



THE SPIRITED VIEW

Connecting sustainability dots

At this rate we may be going to hell in a technological hand basket

**CHRISTOPH WEDER**

Perspective is sometimes lacking as we trod through our daily routines. We become so focused on tasks, missions and planning for the future that we often forget about the present and how it all is connected.

Let me recount the past 10 days. Besides the daily routines, I have listened to Imagine propaganda from Monsanto, worked with a beef focus group in Nova Scotia that was trying to get a vision for the future of their industry, dealt with 25,000 pounds of beef trim being destroyed because of E. coli contamination, worked with x-McDonald's (Restaurant) marketing gurus to develop an advertising plan for our new burger program in Toronto, watched a CBC documentary called "Sacred Cows/ Mad Cow" and recounted the rants of a producer who is production transfixed. To top it all off I then read a book by Wendell Berry, called, "The Unsettling of America" that helped connect the dots.

Freud said, "The further we get from reality the closer we get to insanity". Berry said "that agriculture has given away ecological responsibility in favor of financial accountability". The two may seem worlds apart, but study them closer and they are directly related.

As most of us will agree agriculture is a biological process of relationships. For every action there is a reciprocating reaction that sets a process in motion. It is as simple as a seed that is planted. From it a crop germinates, and soil nutrients are utilized, while solar energy is harvested. Four months pass and the crop must be harvested, unless mother nature decides to



The key for beef industry survival is to get back to sustainable production systems.

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPH WEDER

take care of the process herself. As agriculture moves more and more towards financial accountability, the less we remember our ecological responsibility.

Take for example the Imagine video from Monsanto aired at the Farm Tech 2009 conference in Edmonton. In a nutshell it was the equivalent of the Winston Churchill "we shall fight on the beaches; we shall fight in the hills" speech" on how this modern day agribusiness crusader was waging war on world poverty and hunger. In my view, Monsanto's tactics

of diluting and destroying traditional germ plasma are causing the destruction of traditional agriculture models that have worked for hundreds of years to maintain societal stability. It has forced Third World farmers from independence to dependence, no better than a junky in downtown Vancouver.

As much as I thought the Scared Cow / Mad Cow documentary on CBC would be off in left field, it stirred my thoughts of the Monsanto message I felt I was forced to watch the week earlier. Society has a belief that for some reason the future will always be better than the present. In fact, future needs are used as excuses justifying misbehavior in the present. Wendell Berry, says, "We are using up future necessities in order to make a more abundant future". It sounds like a far-fetched paradox, yet if we look at how we have squandered resources, it is real. Our society has sacrificed land to make way for urban expansion, water to necessitate the dissipation of tar from sand, and air to dissolve pollution from production that we have not found a use for.

Many westerners (myself included) believe the cow to the people in India is purely a religious symbol. As it turns out, the cow is more than just that. It is transportation on the streets, power in the fields, fertilizer in the soil, milk in the stomach and independence in the heart and soul of Indian farmers. Take away the cow and add a tractor and their society collapses like a building whose foundations have been blown from within. Add GMO crops and TUs to a society that has been biologically savvy, self reliant and built on inter-

generational knowledge, and I believe you have the formula for societal self destruction. Which is in fact what is taking place as we commit a society to sacrifice and make way for the future. Why does it happen? Because the people and specialists who promote these ideas do not have to live in or live with the repercussions of the processes they have put in motion. They are isolated from the communities that are affected!

Our beef industry is now more condensed than ever. Fewer producers, fewer feedlots, fewer packers and fewer retailers. If I were to put it in biological terms we are genetically predisposed for extinction. Our industry's strategy for survival is to become big, specialized and low cost. At least that's the answer given from producers who are disgruntled with my vision for beef industry sustainability. Employ more technology to produce it cheaper, faster and in larger volumes so as to stay ahead of the curve. This low-cost resolution however comes with an eventual restitution. And we all somehow miss this connection.

Take for example our packing plants and food processing. Everything is about more, faster and less. Our food is the cheapest in the world and somehow our society, governments and universities are fighting a war to keep us in this No. 1 position. Plants sacrifice quality for quantity and then we wonder why we have things like Listeriosis and E. coli contamination. We are all experts and have 20/20 vision at seeing symptoms, yet we are blind at seeing the problem and better yet the disease underlying these systems. These more, bigger, faster, more efficient throughput sys-

tems are resulting in more screw-ups and in an effort to deal with them we invent more technology, to deal with it. It is like a dog chasing its tail. Rules are made to compensate for the shortfalls and the small processors that cannot keep up become another statistic of extinction.

In Nova Scotia I worked with a beef industry focus group that was in a last-ditch attempt to stave off the extinction of the Atlantic beef industry. Some would argue that their demise is a natural process, however after seeing how this industry was intertwined with the landscape and the culture it is hard to agree with this notion. In fact, I would argue that their traditional grazing and pastoral system coupled with feeding byproducts from the potato industry was by far more sustainable than any "green washed" intensive livestock production system from western Canada.

Sustaining soils, water, landscapes, rural communities, biological diversity and future generations in agriculture will be about re-coupling cities and rural communities. It will be about reconnecting our food with ecological accountability, it will be about understanding the repercussions of solutions and it will require a look in the mirror as to what is really needed to create a better future. In fact that is what I told the X-McDonald's marketing gurus, and they said I was right. Now let's hope they act on it and better yet we all act on it.

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