Jean-Paul Courtens, narrator

Anneliese Abbott, interviewer

November 21, 2022

JC = Jean-Paul Courtens
AA = Anneliese Abbott

AA: This is November 21, 2022, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing

JC: Jean-Paul Courtens.

AA: And we are doing this interview over the phone. So Jean-Paul, thank you so much for being willing to interview today. So why don't we start, just tell us a little about when and where you were born and if you had any connection with agriculture when you were a child.

JC: I was born in the city of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. The one thing is that we lived on the outskirts of the city. We moved from downtown when I was very young to a newly-built complex of affordable housing on the outskirts. And we would be looking out on glasshouses that were still, at that point, still part of Amsterdam. They were supplying the city with vegetables. So we would get our fresh vegetables directly from the vegetable growers. Of course, they were within half a mile walking distance. So I was somewhat exposed, but not directly. Later on I ended up working for the auction, the vegetable auction, where the vegetable growers would bring their produce. And as a high school student I would help unload the crates and put them up for display for the wholesale buyers. So I got an exposure to the actual growers, working with them, just by working with them to earn some money on the side. (1:38)

AA: Where did you go to college, and what did you study?

JC: Well, I initially went to college to become a social worker. And halfway through I was disenfranchised with what I was learning there. And felt, what I'm going to do now, I knew that I enjoyed being outdoors. I was very much, my hobby was botany. And I decided to take my bike and ride around the countryside. Went over to England, to Wales, to Ireland. And ended up working on farms. When I came back, I realized that this was what I wanted to do. I found my vocation, and I went back to college, but now this time to study agriculture. I was happy to find a biodynamic training, called Warmonderhof. And that really influenced the way I farmed, because I had excellent teachers there that were able to teach me how to farm. (2:53)

AA: So what was it like attending a biodynamic training school? What kind of courses did you take?

JC: Well, the curriculum was the same for everyone, except that by the fourth year you would select if you would be a vegetable grower, a dairy farmer, a field crop grower. And I actually ended up, they introduced in the year that I was there, they said, "Well, if you don't want to select one specialty, you can maintain within—really, that the idea behind the biodynamic farm,

to be an integrated farm, which was what I selected. So I was able to follow all the courses, from vegetables to field crops to dairy. So I graduated with my degree in integrated operations.

My courses all through the years, the curriculum was based on six weeks of theory and three weeks of practice. Similar to the Waldorf School education in this country. And so whereby every three weeks you got an intense exposure to particular topics. So if we would have soil science in those three weeks, we would have soil science every day for two hours, between, say, eight and ten. Then we would have other topics as well during those days. And then if we would have a practicum, it would be on the school farm itself, where we would rotate from vegetables to field crops to dairy to landscaping. So we would be exposed to everything else.

In the second year we went for a very long apprenticeship on an existing biodynamic farm anywhere in the world to get practical exposure. And in the third year we would create or convert an existing conventional farm to biodynamic systems. And then you would be graded at the end of the third year on your ability to do that thoroughly, from a financial perspective, from an ecological perspective, an agronomic perspective. You have to really look at everything, you have to create a business plan, you have to work with existing markets. And so each teacher that would have taught you over the last three years would then grade you on your ability to successfully upgrade a biodynamic farm.

And in the fourth year we would continue our education, whereby it would be extremely practical. It would be diesel mechanics, it would be hoof trimming, it would be marketing management. So whereby you fell short in the third year in particular areas, where you felt like, "I needed to hone my abilities there a little bit better." And then the idea was that you got out into the world and got more experience and started your own operation. So they really wanted to prepare you as a good farmer but also as an entrepreneur. It was entrepreneurial training as well as agricultural agronomic training. (6:37)

AA: So what farm did you do your apprenticeship on?

JC: A vegetable farm. I ended up on a vegetable farm in the Netherlands. A large—at that point, we're talking here about the early '80s—large farms, at that point, were 30 acres, 40 acres of vegetables were considered to be large. These days that's not considered large anymore. But back then, if you were able to sell 30 acres of biodynamically grown vegetables, you were pretty big. I really wanted one, the scale we were at at our school, which was more like five or ten acres. I wanted to get exposed to more production farming. The best place to get exposed to at that point was really in the Netherlands itself, which was by far the most evolved in scaling up organic farming. (7:33)

AA: So then, other than your classes, was that the main thing that got you interested in biodynamic? What influenced you to choose biodynamic agriculture? What really got you into that?

JC: There was definitely the worldview that biodynamics was based on was very attractive to me, whereby the mechanistic perspective on the world was, with the biodynamics we look at the world more from a holistic perspective whereby everything is interconnected. And that notion was very attractive to me. The esoteric part of the teachings of Rudolf Steiner were relatively foreign to me, even though they did teach us that at school. That part was, for most of us students, was like, "Oh, okay." I would say that there was definitely a few students that clearly

came for the anthroposophical component of the curriculum, but the majority of us students—there were 200 of us—weren't really introduced to that. They did ask us before we would enroll if we would read some of the work of Rudolf Steiner. And I did. And it was more to me like, "Wow, okay, I don't understand a word of what this man is writing about." And then they told us, "Just don't read the Agriculture Course by Steiner. Read some introductory books."

And also in the first year of our school, they did not even, it was not until the third year that we actually read the Agriculture Course with one of our professors. They did shield us a little bit from getting us too much into the weeds of the esoteric components of biodynamics. And the school itself, if you just see the writing, it would not be reflected in anything that you would experience in a daily basis at the school. It was not cultish in any way. So I think us students felt very much at home. And we were allowed to either immerse ourselves in the teaching of Steiner or ignore it altogether, and to take the soil science and economics and everything else the way it came. Because it wasn't forced upon us in any way.

And I would say that I thought most of it was very inspiring. I felt that what Rudolf Steiner had to share with the world was almost a utopistic, or utopian worldview. That if the world could be a different place, it would be a beautiful place. And it made a lot of sense, especially in the context of his views on agriculture, that if the farm is what they call a closed system—it's never of course closed, and just trying to have a method to be a closed system—that a farm could be self-regenerative. That the farm is a living organism. So the whole notion of working with analogies was really introduced to us, as opposed to working with abstractions or analysis.

And in the end I would say that what I got out of it was a healthy balance in natural science and the introduction to a very different worldview that was more based on an analogy and indigenous wisdom. And all through my career I felt that perspective has really supported me in making decisions that were not just based on facts alone. I was able to rely on my own intuition in certain things, and hone my intuition in certain things, and also learn how challenging it is to base decisions on intuition unless you are very good at your job. This is not a fantasy, this is not just some idea or notion. This is something that is not dissimilar to someone who learns to play the violin and over time becomes, through practice and practice and practice, becomes quite good at playing the violin. And then intuitively is able to interpret the works of Bach or Mozart or any other composer. And I think that's kind of like what—I started to see my work not just as production but also as an art form—has really supported me all through my career in giving me more, it has given my work more meaning.

So that's really where I would say my school was very good at seeing us students also as, they really valued us as complete human beings. And we had to be honored in all aspects. So we—and the school, just to give you an example—art was very much integrated in the curriculum. We would have plays together, we would have choir together. And I was willing to do so, because in regular high school where I went to Catholic school all through my life, choir was not as enjoyable. This was enjoyable choir, it was the joy of singing together and doing drawing, doing clay work, whatever it was allowed it to hone our own artistic abilities. And I would say, from the outside people would say, "What does this have to do with agriculture?" But I would say it has a lot to do with agriculture.

The second part I would say was the observation skills that they were trying to hone us with have helped me looking at my own animals, looking at my cows, looking at a pig. What is it? What does it mean to be a pig? What does it mean to be a cow? How does it feel to be a cow? It's helped me to be a better herdsman or livestock keeper, providing them with an environment

that really benefits them. So that's, I would say, to me have been the great advantages of my education. I don't think I would have done all these things unless it had been part of the curriculum at that particular school. I would see the use of it, to teach me how to do a soil test, right? (15:41)

AA: Were there any people or publications, books, or organizations that you would consider especially influential?

JC: Well, the balance of them would not really have mattered so much to people in the US. I would think that ultimately Goethe's work was influential, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. But then from a practical perspective, I would say that I still have all my textbooks. They were my schoolbooks. If it's soil science, or if it's practical guides to grow lettuce, or anything like that, those were all published by the Dutch government, by the Extension, and were extremely useful because they were very practical. So you have this balance between on one hand the part where my, I was very much influenced by books that came out of the anthroposophical movement and then on the other hand the books that were published by Extension in the Netherlands during that time on soil and crops. (17:13)

AA: Were the books published by Extension in the Netherlands favorable toward biodynamic or organic agriculture at that time?

JC: Yeah, very much so. [The books were all based on conventional methods but there is more in common with conventional agriculture than what differs in methodology of crop production.] Oh, you mean the government?

AA: Yeah, the government publications.

JC: Well, the fact that they supported the school—I mean, we were fully funded by the government—tells you something. We were the only—there were many trade schools, of course, in the Netherlands, where you could become a farmer. This was the one and only that was organic biodynamic. But nevertheless I would say that when the school instructor would come, and he would see that a lot of curriculum was dedicated to art, he was like, "Oh, I see how your students turn out. I think they turn out to be really, really good farmers. You do it very differently than the way we do it." But yeah, they definitely—and it still exists, that school. It's part now of a larger agricultural college. But it's ongoing. And I would say that biodynamics and organic has become a respected component of farming, of Dutch agriculture. (18:37)

AA: That's really interesting. So tell me about your decision to move to the United States.

JC: Well, the Biodynamic Association of the US wrote a letter to my school saying that they needed more trained farmers in the US. And my school approached me and said, "Are you interested in pursuing that?" And so I bought a ticket and met with some people and traveled around the country to look at opportunities. And that's how I ended up in the US. I thought it was an opportunity, and I enjoyed the environment of the US. And so I ended up coming back and working in Minnesota as a vegetable farmer for Camphill Village, which is an intentional community that worked with people with disabilities. And a year later was employed by

Hawthorne Valley Farm in Ghent, New York, a large biodynamic farm in New York that was looking to add vegetables to their farm. So I started growing vegetables there. So from one thing came the next. Really, me staying here was more of a natural outcome of the fact that I got more and more grounded here. What I initially thought it would be a couple of years coming over here, working with existing organic/biodynamic farmers, I ended up staying in this country. (20:22)

AA: So what were your first impressions of organic and biodynamic agriculture here compared to the Netherlands?

JC: Well, it was pretty obvious that everything was pretty small-scale, except for the grain growers. The grain growers were much larger, of course. But the operations on the East Coast, I visited mostly vegetable farms and some small beef farms. They were struggling. They had, many of them were not able to sell their products as organic. They were organic by philosophy. And so their customers appreciated that they were organic, but their pricing structure was mostly based on whatever the restaurants or customers would be able to get on the wholesale market. With the exceptions of the just-beginning Green Market in New York City, that was an exception. And that's also what got me the job at Hawthorne Valley, because they wanted to sell vegetables, organic biodynamic vegetables, at the Green Market in New York City. There was a tremendous interest there. But it was very small. In Holland, where I worked for my apprenticeship, we would take orders by the pallet. And here I was spending a week with a vegetable grower in New York selling vegetables out of the back of his car, not by the box, but by the piece, to restaurants. And I was astounded how they were able to make a living doing such a small volume. (22:29)

AA: So what was it like visiting those organic farms in the 1980s? Were there any farms or farmers that specifically stood out to you at that time?

JC: Yeah, I would say, Ann Mendenhall in Aurora, New York. And she stood out to me because she was a woman who was all by herself. And it was very rural. It was incredibly rural. And here she was, and against all odds was making this farm work, this diversified farm. She grew grain, she had some vegetables, she had a few chickens. And I was like, "Wow, this is truly amazing." And the same thing with Dwayne and Anne Morgan, all the way up in northern Minnesota, that I visited. Very isolated. And what impressed me was the immense amount of willpower in which they had this vision of wanting to have a farming operation and against all odds made it work, because clearly—of course, the historical context of all of this is that we're talking here about the '80s, we're really in the aftermath of the farm crisis or right in the middle of it. So things were tough for everyone, for every farmer it was tough. There weren't many interactions I wasn't impressed with, with how they were able to make it work. Without the kind of support system that I was used to in the Netherlands, where agriculture had at that point still a very strong support system. Not just financially, we're not just talking about subsidies, I'm really talking about, you have a question, you call your extension agent up, they're right there. Or the publication that you use, or anything like that. There were all these people here, had no education, were self-taught, and they made it work. That was very impressive, I thought. (24:49)

AA: So you mentioned that you spent some time in East Troy, Wisconsin, at what is now the Michael Fields Institute. Can you tell me more about that?

JC: Yeah. Well, that was really where I was able to meet many of the biodynamic farmers in the US, because they all came to the biodynamic conference at Nokomis farm. At that point Michael Fields did not exist yet. So Nokomis farm by Christopher and Martina Mann, who came to the US to be close to Zinneker Farm, Zinneker Farm is the first biodynamic farm in the US, also in East Troy. And they wanted to start a community. And they immediately started a dairy farm, they employed a group of young farmers from the US, England, and Germany. All, by the way, all of these farmers are still around and are still farming or doing something agriculture-related. And there was an enormous amount of excitement in the air because Albert Steffen and Fred Kirschenmann, for example, were grain farmers who were at that conference. And they were all talking about the tremendous demand for Demeter-certified grains in Europe. And their ability to help convert a great number of growers to biodynamic methods. So it was an exciting time, a glimmer of hope really in the middle of that very depressing farm crisis, whereby a lot of farms were going out of business. So yeah, I have a lot of warm memories of those early days at Nokomis farm at the white barn where the conference was held, where also the Michael Fields building was constructed, and the Michael Fields as an organization was incorporated.

These days I'm still very connected to the East Troy community. I'm going there quite frequently because the organization I'm part of, called the Living Lands Trust, or formerly called Yggdrasil Land Foundation, was funded by Christopher and Martina Mann. This organization owns 1200 acres in the East Troy community that is leased out to a great number of farmers. And this organization owns land all over the United States in order to help and to remove land from the market, to make it available and affordable to organic and biodynamic farmers. So yeah, it's very nice to see that this impulse that Christopher and Martina brought to the US continues to live on. Warm memories of those days. (28:09)

AA: That's really interesting about the international biodynamic farming community in Wisconsin. Would you say that the biodynamic community had more people from other countries than the organic farming community in Wisconsin or the United States at that time?

JC: The fact that some people from Germany and Holland came over to farm here, you mean?

AA: Yeah, were more of them biodynamic than organic?

JC: Maybe. I mean, Christoph Meier at Hawthorne Valley was from Switzerland, Stephen Schneider who was also from the college came to Hawthorne Valley from Germany, I'm from Holland, Aktfrid Krusenbausm was from Germany. Yeah, maybe. But the majority of biodynamic farmers are American. It's, of course, my subculture, being European and all, it was very easy for me to hang out with my fellow compatriots from Europe. No, I would not say, I would still think that the majority of biodynamic farmers that were at the conference were American. But I think that the connection to Europe is really true to the fact that biodynamics is a European movement. And that it was definitely introduced in the United States by immigrants from Germany, Holland, and Switzerland. (29:41)

AA: So how connected was the biodynamic community to the broader organic and sustainable agriculture movement at that time?

JC: Well, I don't know at that time, I do know that when Ehrenfried Pfeiffer came over in 1938, started the Biodynamic Association, he and Robert Rodale had a lot of interaction, because they were both in Kimberton [?], Pennsylvania. And so there were, as far as the birth of the organic movement in the US, and the biodynamic movement, they were at the same time, basically. So Robert Rodale started the *Organic Gardening* magazine, and Ehrenfried Pfeiffer started the biodynamic magazine. Obviously *Organic Gardening* magazine was hugely more popular than the writings of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer. But Robert's being heavily influenced by both Ehrenfried and by of course also Sir Albert Howard and Lady Eve Balfour and others as well. So again, Europeans, English for that matter.

At the time of the '80s, I did not feel that the Biodynamic Association was doing a good job of integrating with the existing organic movement. It was not well done. I had the impression also that they felt they were different. And that was not dissimilar to what was happening in Europe, whereby there was a sense of competition between the ecological movement there and the biodynamic movement. In Holland we call it ecological agriculture, we don't call it organic, we call it ecological. And so, yes, there was definitely a bit of an atmosphere of competition between the two different movements. I always felt that was unfortunate. (32:14)

AA: So who were some of the key people involved in biodynamics? I think you mentioned a few names; is there anyone else you want to mention that was really important in the 1980s or beyond?

JC: I would say that Ann Mendenhall helping start Demeter was an important person. Fred Kirschenmann, of course. Christoph Meier, Albert Steffen, Lincoln Geiger, Trauger Groh. Those were a few people that I remember. And, of course, I should not forget Herbert Koepf, who was a soil scientist from England who was a very leading figure and influential here in the US and very inspiring. I personally, when I was at the biodynamic conference, I decided to work for Hartmut von Jeetze, another immigrant from Germany. Another leading figure as well. Not as much a farmer as also a person that started Camphill Villages and was an innovator and a visionary. So yeah, there were a lot of people like that I would say in the '80s. They were strong visionaries back then. And inspiring young people like ourselves with a lot of hope for the future, and a lot of ideas.

Now Trauger Groh, I just mentioned him. He's of course one of the people that helped introduce the CSA into the US. Temple Wilton Community Farm, and at the same time there were a lot of folks in West Stockbridge, I believe it is. Indian Line Farm. Robin Van Enn, Andrew Loran, John Root and others, who were all people coming out of Anthroposophy or the Waldorf School that also started a similar-type operation. And between the two they called it Community Supported Agriculture. So that had an enormous impact on organic farms, I would say through the '90s and later on, and even today, although nobody knows really where the CSA movement came from. But yeah, it was really born from, again, the philosophies that were the foundation of Anthroposophy and approaching economic life. So without going into the weeds right now, the ideas that Rudolf Steiner introduced at the time were that the economy works best if everybody is able to overcome self-interest. So when you are overcoming self-interest and are truly at the service of the general wellbeing we can have a very good and beneficial economic relationship. So hence, the community supports the farms, and the farms are supporting the community. So how can we support each other?

Steiner was very much influenced by other thinkers around his time, of which one of the most, Peter Kropotkin, who wrote *Mutual Aid*. So very similar to these thoughts, how can we create mutual aid amongst people? And that was, I would say those were influential people back then. And I was very inspired by Trauger. He had a tremendous amount of energy to travel all over the Northeast and to Quebec also and inspire farmers to have a different approach to how they were having a relationship with their eaters. And out of that the CSA movement was born. (36:49)

AA: So when you say, "brought to this country," was CSA being, was that model common in Europe at that time, before it was common here?

JC: It's interesting that you say that, because what we had in Holland and in Germany were associations. Producer-consumer associations. So their scale was much larger than what we have here. So there, farmers would form an association with customers. And it would be a group of farmers and a large group of consumers. So they would agree upon a price based on value. So this way of doing business was already being practiced in the '70s by biodynamic farmers, extensively. I think what Trauger and Jan vanderTuin, who was working in Switzerland, what he brought back to Robin Van Enn was really like, "Look, these farmers are doing things quite differently. They're not competing on the open market. They actually talk to their customers and they're having a dialogue, they're having a conversation. How can we do that here?" So she came up with one way of doing it, they had an orchard whereby they said, "Now the community owns the orchard, we're collectively taking care of the orchard, and then divide up the harvest between all of us." So that's what the beginning principle was at Indian Line. At Temple Wilton they had a small dairy farm. It was vegetables and fruit, Alice Groh grew fruit. And it was like, they were all pedaling that to the local community.

And I think what was brought in was, "We can do it a little bit differently here." So that's what Trauger said, "Why don't we bring the community together and say, look, we're going to grow all this stuff for you, and you tell us what you think we are worth. This is what is costs us to operate this farm. Are you willing to support us in our operating budget?" And they still do that today, Temple Wilton Community Farm still has the community approve basically their operating budget. Which includes the salaries for the farmers. So by creating a dialogue about what the cost of production was, there was this ability of the community to say, "I want to make sure that you're taken care of." And at the same time the farmers instilled in them a deeper value, wanted to make sure that they realized that they're growing food for people. They aren't just growing food to pay their bills. This is like, "I'm taking care of the community, I'm feeding my community, nursing my community." That's really the foundational principle behind how we were taught at my school, how we were taught to do business. (40:06)

AA: Thank you. That's really interesting. So can you tell me more about your own farm in New York?

JC: Sure. I founded Roxbury Farm in 1990. Yeah, what do you want to know?

AA: What crops did you grow?

JC: We started with growing five acres of vegetables. By the time that I moved on, which was the end of 2014, we had grown to 425 acres and we were growing 45 acres of vegetables and we had 50 head of cattle. We had pigs, sheep and lambs, and were raising chickens. So we were doing that for about 1500 households in New York City, Westchester County, Capital District, and at home in Kinderhook, New York. So yeah. This has been 25 years of my life, to put that in a nutshell. Basically within the context of the farm what we did early on was to take the ideas of Trauger, whereby there's a local community supporting a farm. We were pushing that to the possibilities of going to the city. And we said, "Well, people in the city have to eat as well. Can you have this kind of associative relationship with people in the city even though they don't always know the farmers, they don't know the land? Is this possible? Is this more than an abstraction?" And I would say we successfully did that.

Because when in 1999 we lost the lease on the land—I started on leased land with Roxbury. And built up to 800 families. And then lost the lease on the land. We ended up going to the members and saying, "Look, there's just no way. We are successful, but we're not that successful that we can afford to purchase land in the Hudson Valley." That's kind of hard to imagine how much land has gone up since '99, especially after the 9/11, when we saw a real exodus from the city, and now with the pandemic the second exodus from the city to move upstate, where it really affected land prices. But in '99, land prices were high enough that we didn't feel like we could afford to buy land. We could maybe buy enough land to grow vegetables, but we really, I felt it was important that we remain faithful to the idea of being a biodynamic farm whereby our cattle would provide us with the manure to provide the nutrients for the vegetables. So we really wanted to have that closed loop. We said, "We're looking for a farm, we're looking for a couple hundred acres, and we just don't have that kind of funding."

So the members then ended up organizing themselves, working with Equity Trust, Chuck Matthei from Equity Trust, who was very influential in helping us shape the ideas around land ownership. And they fundraised and then helped Equity Trust, a nonprofit, purchase 150 acres of land in the Hudson Valley. And provide us with a ground lease, a 99-year ground lease. The second thing that Equity Trust then did was to ensure that the improvements, while owned by the farmers, owned by me, would remain affordable in the long-term future for successive farmers. And that concept has proved to be true, because I sold my interest in Roxbury Farm a few years ago. And the house and the buildings were sold to the next generation at an affordable rate. So we were able to keep the cost of housing to a level where it was affordable to a farm where they could actually afford to purchase it for.

So keeping land and buildings out of the system of what we call "social appreciation" has become an important tool to make sure that it's not just like, "Well, it's great that you're supporting this farm right now with the CSA model," but you're actually supporting this farm and making sure that it's going to stay around for multiple generations. I would say that's one of my proudest accomplishments of Roxbury Farm, aside from the fact that we have been a model for a lot of other farmers. We have been always generous, I have been always generous with sharing information with other growers to further them along, feeling like the pie can only grow bigger. There's no such thing as there's only one pie and I've got to protect my slice. It's more like, "No, we're going to grow the pie." I think there's an expression in English about all the boats rise, something like that?

AA: The rising tide floats all the boats, something like that?

JC: That's the one. That's the one I was looking for. And I firmly believed in that, and out of that followed that we always had apprenticeships where we trained many different successful farmers at Roxbury. They were with us for three or four years. And we created manuals for them, and those manuals were eventually shared with other farmers to help make it easier, especially when you're a beginning farmer, to have some tools. Tools that were completely available and accessible to me from Extension when I was a student in Holland. So I'm like, this is the kind of stuff that someone needs, they need to have those numbers at their fingertips. So that's a little bit about Roxbury Farm. I left that behind and my wife and I moved an hour and twenty minutes west from Roxbury Farm, and we have a very small farm here called Philia Farm. I look at it as my semi-retirement, in the sense that I'm very busy farming, but it's not a large operation. It's a very small operation whereby we focus on seeds. Initially only seed garlic, and now we're adding a lot of other seed crops to that. And we're also growing some vegetables for the local community. We have a very small CSA, about fifty members, where basically you're going back full circle to the original CSA movement whereby it's really about this personal relationship that we have with each and every community member of our farm. It's very different from having 1500 families that you have absolutely no idea who your members are. (48:20)

AA: So is there anything you want to share about your farming methods at Roxbury, and then your current farm?

JC: Yeah. Wow. Well, I would say that the methods—I mean, it's interesting, I don't look at them as being that exceptional, except that at Roxbury we were usually one of the earliest adopters of new systems. Initially, those "new systems" were not new systems at all; they were basically the systems that I had learned in Holland. So when it came to weed control, or when it came to planting systems, these were ways in which it was like, well, there's got to be a better way of doing this. I was very interested in closing the loop of fertility, fertility management. And one particular way whereby we stood out is in developing systems whereby even though we do extensive tillage in organic biodynamic farming, we can incorporate methods whereby we can still increase soil health, and especially organic matter.

Early on in the '90s I met with Eric and Anne Nordell of Pennsylvania who, just like me, went back to a lot of books that were written in the '30s. One book that I had discovered was by Adrian Peters called *Green Manuring*, written in 1935. Back then, before the introduction or widespread adoption of synthetic nitrogen, a lot of nitrogen came from green manures. And so I was trying all these crops out that Adrian had already done a lot of research on. And Eric and Anne Nordell, in their research on what had been done in the '30s, came to this rotation called COW—corn, oats, and wheat—and developed their own vegetable rotation based on that, primarily based on having better weed control by breaking the cycles of when weeds, being able to have ground open at the time preceding the year that you have it in a cultivated crop. In other words, you want to have a summer cultivation in the year when, for example, the year preceding that you have it in potatoes, because if you can eliminate the weeds that like to grow in July by having cultivated ground in July, then you are reducing the weed seed bank to the extent that it is easy to grow potatoes in the following year. So that's just an example.

What it actually came out to be is that, by default, we created a neutral year whereby we grow a year of vegetables and then a year of cover crops. Whereby Eric and Anne mostly used oats and peas, rye and vetch, I started developing different systems. I started introducing different types of cover crops, like crotolaria [Sunn hemp] and sorghum-sudan, that produce a

tremendous amount of biomass. By doing that and working that under over ten years at Roxbury Farm where we initially had bought the land with ridiculously low organic matter, anywhere between 1.7 to 2.1 [percent]. We were able to bring it up to 3.5, 4 percent. And we did not do this by applications of lots and lots of compost, which was the traditional way of raising organic matter in organic farming around the time, which also overloads the farms with nutrients, or the soil with nutrients. And also robs from Peter to give to Paul. At Roxbury we were able to have the land, or actually the plants, generate the soil health. So the cultivation of crops became a principle way in which we were able to generate fertility. And I would say that is something that I've given a lot of workshops on, given a lot of talks on. And I'm especially proud of that, how we have inspired many farmers to see how cover crops and green manures can be very, very beneficial. And as a side effect, of course, that neutral year did, of course, have the original intended effect of reducing weed pressure on the farm. (54:32)

AA: So is there anything you want to talk about your CSA marketing model? How were the logistics like, managing 1500 shares?

JC: Well, I know that there were a number of farms that went to that scale that immediately thought of packing shares. And we never did that. Because we were immediately, we started out with the principle that this was about overcoming self-interest. The principle was about having a dialogue. The principle was about, we want to be of service to each other. First of all, it was the community that found me. There was a group in New York City that approached me and said, "Look, we've heard these talks about CSA, and we asked, where are we going to find a farmer? And several people suggested that we talk to you." I said, "Oh, okay." I was wholesaling at the time. My idea of creating a profitable farm would be to grow five crops and do them really well. One of the complaints I had of CSA was that you can never do 45 different crops well. There's always going to be a few that you're going to forget about, you're not going to pay attention to, and they're not going to be very good. It's very difficult to do 45 crops, especially when you want to have multiple successions within these crops. It's chaos. Or can easily become chaos.

So reluctantly I said, "Okay, I really don't like my relationship with the wholesalers. I really want this relationship." For me, it was really about, I want the relationship. I don't like the fact that you're asking me to grow 45 different vegetables, but I will do it for the sake of that this is how I believe we should do business. Well, what happened in that one year, we started with thirty households in New York City, which wasn't economical at all to drive down to the city. So first of all one of the members donated a truck to us. And then, even though we had a donated truck, we still had to pay for the time and the fuel to drive down. So we combined it with going to the Green Market in New York City. And that allowed us to pay the bills to do both. Which actually ended up really being a good thing, because we had a members' section at the Green Market, and as it is with New York, if you do something that's members only, they clearly want to be a part of it. It was actually a really good recruitment because they felt like they were special. And they are special. So we were able to expand the membership in New York quite rapidly, where we no longer had to go to the Green Market and only go down for the members.

Well, the Committee for Peace and Justice in the Capital District heard about what had happened through the grapevine, and especially about the ideas were behind what we were doing in the city. And they immediately understood it, based on their Catholic faith. They understood what was happening there. And so the Committee for Peace and Justice approached and said, "Can we do something similar in the Capital District?" I said, "Absolutely." So we met with the

bishop, and the bishop also immediately understood. He said that every parish should have their own CSA based on these principles. So we very, very quickly grew to about 400 members in those first years.

And the way that it allowed us to work was we said, "Look, we really, the idea is that you are allowing us to be better growers. So the moment that we have to do a lot of work on your end, it's no longer beneficial to the farmer." And they said, "Well, we understand. We do all the work on our end." So we had site coordinators. They still, Roxbury Farm as it still exists today still has site coordinators at every site. Vegetables were being delivered at the central distribution site, usually at a church, synagogue, or a school. And distribution was done inside these public buildings. Site coordinators, and every member signs an agreement that they were willing to volunteer two to four hours a year. And by everybody volunteering two to four hours a year, there was always someone at the site helping with the distribution, helping with the setup, helping with the cleanup, etc., etc. So all we have to do is grow vegetables, put them in the truck, and drop them off. Initially, we even had the members do all the administration. And over time, when that became too much, we took that back.

But it really, as we were growing in size, it became more effective and efficient to grow 45 different crops. If you grow 45 different crops for 1500 families, now it makes sense. Now everything has a scale. You grow six acres of corn and two acres of potatoes, an acre of carrots. Suddenly, everything had its own scale whereby it made sense again. If you grow a couple of rows of carrots, which we do right now, it is just because we don't necessarily need the economics of it as much right now because my wife works for Cornell University and I have some other sources of income that allow us to really look at this, this is vocation now. But back then, I had a young family, and you can't afford to look at it like that, as a vocation. It is a job. And so we needed to make things work. And so the economy of scale allowed us to make a CSA of that size really work. And as John Peterson put it, Angelic Organics, once said, "A hundred-member CSA sounds like an awful lot of work to me." And at that point he had 2000 members. And I think he was right. The scaling up is what allowed us to become actually effective at doing this. (1:01:32)

AA: So can you tell me more about your involvement with the Biodynamic Association?

JC: Yeah, I felt like I had, almost like I was indebted to the Biodynamic Association because they had brought me to the US. And they always supported me in any way they could. So when they asked me to serve on the board, I couldn't say no. And within a year they asked me to become president, which I did for nine years. And I would say, if anything, during my tenure as president, what I have tried to do there is, biodynamics attracts a very diverse group of people. And they might not have anything to do with Anthroposophy or the original teaching of Rudolf Steiner. They might just be attracted because this is a spiritual form of agriculture. And my attitude was, we can call fit in the same tent here. You don't have to ascribe to everything that biodynamics stands for to feel a part of this movement. The more the merrier, so to speak. And I am very proud of that, that during my tenure people felt very welcomed to the Biodynamic Association.

We also reached out more to our international partners. The headquarters of the biodynamic movement is in Dornach, Switzerland. And to make sure that we had good relationships with our counterparts that are all over the world. Biodynamics had never really caught on as much in this country. And it's a bit foreign to many Americans. But it has become

very popular in India and Australia, Philippines, Egypt, and of course it's still very thriving in western Europe. So for us to be able to make these international connections was very inspiring. To see what is happening in Egypt, for example, and to see how seriously they take the ideas of creating a different kind of economy as part of being a biodynamic farm or biodynamic community. It's really, really cool. I think our only counterpart in that was the affiliation we had with the CSA movement, which over time of course led its own life, had nothing to do with biodynamics anymore, because anybody could use that word. So nobody really saw the connection anymore between CSA and biodynamics. But in other countries there were these strong cooperatives or associations that were working according to those principles of what is now mostly adopted as Fair Trade. (1:05:10)

AA: What years were that, that you served as president of the Biodynamic Association?

JC: This was 2005 to 2013 or '14.

AA: Were you involved in any other organizations. I think you mentioned NOFA-New York. Is there anything you want to say about that? Or any other organizations?

JC: Well, my wife is currently president of NOFA-New York, so I definitely am by default involved in NOFA-New York, of course. But yeah, I would say I always seemed to, in the early years, I've gone to their conferences. I taught at many of the NOFA conferences and workshops, NOFA-Vermont, NOFA-New Jersey, NOFA-Massachusetts. So yeah, I've always been trying to maintain a really cozy relationship with my local co-producers. Actually, I've only been certified a few years by Demeter, which is the biodynamic certification organization. And all the other years by NOFA-New York, because I felt it makes more sense to be certified by a local organization than by an organization that is only in California. So in that sense, yeah, we've always had a strong connection to NOFA. (1:06:54)

AA: So you mentioned you're currently focusing on research and seed production on your farm. Is there anything you want to share about that?

JC: Well, it's just really exciting. So as a grower, you've grown production vegetables for a number of years. It's okay. I mean, it becomes same old, same old. I think to be able to be challenged and learn new skills whereby, observation skills are becoming more and more important, is exciting. And to be able to work on quality, to do selection and to raise high quality seed. So it's just something that, say, we've got to have 20,000 pounds of carrots that are halfway decent, consumer grade is consumer grade, right? So it just means that the consumer, that the carrot looks good, that it tastes good, has a nice crisp to it, etc., etc. That's not that hard. I think to get seed that has very high germination rate whereby you are also able to select for best qualities. I always like the fact that my job has intellectually stimulated me. So I'm always looking for new things.

I also, when I started a farmer training program in 2014, at the Hudson Valley Farm Hub. And these young farmers that I was training were looking at, "How can I make my farm profitable? How can I make it work?" I always suggested back then, I said, "You know, the one area that has not been developed is seed." All that seed is being produced elsewhere. A lot of it is in Oregon or somewhere else on this planet. To create a source for our own seed in the Northeast

is something that has not been done. But also very important. The question right now and the challenge is going to be, can we develop systems there the way that we developed systems in vegetable crop production whereby at Roxbury I started developing systems so that I could teach other farmers that if you want to do it more effective, if you want to do it more efficient, here's the way to do it. We haven't really done that with seed yet. We don't even know yet, for example, how much it costs to produce seed at a small scale. So my wife, Crystal, received a grant to help us to determine that, to say, "Well, we grew onions last year for seed, New York Early. And it would be really good to find out what the actual costs of production are." And then we can tell other farmers, "You can have a choice here. You can either grow onions for the wholesale markets, or for your farmers market, or for the CSA. Or you can grow onions, and this is what you can expect to earn back." And that's about what you can expect in yields. So to be able to do that now, I find it's great.

The other thing that we're doing here is we're continuing to work with reduced tillage. And we've got a couple research projects here. We're looking at either planting two existing cover crops and how to best eliminate that cover crop so it doesn't become a problem, either by targeting or rolling and crimping, or by mowing it and doing reduced tillage by ripping it. So I think these are ways that I can continue to be really engaged and really where my favorite hat is just being an innovator. (1:11:35)

AA: So if you were to summarize your philosophy of agriculture, what would that be?

JC: [Laughter] Summarize it. It's a holistic form of agriculture. That would be the summary. Whereby everything is interconnected, everything has to be integrated. You cannot think that the effects of one part of your farm won't have an effect on another area. And to me, that would be whereby the way in which you have your economics of the farm. It is either how you sell your stuff or how your land is valued, or how it is not, has an eventual consequence on your farming systems and your farming methods. Or how your farming systems affect the local ecology. There is a relationship with the landscape surrounding the farm. So the summary is really that everything is interconnected, that we are nature. We're not separated from it. We're part of it, and we just have to face that fact that we have to acknowledge that by being an eater, or a producer, or all of that. It's not very articulate, I apologize. But that to me is the foundational principle of what I'm trying to do every day, is to understand where those connections are, and to do as doctors pledge to do, to do no harm. (1:13:27)

AA: Would you say that your religious or spiritual beliefs have any connection to your philosophies about farming?

JC: Well, they're one and the same. I am not religious. Anthroposophy, for example, is not a religion. It is a philosophy; it is an approach. It's an acknowledgement of our own humility, I guess. That natural science can give the illusion of a lot, but the greatest natural scientists will tell you there is so much that we don't know. And so we need to, at some point—and not be paralyzed by it—relax, to the best of our knowledge, do the best we can, and admit that when we're wrong, we'll adjust. There are so many things that we thought were pretty good thirty, forty years ago in agriculture that now we're looking at and saying, "What were we doing?" We have more information now. And honoring the humanity in ourselves. And that human beings

make mistakes. No, I don't really have a strong belief system in that sense whereby it involves organized religion. (1:15:12)

AA: Is there any person or publication that has strongly influenced your philosophies?

JC: Well, the person that has mostly influenced me I actually have not talked much about, would be Chuck Matthei of Equity Trust. So one of the things that—and I would say that the second person that has strongly influenced me has been Douwe van der Werff, teaching in economics. So there's two people. The first person, Chuck Matthei, influenced me on my relationship to ownership of land and buildings. Chuck, who came out of the civil rights movement, has really influenced me and my thinking. And I've continued to do his work as a board member of the Living Lands Trust, which is a national organization. It originally started with owning the land there in East Troy. Whereby we work with these ideas, that we need to decommodify agricultural land.

The second person, Douwe van der Werff [PhD], he really was the person that influenced my thinking regarding economic relationships and financial relationships. How we related to the marketplace, how we relate to each other. These are relatively unknown people, so I have not been as much influenced by, while I've read a lot of books, it's not that Goethe or Steiner or any of the other people, or Daniel Kahneman for that matter, it doesn't matter who they are, that they strongly influenced who I am today. It's really the people that I had personal interaction with and are personal mentors. And I would say those two were by far the most influential in how I turned out as a human being. (1:17:29)

AA: So do you think there was or is any connection between organic/sustainable agriculture and the environmental movement, the back-to-the-land movement, or any other social or political movements?

JC: Well, I think it should be. I think that the origins absolutely are. That is really how a lot of organic farmers started out, including myself. When I was traveling on my bicycle through Wales and Ireland, I stayed on homesteads. These were back-to-the-landers that gave me room and board, and I helped them muck out their pigsty or helped them weed their vegetables or harvest their vegetables or process their vegetables. So definitely, that's how a lot of people originally started off. And that became a business, and they just became organic operations. And why did these people go back to the land? Because they did not want to partake in the economy that they felt wasn't right for them. It didn't feel right to participate in the system. And so for many people it was a way to do something that's an honest profession. We all felt that farming is an honest profession. You're doing something right there. So the fact that not all of us have actualized that into different forms of ownership of land, for creating a different relationship to the marketplace, is not by lack of will. It's more like lack of exposure to opportunity, or skills.

But I do sense, when I go to a NOFA conference, I feel very many like-minded souls, that they just all would like to see a better world. I see a lot of people that are very, very talented and have left very, very good jobs in order to be a farmer. And I think it's not just about, I want to do something that I enjoy doing, but I want to do something that I find to be more meaningful. And feeding people is a very meaningful profession. Taking care of the land is a very meaningful profession, being a steward. Having an interaction with farm animals whereby you can honor the animals is very meaningful, having that relationship.

So yeah, I don't know if that really answers your question, but could there be more interaction or more activism coming out of the organic agricultural movement? Maybe. But I don't think it was ever intended as a political statement. So I don't think you see farmers becoming therefore politically active just because they are a farmer. (1:21:18)

AA: Do you have any thoughts you would like to share about any current trends or controversies in biodynamic or organic or sustainable agriculture?

JC: No, I'd like to stay out of that. [Laughter] No, I'd really like to stay out of that.

AA: Yep, that's fine. Do you want to share—and you don't have to if you don't want to—your opinion on the Real Organic and regenerative movements and their critiques of USDA organic certification? Do you have any views on certification you'd like to share?

JC: Well, I have to say that I know the certification was a really important thing at some point because there was fraud. Everyone called themselves organic in the '80s. Or no-spray. And there was a need for people who were truly organic to be distinguished, and also to be rewarded in the marketplace. I think an unintended consequence of certification—I mean, it's not that I want to abolish certification. Certification is there to stay. It's an important tool. And I think that the Real Organic network is doing important work to challenge the USDA in how it's being watered down, especially, it's always been a principle in biodynamics that plants are grown in soil, with the exception of sometimes they're not grown, that's a whole other conversation which depends on how you define soil, if something's growing in a peat pot or something.

But having said that, I think the unintended consequence of certification has been that we have siloed the impulse of the organic movement whereby—and it's so easy to do that, right? You're either organic or you're not organic. You create this wall between—well, what we also need to think about is the larger society as a whole, whereby now we give consumers a choice by saying, "Well, you're going to be saved, because now you're eating organic food." But what about the 95 percent of the food that's not produced organically? We should be equally concerned about that. And I've sat in EPA meetings where we approved a pesticide or a herbicide or a miticide, whatever it is. And every year they'll continue it based on hardship rules. Because there is no other way, and there's going to be an economic hardship for that farmer, if the EPA did not approve it. And if the EPA had their choice, we would not use half the chemicals in this country on crops.

So what opportunity have we lost in society to address the fact that food should be safe and crops should not be sprayed with chemicals? If we wouldn't have this option to say, "Well, I can buy myself into having organic food. I have the privilege to have organic food." But that we are as a society concerned about all of us. It's not just my food that I'm concerned about. I'm concerned about everybody else's food. And therefore, I need to engage myself in the process to make sure that food becomes safer and that the environment is less polluted over time. And I don't know. Has it taken energy away, or not? It's just a question I have, more than that I have an answer to that. But I do know that if there will be a will out there and a need out there to create safer chemicals, chemicals that, for example, only kill aphids—which, by the way, exist—instead of having a broad chemical like DDT. So we've already moved away from these broad, terrible pesticides to more pesticides that kill only one particular insect. This is where—and also, if anything, organic farming has done some good in the sense that there are now organic

pesticides that are now coming back into conventional farming. So there has been some really positive influence to society overall from organic farming.

But I just, it's a question I have more than anything else, is that we kind of just are out here, all the way out here, and say, "All we want to do is maintain organics." I think we have to maintain the integrity of food as a whole, of everybody that farms, everybody. Because we're also endangering the lives of farmers, we're endangering the lives of farm workers, we're endangering the water, drinking water, and everything else. I don't know. I'm rambling here, because I haven't really formulated my thoughts here at all, since they are still questions. They're not answers. And I'm not questioning the fact that we need to maintain the integrity of organic farming right now. That's not a question. We're so far along the way right now we can't go back. But what can we also do to take it back, to make sure that we bring everybody along with us? (1:27:35)

AA: So then what is your perspective on the relationship between the agricultural universities, especially the land grant universities, and biodynamic or organic or sustainable agriculture? And how has that changed?

JC: Well, fortunately for me, I've always had a very positive interaction. I'm actually a little dumbfounded by when farmers come to me and say, "Oh yeah, University of Wisconsin, or UC-Davis, or Cornell, they're all bought by the chemical companies." Well, I can see in a certain narrative, I can see how they've come to think that way. But the reality is that my interaction with the faculty at those universities has been extremely positive. And boy, have I learned a lot from that relationship. And have I learned a lot from the research that they have conducted. So I am extremely grateful for the work that the universities have done on behalf of organic farming. And also, sometimes proving us wrong, which I really appreciate. We have ideas sometimes that don't always prove to be true. And it's good. It's good that we're being challenged sometimes. So I am a big believer in science. (1:29:08)

AA: You mentioned that your wife was at Cornell. Is there anything you want to say about that, about her work?

JC: She works with Extension, yes. And she is the organic vegetable specialist here. So she focuses really on vegetables, and specifically on garlic. So yeah, I've learned a lot from my wife. She will challenge me. In fact, even the faculty at large, it's at home where some of the ideas I bring to the table, she was like, "Okay, let's look at them. Let's take them apart." And I'm like, "Oh, okay, that's pretty good. I like that." And knowing also that she has access to information that I didn't even know was available. So that's been very, very helpful. But yeah, it's a large university, and I'm sure there are many moving parts there, and of course I only engage with the folks there that I have found to be extremely helpful and extremely valuable.

AA: And what was your wife's name?

JC: Crystal. Her maiden name is Stewart. Crystal Stewart. Crystal Stewart-Courtens. (1:30:38)

AA: So what do you think are the most important aspects of biodynamic or organic or sustainable agricultural history to preserve and pass on to future generations?

JC: That's a good question. Yeah. I think, at some point I think organic is going to be very generic. And for people to see that the original organic pioneers had a much larger belief system than producing "safe" foods—"safe," not chemicals. There's been, a lot of depth and thought went into why they wanted to farm the way they wanted to farm. This particular kind of farming has its roots in a different cultural approach, and implications on the way that they would hope society would improve upon. Because the whole thing, we haven't really discussed climate change at all, but becoming energy neutral, these are all ideas that were there very early on. I mean, the first solar panels and windmills, you found them on organic farms, you know. These were folks that really saw early, we have to get off the oil. We have to do something, we have to get away from plastic.

And it's not just about farming within the constraints of organic certification standards. It's really about what impacts are we going to have on this planet? So, if anything, it birthed really more of a movement that honors the notion that we have to think about the next seven generations, not unlike how Native Americans thought when they made important decisions. And when you make a decision based on the next seven generations, you do very different things. Now, have we all done that? And have we been consistent in that as organic farmers? I don't think so. But it doesn't take away from the fact that this movement was based on people that really thought, "How can I leave this world in a better place than when I found it?" If that starts disappearing because organic becomes this generic thing whereby it's all about a label, it's sad. And yes, I appreciate you very much in recording this and speaking to some of the early adopters. Because we were idealists. We were people that said, "Hey, things can be done differently if we take a different approach." So yeah. Thank you.

AA: Is there anything else you want to share before we end the interview?

JC: Well, I've talked a lot. [Laughter]. I was very long-winded. No. I have nothing to add.

AA: All right. Well, thank you so much. That was all really, really interesting.

JC: Well, thank you for taking the time. (1:35:13)