

The Biodynamic Movement: Where Have We Been, Where Are We Going? Walter Goldstein

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(The following piece is based on a talk given by Walter Goldstein on October 3, 1999, at a biodynamic conference held at Michael Fields Agricultural Institute, in East Troy, Wisconsin. He wishes to acknowledge the helpful criticism of several reviewers.)

Coming into the new millennium presents us both with a challenge and an opportunity. We can re-evaluate our progress with bringing the biodynamic method forward in the world. In fact, it would be a healthy exercise for members of our community to review our achievements and failures, our strong and weak points, opportunities and threats, and also to consider what needs to be achieved in the future if we are to make further progress. Any one person will have a limited perspective on these issues. Nevertheless, I offer these thoughts as a kind of critical review in the hopes that they will stimulate discussion about the condition and place of our movement and where we need to go if we are to take the place in world agriculture that we should.

Before I go any further I would like to emphasize the significance of our work by pointing out three personal experiences that support my continued enthusiasm about working with biodynamic agriculture. Firstly, when a farmer really deepens his or her relationship to what they are doing on the farm, and implements soil building practices, whole farm management, and the use of the preparations, an intangible enhancement happens on the farm. The farmer may experience the farm becoming healthier and more efficient, more stress resistant and responsive; though this might not necessarily mean that it achieves the highest yields or totally lacks problems.

Secondly, I believe that eating biodynamic food helps to humanize people. When I consume conventional food for a period of time I find it more difficult to think really spiritual thoughts. Instead, I seem to "swim" more in my feelings, rest more in dead concepts, and become more sluggish. I believe this is true for others as well. Food that comes from healthy biodynamic farms may stimulate human beings, helping us have the inner fire to carry out our ideas and really work. It is difficult for me to conceive of an optimal spiritual development of humanity as long as we continue to consume conventionally produced food.

Thirdly, the content of the biodynamic path can feed us spiritually if we take it up in the right way. Not only does it give us new ideas and insights about the relationship of agriculture to the spiritual world, it also can help us to develop new capacities. Our method is one of spiritual science. It starts with the Goethean approach to observation. This method takes us beyond paying attention in an outward way to the animals, plants, and minerals that we work with in agriculture. We begin to get a sense for them in an artistic way. These experiences can be deepened through spiritually scientific, meditative work so that the inner nature of our co-inhabitants is revealed to us. It becomes possible for us to have new, creative ideas that live outside us as well as within us. By working with these insights, we can develop a process and a strengthened capacity for discriminative judgment that helps us to find what is the morally the right thing to do, on our farms, and in life in general. This can lead further into a kind of living technique of sensing how to do the right thing at the right time. Despite all these wonderful things about our method we have problems. For the sake of a reality check I will list some of them:

- Though we may have the kernel for what is needed in agriculture, it is largely rejected and unrecognized. We are generally ignored by the 'world-at-large'.
- We have failed in a half-century of work in establishing anything more than a beachhead in American agriculture.
- Our efforts are fragmented, our market impact is minimal. The organic movement has eclipsed us.
- We represent a 'life-path' for individuals but we often don't work well together.
- We are viewed as a religion or sect by many. This perception engenders hostile reactions from institutions and real religions.
- We may be seen as being dogmatic and pompous, having all the answers even when the questions aren't asked.
- Biodynamic farming is complex to do and difficult to understand. Some practices seem objectionable. We may be unrealistic in expecting that farmers will be immediately capable of grasping our message.

It may be in the nature of things that we have failed to make much impact despite our individual and collective efforts. But what can we do to understand where we went wrong or how we could do a better job? This difficult question can only be answered rightly by each of us starting with ourselves. But I would like to characterize some tendencies that I see in our movement and in myself. I pointed out some aspects of the caricature that the biodynamic movement has taken on in the outer world. The origin of this caricature actually grows out of our attitudes. It boils down to the fact that we have not yet won the content of anthroposophy and biodynamic agriculture for ourselves. We are still faking it. I see three approaches out there, two of which feed this caricature:

- **Don't develop the conscious, spiritual path, just believe. It is too difficult to have spiritual experiences, and unpopular, too!**
- **Farmers should gradually develop a relationship to their farm work through meditative work and clair-sentient experience.**
- **Develop by using shortcuts, using the paths of radionics and dowsing.**

The middle path is the one suggested by Steiner. The other two paths are unfortunately taken by some of us. This is not out of bad will, but simply because a) it is difficult to grasp what the biodynamic path really is, and b) the first and third approaches are easier and they don't demand changing one's mindset as much as the second.

Now in order to live, our movement must continually develop, not only socially, but also in its techniques. These can only develop rightly if our ideas are developed and confirmed through scientific research. Whether research should occur, and how it should occur (whether it should be scientific or not) is in reality contested within our movement. I see three approaches out there:

- **We don't need research and science because we know it already. We stand against science. Biodynamic methods work; just believe in them and in biodynamic authorities.**
- **Develop by using deepened scientific methods. Test ideas using scientific techniques. Develop a research council that includes farmers and scientists. Propagate practices that are based on truth.**
- **It isn't really possible to do research into biodynamic agriculture because a) it is a "religion", or b) it is such an individual issue. Therefore, it is not in the nature of being testable.**

The middle approach is again the one suggested by Steiner. The other approaches are taken often by detractors or supporters of the biodynamic movement. Steiner was not anti-science; he considered it to be invaluable; he wanted simply to deepen it. Biodynamic agriculture has grown out of spiritual science, and for it to develop healthily in the future it needs to continue to grow from the same source. However, Steiner reiterated again and again in his lectures that there was no fundamental difference between the results of spiritual science and the results of conventional science. The things Steiner described in the Agriculture Course were about reality; the results of scientific investigation would confirm them or not, but probably would deepen and illustrate them. In other words he did spiritual scientific work to come to his recommendations but wanted them confirmed through outward scientific investigations.

Biodynamic agriculture is not a religion. Religions have their inception through spiritual revelation by prophets or holy people. The teachings of these leaders become formed into dogmas and practiced by their followers as being truth solely on the basis of faith. There may be little room for change and no clear methodology for followers to receive their own revelations so that they too can really know the truth first hand. Biodynamics differs from this. First, one can be a member or non-member of any religion, and still utilize biodynamic practices. Furthermore, the anthroposophical teachings of Rudolf Steiner that underlie biodynamic agriculture give methodologies that allow people to do spiritual scientific research for themselves. Also, many of the claims of biodynamic agriculture are testable, and a lot of research has been done already that either proves or disproves them.

However, it cannot be denied that there is a tendency for some to make biodynamics into a religion. This is due to a number of reasons. The majority of practitioners need to have faith in the principles and practices of biodynamic agriculture because it may take years before they have built up sufficient experience with the results to be able to speak out of them. Furthermore, many practitioners do not have scientific inclinations and they do not trust their capacities of observation. They are simply interested in applying the principles of biodynamic agriculture on their farms to improve them. They have little inclination for proofs or for knowing,

first-hand, the facts behind biodynamic principles and practices. Finally, many biodynamic practitioners may be opposed to science. For many farmers and gardeners the issue is not so much whether biodynamics is scientific and testable, but whether science itself is a valid criterion of truth and preferable, for example, to intuition, feeling, or dowsing.

Actually, for biodynamic practitioners to take an anti-science stance is really a kind of spiritual contradiction, because biodynamic agriculture itself is based on an enhanced science. Doing this can lead to a spiritual vacuum and muddled soul space out of which potential problems can arise. The three potential errors that I see arising are that: one could deny the validity of scientific investigation of biodynamics; one could dogmatize biodynamic practices; or one could be led astray by developments that are not based on proper observation and scientific methodologies.

Conventional science has developed a powerful methodology for objectively evaluating the truth within a narrow scope. It may, however, have a bad reputation among biodynamic circles due to technologies that have questionable impacts on the health of agriculture and the earth. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that the content of conventional science itself has become a kind of world religion, complete with its own set of pedantic practitioners and dogmas. Nevertheless, a core of active researchers exists. These people continuously develop the findings, concepts, and applications of conventional science. If these researchers come to controversial findings, their results can still come to be accepted and change the world-view of teachers and practitioners. Change depends on them having derived sufficient, convincing evidence based on proper methodology. The same is valid for biodynamic agriculture. Only in as much as we foster scientific research based on proper application of our methodology and learn from the external and internal sides of our work, are we capable of escaping stultification and avoiding untrue development.

Often the problem of perceiving biodynamics as a religion has to do with how we convey biodynamic principles and practices on a person-to-person basis. This is, of course, an utterly individual activity that is different for each of us. We all have our individual styles for doing this. Some people teach more by doing; others explain more conceptually. However, when explaining biodynamics conceptually, it may be useful to do the exercise that I have found useful by being an advisor. It has been essential to be able to clarify and identify, both for myself and for them, whether the information I have to convey is based on personally experienced facts and research or whether it is based on tradition or belief. Tradition and belief may be valid, and the principles they are based on may be mentioned, but it is important for me to note when they have not yet been confirmed in my own life or through research. Only if I win a free relationship to what we know, feel, and think about the practices and principles and can convey them in a free way are the recipients of my message left free. If they feel bound or unfree as a consequence of my words they may easily come to think that biodynamics is a religion.

Through our inner and outer work we should develop the insights and knowledge that are needed to develop our method further. It is not simply a question of believing in or speculating about living forces. One has to gain the right to speak about them based on inner work and experience. Unfortunately, the scientific and spiritual basis of some of the new methods proposed and propagated by members of the biodynamic community are questionable. This may include the planting calendar and indications of Maria Thun and the message coming from the supporters of the radionics/cosmic pipe "technology."¹ The claims may seem impressive. But are they based on realities and are they in consonance with the biodynamic approach?

Furthermore, the end result of using these methods may lead to a confusing picture of what biodynamics is. Depending on the angle from which one looks at it, our message takes on a fuzzy profile. We appear either pompous or kooky, we propagate half-truths or untruths, we run the risk of being oracles or becoming superstitious, and we spend more time struggling among ourselves rather than in developing our essence. Of course, within the restrictions imposed by law, anyone is free to do what they want on their farm. But the biodynamic movement needs to clarify its profile: what is biodynamics and what is it not?

I refer to the system of planting by the sidereal-lunar calendar that was developed by Maria Thun as a classic example of this problem. This is an original system of planting that grew out of Maria Thun's research, received worldwide publicity, but could not be confirmed by many years of scientific research, involving extensive testing to have universal validity.² Despite that fact, calendars and books that put this method forward as indisputable truth are still being published and/or sold world-wide by biodynamic associations. The system of planting according to sidereal positions of the moon is a simple recipe that has become a kind of guiding principle for many gardeners. It is convenient in that it allows them to structure their work activities in a meaningful way. However, the overwhelming scientific evidence before us now is that life does not seem to obey the Thun calendar. I am well aware that knowing this may still not dissuade biodynamic practitioners from using the calendar or associations from publishing it. I am also aware that for some practitioners the personal

authority of Mrs. Thun carries greater weight than research by biodynamic scientists. Indeed, within our movement there is a dangerous tendency for convenience or authority to outweigh facts. This kind of laissez-faire attitude reveals that we have a general sleepiness, a lack of discipline and scientific approach towards making claims, and a lack of process for defining acceptable practices. The early biodynamic pioneers were very careful about what they let out as proven practice. Certainly we do not need to be as secretive as they were, but we nevertheless need to take care. My suggestion is that the Natural Science Section should work out a process for evaluation of new methods. We need to take this seriously, not only to ensure the best management and quality, but also because propagating untruths has the potential to destroy us as a movement.

In order to develop our essence we need to deepen our work in observation while stimulating the depth of our inquiries by working with the agriculture course. I have referred to the crucial role of observation for allowing us to make the content of biodynamics our own. This is difficult and therefore largely avoided. People have come to different relationships with the course. I characterize them again in three general approaches:

- **We read the course, think we own the concepts, but do not really make them our own by inner work. Instead we codify biodynamic agriculture as a content of beliefs, practices and products. We do not really understand it.**
- **We work through the concepts and then do the work needed to gain the experiences through our lives in order to understand the content of the course.**
- **We try to understand the agriculture course as a logical system of concepts but we give up because it is indigestible. Therefore we reject it.**

The second path is the only one that will lead us further. Though it should be grasped intellectually, the agriculture course simply can't be verified as an intellectual system. It can only be earned by struggling with it in life. Understanding the agriculture course is a process that takes at least a lifetime and demands that we develop and trust our observational skills. We can help each other with it. This work needs active inputs from farmers, gardeners, and trained scientists. It also should include research on issues that are rarely touched on but are central to the course.

Alongside this, I think that we need to put more thought into how to grow our movement by attracting new farmers. Our remaining conventional farmers in this country are the survivors of a selection process that has weeded out a lot of the idealists. Yet we have something to offer all farmers, no matter how hard-boiled they are, if they want to improve the health of their farming system. One can ask oneself, what kind of package is needed for our movement to become more attractive? My impression is that we need to foster healthy development in three areas:

- **Ideas: Ideals, goals, thoughts, a coherent set of management practices that make sense and are backed by facts. Getting them to trust and develop their own observational skills.**
- **Human connections: Visits, events, conversations, friendships, advisory activities**
- **Business: Marketing, good prices, Demeter certification**

Above, I touched on the fact that our way of working together could be improved. I would like to characterize two ways of working (admittedly in a somewhat crass way). Though it is difficult, moving in the first direction indicated is naturally the only way that will bring us forward in the long run:

- **We work together in free association to accomplish projects that we never could have done separately. We actively empower each other, recognizing what the other is worth and tolerate other personal approaches than our own.**
- **We lead an existence as individuals or in camps. We de-power each other to maintain our own worth, and actively refuse to see the value of others who we do not agree with, despising them silently.**

So how will we go into the future? For me, this raises a subset of questions that I list below. They can really only be answered by all those who will choose to work with biodynamic agriculture in the future. Certainly, the success of biodynamic agriculture depends on us and on our ability to work together. The Biodynamic Farming

and Gardening Association does many good things, and it has an important supportive role to play in biodynamic development. Though it should be worked with, we should not complacently wait for it to take leadership in our future development because it may not. The future depends on all of us becoming empowered and taking on regional and cross-regional initiatives. So here are some questions for us all to answer, questions that we cannot answer at any one moment but only work through as processes:

How can we foster a common vision of a thriving biodynamics and form a community of realistic people that accept the task of realizing that vision as a major goal?

How can we work together in real, mutually interesting development projects that will strengthen our movement (outreach, products, Demeter, marketing, research)?

Finally, how can we foster individual human development and the kind of research work that lies at the basis of our future development?

I have brought up these issues to stimulate our moving towards clarity on what we are, including our weak points, and what we want to become. If we don't take up these issues honestly, with a clear consciousness and work on them, we probably will reap unwanted consequences in the future that will sap our movement. Therefore I hope these thoughts will lead to fruitful discussions. I look forward to hearing the results of these discussions and your comments.

Notes

1) I intend to explore differences between the methodologies of dowsing, radionics, and cosmic pipes and the biodynamic approach in a future article for *BIODYNAMICS*.

2) I refer readers to the research on the planting calendar that appeared by Hartmut Spiess in *BIODYNAMICS* 229, and the article by myself and Bill Barber called "The effects of planting dates and lunar positions on the yield of carrots" in *BIODYNAMICS* 230:13-17.

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