Digging for the Roots of the Urban Farming Movement

Alemany farm thrives thanks to the Tom Sawyer method. Like that Missouri huckster who convinced his friends that there was nothing cooler than whitewashing a fence, we get our farm chores done with the labor of the overeager and the ever curious. Twice a week we host community workdays at our three-acre organic fruit and vegetable garden in San Francisco, and without fail they are packed. On the hottest days of summer we have volunteers happily weeding the basil and peppers. During the wet of winter, crews will spend hours in the cold rain spreading compost in the orchards. Every weekend dozens of people show up—some new, some returning regulars, all looking for a task to participate in.

Above: Volunteers from Alemany Farm take a breather from their work to pose for a portrait in the tomato patch.

Now, I’ll admit that San Francisco is an odd place and that people do weird things here—like grow row crops next to twelve lanes of freeway. But I know that our little farm isn’t alone in experiencing a wave of public enthusiasm for local food production. The growing interest in all things agricultural has been well documented by now. Backyard food production is more popular than ever, according to the National Gardening Association.
spurning Wall Street and Washington to go into the fields. Organic farms are flooded with apprenticeship applicants, mostly twenty-somethings willing to work sixty hours a week for the prevailing wage of six hundred dollars a month plus room and board. In North Carolina, the New York Times reports, a phenomenon called “Crop Mobs” has sprouted up: willing workers converge on a farm and spend a day hammering out major projects—evidence, according to one organizer, of the momentum of the “young-farmer movement.”

Something, clearly, is happening, but what that is has yet to be fully explained. When potential McKinsey consultants decide they would rather dig in the dirt than work in the comfort of an office, a shifting of culture’s tectonic plates must be underway. Yet if we have witnessed the evidence of this shift, its causes are unclear. The rumble beneath the surface of the American landscape—the roots, if you will—is not well understood.

What, exactly, is going on? Why are a growing number of people so hungry to do hard, dirty work for little or no compensation? How has a trend become a movement, and what motivates it all? Or, as I’ve asked myself many times as I watch the volunteer work crews at our farm, “Why would someone spend their limited leisure time shoveling horse shit into a compost pile?”

Will Work for Food

Perhaps the most obvious answer is, well, the food. At the end of each workday we do a collective harvest and split the bounty. During the height of summer this means a basket-breaking take-home of tomatoes, green beans, cucumbers, squash, carrots, and strawberries. At the nadir of winter it could be as little as collard greens and cabbages. (Some of the farm’s harvest goes to households in an adjacent public-housing complex who receive a free weekly share during the summer months.)

Getting to take home some food after a day of manual labor is a powerful attractant. Michael Pollan’s permanent perch on the bestseller lists, the explosion in the number of farmers’ markets, and the lines outside the local-sustainable-organic restaurants are all proof of people’s desire, as the line goes, to “get closer to our food.” This cultural craving is, I think, a natural response to our steady distancing from the physical world. After a harrowing day spent navigating the digital wormholes of the interweb, sitting down to a meal of whole foods has become, for many people, a sorely needed comfort. The visceral experience of food is a break from the virtual reality where many of us spend most of our time.

By giving people an intimate connection to their food, the farm feeds this appetite. Our fruits and vegetables, I have to say, are pretty amazing, if for no other reason than that they are fresh picked, a luxury in an age of transcontinental meals. We give people the treat of a sun-warmed strawberry. We let them eat zucchini straight off the vine, fruits as crisp and watery as cucumbers. We remind our volunteers that, in the midst of an ever-more-denatured society, food is among the last refuges of the real.

Will Work for Work

And yet, far more important than the consumption of the food is the production of it. We offer visitors not just food that is real, but work that is real.

The volunteers come to the farm for the same reason that anyone enjoys a hobby: it’s an escape, a reclamation of time, an intrinsic reward. Yet if we have witnessed the evidence of this shift, its causes are unclear. The rumble beneath the surface of the American landscape—the roots, if you will—is not well understood.

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“Trafficking in abstractions is not the same as thinking. White-collar professionals, too, are subject to routinization and degradation, proceeding by the same logic that hit manual fabrication a hundred years ago…The central imperative of capitalism…assiduously partitions thinking from doing.”
The garden is an antidote to this separation of judgment and effort. It gives people a rare gift in today’s workplace: an understanding of their own labor. The completion of straightforward chores—“whole tasks that can be held in the mind all at once,” as Crawford puts it—lets people comprehend their actions. Such seemingly simple (but discernment-dependent) jobs as mulching the garlic, clearing and digging a bed, or planting out rows of lettuces return agency to one’s labor. At the end of a workday, the most common sentiment I hear from volunteers is astonishment at how much they have done. They are delighted to witness the immediacy of their accomplishments. When the day started, the onions were a weedy, overgrown mess; by the close of the afternoon, the crop lines are clean and obvious. Most people’s regular jobs don’t provide such clear cause and effect.

“I like getting to complete tasks here,” Heather Davis, one of the farm’s stalwart volunteers, has said to me. “The work that people do—it changes the farm from week to week.” Heather works as a budget analyst for the City of San Francisco, and though she likes her job, she says it can be difficult to see the results. At the farm, in contrast, the work is self-evident. “Even if the farm is always moving forward, you can really see the effect, you can see the harvest.”

The work is also creative. The garden is a kind of art installation, a “living project,” as Heather calls it. The volunteers’ pride in a job well done comes from having contributed to an artistic, imaginative endeavor. People leave the farm fulfilled, knowing they have used their hands to reshape the world.

Garden as Instructor

As the volunteers feel a sense of pride in their work, they also experience a kind of humility in the garden. This is, I believe, just as important in explaining why they come—and why they keep coming back. If the physical labor of food cultivation is an antidote to the abstraction of our information economy, a few hours amid the fecundity of the garden is a cure for the self-absorption of our celebrity culture. The sheer riot of the farm—the mix of shapes, colors, tastes, and sounds—forces people out of themselves. The garden reminds people of how little we know about the physical world. And this in itself, this recollection of our place on the planet, is a balm.

If, as Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson has suggested, humans possess an innate biophilia, an instinctual love of nature, then at some level our daily routines in urban and suburban spaces are stultifying. The landscapes of concrete and neon (or, at best, lawns and container gardens) leave us wanting a relationship with ecosystems apart from us. We are disconcertingly disconnected from the living world. We suffer from what author Richard Louv has dubbed “nature deficit disorder.” And we know it.

Simply being in the garden, then, is a relief. I don’t know whether the study published last year in the journal *Neuroscience* showing that some soil bacteria work like antidepressants has been confirmed yet, but my experience watching thousands of farm volunteers over the years suggests that it’s true. Without exception, the garden makes people happy. People come to the farm, they connect to the soil, and they come away—excuse the pun—grounded.

The most important skill for any farmer or gardener is observation. This is difficult for many people at the beginning. Often visitors simply don’t know what they are looking at: an adolescent cucumber is inscrutable, the Brussels sprouts look alien. No wonder, since our minds have been trained to sort through other signals and pick up different cues. According to one study, the average American recognizes more than one hundred corporate logos but can identify only twenty plants endemic to where they live.

“I had heard about fava beans, but I had never seen one,” Heather told me, recalling her first visit to the farm. “I love the artichokes. They’re just enormous, monstrous-looking, and I really like artichokes, so it’s intriguing to see the plants. I had eaten collards or kale, but only on rare occasions. There’s a sense of wonderment about what goes on here. It’s about all of us learning, together.”

Indeed. Because we are illiterate when it comes to the living world, the garden is a kind of delightful deciphering. To understand what is happening at the farm, volunteers must become intimate with the place. They begin to undergo a reawakening of the senses. They must learn—or relearn—how to see and smell and taste. By necessity a gardener must be attentive to the world. She must be at once meteorologist, botanist, soil scientist, hydrologist, entomologist. To grow living things, she must be alive as well.

No doubt that sounds very lovely—garden as teacher and all that. But I don’t want to succumb to too much sentimentality. This isn’t the backwoods of Yosemite. We grow food next to a 165-unit public-housing project. I will never forget one college student I spent an afternoon weeding with. I asked him why he came to the farm.

“It’s just great to be out in nature,” he said. I almost dropped my hoe. Didn’t he hear the rush of freeway traffic seventy yards away?
A Cure for Self-Absorption

Of course, this is exactly the point of urban farming. The twenty-first-century agrarians at Alemany Farm are not, like their hippie forbearers, seeking to go “back to the land.” They are, instead, trying to develop a land ethic in the city. The garden fulfills people’s instinctual need to connect with natural systems because of (not in spite of) its location within the city.

That student gardener was in some fashion building a relationship with living things beyond himself, even if that merely meant walking on real soil for a few hours and getting a smidgen of dirt underneath his nails. As we become involved in the production of food, we establish a reference point in our relationship to the natural environment. We relocate ourselves in the physical world.

“This modern person does not know where he is,” farmer-author Wendell Berry has written. According to Berry, some of the most important lessons of agriculture come from the discovery of limits. It is the failures that reveal to us where we stand on this earth. Half the beans fail to germinate. The cabbage moths hammer the cauliflower. The carrots, sown too tightly, don’t grow as long or as thick as we would like. In the garden we come to understand that we are not, as we might wish, entirely in control, and that feeling confirms for us our true position: small parts of a huge system. Amid the unbridled narcissism of the Facebook age, the sense of humility is a surprising comfort.

The garden hints that the current epoch of convenience, the era of ignorance about agriculture, is no more than an interregnum in human history.

“There’s a part of me that thinks the world won’t be able to give to us as it gives to us now,” Heather said. “I don’t know, but there’s something that’s real about valuing the basics of the world, how just to survive. She continued: “Coming out here fills a little bit of a hole for me. It provides additional meaning to my life.”

All Together Now

When I started farming six years ago, my farm manager introduced me to a poem by Marge Piercy called “To Be of Use.” It’s a poem that I have heard requoted so often by the sustainable-food partisans that I wonder if it might not be a Rosetta Stone for the new agriculturists, a way of understanding the motives of this still adolescent movement. Piercy writes:

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest...
If the poem has become something of a cult classic in the local food scene, it is partly because of the dig at the “parlor generals.” The new crop of farmers and gardeners are, in their own nonthreatening way, staging something of a revolt against the managers, the investors, the online bloviators whose energy (feverish though it may be) doesn’t create much that is tangible. The poem, especially the cry in its closing line for “work that is real,” gives voice to that rebellion. At the same time, the poem is a celebration. Its praise for the salt of the earth—the people who harness themselves with massive patience—who do what has to be done again and again—appeals to the urban pastoralists’ desire for meaningful labor and to be a part of a collective endeavor. Piercy’s admiration for “a common rhythm” rebukes our society’s preference for individual accomplishment—and that’s something many people want to hear.

The farm first attracts people with its offer of individual rewards: an afternoon in the grass, the exercise, the bundle of whole foods to take home. But if people come for personal reasons, they stay for collective ones. After a while, volunteers start to feel part of a community. At the end of a long workday, when the volunteers see, in the wake of their own sweat, a place transformed, they understand the old Shaker saying: “Many hands make light work.”

“I like that I am meeting people at the farm that I don’t meet in other aspects of my life,” Sally Smyth, a recent Wesleyan graduate and increasingly regular volunteer, said to me. “People who are there—there is a shared common ground in terms of doing work and being useful…I don’t know what it is. Just being there. To me that’s how you can be most cooperative, to put your all into it and being all there. I feel it builds trust and openness. Showing up at Alemany Farm you assume there is some desire to do something productive.”

More than building a relationship with the land, agriculture is about building relationships with other people, as it has been ever since the first seeds were saved and the first harvests stored. Through weeks and months and (for some) years of working together, the Alemany Farm volunteers have knit bonds of accountability and mutual responsibility that have become the threads of community. Sally’s “trust and openness” is the ethic of solidarity behind the old-fashioned barn-raising. The farm volunteers work in a shared effort that allows them to accomplish something beyond their individual abilities. Which is why the garden chores don’t feel like drudgery: The work is, like a barn-raising, festive, fueled by the thrill of collective action. To grow several tons of organic fruits and vegetables on a small plot of land in the middle of San Francisco is, simply, a rush.

The garden, then, is a shared political act. There is a feeling among volunteers that agriculture today is important beyond its face, that a home-grown carrot is a statement as well as a snack. The farmers believe that ecological horticulture offers one of the best responses to the environmental crises cascading down on us. Otherwise, they wouldn’t be out there sweating in the dust.

“As time went on, this infectious sense of community started to take over,” Chris Chimenti, the volunteer who joked about being twitchy, recalled of his deepening involvement in the farm over the years. Chris is a solidly built Calabrian who looks like he knows how to brawl, and he is, without a doubt, the hardest working person out there. (“If you don’t look fast enough, you won’t see Chris,” Sally said.) “What I found,” he said, “was that I was making my contribution, in some form, to teach people and myself how to be more sustainable in this world. If food becomes more localized, there’s this domino effect. I have this opportunity, whether small or big, to make an impact, not just on my life, but on my family, friends, peers, and on the greater community. Every day I am learning something new, and I am grateful for that and I want to give it back.”

In that statement of purpose you can hear the “something productive” Sally spoke of, what Aaron thinks of as a “connection to something good.” No matter what words they use, the new agrarians are seeking a way to refashion the relationships—ecological, emotional—that have been eroded by work without meaning and food without substance. They are trying to accomplish a kind of restoration of the world, what Wendell Berry would call the resettling of America.

The Tom Sawyer method works so well for us because it’s not a con—it is a prize. The farm’s gift is the confirmation of our common need for sustenance, for cooperation, achievement, and creativity, and for a visceral connection to the biological systems on which we depend. The farm reminds us of how, when we join together in the spirit of collective action, we fulfill our individual selves. At the end of each workday, the volunteers leave fed. They know that through their shared labor they are—each of them together—part of a growing community.