

Steven McFadden, narrator

Anneliese Abbott, interviewer

November 13, 2023

SM = Steven McFadden

AA = Anneliese Abbott

AA: Today is November 13, 2023, and this is Anneliese Abbott interviewing

SM: Steven McFadden.

AA: So Steven, thank you so much for taking the time to do this interview today!

SM: My pleasure, and my honor. Thank you for asking.

AA: So why don't we start, tell me a little about when and where you were born and if you had any connection with agriculture when you were a child.

SM: Yeah. Actually, very little connection. I was born in Boston, Massachusetts late in 1948. I am a twin, have a twin brother Michael. We soon moved from the city out to the suburbs. And I suppose if I have any starting point for my relationship with the land and growing things, it would be in that suburban backyard where there was already established a bed of peonies. A beautiful flower. And my mom noticed that when the peonies came into bloom that they'd be covered with these tiny little black ants. So she recruited me—I was seven, eight, nine, young—and we'd go out with cans of Raid and just completely bomb the peony bed trying to eliminate the little black ants. A couple of years later, I learned what a poor idea that was. Ants are actually in a relationship of biological mutualism with the flowers, where they can come and take the nectar from the flowers for their own sustenance. They rid the plant of aphids and thrips and other pests, so it's a healthy mutual relationship between the two. And we were disrupting that with our chemical attack. To me, that was a seminal moment of realization.

I recall also that in my childhood I helped my dad dig out a tree stump one time. It was a pretty good-sized tree. And if you've ever been around stump removal, you know it's quite a job. All we had was shovels and an axe, and I don't know how long we worked on it. I certainly learned the value of hard work. And I also learned the value of working smarter rather than harder, so when we had other tree stumps to get out, we got mechanical.

One other thing that happened that probably contributed to setting me on a career of writing about farms and farmers and food was that during the five years between high school and the start of college, I really wasn't interested in college right off the bat. So I went off working, and I was a pipefitter and did a lot of landscaping. But I had a year working for Tom McSherry and his apple orchard in Sweden, Maine. And we did everything through the spring, summer, and harvest. There was lots of spraying of chemicals there on the apples every which way. And at that point, I guess late '60s, they hadn't really come fully home to the danger of some of these sprays. Fortunately I don't seem to have suffered any ill effects. But one thing that did occur was I just fell in love with the land and being out walking through the orchard doing one chore after

another. I used to love waking up in the morning and just going out and being in that environment for the day. I had a chance also to pick grapes in upstate New York, working with my cousin.

So those things all kind of led into my appreciation for some agrarian endeavors. That was all before I began my college education. I guess that describes my connection. (4:29)

AA: So then when and where did you go to college, and what did you study?

SM: Well, I started around 1971, not really clear what I wanted to do. I went to a community college, Mass Bay Community College. By the time I finished those two years, I knew I wanted to be a writer. I just thought, “I don’t really have anything to say, I’ll become a journalist, and I can run around and find interesting people who have insights that are worthy of clarification and publication.” So I went to Boston University and enrolled in the journalism program. It used to be called School of Public Communication back then. Now I think it’s got a different name. So like so many people, I worked full time while going to college. I was a security guard at the Mass General Hospital, and I’d go in at 11:00 at night and work until 7:00 in the morning. It was often quiet, so I could read and study a little bit through the night.

And then in my senior year I got a job as a reporter at the suburban newspaper, the *Watertown Sun*. I did that for three years. As my final semester at BU was getting underway, the man who was editor had a heart attack and died. And I was the next person up, so I became editor before I even graduated. There I was, I was off and writing, just going at it. Young and full of beans. I’d go to every single meeting there was—the selectmen and the library commission, the school board. I was out every night and up early in the morning writing. Burned out after about three years.

But I will say I did have a seminal experience while working as editor. I went off to interview a man, an immigrant. He had moved to the United States from Ireland. He had a big family, eight kids and of course his wife. And he was working. I think he also was a security guard and worked nights. But during the day he had a plot of land out at the community garden in Belmont, Massachusetts. And I went out with him and saw what he was doing organically, particularly his potato patch was a marvel. It was so deep and so carefully assembled. He was very careful about his potatoes. They were an important crop for him, as of course the Irish heritage would suggest. But just spending time with him out there in the garden, watching him, that was very inspirational to me. I don’t know that he illuminated a particular direction, but just an overall appreciation for what could be happening in the garden. (7:59)

AA: So then, what got you interested in organic food and farming?

SM: Well, that was certainly part of it. I think at that time I might have had a subscription to Rodale’s *Organic Gardening* magazine. My wife at the time, Carolyn, who passed away in ’99, we had an apartment in an old three-story house. We were on the second floor. And out alongside the driveway there was a strip of land between the pavement and the fence. It probably wasn’t a yard wide, and maybe two car lengths long. Maybe it was after my visits to Belmont Community Garden, I got inspired, grabbed a shovel, and dug up that narrow strip and started planting tomatoes and lettuce and probably a few other things as well. And that was very satisfying to me, to be able to leave the typewriter and the notes and all the writing and come and be with the

earth, even though it was just a pathetic little strip along the driveway. But it was ours, and we cared for it. Of course we benefited from it.

One interesting thing, Anneliese, is that a neighbor across the street was an immigrant from Armenia. His name was Papazian, and we called him Papa. Papa Papazian. He was quite elderly. But he was also quite passionate about his gardening, and [he had] a grape arbor. He would come over and poke me and poke the plants, and he had all kinds of ideas. But his enthusiasm, as is so often the case with people who are enthusiastic about one thing or another, his enthusiasm infected me. And I just really wanted to do more gardening. I couldn't find another couple of square feet of land to do anything with. So that got Carolyn and I thinking about moving out of the city into the countryside.

I guess we were probably reading *Organic Gardening* all the time. I'm not sure when I got a subscription, but I had seen it here and there and it made good sense. I imagine it was profoundly influential for a lot of people around the country.

We did move up into the Monadnock region of New Hampshire, about 75 miles away from Boston. We had an acre of land and a big old farmhouse that was over 250 years old. It was a very romantic notion of ours. Now, there are a lot of limitations in having a very old house. There was no end of chores keeping the house together. But we loved living there and had an enormous garden. We were growing everything. There was a huge raspberry patch. So we were very content there. And I really got seriously into gardening at that time. It was a big part of our life, growing and then putting the food up for the winter. We bought a big freezer, and we would can things. Of course, a lot of that was going on at the time. Very satisfying. (11:53)

AA: So would you consider yourself part of the back-to-the-land movement at that time, when you moved there?

SM: I suppose. We were certainly still living very much the modern life. It wasn't as though we disconnected from society in any respect at all. There was a spirit in the air—I guess to go back I should mention that I actually went to Woodstock. I was there. Turns out that [for] the Baby Boomers, that's the most frequent or most common lie, made-up story, to claim that you were there at Woodstock, as if it had some sort of glamor attached to it. But I did go. I hitchhiked there. I was working at Martha's Vineyard that summer. Noepe is the Indigenous name for that beautiful island. But my girlfriend Joan and I hitchhiked. It turned out we were glad we didn't have a car, because it would have just been in the way. And for me, the experience of Woodstock was not so much about the music or the drugs or any of that stuff. It was just standing on the hill and looking out and seeing a quarter of a million people all over the hillside, and recognizing that we all shared a spirit of awakening to the vitality and the possibilities of life. And recognition that there were a lot of social and, to an extent, also agricultural issues that could be handled with greater wisdom.

So I felt that spirit there, and I felt it everywhere. It was really out there. And I think a lot of the back-to-the-landers and the initial people who started what was being called organic farming and gardening at that time felt that spirit as well. It was a real sense of solidarity and possibility. It was palpable, almost as if you could touch it. So I recognized that. I don't really consider that I was a hippie. I never really dropped out. I was always working and productive and had things to do and wanted to be a part of the larger society. But I certainly saw what was going on and recognized that profound change was necessary. Of course, by then we were

becoming much more aware of chemicals and their impact on the environment. So that was an influence. (14:54)

AA: So then you mentioned that you wrote a weekly newspaper column on organic farming. Can you tell me more about that?

SM: Well, I guess at that point I was somewhat of an expert. I've never really considered that I was an expert. I'm a reporter, I go out and gather information from people who are true experts. But I could do that in the role of the organic outlook columnist for the *Monadnock Ledger*, [in] Peterborough, New Hampshire, in the mid-1980s to up about 1990. And it was an opportunity for me to deepen my own knowledge by talking with other gardeners and presenting general garden advice. I could report on what was going on around the country a little bit, certainly what was going on in that region of New Hampshire. Which was not a lot, at that point. Sustainable farming and gardening was beginning to generate momentum in the 1980s and on into the 1990s.

Of course, that was also the time—or really probably just before that—that Earl Butz became Secretary of Agriculture for the United States. And that was really the era, back in the 1970s, when farms began to consolidate and the power and finances began to consolidate into what I guess you could call an agricultural plutocracy. The rise of agribusiness, big chem, high fructose corn syrup, and all that. Butz is famous for a couple of sayings. One was, “Get big or get out.” That really struck so many people of my generation as anathema, an idea they just couldn't go with. There was the idea of the family farm, Ma and Pa Kettle, with their couple of pigs, some cattle, growing a wide variety of things. Well, he saw that didn't really have a future, and he was probably right in that regard. But his command that you get big or get out was like a death sentence.

The other thing he was famous for saying was, “Adapt or die.” Well, what he had in mind for adaption was the consolidation of land, farms buying up smaller farms and just getting bigger and bigger and bigger so that it became a business. And while it might, many operations were still called family farms and were in fact owned by farmers, basically they were into industrial agriculture and relied on chemicals and machinery to produce crops. Many people in that era—and I think still today—recognized that there are a lot of problems associated with that. I don't think I need to get into cataloging what they all are. But it was going on wholesale.

Later on in the 1980s, when I was growing my own organic garden and also writing the column for the *Monadnock Ledger*, I heard about a group in the tiny little town of Temple, New Hampshire, which was actually our next-door neighbor. I lived in New Ipswich. But I heard about a group that was starting a new approach to farming. And naturally being curious, I grabbed my pen and notebook and went over to see what the farmers at the Temple-Wilton Community Farm were up to. That's where I met Trauger Groh, who was quite influential for me, and of course I think for many other hundreds of people. He was quite brilliant.

Trauger had come from Germany to be with a woman he had fallen in love with, Alice [Bennett]. And she had a small farm, and he moved in and began working the land with a couple of colleagues—Lincoln Geiger and Anthony Graham. The three of them decided that they wanted to associate formally with each other and produce a farm running on a new concept, a concept that we now know as Community Supported Agriculture, CSA. So that was very exciting for me, to meet him and to begin learning about biodynamics. The biodynamic approach to growing food, which I find more sophisticated than organic gardening or organic farming. And more challenging, but also with greater possibilities.

I think Trauger found that I was a good listener, always full of questions, but I piped down after a while and would actually pay attention and actually listen closely. I think I did a couple of newspaper columns on what they were attempting, and then Trauger said, “Would you like to write a book together with me?” I think I had written two books already on other themes altogether. *Profiles in Wisdom: Native Elders Speak About the Earth* and *The Legend of the Rainbow Warriors*, which was a journalistic account of what I think is one of the core myths of the Americas, the Rainbow Warriors theme. So at any rate, I got together with Trauger, and I’d go over to his house once or twice a week and get out my notebook and pepper him with questions. He was so insightful. He really got me enthusiastic for their level of enthusiasm for what was possible.

Now for me, Anneliese, it kind of comes [down] to what has been for me a real foundational understanding—and that’s the key word, foundation—to appreciate that farming in particular is the foundation of all the rest of our civilization, including all the fantastic digital and artificial intelligence and space exploration and all the rest of it. You’ve got to have a steady reliable supply of good food, or the rest of it doesn’t happen. So of course, that can seem like, “How could you not know that?” I don’t think most people really get it, really appreciate it. For me, it was like, “That’s it! That is so important. We’ve got to take care of that foundation.”

Because if it’s corrupted in some way, whether through overchemicalization or just consolidation into these vast holdings, which of course as we know now in 2023, many foreign nations and multinational corporations and investment corporations are buying up the farmland, great swaths of it. And they drive the price of the land beyond the reach of the ordinary woman or the ordinary man who may have that authentic vocational call to go to the land, to touch the land, to produce from the land. And we see now, in our era, that so many of the young people who feel that vocational call are unable to gain land, gain access to it. Maybe they can get a job working for somebody else, or some corporation, and perform farming tasks. But that’s a whole lot different from having your own place, your own investment, and your own authentic connection with the land. So the dream of the family farm was up for change, for mutation.

And certainly the whole industrial consolidation process hastened that and thinned out a lot of the countryside. I spent a lot of time in the Midwest, in the Heartland, in Lincoln, Nebraska for a long time. And you could see what happened to the small towns as the farms became bigger and bigger and given over to the corn-soy rotation. A lot of the elements of community life that made rural communities so attractive became depleted as the population thinned out. I think there’s a good chance that there will be a turnaround in that over time, but that happened. I think it was a true loss. And also, I think it’s somewhat of a loss of the beauty of the countryside. I don’t get inspired driving for miles and miles through the corn-soy rotations, after a while. So I’m not putting down the farmers who were called to this. They were all trying to find ways to survive, to earn enough money to keep their households together. But there were consequences.

I’ve kind of lost track of where I was going in response to your question. That’s kind of connected with Trauger. And I know Trauger—and then, of course, I came along to appreciate that the whole CSA thing was an alternative model. It was offering another way for people to be close to the land. While a family farm, per se, might not be the ideal model in the circumstances of the ’80s, ’90s, and onward, a farm where people who might not be blood related but who shared that vocational call could associate with one another and pool their intelligence and resources to create a CSA farm. And hopefully—I think this is so important—claim the land.

And we advocated strongly in our first book, which was *Farms of Tomorrow*. It had a subtitle, not just “Community Supported Farms,” but reversing that, “Farm Supported

Communities.” Where the farm actually became incorporated under a land trust, where the land would be held in perpetuity for agricultural purposes. And, of course, the other thing that was going on with farm consolidation was just development. All of the cities all over the country were building out. The suburbs were expanding, and farm fields were being plowed up for shopping centers. One thing after another. And land being priced out of the reach of individuals who wanted to farm. But with an agricultural land trust, the land could be placed into a legal form that would ensure that it would be available for future generations to farm. It couldn’t be developed in some other way. It would always be there to produce food in one form or another. And then the farmers could then contract with the trust for use of the land. Write a lease that would extend over a number of years.

Because one of the frustrating things that I’ve seen happen, and perhaps you’ve also seen it, Anneliese, is where a young farmer or group of farmers go to work. They have beautiful ideas, and they’re farming on a plot of land, and after maybe two or three years they’re beginning to improve the quality of the soil. And the owner of the land decides that he or she wants to use it for some other purpose, and all of the labor that has gone into enriching the soil and improving goes by the wayside. That has to be devastating for somebody that’s poured their heart and soul into farming. Do people go on after that, or do they decide they want to get a job elsewhere and try to make a living some other way?

So I think the land trust was and remains an important element in parallel with the community supported agricultural ideas, so that the land remains accessible to young people who feel that vocational call. (29:40)

AA: So how did the CSA model work at the Temple-Wilton Community Farm?

SM: Yeah, let me back up here a bit to acknowledge Professor Booker T. Whatley of Tuskegee University. He was a real pioneer, a brilliant man who had a lot of wonderful ideas. He was one of the pioneers of the pick-your-own movement, where you go out and pick your own pumpkin, pick your own corn, whatever it might be. Berries are very popular. So he had that idea. He also had something called, I think it was “Clientele Membership Clubs,” which was a progenitor of the CSA. People could join the club, and they would pay in a certain amount and get vegetables back. Well, he wrote a wonderful book called *Handbook on How to Make \$100,000 a Year Farming 25 Acres*. It really makes your eyes pop, or at least it did when it came out, I think in ’87. But his ideas were in wide circulation before that in the 1970s and the 1980s. He wrote a great number of articles in *Mother Earth News* and also for *Organic Gardening* magazine. So his ideas were definitely out there. Possibly even back in the 1960s.

So that was an influence. I don’t know that it was an influence on the two CSAs that got started in New England in ’86. But probably his ideas did filter in in some way. There was a parallel movement in the mid-1960s in Japan called the Teikei movement. And that Japanese word means, “Food with the farmer’s face on it.” You know who grew it, and they know who’s eating it. That was a motivating idea, particularly as more and more processed and chemicalized foods were coming onto the market, that you could know specifically where the food came from and how it was prepared.

And also, Trauger Groh in Germany—I think the farm there was [called] Buschberg Hoff, I’m not sure exactly where in Germany it was—he had associated with other skilled farmers, and they were pioneering in what might today be called a CSA, looking for ways to survive economically without either getting big or getting out. So when he came to the United States and

got together with Alice, and then with Lincoln and Anthony, they started up an idea. I don't know that Booker T. Whatley had an influence on them. Perhaps he did. But what they wanted to do was to create an economy so that the farm was creating an economy of its own, supported by people who were shareholders, [that] was the word that they used. Meaning that they were investing in the farm. They weren't buying a bag of carrots, or a bag of potatoes, or a dozen eggs. They were supporting the farm.

And the thought was that would liberate the farmers to do what was wisest for the land, to take care of the land in the most wholesome and forward-looking way so that it would still be there in good shape seven generations from now. That's an Indigenous idea, the seventh generation of our children, to bear them in mind as we go about our work in the world, and the consequences that our actions will have on our children's children's children, on to that seventh generation.

If you're just saying, "Here's a dollar; give me a carrot," that's one thing. The whole backstory of that carrot, or that potato, or that steak, or that dozen eggs—as you know, being involved in farming yourself—how complex and rich it is, all of the different elements that come together. It's not just a carrot that you're holding in your hand. It's a whole story, a whole history.

So when people would join the original Temple-Wilton Community Farm, they would make an annual pledge of so much, whether it would be \$500 or \$1000. And the way they would come to a figure for your financial contribution would be to hold an annual meeting and have all of the households that were shareholding the farm—it might be 100 or more—come together. And the farmers would stand up and present their budget. And they might say, "Well, we need \$140,000 to run the farm this coming year." And that money involves all the expenses that they would have for equipment and seeds and whatever else, and also the salaries for the people who were doing the actual farming. And then people would write on a slip of paper what they could contribute toward that number, if it was, say, \$140,000. And somebody in the front of the room would add all the slips of paper up, and if they attained the budget, great. If they didn't, they'd go into Round 2, and everybody would be asked to dig a little bit deeper. And, of course, people who had smaller incomes would naturally not be able to make as large a contribution to the support of the farm. But through the process, eventually it worked out, and they could either meet the budget, or they might have to adjust the budget down somewhat. But on they would go.

That's how it started out in '86, '87. And it's still going. I'm not in touch with the farm these days, so I don't know exactly how it's working anymore. Of course things change over time. But I think that was an important distinction, a little spirit of the CSA, where you support the farm rather than purchase a box of vegetables. Over time, that approach hasn't really caught on. I think one of the things that made it possible for the Temple-Wilton Community Farm was that they were in a small town, and people knew each other. A lot of them were connected through the larger Anthroposophic community, students of Rudolf Steiner's work, and there was a Waldorf School there. So they knew each other, and they had a lot of values in common. And that could work. I think it probably has worked a few other places as well.

But more generally, CSA went in another direction. And I think a lot of the land grant universities and other advisors latched onto CSA as a marketing scheme. And it's still pretty much presented that way. A CSA is a way for small-scale farmers to market their vegetables. But that wasn't the originating impulse in Temple-Wilton or out at Indian Line Farm in western Massachusetts. The originating impulse was, "Support the farm; that's the foundation of everything. And then the farm can create its own economy." Rather than, "Here, we've got a farm, we're producing crops, we need to take them to the larger economy" and go knock on the

door at the local market and say, “Hey, we’ve got all this food, will you buy it and put it on your shelves?” And, invariably, the market says, “Heck, no! We can get it a lot cheaper over here. You’ve got to cut your prices. We can’t pay what you’re asking.” So the farmers get squeezed. Are they always going to be cutting back on what they’re doing in order to get into the economy and into the market, or are they going to be liberated to do what’s necessary and wise for the land, and then have a product that they can share with their community?

So that’s it, and it sounds very idealistic, and I think it’s still worth contemplation. And probably, depending on how the economy goes, worth implementation. (39:51)

AA: I found it very interesting, when I was reading through *Farms of Tomorrow*, how much you talked about how all of these farms were biodynamic. And that was something I didn’t realize, how important the biodynamic influence was on the early CSA model.

SM: Yes, although it certainly dropped out of that pattern pretty quickly. I think what was recognized that, gosh, it’s hard to get along and to keep our operation going here as a small-scale farm. If we take this approach and just create boxes of beautiful fresh vegetables and food every week, we can sell it. It’s a marketing approach. No. I don’t want to criticize anyone who’s doing anything on the CSA model. I know how hard it is to farm and to produce enough income to keep on living on the farm. So I think that basic reality has caused people to be creative and innovative in any number of directions. I generally am supportive of all that. Innovations are probably going to continue.

Nowadays, looking into CSA, the first thing that you see is basically that it’s a marketing scheme. I think the land grant universities and so forth have all taken that approach to it. Now I’m making a general statement here. There are undoubtedly exceptions. Always are. It’s a big country, and so many different things going on. I can’t claim to be on top of the latest CSA developments in any way. I’ve been called in other directions with my work. But I have to say, Anneliese, here I am approaching age 75—I’ll be there in another month—I do hear the call of the land again in me. And I’m returning my attention to farming and food and our future. Those are the things that I want to be involved with and continue to, in such time as I may have, in years ahead. (42:22)

AA: You mentioned that you also worked with the Watatic Community Farm. Can you tell me more about that?

SM: The Watatic Community Farm. Sure. That was an initiative in our little town, New Ipswich, New Hampshire, a little over 2000 people. But the town had a beautiful Grange building in the middle, right next to town hall, across from our little library. The word Watatic came from Mount Watatic, which was a mountain in the community. I just want to mention in passing that it’s one of the great sacred mountains of New England. There’s a string of them, starting with Mount Wachusett down south in Massachusetts and going diagonally on up towards the northwest into Vermont. Seven beautiful mountains, seven sacred mountains. And the Grange, which got started in town probably in the 1870s, built a beautiful building. But it had deteriorated. All the farmers in New Ipswich and surrounding communities had been squeezed out by the market factors that were wreaking havoc on family farms around the country. So the membership had shrunk, and they lacked the resources to keep the building up. But the first floor was still usable.

At any rate, I was getting excited seeing what they were doing in the next town over at the Temple-Wilton Community Farm. So I hosted a number of meetings through the winter. That would have been '89 or '90. And people would come, and we would talk about, what are our local resources here? What can we do? What can we create? We came up with the idea of a farmers' market to be held at the Grange. And this was before the whole farmers' market movement really took off big time. Of course it really went full-bore in the early 2000s and on, and is still going strong, and deservedly so. It's a wonderful institution. But we wanted to do one, and we didn't really have a farmer. But we did have a lot of really big gardeners. And so on Saturdays we would all come down with whatever was ripening in the garden and set it out on tables, picnic tables and so forth.

But it never really took off. One of the things that had happened was the post office had moved out of town, up the road about a mile and a half to a new shopping center, which took over some old farmland. Got plowed up and put in the restaurant and the post office and a bunch of other shops. So people didn't come down to the center of town anymore. There wasn't anything there. Or not much, I shouldn't say there was nothing there. But when the post office was nearby, of course everyone would have to come routinely to get their mail. Anyway, we didn't have a lot of traffic, we didn't sell a lot, and so we staggered on for two years and finally gave up our experiment. It just wasn't working. I learned a lesson that I'm not really a businessman. I'm better off sitting at my keyboard writing than trying to be a direct community activist.

So we learned a lot and we moved on. I think what was healthy was the partnership with the Grange. They were all senior citizens at that time, which I appreciate now that I'm one myself. And they were looking at us as young people in our 20s and 30s, full of energy to do something. We admired each other, even though we never really formed all that close of a social bond. We appreciated what each other was doing.

So that was our Watatic Community Farm. A good experience. (47:07)

Going on with my life story here in a way, or at least my reflections on the part of it involved with farming, Trauger Groh and I went back to the subject we took on in *Farms of Tomorrow*. And in 1998, seven or eight years later, we published *Farms of Tomorrow Revisited*. That gave Trauger an opportunity to add a few more essays. His thinking about farming is quite provocative and inspired quite a few people. And it also gave me the opportunity to travel back around to the eight or ten farms that we profiled in the first book and to ask them what had changed in eight years using the CSA model. What had they learned?

Well, a couple of them had given up and gone off to do other things. And others had persevered and prospered. I probably should have done my homework. Maybe you can answer the question, Anneliese. What had they gained over those eight years? What had they learned? Certainly they had become more sophisticated in their farming methods. And then, once the crop is produced, there's the whole processing and packaging, separating, getting it into the hands of people. So those systems were becoming more and more refined.

I'm kind of listening to see if you'll say, "Oh, well I read this chapter!" I should probably go back and read my own book.

AA: Yeah, I thought it was interesting that it was the biodynamic farms, pretty much all of those that you had profiled in the first book were included in the second one and were still doing well. So that was after the Watatic Community Farm—that was in your first book, but it was not in the revised version, so by then it had kind of failed?

SM: Fizzled, yes. Yeah. And I think a lot of CSAs fizzled. And right now, according to the USDA, they say that in the United States there's some 7,200—I don't know exactly how they get their survey number. But that's what they say. And if you add Canada in, there's probably at least another 5,000. And then, of course, CSA isn't just confined to the United States, nor were the originating ideas confined to the United States. Certainly in Japan, and I'm working with a group in Indonesia that has a CSA farm going there. There is an international organization, it's called URGENCI. urgenci.net. And that's an international resource for CSA farms. They have another [term they also use, Local Solidarity-based Partnerships for Agroecology (LSPAs)], but basically anything that creates a direct relationship between consumers and farmers. They're a wonderful resource internationally. They have a lot of educational and training programs on their website, urgenci.net. So I'm curious, what is the global status of CSA farms?

Maybe that's a question I will look into. I certainly know some doors to knock on and questions to ask, and I think it would be fascinating to give a description of it as the consolidation process continues in farming and corporations in general. Especially the agrichem corporations, Monsanto got gobbled up by Bayer, Syngenta. And now in terms of markets, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, one of our big local markets is Albertson's. They're about to go into a merger/consolidation with Kroger, which is a huge national corporation. And that means there are fewer buyers for farmers to approach with whatever they have grown. You're only talking to a smaller number of potential buyers in order to get into a market. And of course they want to do business with the huge industrial operations. It's just not efficient for them to deal with the small family farms. And that process seems not to be slowing down, at least not that I'm aware of. It's going ahead. And I find it generally concerning.

We belong to a CSA here and also to the local food co-op, La Montanita. So a great deal of our food comes from those sources. But I think we're a rarity in the community here, of maybe half a million people. Are there a thousand or more who are involved with these community initiatives? I don't know. I see them as a source of stability and security, the support of local growers. Not only for the food and their care of the land, but just for the beauty that they add to the world. There's something about walking or driving by an organic or biodynamic farm that is encouraging. You have to really stop and take it in, what's going on in that field there. It fills me with strength. I guess the other word I want to add is excitement. It's exciting. But I think if they were to spend time and really look and appreciate what's going on, it would make an important difference for them. (53:54)

Now an experiment that I often used to suggest to people when I was out lecturing—and I haven't done that in quite a while. But it's just the basic food experiment of, the next time you're tempted and you go into or drive by a fast food joint and get whatever your taste buds are desiring, okay, if you give into that impulse and satisfy the feelings inside, just wait half an hour after you eat and sit quietly for five or ten minutes and pay attention to what's going on inside your body. Feel what's happening in your stomach, feel what's happening in your bloodstream, feel what's happening in your brain. And you really can—for me it's quite pronounced, and I think for anyone who stops and pays attention, you notice what that ultra-processed, chemicalized food is doing to you. And while it may pleasure your taste buds, what is it actually doing to your sense of health and wellbeing? I won't answer the question for anyone who's listening, but I will say it's a worthwhile experiment and I think conveys an important lesson. So there's my science experiment.

Now, on the other hand, go and get some beautiful food from an organic or biodynamic CSA. Make a meal from it, sit down, eat it, wait half an hour, and pay attention to what's going on inside you. Beyond what any speech or any book can convey, your own experience of the food will make the case for organic, biodynamic, and other regenerative processes for growing. So that's my recommendation for an experiment. (56:12)

AA: Very good. I fully agree with that. So you mentioned you moved out to Nebraska at a point, and you said you were involved with the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society and the Open Harvest Cooperative. Can you tell me more about those?

SM: Sure. My first wife, Carolyn, passed away in '99. And around 2008 I met Elizabeth Wolfe, who had roots in Lincoln, Nebraska. So I moved there. And she was working at the local co-op, Open Harvest, or actually she was just transitioning out of that job to another one as I was arriving. But I got to meet a lot of the people there, and I was invited to join the board in 2009. I think I served for five years. Very wonderful and educational process for me. The market, our Open Harvest Co-op Market, was drawing from over 120 local farms who were producing food, and then they would bring it to our market. We would pay them for it, put it on the shelves, and people could come to the market. And I was so happy to see the powerful impact we were able to have in supporting the local farms, organic and biodynamic and whatever. I was thrilled to participate and pour a lot of energy into it. I think co-ops are just a wonderful innovation, and I hope we will see more of them in the future.

I also signed up and joined Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society. I certainly didn't play a very big role. I was just a member, and I would go to the conferences and talk with people and listen and learn. I have to say I met a lot of wonderful farmers and gardeners through my participation.

One thing that happened though, one year, is that I wrote a letter to the editor, because there was a big of a brouhaha. The University of Nebraska in Lincoln, which of course has a big ag school, one of the people from the school, an Extension member, came out and would sit with the board members of the NSAS, the agriculture society, and be there to listen and offer advice. And that went on for years. Likewise [the university] also had representatives that went to meetings of the Farm Bureau and the other farm groups that were oriented to production agriculture and the big farms that were going on.

But the university blocked their person from participating from the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society and said they couldn't go to the meetings anymore. There was some kind of violation of ethics. I don't know. It was all very unclear to me. But that ticked me off. So I wrote a letter to the editor of the newspaper, the *Lincoln Journal-Star*, saying, "Well, the university's sending representatives to all these production associations. What's wrong with our sustainable group?" And I never did get a satisfactory answer, but apparently it ruffled a lot of feathers at the university. And I'm glad it did, because there's no reason that they should have pulled their advisor from being involved with the sustainable association. That, I guess, was my one moment of infamy.

Otherwise the group has been just fine and hasn't really needed me. I think they're going strong now, as is the co-op. Open Harvest Co-op is moving into a new location much closer to downtown, and I think they will prosper there. So good for Open Harvest, and good for Nebraska Sustainable Ag Society. (1:00:51)

AA: So going off of that story, what's your perspective on the relationship between the land grant universities and organic/sustainable agriculture?

SM: Let me give a little bit of a backstory here. *High Country News* researched an investigative piece a few years back and published a story called "Land Grab Universities," which I'm sure you can find on the internet. And it documented how as many as 11 million acres of land that belonged to various Indigenous nations, various Native nations, it was just taken, just appropriated back in the 1860s I think they were getting started, in the 1870s and 1880s. But that land was either used for the land grant universities themselves or otherwise used to generate income to fund them. So they got off on the wrong foot by appropriating 11 million acres of land that they didn't really have any right to. To me, when you start out on the wrong foot, sometimes it's hard to get the correct footing.

Let me acknowledge that the land grant universities with their ag programs have done a tremendous amount of good. If you go back to the writings of Liberty Hyde Bailey, who was the dean of agriculture at Cornell back in the late 1880s. He was a real champion of the land grant college movement, and the way he put it was it brought ivory tower academia close to the ground, to the actual farmers, and brought them into relationship with one another. That was really healthy to have that kind of relationship. And Lord knows there have been an uncountable number of benefits that have come out of that.

But in more recent years, I guess starting with "Get big or get out," as the agribusiness corporations got bigger, they started pouring their money into the land grant universities to influence research. What are the land grant universities going to study, and what kind of reports are they going to put out? I don't think it's at all a surprise that the universities followed the money, and they shifted the public research agenda towards the ambitions of the private sector. And the private sector will often—of course, it does have some good motivations mixed in—the number one priority always has to be produce a profit for the shareholders quarter after quarter after quarter. It's relentless. And that often drives poor decisions, or decisions that will make money but are not in the interest of the land or the public. And that has continued. That is a criticism that I share, I'm certainly not the initiator, but in reading and learning and trying to pay attention to what's going on, you can see that that has happened.

And I think we've lost a lot because of that. Certainly they took up the whole idea of the CSA as a marketing concept and continued to pursue it as if that was what CSA was really all about. In truth, I guess you could say today, in 2023, by and large it is true for a great number of CSAs. That's what it's all about, a marketing concept. And then for others, they have other values which are guiding them. And here again I want to make clear, I'm not criticizing any CSA for doing what they need to do. I'm just saying there are ideals that are worthy of contemplation, active consideration, and I feel implementation. And the reason I make that remark, Anneliese, is seeing what's going on environmentally with climate change in particular, but then also just the market forces globally. So I think I consider CSA as a possible sanctuary for a lot of the beautiful agricultural ideals.

Going back to the concept I appreciate farms as the foundation of the rest of society. That foundation has got to be cleaned up and elevated so that what is produced is of the highest order. When you're producing highly processed, highly chemicalized food, it often has a numbing or a dulling effect on the body, our sensitivity, and our consciousness. I don't have a whole lot of research to trot out support that assertion, but going back to my little experiment of eating a batch of fast food and paying attention to how it impacts you. It does numb and dull. And I think

for a lot of people, that's just what they consider to be normal. It isn't. We can clarify and uplift. And I think the human spirit benefits enormously from that. And that's kind of where I'm at with the work I'm doing now, advocating. It's important to liberate the farmers by supporting the farm and not just buying their carrots or their peaches or what have you, but to support the farm.

Now saying that, I guess I could be called a hypocrite, since I'm not actively supporting a community farm in that way now. And I have my own excuses, which are legitimate. Life changes that my family and I have been through. But we do try our best, as I suppose everyone does, by belonging to a CSA here that is more typical of the modern form, and also belonging to the co-op. So that goes on. (1:08:37)

AA: You mentioned that you also did some writing for *Mother Earth News*. Is there anything you want to say about that?

SM: Gosh, yeah. I don't even know how that got under way. I guess I was writing my "Organic Outlook," and then we did the book. I actually was named editor of *Mother Earth News* one year. It was around 1990, in the late '80s or early '90s. But *Mother Earth* was changing hands from the people who initially started it to another group, and then to another group. It went through a bunch of bumpy changes. So I got a phone call one summer day, would I take over as editor? And I said, "You betcha! Let me at it!" And then the negotiations I think were all going on in New York City, or somewhere. At any rate, things shifted in terms of the ownership, and they forgot about me. I think I finally got another phone call one day saying, "We changed our mind," or whatever. So I was kind of a ghost editor. Didn't really exist. Didn't really get a job or get paid, didn't do any work. But I had that title for a month or so.

Otherwise, I did a lot of blogging for them. More in this century. Interesting to say that word, having lived through the bridge from one [century] to another. But probably around 2007, 2008, working with Kale Roberts, who was the blog editor. I just would do pieces occasionally, maybe one every other month for *Mother Earth News*. Which was a profound influence, I have to say. Like *Organic Gardening*. So if you're doing any history of the organic farming movement, *Mother* plays an important role, and I think continues to. I don't have a subscription at the moment. But they've done so much wonderful work over the years. (1:10:55)

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

SM: Well, the statement I made earlier about farming being the foundation of everything. And I think organic farming, the foundation of everything healthy. Clean land, clean food, clean, unpolluted water. All of that. It's all built on what we do with the land, the way that we treat the land, and the foods that we bring out of that.

Do my spiritual beliefs have any connection to my philosophy? I want to say I'm very cautious or careful with the word "beliefs," because they can evaporate or shatter so easily. You might think you're the smartest kid in your class, and then somebody did a lot better on the exams than you did, and there goes that belief. Or you might think that this wonderful person you've met is in love with you, and then a little time goes on and you realize your belief was based on a fantasy. Well, likewise, I think in the larger society there is a lot of disinformation and misinformation out there that people latch onto as a belief. Some people cling to those beliefs seriously, even in the face of counterevidence. So I'm not a big fan of beliefs. But I am a big fan of experience. And I know that organic farming is a superior approach, and I know that we can

go much more widely around the world with it. And I think it's really the hope of the future. Clean food, clean land, clean water. Enable people to have clean or clear thoughts or ideation to see what's going on in the world. And hopefully to base what they're doing in the world, their actions, on experience and knowledge and consideration rather than just, "I believe something because some charismatic individual was able to put it across in a dynamic way that moved me."

So my philosophy? Farming's the foundation of everything. You want it to be clean and healthy. Crappy food leads to crappy health. I should have looked up the statistics on how many food-related disturbances there are in the human body. Irritable bowel syndrome, indigestion, the list goes on and on and on of people who have issues with food. The whole gluten thing. It's endless. I think in a broad, general sense, if you're eating a healthy, balanced diet, you're far less likely to encounter health conditions that arise from bad food. Bad food leads to bad health. I guess I don't want to get into an argument about that. Maybe I have to classify that as one of my "beliefs," but I've got to classify it as one of my elements of knowledge that has come through experience. And can I convince anyone else of that? I don't know. I certainly have come to appreciate it myself and to hold the hope that more and more people will also make those careful observations and pay attention to their own experience and revel in the truth of what their own perceptions are able to provide them. (1:15:26)

AA: Now you wrote a book called *Deep Agroecology*. Could you tell me more about what inspired you to write that?

SM: Well, let's see. My current wife—I hate to say that. Carolyn died in 1999, and then I met Elizabeth, and it's been wonderful. But living in Lincoln, Nebraska, I was out one day in front of our house, raking leaves or something in the yard. And Professor Charles Francis, Chuck Francis, came by on his bicycle. He was a professor at the University of Lincoln, in the ag school. And he rode his bike to work every day. It must have been seven or eight miles. He would ride in all kinds of weather. And the bike route came by the front of our house, so he saw me raking leaves, and he stopped to chat. He had reviewed a couple of my earlier books and knew of my interests. And as we talked, he said, "Hey, have you ever considered writing a book about deep agroecology?" My eyes kind of bugged out of my head and I said, "What? What the heck is deep agroecology?" And all he said was, "Think about it."

Well, I didn't even really know what agroecology was at that time. I mean, I had a vague sense of it, but I hadn't really looked into it. I just took what Chuck had suggested and put it in the back of my mind and didn't really do anything about it. But it was like what they call one of those "worm ideas" that get into you and just constantly work on you. So I began to read up on agroecology, and I learned that it's a science, a practice, and a movement. Starting in the 1920s, the pioneers began to recognize that agriculture had a profound influence on the ecology, on the farm, on the community, or broadly the world. Certainly we can look at the huge dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico caused by the runoff of fertilizers and other chemicals from Midwest farms and see how that process has just kind of assassinated huge swaths of the ocean where nothing can survive from conditions caused by all of that chemical effluent running into the Mississippi River and then down into the Gulf of Mexico.

At any rate, Chuck got me thinking. So I began to make notes, and then came the question, "If agroecology is this global movement"—which it is, although not well appreciated yet—"what would deep agroecology possibly be?" So let me back up just a little bit and say, agroecology, while a science, a practice, and a movement, is basically about sustainable

agriculture in many different forms. Not just organic. There's also regenerative and a lot of different names and systems that get under the umbrella. That's of course an issue unto itself. But agroecology is out there. And one of the things that really interested me was a movement, a social movement that talked about equity and egalitarianism. When we think about where our food comes from and then look at the human beings who are doing that work, so many of them are coming up from Central America or elsewhere to our United States farms, and what their lives are like. The intensity of the demands on their bodies working out in the fields, and the low pay, and the living conditions. Well, there's your foundation right there, all of these human beings. And in my view, that's unjust. And we wouldn't eat, wouldn't have any food if it wasn't for these people, these human beings and the conditions that they're in.

Well, agroecology takes that into account and looks for different ways to change the status quo. Certainly the CSA movement was about that, so that the farmers who were growing the food have an investment and can finish it long term from their involvement with the CSA. So in terms of deep agroecology, of course I turned to the works on the subject of deep ecology. Deep ecology was an idea that came out in the 1970s, [the] work of Arne Naess, in Scandinavia. I can't think of what country exactly. But he, among his many ideas for deep ecology, was the recognition that every creature, every living form, has a right to exist beyond its utility to human beings. In other words, cows and sheep and pigs, sentient beings, have a right to exist beyond the fact that they give us pork chops, or chicken wings, or porterhouse steaks. They're not just economic units. So that was one idea that gave me a starting point for looking at deep agroecology.

Now going on and researching and finally writing the book, what I did is pretty much the same thing that I've done with all of my books, which is to run around all over the place with my pencil and notebook and talk to people who were informed, inspired, and doing and saying things that I thought were helpful, and listening very carefully to them. So deep agroecology doesn't really represent my philosophy. It represents a philosophy I share, but that has come from a great number of wonderfully creative and innovative people. And one of my central reasons in wanting to write the book was first of all to try to educate more people about the word "agroecology," first of all. It exists, don't be intimidated, it's Latin, it sounds like a big head or a pointy head concept, but no, it's about the land, it's about food, it's about people touching the land on your behalf. It's so foundational, so fundamental.

But I don't think I've been successful in that regard—not that I'm the only one, there's certainly a great number of organizations and other individuals who are sounding the song of agroecology and seeing that this is an important evolutionary step for humanity to take, that capitalism for all of its benefits has created some really disastrous side effects on the land and the waters by unrestrained pursuit of profit. When that becomes the driving force, a lot of other important considerations get pushed to the side or just get completely overrun. And likewise, the social considerations of the people who handle the food. A phrase that I have come to use over the years, others use it, but it speaks I think accurately, is to say that those are our ambassadors to the land. The farmers touch the earth for us. If we do not touch it ourselves, and instead rely on them to touch it. And if we treat them badly, then they cannot be effective or noble ambassadors. They cannot do the thing they recognize is the highest and best, but instead have to do what is absolutely economically necessary to make a profit to get to the shareholders.

So I think looking at farmers as ambassadors to the earth, and deep agroecology, I think there's also a reality of them performing almost a priestly function. Because if they are enabled to do what's best for the farm rather than what will make money from the farm, then they can

elevate the qualities—not so much the quantities, but the qualities of what they are doing. And that in turn influences us so directly, influencing the quality of our lives. Not just our basic good health, but also our clarity of thought and feeling.

Dannis Klocek wrote a book called *Sacred Agriculture*, which I would recommend to any and all farmers and really any and all consumers who recognize the importance of farming. He put forth the notion, agriculture's not just about manipulating material substances—this much soil, this much fertilizer, this much seed, this much machinery. But at the same instant, we are involved in an energetic and spiritual act. And it has consequences in the quality of our lives and the quality of what we're able to develop otherwise. It's not spirituality as some sort of otherworldly thing that's far removed from us and that we only engage in churches or temples or mosques on our designated holy days.

But rather, as we learned from all of our Native, Indigenous relatives, spirit is pervasive. It's everywhere. It's in everything. And thus the quality of respect is so important, that you recognize that there is a certain quality of spirit or intelligence within all of creation. The sacred hoop—what was it, in the Disney film *The Lion King* they talk about, what's their phrase for the sacred hoop? The circle of life. The interrelationship among all elements. Carrying that level of awareness and respect into your work as a farmer is a lot easier if the people who are consuming and who are surviving by virtue of your work recognize that you are an ambassador and that you're touching the earth for them and that you're empowering them to touch the earth in a highly intelligent, informed, and uplifting way.

So here I probably sound like I'm jumping up on my soapbox and waving my pencil in the air emphatically. Well, I do feel passionate about the whole subject. That's obvious, or I wouldn't have written these books or read all of these wonderful books by other writers and investigators and farmers. So it's in me. (1:28:46)

AA: And so you mentioned that you worked with Indigenous teachers and elders. Is there anything you want to say about that?

SM: Oh, gosh, I could go on at length, so you may need to stop me at some point. But it was a bumper sticker that woke me up. I was living in New Ipswich, and I went up the road to the post office one day, and there was a beat-up old jalopy with a bumper sticker that said, "Broken treaty score: Red man 0, White man 375" or something like that. I looked at that bumper sticker and couldn't make heads or tails of it. And finally a man came out to get in his car, and I said, "What the heck is this? What's your bumper sticker mean?" And he said, "Well, that's a fact. The United States government has entered into some 370 legally binding treaties with various Indigenous nations and has broken or violated every single one." I said, "What? Baloney! Can't be! Not my country! Not my beloved United States of America!" So I kind of got into a little argument with him about how that couldn't be true. And that was the end of that conversation.

But I'm a reporter, and I'm curious, so I went and looked. And wow. I was stunned. That is an actual fact. And I could have shrugged my shoulders if it had been 25%, or maybe just 50%. But that every single legally binding treaty had either been broken or violated, I experienced the Greek [concept of] *metanoia*, a fundamental shift in the way you look at the world. There's something really wrong at the core of this. So that began my quest trying to understand what's going on. And it led me, first I wrote a book called *Profiles in Wisdom: Native Elders Speak About the Earth*. I had gone around and met with 14 or 15 respected Native elders, women and

men, and profiled them in profiles and assembled [the profiles] in this book. And I also wrote *Legend of the Rainbow Warriors*, telling that story.

And that created an opportunity for me to be the national coordinator for our Earth Day, 1993, through Earth Day USA. And the reason they tapped me on the shoulder to coordinate that year's program was they didn't really have an idea. It was getting to be late October, and they were looking at Earth Day coming up in March or April. But we had an idea. I'm blessed somehow that ideas just descend upon me. And I thought, "council circles. We should all sit down with our local Native neighbors and talk about the condition of the earth." So we formed a formal partnership with Seventh Generation Fund, which is an all-Native group in California. So Earth Day USA and the Seventh Generation Fund created the Council Circles program, and that's what we went with in 1993. We created a protocol for people to sit with Indigenous people in their community and exchange views using the council format. I won't go into that now, but it's just so inherently respectful of each individual and what he or she may bring to the circle, whether they speak or not, just their presence elevates the whole conversation if they come into it in that protocol, in that form.

Then that led on to other things. I became involved with Grandfather William Commanda, now deceased. But he was a highly respected Native elder from Manawaki, Quebec, up in Canada, the Kitigan Zibi Algonquin reservation. And he led a pilgrimage from First Encounter Beach on Cape Cod, Massachusetts, down to the Qualla Boundary, which is the Cherokee Reservation in North Carolina. So we walked all the way down there, and we banged a right, started walking towards the West Coast. We walked and walked and walked until we got to Los Angeles, and then we turned north and headed up towards the Western Gateway. And we met with dozens of Native elders as we walked. They would come out to meet us, or we would go to their reservations. And so the whole time I was listening and writing notes and just feeling so enriched from the experience. It took us eight months, eight months of walking. I wrote—well, I call it a book, but it's online. It's absolutely free. The tale of our journey, *Odyssey of the Eighth Fire*, the Eighth Fire being a very important Native teaching about the timeframes that we have lived through and are living in. And I put it up on the internet, so it's there. It's enormously long, it's just at 8thfire.net.

At any rate, the whole time I was being informed by these meetings with Native elders, of course I was paying attention to the land and the way we were treating the land and the water. And that, of course, always brought me back to agriculture, farms, food, and our future. So that's it. That's the song that has resonated within me, hearing from all of these wisdom keepers and then meeting all of these enlightened and enthusiastic farmers who were doing so many wonderful things. Well, they're probably all aging out now, just like me, but they were the pioneers. And they really had the spirit of recognizing, not just the enormous environmental and cosmological difficulties that were arising, but also the social conditions. And I mean that beyond the realm of the human beings that we depend upon to grow our food, but just more generally the quality of our social lives and our social interaction.

Something real, something tangible, something valuable, and something that can sustain the next seven generations of our children. Such a beautiful Native teaching, coming from the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Six Nations tradition. To think what you're doing, the impact it will have not just on your children, but your grandchildren, and then onward for those generations. What a different world we would have if that was an operative principle. And I think we still have the opportunity to embrace it more fully and to go forward more carefully. Maybe not as swiftly. That's one of my issues with all the technological development. I mean, I think it's

fabulous, so many of the tools and techniques that get developed, but sometimes a little too fast for that consideration of the consequences. I don't think we need to look any further than Roundup glyphosate to tell a story that proves that point. (1:37:31)

AA: So what are your views on the current USDA certification standards?

SM: Well, Elizabeth, my wife, while we were living in Lincoln Nebraska, worked for five years with the Cornucopia Institute. And so I of course paid very close attention to their ongoing critique of the National Organic Program and the National Organic Standards Board and all of that. And I could see kind of a deterioration of standards over time. Because what happened is, we had this initial spirit of organic that was ideal and pure in some respects, but going forward it soon became apparent that people were willing to pay a premium to attain organic food and support their own health and family's wellbeing with that. So ka-ching, oh, a premium, you can make more if you have the label "organic" on it. That has, unfortunately, in some ways been an insidious influence, and a lot of agribusiness entities wanted to make that premium to increase their profits. And they were willing to undermine, I think, the whole idea or the whole spirit behind it.

And here I would point first of all to the whole hydroponic movement. Hydroponics is a pretty nifty technology, but it doesn't involve soil. And we are beings of the earth. We live on the earth, and we have a relationship with the soil. And I think hydroponics cuts that off. It's so removed from the real world, so chemical. Or not chemical; I mean, it uses a slurry that is "organic," but basically it's just a slurry of nutrients that get fed in. So I grant that there's a place for hydroponic agriculture in the world, but I do not agree with the concept of calling it "organic." It just isn't. Meanwhile, other standards including the care and treatment of livestock and elsewhere are kind of systematically and steadily eroded, a little bit here, a little bit there. The process goes on. So through the Cornucopia Institute, as Elizabeth was working with them, and certainly a number of other institutions, it became apparent to me that that really was happening.

And the National Organic Standards Board kept losing the old generation members and involving more and more people from agribusiness. I don't know what the current makeup is. I'm involved in other projects that are not directly agricultural at the moment, so I'm not exactly aware. But I'd say a general undermining and deterioration. And that needs to be, in my mind, arrested and go back to that true spirit. What's going on in the world, the true state of the world? In my view it's too precarious to shortchange. We need to be doing the very best we can to reckon with all of the challenges that we face. So I'm wagging my finger at the National Organic Standards Board, saying, "Straighten up and fly right!" And the USDA, of course, is a huge institution that overshadows the tiny little segment that is organic. What is it, less than 2%? But that 2% is golden and produces a premium, and you can get more for your carrot if you can call it organic. But is that concept of organic or, contemporarily, regenerative, being undermined and weakened? Yeah, I would say so. I'm not condemning all organic. There's still a lot of really good stuff going on, and there's still a lot of wonderful regenerative approaches, but they get compromised often. (1:42:30)

AA: So what's your view of the Real Organic and the regenerative certifications?

SM: Well, I'm a big supporter of that. I watch a lot of the Real Organic videos and pay attention to what they're saying. And they still recognize and actively support and advocate for true organic standards. So it's unfortunate for farmers that then there are these different levels of certification, that there's organic, there's Real Organic, there's regenerative. Then there's natural—boy, that word really came to mean nothing after a while. You know for me, growing up in the '60s and especially in the early '70s, “natural” did mean organic. But that didn't last long. You can call anything natural, and marketers were happy to do that if they thought they could get a few extra cents on every unit of food they sold. So have I gotten away from your question here? What was it?

AA: Oh, it was just how you felt about the Real Organic certification.

SM: Yeah, I'm glad they exist. More power to them. I've got to re-up my membership. I want to support them, not only vocally and in writing, but also put some money in so that they can continue to do the good work that they're doing. I think that they're continuing to increase elsewhere. Of course, the Biodynamic Association has formed a formal partnership with their certification agency, the Demeter group, which goes out and can give you a certification as a biodynamic farm, which is important to many consumers. So they've come together, they've joined. And I have hopes that the Real Organic Project will develop even more allies as time goes on and get stronger, and that the federal National Organic Program will learn from them and pay attention and understand why some farmers are willing to spend the extra money to gain certification from Real Organic. So an enthusiastic supporter. (1:45:07)

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

SM: Soil. I would say, don't abandon the soil, even as we're going out into space. Really honor and respect that. We are beings of the earth. We may be interplanetary citizens at some other point in time, but we're just getting started probing. We cannot turn our back on the spirit of the land here. Anyone appreciating what's going on, climate patterns and how it produces these absolutely radical weather events and climate changes and the shifts in the growing zones, you've got to recognize we're in the red zone. Things are not well. And anything that you can do that's a step in the right healthy direction is so important.

I'm going to go back to tell a personal story. And maybe this is a good way to end and answer more fully, what is it that organic needs to carry forward. Back in the 1980s, when I was beginning to learn about some of the Indigenous wisdom ways, one of my neighbors was Manitonquat, or Medicine Story, an elder of the Wampanoag Nation. And I got to know him socially. So with him and a couple other friends, I got put out on [a mountain along the Wapack Trail] for a vision quest, four days and four nights fasting in the wilderness. And nothing happened. I sat out there, and I was hot and covered with bugs all day, bored. At night it would get dark and cold, and you'd hear things rustling in the bushes. There were a lot of wild turkeys up on the mountain. And you can imagine some monster if you want, so you have to deal with your fears. Well, four days, four nights, nothing happened. I was kind of hoping maybe an angel would arrive with a golden scroll explaining everything. Nothing happened, just the bugs.

But on the final day, I was fiddling with a twig just to pass the time, and using my thumbnail just to peel a little bit of bark off the twig. And down below the mountain I could hear

my friends, Manitonquat and Bill Watkinson and some of the others, starting up the mountain and rustling through the leaves. And I could hear the conversation. There was a lake down below, and their voices echoed off the lake. And so I knew they were coming, and I kept peeling that bark. And then the twig broke! It snapped! And when it snapped, my mind snapped, and I realized that I had just changed the world. It was an infinitesimally small change to break a twig, but there's no putting that twig back together again, not with Super Glue or duct tape. That twig was never going to be the same. And it may sound ridiculous hearing the story now, but I was able, in a moment of *metanoia*, a fundamental change in the way I perceived the world, to recognize that everything I did changed the world somehow. Maybe just a tiny little change, or maybe something more significant. But it all counted.

And then of course, learning this theory of how we are all related, a small change can wind up making a profound difference. And that is part, not of my belief, but of my knowledge, my understanding, my experience of organic farming and gardening and biodynamics and the best of it. Everything makes a difference. And so when you improve a square foot or a square yard of soil, that's something that's going to endure and be of benefit to those that come behind you. It's going to be richer, more fertile, more willing to produce goodness.

So that's it. Everything that those organic farmers are doing, they are champions, I salute them. It's making a difference. It's not just earning an income for them to be able to go on with their lives. But it is making a difference. And my hope is that we'll continue to make a bigger and more profound difference as the years go forward. That's my hope for the future, that in righting our foundation we right the whole of society.

AA: Well, thank you for sharing that! Is there anything else you want to say before we end the recording?

SM: That's it! I'm so honored that you asked for my observations, and I hope that in some respects they'll be able to be of service. (1:50:53)