

In Defence of “Old Fashioned” Training

A few words of wisdom for all trainees, apprentices and master growers alike.

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The question is often asked: how can I become a Biodynamic farmer or gardener? Of course, it is best for anyone who really wishes to follow that calling to find a place where he can get training. I will make an attempt, however, to describe some methods which an aspiring farmer or gardener may be able to apply, even if he does not yet happen to be on a Biodynamic farm or garden.

What I will describe was, only a short time ago, considered an indispensable part of any training. It is still mentioned in text books today, although in books on Biodynamic agriculture it is more apt to appear between the lines. To an experienced farmer or gardener, therefore, I am not really saying anything new. At a time when mechanized operations and fast returns are the order of the day, I hope only to throw some light on what no longer appears on the surface.

Anyone traveling through the Amish country or on the European continent will find one thing common to the farmers in these areas: an almost ritualistic devotion to order. Order permeates every facet of work and life on the farm and in the garden. If you had the opportunity to be an apprentice on one of these farms, you would probably find that, for the first year or two, more emphasis would be placed on the acquisition of certain skills than on what might seem directly related to farming or gardening. Nowadays, such an emphasis is often considered petty, although, as we shall see, there are good reasons behind it.

Today’s virtual separation between the attitude of the person performing a job, and the actual product or work, may be considered a necessary

evolutionary step. In earlier days, the manner of working was an inseparable part of the created product. We need only think of the old craftsmen, although many other examples could be given. Here, as Goethe said, "The What bethinks, yet more the How."

Our relation to labour today, largely the result of automation, has changed all this. However, while an engineer who does a poor job designing a bridge will have to face up to the consequences of his negligence, the same laxness in professions dealing with living organisms (e.g., farming and gardening) may not have such immediate and obvious results. And yet it is precisely in the area of working with living organisms that sensitivity is required as a first condition; without it, we cannot even realize what domain we are in as we work on a farm or in a garden. Considering this, we may not find it hard to believe that the old-fashioned steps of training—leading from apprentice through journeyman to master—may have had a purpose. Some of these steps shall, therefore, be described below. (I might add that, in earlier times, an apprentice often had to pay for his training, and certainly never received anything, to begin with, except board and lodging. Think of college students today.)

The initial step, for one who enters upon the path of learning a trade—such as an apprentice in Biodynamic agriculture—is the acquisition and development of certain disciplines to the point where they become second nature. These disciplines are quite simple, and the first one—already mentioned above—is order. What does order have to do with farming? At the very least, it must be agreed, a farmer whose house, barn, tool-shed, field, etc. are in order will have everything he needs at his fingertips.

Such order may be difficult to achieve at first; life itself must often come to one's aid. Imagine, for example, that you are ploughing, have to stop for a repair, and find that you left the hammer lying on the tractor wheel, at the last fixing job ten furrows back. Or you are trying to attach a trailer to your tractor, with the boss standing by, when you remember that you left the hitch-pin on the bench in the tool shed, half a mile away! Few of us have escaped such lessons.

It is the effort that counts, however, and one day the apprentice will see that his attempts to achieve order are paying off. Not only will he find things at his fingertips when he needs them, but he will eventually discover that orderliness has an immense power to turn things around him into willing servants in the execution of his work. They become just as helpful as the orderly thoughts necessary to an engineer, for example, if he is to be successful in his trade.

All experienced farmers can confirm that this is so. An old hand will be unable to walk past a pitchfork negligently left lying on the barn floor, or placed prongs up in the corner, by some novice. He will instinctively grab the fork and place it securely, probably thinking, “I wonder who will look for this tomorrow morning!” Or consider the nail carelessly dropped in the farmyard. There will most likely be a hot afternoon, with a storm on the way, when the tire of your hay wagon will pick it up, or—even worse—an ailing cow may unsuspectingly swallow it.

Many an eager beginner in the all-out attempt to bring order into his life finds that almost everything, as if by agreement, seems determined to defeat him. Although it will not necessarily happen to everyone, most of us have experienced frustration when a tool that was always there suddenly vanishes, or when the pin that has held a piece of equipment together for years breaks on the very day when we actually arranged everything well, and work is finally progressing smoothly.

We should not be deterred or discouraged by all this. We must realize that our efforts are strong enough to be causing a response—and that we still have much to learn. One problem may be that we do not yet have the appropriate inner relationship to the things we come in contact with. Perhaps we are too eager in our efforts, in which case things will have a way of breaking or going wrong under our fingers; or maybe we are not yet really “there,” with our mind on the job, and so objects continually get lost.

To help the novice over this hurdle, a second discipline is necessary: the ability to submit oneself completely to doing what one is asked to do. Again, obedience to this discipline may be hard at first. There are so many times

when what we have been told to do could be done differently, or with much less effort, or perhaps more efficiently with a machine.

But right here is the crux of the matter. At this stage of our training, it is not a question of how we can do something easier, quicker or better. The real point is that a certain inner strength and quality—which we alone can develop—must not be dissipated too soon in outward concerns but allowed to grow within us. As the germinal force of the sprouting seed has to be held back for a while, if a strong bud is to develop, the willingness to do what is asked, without questioning motives or pushing alternatives, gives strength to a special virtue that is well worth every bit of effort.

The apprentice who persists long enough in this discipline will, sooner or later, discover a stability within himself that he has not known before; perhaps he hasn't even suspected that it could exist. The fruits of obedience will also give him a sensitivity to his surroundings by virtue of which he will approach an understanding of inner, universal laws. This will help him to overcome the “bad luck” syndrome. As he discovers that “efficiency” is beginning to become his companion, he can experience it as a kind of inner space, existing between the person and the things around him.

Everyone is familiar with repetitive work. It has a flavour of its own, especially for beginners. Confronted with the task of singling turnips, weeding, picking stones, or any similar work for eight to ten hours a day, in a field that may take weeks to complete, one can learn a great deal—and not only about the weather.

An apprentice placed in such a job for the first time soon finds himself surrounded by what seems an endless ‘sea of plants, weeds or stones—alone. Any old hands who may have started out together with him have moved out of talking distance, if not out of sight, by dint of their ease of movement and skill. Thus, left to himself, the beginner finds that time seems to stretch almost as long as the rows of plants before him. Aching backs or hands and other discomforts may add to his plight. Situations like this may well test the apprentice's vow to his chosen profession.

Sticking to one's guns in this test is, however, essential; if we persist in our task, we soon develop skill. Moreover, we soon discover a certain rhythm of movement contained in all repetitive work. Once we have found this rhythm we have gained a powerful ally. For it is as if this rhythm would lend to us its own strength. With its aid we soon learn to move through the weaving rows with the same swiftness as the experienced worker. An inner stability begins to manifest itself in our work, making us immune to the change of weather, to boredom, or to any other irritations that had beset us to begin with.

Finally, the submission to repetitive tasks will engender in us an equanimity unknown to us before. Once we have reached this point in our apprenticeship, we have gained a great deal. We have not only learned something about work, but about ourselves. We have gained a certain detachment from ourselves, giving us a new relation to the element of time. We know now how much can be done in a given time. We can move on.

At this stage in our training we will find ourselves involved in all manner of tasks in and around the farm. Most tasks will be known to us by now and we are actually well on the way to becoming journeymen. What we will now need is perseverance.

Few things foster skill and strength more than perseverance. I remember well a situation which I considered insoluble. One day, having to replace a broken part on a plough, I found myself hopelessly stuck trying to dismantle certain parts. Just then the farmer happened to come by and looked at the plough for a few moments. Then he looked at me and said: "If man has put it together he can also take it apart," and walked on. I succeeded. Recollection of this situation has helped me many times since. Perseverance duly practiced not only gives us outer strength. It lends certainty and tranquillity to all our work. Its result is an outgoing efficiency, which will begin to permeate all our work.

An old proverb says: There are no dirty jobs on a farm. Few apprentices realize the wisdom of this proverb. We may have come very far in our knowledge about farming practices before we are faced with the full weight of this statement. For we will probably be a good way into the journeyman

stage of our training before we realize how much preference we still carry in us for certain jobs rather than others. Yet, if we wish to aspire to mastery of the trade, preference for some jobs over others is a barrier we have to overcome. Only the ability to turn to one job, with the same fullness of attention as to another apparently less enjoyable, leads to that flexibility, openness, and ability to judge situations which we need if we want to stand responsible for our trade. Non-preference, if acquired, leads to freedom from self in all we do.

Lastly, a trainee who has acquired the five virtues previously outlined will, if he wants these to be effective in his daily life, have to pay attention so that they do not get lost. A sixth exercise or step, therefore, consists in devoting attention to all the above virtues, to the point where they become an inseparable part of him. He who achieves this will find a way to harmony with himself and the world. He will also gain a living relationship to the land, which will help him a long way on the road to mastery of his trade. He will acquire a certain gratitude towards his daily work.

The careful reader may find that the above stages, described as part of an outer training, contain the same elements which Rudolf Steiner gave as subsidiary exercises for those who want to go a path of inner development. To those who may ask if such a parallel is justified, I should like to say: "Is there any true outer training which is not at the same time an inner one?"