible of unimaginable stress my health failed utterly. Although the doctors still don't really know for sure what is wrong with me it certainly is partially due to unbelievable stress. The diabetes contributed but did not explain why I was suddenly only able to work an hour or two a day before becoming exhausted. The radical change in my diet, away from carbohydrates to protein and fats quickly brought my blood sugar levels under control (much to my doctors' disbelief). But the lower blood sugar levels set off huge amounts of exhausting and debilitating pain in the nerves of my feet and hands.

My days of being able to run a business single-handedly were essentially over. Even though a number of people offered land for Our Farm to use we lacked both the capital and now my physical ability to build a new farm from scratch. It took everything I had just to keep things going on the already established farm. As you know from previous newsletters I accepted the situation and realized that I was basically finished. I looked at all the options and I decided that taking the job here in Pescadero, working part time to develop a farm for Ed would give me the opportunity to get some rest and recover my health. Just as important however, Ed agreed to fund the continuation of the Our Farm CSA until the end of the season hoping to capture the renewals for the CSA he was developing for his farm. He also saw it as a cheap way to learn if operating his farm as a CSA was to his style. Making sure that everyone got the food that they had paid for was very important to me. I did not want Our Farm to be the source of doubt when people considered signing up with CSA's in the future. I didn't want the local public to think, "CSA's?? Oh yeah that's where you pay in advance and hope that you get the food you paid for." This has unfortunately happened in some other parts of the country. So taking care of Our Farm's members figured prominently in my decision to come to Pescadero.

Ed's place was already an organic farm. It was not a raw piece of land and he had equipment and capital. Expansion was all that was needed. It was a hard blow to my pride to have to work for someone else but I had to be realistic since I was really sick for the first time in my life.

I have gone out of business before but I had always been proud of the fact that I paid my bills and found work for all my employees when I closed my doors. I have been the most unusual of species—an entrepreneur that had never had to declare bankruptcy in more than 25 years of starting and running a variety of businesses.

I had hoped that the CSA would be able to continue as Ed's business and that there would be a good chance that you all would be able to continue to get food this way after the end of the season. As you know even up until a month ago we had been discussing continuing with a winter share as Our Farm had done for the last 8 years.

Unfortunately Ed and Gayle were hit by a huge unexpected bill from the IRS and this wiped out the capital that was going to be used to develop the farm and have it fully functional by next spring. Ed, Gayle and I have looked at a variety of ways to make a go of it and Ed even looked into borrowing money to make up the temporary shortfall until the Spring income flow from CSA share sign ups. But nothing worked out.

I want to say here that Ed and Gayle have been unstinting in their support to see the CSA through to the end of the season. Given that there won't be a following season their original motivation to fund the finish of this season, to capture business for next year, has gone up in smoke. People with less integrity would have pulled the plug to save a few dollars leaving both you and I in the lurch. In their having to end the farm they have generously continued paying Matt, Bat-Ami and I to finish the last few weeks of maintenance and harvesting sharing my feeling that we wouldn't want to soil the reputation of CSA's in the region. These people have done a very good and honorable thing. I'm very glad to have met them and I wanted you to know who to thank for our bounty. I want to thank all of you who have been members, many of you for many years. Your support has been what has made it possible for me and my various colleagues over the years do the good work we have done. You now know it really was your support too. We didn't have foundations propping us up or underwriting the educational work of the farm.

I don't know what to do next. What happens when you go for your dream, get it, and then it ends? When you haven't gone for it then you still have it to aspire to. It's pretty awful to try and figure out where to go after your dream collapses. I wouldn't wish it on anyone. If you hear about some sort of work I'd sure like to hear from you.

If anyone wants to write something either privately to me or to be published in the last few couple of newsletters send it to farmerdave@permaculture.com. You can also mail it to Box 164 Pescadero, CA 94060. My current phone if you want to call is 650-879-1404. Remember November 1st is the last delivery week.

The Food

Genovese Basil: Oops last week I'd thought we'd harvest this but we harvested the purple instead. We got it right this week.

Cho-ho: I just love this stuff.

Spinach: A fresh bed of this great tasting stuff.

Beet Greens: These thickly planted beets have very tasty sweet greens very much like a baby swiss chard. Use it like chard or put them in salad or stir-fry.

Celery: Most of this celery has thin stalks since it is technically leaf celery rather than the usual heavy stalk variety of celery. Use the leaves and stalks in recipes.

Summer squash: These plants continue to be generous.

Cucumbers: Almost none left.

Tomatoes: We picked ones that were at least a little pink this week. Leave them on your counter to ripen up. Next week we'll be picking straight green tomatoes and will give you recipes for those.

Kohlrabi: Although common in Europe, they are almost unknown here. Although they look like alien space ships they actually are related to cabbage. These are the giant Chinese variety. Peel them and use them raw on salads (I grate them) and sandwiches (thin slices) or cook them. So sweet, crunchy and tasty.

Arugula: Last week it got pretty badly bruised in packing. We will try to do better this week.

Collard greens: Yet another nice bouquet of these thick meaty leaves.

CELERY

The soup below uses both the tops and leaves of celery heads. It is very economical and very delicious.

LEEK AND CELERY SOUP

1 cup minced celery tops and leaves	2 cups water
1 cup minced leek tops	2 tsp. salt
1 medium-large potato, chopped	1/4 tsp. freshly ground pepper
3 Tbsp. butter	2 cups milk
1 Tbsp. butter	

In pan over medium heat, saute' celery, leek, and potato in butter for 10 minutes, stirring often. Add water, salt, and pepper, cover, and simmer over reduced heat 30 minutes or until vegetables are very soft. Mash in the pan with a potato masher. Stir in milk and reheat to just boiling.

Ladle into soup bowls and put a bit of butter in middle of soup.

**Excellent reheated

**May be made hours or a day ahead.

BRAISED CELERY

1 head celery	Salt
Several slices leek or onion	3 Tbsp. butter
1 carrot, thinly sliced	Chopped parsley and celery leaves

Bouquet garnish (parsley sprigs, a bay leaf, and a few thyme sprigs) tied with string or gathered in a piece of cheesecloth. 1/2 tsp. peppercorns and a pinch of celery seeds

Remove the leafy ends of the celery and peel the large outer ribs. Cut all the ribs into 3-4" lengths. Put the leek, carrot, bouquet garni, peppercorns and celery seeds, 1/4 tsp. salt, 1 Tbsp. butter and 3 cups water in a wide skillet. Bring to a boil, add the celery, cover, and lower the heat to simmer until tender when pierced with a knife, about 30 minutes. Arrange the celery on a platter and strain the liquid into a saucepan. Boil until 1/2 cup remains, then whisk in the remaining butter to make a little sauce. Pour it over the celery and garnish with chopped parsley and celery leaves.

GRATINEED CELERY

Put the braised celery and its sauce in a gratin dish and dust with freshly grated Parmesan, dry Jack, or Gruyere.

Broil until the cheese melts, then serve.