

I Just See Life
A Conversation with Alex Podolinsky
2006

Peter Botsman: I was listening to the radio and the American poet Ted Kooser was talking, he said a student came to him and said “We don’t do that poem anymore, we’ve already done that course”! Bureaucracy has taken over. It’s taking over the environmental movement as well, but Demeter has a different philosophy...

Alex Podolinsky: Well we don’t specifically concentrate on countering bureaucracy. Our work is to show life. At the IFOA (International Federation of Organic Agriculture) conference dinner recently in Adelaide there was a eulogy for two people, myself and Burnwood Gaiya. Burnwood built IFOA, but he left because it had got too bureaucratic. They said I had a vast intellect, but the first thing I said was that I had no intellect whatsoever! I just see life.

Biodynamics is about life. Life counters bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is like a clam that just freezes every activity. Organisation is something different from bureaucracy. We have organisation in our work but nothing is fixed. You find this in primitive societies. They don’t succumb to bureaucracy. Our organisation, the biodynamic agricultural association, has no formality. In our meetings what happens, happens at the meeting spontaneously.

If you go to conferences now you are to supply papers beforehand. I refuse to do this. The last international conference on the *State of the Planet*, focusing on the ecological problem, was held in 1980, and nothing was pre-formed. Something happened at the conference because it was totally unpredictable. Speakers didn’t have to supply what they would say beforehand, and it was invaluable. It represented an international study of the characters of countries and of truth about the state of the planet.

A man from Ghana was perhaps the greatest contributor and Egyptians, Nepalese and other small nations contributed well. There won’t be another *State of the Planet* conference like it because of bureaucracy. These days it’s not worth going to a conference because everything is pre-cast.

Lively meetings are not pre-cast. If people meet something must happen or its not worth meeting, there must be freedom in this.

That also translates into the way members of Demeter and the farmers are a part of the organisation. You can’t earn a credential with Demeter you have to be able to demonstrate that you are putting life into the soil...

Alex Podolinsky: If you want to be registered then Demeter is our trademark. But the main focus is the word bio-dynamic. Demeter is the trademark under which people who have developed their farms sufficiently can be admitted to the market. But the main basis of our training organisation is biodynamics – the dynamics of life.

Our training organisation has nothing to do with certification. The organisation revolves around our system of advisors. Any farmer who has learnt to practice

biodynamics properly, becomes an advisor if requested. He doesn't have to advise. He is asked. I may ring him and say 'there is a new person in your area would you take him under your wing'.

I have never taken money. That has set an atmosphere. Normally everyone wants money, everything is done for money. I won't take money. I would lose my freedom if I did so. How could I go onto a farm and say: 'you are trying to run a motor car on four square wheels' - (and that is normally the case) - and then, 'give me five thousand dollars?' It would be shameful and I would lose all credibility.

Others have followed my example. Now I can virtually ask round the globe for advisors. You really know in life what you have done through practical experience. Theoretical training is hopeless.

Nearly all school teachers are frightened of the children and that is why they have to be so authoritative.

It's very good to read Tolstoy's essays about the school he started on his estate before he became a famous writer. The first rule was the children didn't have to come. The second rule was they could do what they liked in the classroom. It was up to the teacher to be creative. The children taught him how to give a Russian lesson. If they stayed away for a few weeks he knew he had done something wrong. He started out by giving lessons much like those he had received as a boy in a good school and they stayed away. It was boring. The worst thing you can do in teaching is to bore the children. Today they are bored nearly the whole week. You have to be creative with children. They are not bureaucrats.

Teachers are generally frightened of the children because they are not creative and have to be taught how to be creative. People who are born to be teachers generally have disorderly classes. No-one is frightened and the children express themselves. That's how it should be.

Agronomists today are trained in god knows what, but most do not know how to run a farm. There is a wide grin on farmers faces around the globe when an agronomist speaks. They know: 'this man, who is pretending he is so very clever, couldn't run my farm'. That grin represents life against bureaucracy. So we are about life. We have no regulations in our association. It is born of the life of biodynamics and the question is how to spread that philosophy and practicality.

We think carefully about democracy in our association. The normal thing in a democratic association is that it starts with a few good people. They are more mature and less egotistical. When the board or committee is changed then people who are ambitious, who shouldn't be on the committee, push themselves forward. The good ones are too mild to be able to counter that and after a few turn-overs they create a shocking committee and they become very bureaucratic.

Bureaucracy hides that you have got no life. You have to prove the need for your existence by being bureaucratic.

So we have a different system. The existing board, the people who started it, nominate new members onto the board, and they have to be presented at the AGM and the nominations have to be agreed to by the floor of the meeting. It is a totally different procedure. You have those who really know what the organisation is about and they nominate new people onto the board. So this situation where you can't say no, especially to a rich person or to a pushy person, doesn't arise. That is the way we have organised it from the start and we have not become bureaucratic.

So leadership comes from knowledge

Alex Podolinsky: It comes from life. You've got to keep the life going and you've got to see that you keep it going and you have to work out how to do that. The number one is quality. Quality of people who guide the whole thing and quality in what is produced, ie the quality of the food. People have gone around Australia and they have visited each certifying organisation and tasted their food and they have all said that Demeter is by far the best.

We have never had a default and there is a lot of swindling going on in organics because many members are in it for money. They get paid more if it's called organic. This is a recipe for disaster. Denmark is often held up as the great example for organics. Well four years ago forty four per cent of Denmark bought organic and last year only eleven per cent did. Consumers say organic food tastes no different why should we pay so much money. It doesn't taste any different because the organic fertilisers are just as water soluble as the artificial ones. This is all in my lectures or people can read it on our website. www.demeter.org.au

I hesitate to ask this question but do you think you are winning with this strategy or are you fighting a never-ending battle...

Alex Podolinsky: We are the only organic association in Australia that has a marketing company. I founded it but have nothing to do with the running of it and it was developed by my fourth son Peter and his wife and it is a very important ingredient. When Peter started about twenty five years ago, 90 per cent of what was produced bio-dynamically went for export and that was mainly grains but also other things. Big amounts of grain went to Europe. I had a big fight with the Wheat board to segregate the quality of our grain. We had to fight the big export organisations to maintain our own packaging and processing from the lowest common denominator.. But now only 10 per cent of our products are now exported. All the rest is sold here in Australia.

Some years ago the marketing company was judged to be the 23rd fastest growing company in Australia. Now I am totally uninterested in this but there are many people employed and we have just had to double our stands in the Melbourne markets. Here at Powelltown is our biggest warehouse no other organic companies have such a diversity of products from yoghurt to wine. There is no other company in Australia in the organic world that has such facilities and caters for all our producers and brings them to one place and then redistributes them.

Peter and I have never talked about this but we are of a similar mind regarding money. First of all the commission he takes for marketing is less than anybody else.

Second he pays the farmer much quicker. Organic farmers have begged him to sell their stuff because they were cheated. This is where Peter has asked me should he also take organic produce and I have said if he or she is an honest farmer, do it, if you can help them.

Being a not for profit company gives Peter the chance to operate quite differently technically and commercially to the other people who are in the market. He pays the farmers quicker and fairer than the other agents in the market. I won't go into details but this is all important because life will remain.

Peter is for quality not just for turnover and the marketing company actually works as a bank. I found that there were new silos CO₂ sealed, an invention of the bio-dynamic work in Australia, and the farmers told me that Peter had advanced them the money to build them. Their wheat would have been lost because they couldn't store it. There is no interest on the loans and Peter doesn't press for repayment that is left to the farmer's decency.

Money should never lie like a brick dormant it should be in movement and not in shares or whatever else. All that is unreal. We have a country with certain values. This farm has certain values, if it was on the stock exchange it would go up and down and people are making money from the fact it is going up and down. It's a hoax, as much a hoax as using chemicals and using artificial fertilisers, genetic modification and so on.

Science becomes intermixed with technology and people are not clear anymore as to what is scientific and what the requirements of science are, for instance in classical science the scientist had an observation that was real. It was either done by himself or by an apparatus he had to design. He came up with an answer of understanding, a concept. Today that has changed.

Over the last sixty years the basic requirement of science has changed. The method now is to have a working hypothesis instead of an observation and statistical evidence is to be the understanding concept. Take thalidomide, the hypothesis was that it stops nausea and pregnancy and the outcome was a terrifying crippling of babies. That was the effect of the statistical answer and today we have that with nearly everything. Doctors don't know the effects of drugs and medicines. We are the guinea pigs. We are simply to report on side effects. This shows how little is known about a particular drug. Only in the last few years many drugs that were once praised have been taken off the market. That's not science, technology has got into it. You know that this particular combination stops nausea and pregnancy but you don't know what else it does, that's not knowledge, there is no knowledge in that at all.

Any substance that is put where nature hasn't put it in the first place, is dangerous. In the name of science we just do anything now. We synthesise drugs and it is assumed that the synthetic substance and the natural substance are the same. But there is no evidence of this whatsoever. The way things are tested is loaded and not objective. So I'm suspicious of any substance that is used outside of its natural place.

We work today with models in science. For example a model of agriculture is: soil holds plants upright. We feed the plants with the major and minor minerals that are

known this plant needs, or it is supposed this plant needs. Through a soil test result we have an ideal of what to use, and if this is not enough then we add, and if there is a disease we find a chemical. In this model one thing has been forgotten and that is “the bank”. “The bank” is an area in the soil which can hold these water solubles that are put in there so they don’t run out into the river and cause blue green algae and other problems.

Now this bank in the real design of nature is humus: the colloid of humus. Humus is a colloid. At one farm of ours south of the South Australian border, a white sand farm originally, the humus in the soil was .33, after two years it was seven times that with biodynamics. Now that is humus not organic matter and the local agronomists refer to colloidal, organic matter because they can’t appreciate what humus is.

At the lecture in Adelaide at IFOA I took a fist size piece of 500, which is a colloid, and it is moist and you can knead it like dough and no water runs out, so 70 per cent of what is inside is water and beside that I had peat moss. Now peat moss just ran through my hands, it is dark organic matter but not a colloid. If you call that organic, colloidal matter its absolute nonsense. If it becomes colloidal its humus, and not anymore organic matter. There is a huge difference. Normal agricultural science does not distinguish between the two. Humus is the bank and it is essential. Conventional agriculture, like other science, works with models and that is a nonsensical way of building up organisation.

The real method is to look at the vastly intelligent design of nature. That is the real model we must aim for and that is what I have expressed in my lectures on agriculture: how nature has organised, and we have to re-create that from what has been destroyed by man with water soluble chemicals and fertilisers.

In biodynamics we have rebuilt a lot of totally compacted dead soils some poisoned badly, full of salt. We’re the only ones to have redeemed salt effected soils. There is evidence in my lectures from government aerial photos. This is what we have done by starting with the biodynamic preparations and they must be made correctly and put out correctly. We are very strict on this because I have seen so many poor practices in other countries around the globe where biodynamics has not understood as rigorously as through the BDAAA.