

We live in a quiet corner of a busy world. We are lucky to “back up” to the Manistee National Forest, an area of few heavily traveled roads and not many inhabitants. And, in our immediate neighborhood, most of the people are concerned with the environmental impact of their lives. Not everyone here considers their food supply to have had its origins in either a supermarket or a far off country. Our Amish neighbors’ vegetable gardens are, I believe, also an inspiration to many who had not raised much of their own food earlier.

Here, on this farm, gardening has always been a way of life. This time of year, we look forward to the summer growing season. Even I, with my dislike for hot weather, know that we need warmth in addition to sunshine and rain, for crops to flourish, and, along with that, for us to thrive. Right now, with frosty mornings, cold winds, and tomato plants that will soon be too big for our plant stand shelves, a little more heat would be welcome. But, we know to live with what IS, not expecting that every personal desire will be fulfilled.

It makes me think about rainy weather, too. I don’t know how often I have “bitten my tongue” after a break in a dry spell to avoid unnecessarily offending some stranger I heard complaining about rain ruining the possibility of a golf game, a lakeshore swim, or some other leisure activity. With water so vital to the lives of all of us, it saddens me that so many of us are so shortsighted in our thinking.

A friend in Sweden wrote recently about the discussion they had had at their reading circle. She and I have exchanged our views on a remarkable variety of subjects over the years, and usually, we find ourselves in agreement on everything from politics to the environment. This is what she wrote—as I have translated it—about the topics that came up after they had discussed their book:

“Yesterday, when we were finished discussing the book, we sat and talked about what would happen if times became uncertain and uneasy, and electrical power is lost, plus internet service and more. Everyone said that we have it much better out here where we live.” (They live in a picture-postcard-beautiful area that is off the beaten path, with lots of uninhabited land and not so many people.) “ Everyone was so happy about how beautiful it is here. We can grow gardens, hunt, and fish. We can gather wood, fire our stoves. But, how can we draw up our drinking water from the deep wells? It will hardly work with a hand pump when it is so deep. Perhaps a mechanically skilled person could construct a pump driven with a bicycle? Otherwise, we would have to get our water from the streams—from the sinking groundwater level. We could get lake water from farther out in the lake where it is cleaner. Otherwise, we would have to filter and boil it. We would have to save our own garden seeds. And who of us has an outhouse now? “

“People need not worry about clothing for a long time, with the overcrowded closets. Later, I could teach them to spin. But other things, such as visits to doctors when there is little or no fuel to travel, would be difficult. The community is so vulnerable.”

And, so vulnerable is the whole world. And what have we done? We have chosen political and economic paths that lead to less regulation of what

are the needs of all of us—water, air, methods of food production, fuel sources, and much more. Our ability to rebound from such misuse of power is lessened with every attack. As we grow ever more dependent on factory foods, as we lose the ability to protect our nationally owned lands and parks, as the wealthy control more and more of the world's resources, our choices and lives inevitably become more and more limited.

Here, on this farm, we are not perfect. We do not pretend to be. We could do better. There are actions that need to be eliminated here, too, and others that need to increase. We could use our Norwegian fjord horses more and the tractors less, we could drive even fewer miles than we do, we could raise all of our own food instead of just most of it, and we could mend our jeans until they are nothing but patches. And we do understand that the changes that other people must make are not the same as ours. Rural life offers us more possibilities than if we lived in a city. But, even in an urban area, much can be altered. Sustainable food grown close to the cities should be available to people of every economic level, not just to the more affluent. Community gardens and community-centered lives are equally important.

But, we do recognize that all of us need to make many, many important changes. And, some things here on this farm do look right, though to many people, it just looks as if we don't "farm." Our fields and meadows are green now, not brown or yellow from the spraying of herbicides to kill every living plant in preparation for monocropping and mining the land with chemical fertilizers. Our ditches and ponds—after three inches of rain over three or four days—run clear. There is no muddy water from the erosion of topsoil after wet weather. And when we eat the food that grows here on the farm—whether the vegetables, berries, and apples that the garden produces, or the dairy products and beef that are grown on the meadow grasses, flowers, and browse of the farm—fresh in the warm seasons and dried as hay during the winter—we know that, at the very least, we are contributing less to the desecration of this planet than the average American. And, we have delicious food, sparkling water, and content livestock in the bargain. Every change we make, as time goes on, we hope will be one that will enhance this precious Earth, not diminish its beauty or its ability to sustain us.