Community Interactions

Dave and Chris have been leaders in the organic farming community in Maine for over 15 years. Dave has been on the Board of Directors of the Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association (MOFGA) since 1988, serving for many years as the chair of the Certification Committee and on the Planning Committee for the Common Ground Fair (MOFGA’s major fund-raiser and public event), and for two years as MOFGA president. He has been involved through MOFGA in national policy issues, particularly the pressing of the USDA to set meaningful National Organic Standards. In addition, Dave regularly presents workshops each year to mixed farmer audiences such as the New England Vegetable and Berry Conference, and the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture, as well as to organic farming groups. Dave and Chris have also shared their cover crop expertise by participating in research projects with the University of Maine.

Perhaps their most important and certainly most enjoyable community work is through their apprenticeship program. Over the years, Dave has developed a serious educational program that is “much more than how to plant a tomato.”

I think a lot of people, young people especially, are looking for some way of re-connecting with their community, their country, even their world. You go to college now already specializing and looking towards a future job. Many of the [apprentices with a liberal arts education] are trying to figure out how they are going to fit into the world as they see it .... A lot of times what we talk about is, if our culture is increasingly going towards
specialization in an industrial model and away from inter-connectedness between people, what do they do? For example, folks more and more can work at home from a computer and don’t even need to interact in an office anymore. So, even work as a kind of community is lost. We no longer have the need to interact as a community in our homes because our homes are entities in themselves.... If you need something, you don’t look to a neighbor or a community member for it; you go to whatever big box store happens to sell that item. So there is very little need for connectedness....

Even many of us who live in the country are living the urban lifestyle because our work tends either to be on the computer or we drive into the city to work, and then back out to the country where our bedroom happens to be. But we bring with us the food from the city and the entertainment culture, and consider it an annoyance when a snowstorm comes. So even though we live in the country, most of our neighbors are living an urban lifestyle and have very little understanding of what it is to live an agrarian lifestyle.

Even so, we have this burning need in our society for community, and some people understand that and are reaching out through churches or whatever for community, but many are just confused about why they feel lost. So, a lot of our discussions center around how do you re-form a community and what does ‘community’ mean? If the industrial model is pulling us away from community, what would pull us back? Often, in our discussions, it comes down to centralization vs. decentralization....

Someone who believes in genetic engineering is not necessarily an evil person. They generally come from a mindset that says a centralized answer is the way to solve the world’s problems. So, if we can create a super variety of rice that will grow under adverse conditions, we may decide to do that as a centralized way of dealing with the problem. Whereas a decentralized way of looking at it would be that each locality has its own unique parameters and you want to figure out locally what will grow best there, who should grow it, how it should be grown, and all those factors depend much more on local circumstances.... For a lot of people, it is understanding that there is a choice... and if there are more people willing to look at a decentralized agrarian community life, it is a direction you can work toward without feeling overwhelmed with how to make changes in our society.