

Farm

“.. a farm comes closest to its own essence when it can be conceived of as a kind of independent individuality, a self contained entity.”

Rudolf Steiner, Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture, Lecture 2, 1924, p. 27

For Charles

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All things being equal it takes a long time, perhaps one hundred years to sustain a half decent farm. Money won't buy it. Technology will not create it. You need three generations with a disciplined, unbroken vision. Every step of the way is fragile and the whole enterprise may come tumbling down at any point. Without enlightenment it can be an impossible, soul destroying enterprise.

In my family, farms, orchards have come and gone to the point where I am starting to be the only one left who remembers them. As for most Australians life has come to mean working in some professional capacity. Without off farm income, it would be hard to sustain a farm. Life is easier in the cities and towns.

Farms are white man's enclosures. There was a bigger, freer picture for Aboriginal farmers. But there are some spiritual dimensions to nurturing land that are common to both and transcend the differences. In Australia, without the blessings of Aboriginal wisdom, farms and national parks are just empty enclosures that do not sit well on the land and will not survive.

There is a modern crisis of farming that begins with the industrial age. The fine farms and food of old Europe that had lasted hundreds of years were on the verge of a complete break down at the turn of the 19th century. Political, familial, demographic, technological forces changed everything.

Rudolf Steiner gave eight lectures on **Agriculture** at Koberwitz, Silesia from June 7 to June 16, 1924¹. They are more seminal now than at any other point of history.

Many of Steiner's practical ideas have been refined and improved. Amongst the most significant innovators was Alex Podolinsky - who arrived in Australia in 1949, 'saved from extermination by Stalin's Soviet "repatriation commission"'².

Steiner's lectures are luminous for many reasons. Looking back they appear to be a cry for reason on the eve of catastrophe. Unique in the world Alex Podolinsky gave practicality to Steiner's theories and thousands of Australian farmers have discovered the qualitative change that comes from what is now called "biodynamic farming". However, Steiners lectures are more than the foundation of new methods of agriculture, they are a guide to what has gone wrong in the communist and capitalist worlds. They remind us about what a good farm is: "an independent individuality, a self contained entity".

The eight lectures, now published as "Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture", were delivered at Count and Countess Keyerslingk's Koberwitz estate of 7,500 acres, one of the biggest farms in the region of Silesia.

Five years after the lectures Stalin ordered the collectivisation of the peasantry across the Soviet Union resulting in waves of state sponsored mass murder. All farming know-how was scattered by the four winds. Twenty five years after the lectures the region of Silesia, and the estate where Steiner spoke, was obliterated by bitter and protracted battles between Russian and German forces.

Steiner's thoughts were universally apt as the world moved to mechanised, industrial scale farming and small family farms were lost from China to South America from North America to Australia. Steiner mourned the lost of peasant wisdom and the rise of industrial farming and particularly the reduction of farming to chemicals, fertilisers and a calculus of inputs and outputs. Soon after his lectures, the peasant knowledge and the structures that sustained it, would be viciously eliminated across almost all of Eastern Europe, particularly in the most productive agricultural regions such

1 Rudolf Steiner, **Agriculture**, A Course of Lectures held at Koberwitz, Silesia, June 7 to June 16, 1924, Biodynamic Ramming and Gardening Association Inc, 1993.

2 Alex Podolinsky, *Life Contra Bureaucratism*, 2015, p. 1

as the rich farm lands of Ukraine but also too in the new worlds of America and Australia that revolved around mono farm cultures of sheep, cattle, wheat..

Estates like that at Koberwitz were wiped out completely and competent farmers were turned off their land or their farms were ruined by war. After this chaos and catastrophe Alex Podolinsky came to Australia and established a farm using Steiner's principles in Powelltown, Victoria. What had been lost, including the knowledge of Podolinsky's own Russian family and much of Steiner's practical teaching was saved, revived and developed further in the Yarra Valley, on the other side of the world in the antipodes.

The irony of Podolinsky's small Powelltown dairy farm that changed the world in many ways, is that it was very close to the courageous, tragic Woiwung estate and farm at Corranderk. No Victorian colonist could comprehend Aboriginal farms that were run by clans and families over hundreds of miles and which had been managed in an unbroken vision for thousands of years. Over run by European pastoralism Corranderk was a successful attempt by Aboriginal families led by Simon Wonga and William Barak to create a farming estate that would be a sustainable refuge for families trying to escape the barbarity of first wave colonisation. It like the later Maloga and Cummergunja enterprises was not allowed to be successful. There is a link here between the greed of land holders and the threat this poses to sustainable, bio-dynamically informed agriculture and Aboriginal self determination. Alex Podolinsky sensed this but he did not understand how close his own farm was to the original Yarra Valley Aboriginal enterprise.

Going back to Steiner now is not so much about understanding techniques of farming that have been so well developed by Podolinsky and the Biodynamic Farming Association it is about developing our understanding of what a farm actually is as a self sufficient enterprise.

The concept of a farm as a self sufficient, sustainable individuality that requires human nurturing, ceremony and labour could be a synthesis of ideal forms of agriculture across all cultures from the peasants of Europe to the plains of Mongolia to North American native communities to Aboriginal Australia to PNG villages. We now know well that industrialised, factory mono-crop agriculture fails on all grounds costs, quality of food, fabric and primary production and environmental degradation. History tells us that revolution, theoretical communism, dictatorships, monopoly capitalism, bureaucracy, colonialism and corporations are the enemy of organic agriculture, good food and high quality social relationships.

Fenced agricultural land as a form, also needs careful thought. Marvellous Melbourne was a product of the gold rush, but for the first non-Aboriginal colonists in the 1830s the plains between Port Phillip Bay north and west were the most lucrative virgin pastoral areas in the world. Millions of sheep and cattle quickly trampled the paradise that existed. That tunnel vision, which wiped out the original native water and agricultural systems, outlasted gold, and continues to dominate but, at least, with bio-dynamics we can think beyond farming materialism.

Podolinsky wrote: "The real value of soil; assets, productive capacity - have become encapsulated in a very powerful environment of un-reality: share values; stock exchanges; hypotheticals of finance, able to break the real value of a country's currency and its assets. Paper replacing gold; "purchase" on hire; and eventually credit card "purchases", where hypothetical money is minted by buying on credit; and the debtor's interest burden becomes a political tool. Media, especially TV and internet, with their ever "developing" additions - "software" - make for unreality of man's environment. It is not long a matter of a few getting richer and richer and the masses getting poorer. It is a matter of mankind being more enslaved than ever before in history. This includes that all but a very few are beset by fear of: losing a job, insecurity of income, position, advancement; even tycoons, of "investing" wrong; or being frightened of dying, old age, sickness; committing suicide - to get away from pressures. Everyone has to abide by the rules and bureaucracy of institutions, Government,

corporations, even religious denominations. Individual thought and expression stifled, “discouraged” or prohibited”. (Podolinsky, **Life Contra Burocratismus**, 2015, p. 160)

Podolinsky was most interested and curious about Australian Aboriginal farming. While he understood the limitations of Australian soil for conventional European farming he was also in awe of the thousand year old estates spanning millions of acres that sustained both a paradise and a healthy “peasant like” wisdom and even a Steiner-esque spirituality about land, water and animals.

For mainstream culture Steiner’s concept of individual farms with their own identities that are self sustaining and self contained is radical.

“Agri-business” which dominates Australian farming is very much oriented towards a money product which often is about mass cropping or singular agricultural production. There are now an increasing number of organic and bio-dynamic farms that use the techniques of Steiner and Podolinsky to create a more valuable higher quality product and to establish a more sensible farm economy. Bio-dynamic farmers are more efficient by improving what Steiner referred to as the brain of the farm, the soil and also the atmospheric dimensions of food production. We could stop there and most would want to.

However wholistic, self sustaining farms with their own identity are an even bigger story. They take one hundred years of inter-generational effort to create. They are precious, fragile and they take a lot of investment and hard work. Often farms which have this unique identity and quality do not survive agribusiness or capitalism. Land goes to ruin and is written off. Whole river and water systems are commodified and the living quality of water and land are destroyed.

The Aboriginal vision of the Dungala/Paaka Murray/Darling basin is a Steiner-esque concept of thousands of square miles of land. Up and down the river systems from Queensland to the Spencer gulf the rivers and filtrations systems and the flood plains were well understood as was the key to a fragile ecology. Water is not just what you see as a river. Its influence stretches under the soil and into the atmosphere. Clouds form.. rain falls.. life cycles are triggered in endless patterns.

Podolinsky relished the creativity of Australian farming families struggling in an impossible, unsustainable environment for European agricultural systems. He knew that the solutions he offered would be accepted because they worked when nothing else would. “To work with Australian farmers.. is humanly, relatively easy, as they are much less influenced by old cultural habits, but are objectively open consciousness, realistic to the need of income, yet, with quality production foremost - not greed for money, and confident, to listen unhindered by pride of Self.” He did not seek to advertise his Bio-Dynamic Association. “Vital to the health of such a living Association activity is that every enquiring farmer asks independently, ie without being influenced by the success of an acquaintance (even if he knows of such), relative or, especially by any kind of ideology. Equally of course there must be no “influence” or promotion, even “hope” for new enquirers by members of the Association, just presentation of facts and insight into Bio-Dynamic work - based on individual experience and Bio-Dynamic results. With farmers this can happen. They live simple and close to Creation - work in it”. (Podolinsky, **Life Contra Burocratismus**, 2015, p. 159)

Podolinsky concludes his autobiography: “A real Christian is one who acts impossibly unexpected or unexpectedly impossible - creatively”. (Podolinsky, **Life Contra Burocratismus**, 2015, p. 164) There is hope in this, where often in regions and agriculture there is only darkness, politics, real estate and mercantilism. Organic intelligence, creativity and active perception of life in all its forms are the polar opposite of artificial intelligence. Farms of impossibly unexpected creativity are the hope for all of humanity.

The actual techniques of biodynamic farming are refreshingly practical, mundane and simple. Stuffing manure into cow horns buried in a suitable cold winter soil, mixing and spraying mists of microbial fertility over fields and crops, composting with precision and use of suitable herbal preparations, understanding sunlight's influence on plants in different seasons and environmental conditions. These things make me think more and more of the yolngu ceremonies to protect the sacred burramundi to assure abundance and fecundity. All this seems so important for our practical survival and impossibly unexpected creativity. There are thousands of interesting, engaging and rewarding jobs to do on farms that go undone and over-looked and so many connections between Aboriginal knowledge, conventional farming and our own well being.

Why do we create incentives for Aboriginal people to live in towns and cities and create disincentives for them to live on their own homelands? Why do we incentivise young people to live in cities and suburbs where there is so much dependency on welfare, supermarkets, processed foods and artificiality? Should we not encourage self contained individual farms with their own originality and creativity in this vast land? And no this is not some return to a Santa Maria like Catholic ideal, because without biodynamics and Aboriginal wisdom, family farms fail.

In the future there will be more demand for alternative lives outside of cities and towns. Farming is hard and it requires skill and vision. But it is more satisfying than many modern occupations. Somehow the calculus needs to shift towards quality of life, food and humanity. Maybe we need to recognise that money cannot buy that and perhaps we do need to return to the Robertson Land Grant concepts as well as recognising new ways to invest in Aboriginal homelands.

In an age of robots a good place for people to live well is on the farm.

Podolinsky wrote "The real professional of Agriculture is the one who produces food akin to the artist who paints pictures. Food that is nutritious and not poisoned." Some of the results of bio-dynamic agriculture are very encouraging and salty, compacted soils have been turned around from barren farm lands to fertile productivity in the relatively short time frame of six years defying traditional farm thinking. But there are many challenges. If you can earn a minimum award wage serving tables but are paid by piece picking fruit, for example, in quite harsh conditions working long hours then it is understandable that there is a disadvantage in attracting farm labour. Similarly if you can earn more money selling, subdividing or renting your land than you can by working it then this also leads to people leaving farming. These simple realities create many dilemmas for farmers.

Agribusiness favours investment in labour saving devices but in these situations farmers end up working for the banks. Many incur unsustainable debt and work themselves to death. It is understandable that there are a lot of mental health concerns on broad acre farms.

Podolinsky built a very solid association by personally travelling the length and breadth of the Australian continent and seeing farms in their individuality and solving problems of land and income in a wholistic way with farmers. A similarly organic approach is needed in Aboriginal homelands. Biodiversity investments coupled with a bio-dynamic perception and a different concept of plains, river systems and big land management strategies such as that involved in mosaic burning in Northern Australia are needed from non-Aboriginal people.

It is interesting to contrast the Bio-Dynamic Agricultural Association with the development of exercises like the ISX (www.isx.org.au) The ISX has worked with a wide variety of Aboriginal enterprises within a context where Aboriginal families in city and regional areas could utilise Commonwealth and State grants to buy back land and in regional and remote areas Native Title agreements have secured access to land. Where traditional culture is intact such as many Northern and desert communities there is a form of biodynamic vision in place, perhaps it is even more

profound than Steiner's vision, and where there is self determination these communities are self sustaining, individual and rewarding places to live and work. They need nothing other than peace and respect to continue. Perhaps the chief historical lesson of the whole ISX enterprise has been to learn that simple reality: Australian colonists have everything to learn from Aboriginal culture and knowledge and probably nothing to offer. Sometimes it is better to do nothing and to turn back and work on the problems of the mainstream community.

However just as it is difficult to maintain and consolidate biodynamic farms in the current mainstream economy, it is also difficult to maintain and consolidate Aboriginal homelands and farm enterprises in more urban and regional Australia where Aboriginal communities are forced to live between two worlds. Anything to do with government grants seems to make things worse not better. Even where there is good will money frequently flows to the wrong people at the wrong time for the wrong reasons. Again forms of enlightened self determination for Aboriginal communities are more useful than not. Flawed as it may have been the Voice referendum was about trying to bring back that responsible and accountable reself management back to communities.

There is something like a malaise of modern life at work here, it has no political colours and Australia maybe healthier than Europe and North America within the Western World. Podolinsky wrote: "I have observed a government department over the course of 60 years, regulating an area affecting farmers, growing from employing 1 man, without cost to farmers for forty years, increasing to a department of 400 employees occupying many new buildings, and costing farmers \$2000 additional to rates and increasing every year". (Podolinsky, **Life Contra Burocratismus**, 2015, p. 152) As in the Aboriginal policy world "the measurement of progress" in things like Closing the Gap and the management of how rations will be dispensed attracts the funds, certainly not productive enterprise. If Aboriginal people or farmers are co-opted to join the bureaucracy all the better and so "progress" gets worse and worse. One of the distinguishing features of the Bio-Dynamic Agricultural Association was that farms and farmers had to show real demonstrable progress in soil quality and what may be called farm individuality and sustainability, often to Podolinsky himself, before they could earn the coveted Demeter status. This was not a flawless or perfect process but it was far superior to anything else in the world of organics or farm bureaucracy.

Podolinsky saw that the world is strangling itself with bureaucracy. Most teachers, health workers and even creative workers would say the same thing. "The most typical and worst feature of bureaucracy is that every activity of man has to be 'reported' on, or there 'will not be any government funding'. So even a solicitor or medical doctor has not only to undertake his professional work, but has to 'document' what he has done as his professional work, ie a second person's wages have to be found to ascertain that the professional work has been carried out according to 'regulation', a professionally totally unproductive certification work. With this double cost, half of the so called 'work', all countries performing accordingly, will gradually strangle themselves - by unproductive costing system - causing unpayable national debt. This 'development' is contradictory to the actual demands of the current objective consciousness activity and as sickening as taking drugs to the point of death". (Podolinsky, **Life Contra Burocratismus**, 2015, p. 152)

What is the answer? Podolinsky never attended church nor followed any religious doctrine. He refused any kind of examination at school and lived his life countering bureaucracy and regulation. He writes "Christ opened to mankind the - developmental - possibility of not obeying a fixed doctrine - but of struggling to gradually search and, maybe, find how to become an Individual, and to act morally, according to independent insight. This possibility is of course deeply fraught during development with the change of egotism, self satisfaction and self gratification, but it offers a chance to freedom - of individuality not being hobble by bureaucratic institutionalism. Faust could remain on an evolutionary path as long as he did not give into the alluring temptations of Mephistopheles. Once he would accept the alluring, or the "safety" of fixture - he would lose out". (Podolinsky, **Life Contra Burocratismus**, 2015, p. 152)

Every farm, every individual, every Aboriginal community needs to find its own set of solutions and answers and thereby to find its individuality by impossibly unexpected, unexpectedly impossible creatingly working in the practical world. This spirit of creativity cannot be found in the metaverse. We need to think about how we can use our resources and economy to reward this special kind of practical activity.

These are not just empty phrases. In **Ad Humanitatem** (2003) and **Active Perception** (2008) Podolinsky talks about seeing lightning versus seeing lightning as electricity. This is something that the Aboriginal elder Djalu Gurruwiwi coached many non-Aboriginal people to think about and conceptualise as 'lightning snakes shooting fecundity into the atmosphere from the earth at the beginning of the wet season'. Such insights have to be based on a form of active perception and practicality. "The biodynamic farm, (and the Aboriginal djungiar) has to observe, almost continually, and take from the nature environment what he should do next" (my addition) (Podolinsky, **Ad Humanitatem**, 2003, p. 5)

Water has to be perceived through this similar active practical lens. So too plants, animals and life itself. "A farm is not a "production unit" with "windows" instead of real fields. No computer can run the farm, however much this is induced by "modernism" ("superphosphate" and "mice"). (Podolinsky, **Ad Humanitatem**, 2003, p. 5)

Not everyone can own a farm or live a farming life. But without farms no-one can live well. The concept of farm stretches into an ethics of life that grounds us beyond the metaverse and the life of abstraction. It becomes a metaphor that helps us to understand the spiritual life of Aboriginal homelands. "A healthy human being is either an idealistic realist or a realistic idealist, and works both physically and spiritually". (Podolinsky, **Ad Humanitatem**, 2003, p. 19)

Mainstream farms must nurture soil and find their own individuality to survive. But there is also an essential ingredient without which they cannot exist. For lessons on longevity, sustainability and hard work look to bees and to Aboriginal homelands. Steiner tells us unlike wasps in which love might be expressed only in sexual activity, bees have a soul love for their hive. "What we only experience when love arises in our hearts is to be found, as it were, in the whole bee-hive as substance. The whole hive is in reality permeated with love - bees suck their food which they turn into honey - exclusively from those parts of the plants that are centred in love; they bring so to speak, the love-life of the flowers into the hive. .. when man adds some honey to his food, he wishes so to prepare his soul that it may work rightly within his body - breathe rightly. Bee-keeping is therefore something that greatly helps us to advance our civilisation, for it makes men strong. You see, when one realises that the bees receive very many influences from the starry worlds, one sees how they can pass on to man what is fitted for him. All that is living, when it is rightly combined, works rightly together. When one stands before a hive of bees one should say solemnly to oneself: 'By way of the bee-hive the whole Cosmos enters man and makes him strong and stable". Steiner, **Nine Lectures on Bees**, Lecture 1, Dornach, Feb 3, 1923, p. 1-2

Mrs. P. B. Burrawaṇa taught us all this lesson about guku (wild honey) too in Dhukarr Yākthun (Remaking the Pathway) When enemies are at the gate and great challenges of nature, resources, labor, logistics arise, love and the guidance and inspiration of bees shows the way.

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