

I am farming humanity

An interview with Lee Burns, retired engineer and one of the founders of the “Detroit Agriculture Network”

I've always been a farmer. If I had three inches of land I planted something there. I was born in the middle of a cotton field in Mississippi. I didn't see a paved road until I was twelve. In 1933 my mother and father were discussing since kids were growing up that they need some kind of access to training facilities, schools, because there were none in that area. My dad and an uncle decided that Cleveland, Ohio had the best school system. So we decided to leave Mississippi.

(Telephone rings)

Excuse me, ma'am. Yes? What is that you need now? Of course! Okay. Come around any time you want. The gate is not locked. Even when I'm not here you'll get what you need. Everything I've got belongs to you.

We arrived in Cleveland and I was an oxymoron. I did not understand what the people were saying because I came from a different language structure. I had no idea what they were talking about, I had never heard most of the words they were using. My training up to then had been self imposed. I learned to read, geometry, my maths and so on because it had to do with a particular project I was working on as a kid. In the meanwhile I always have declared that I was just an ignorant country boy. I had no desire to become urban or sophisticated. I didn't want to join society. It was the ultimate perversion from an ignorant country boy's point of view. Then I became an adult, ran into a girl, had a bunch of kids, and they taught me everything I know, because they had a million questions and I didn't dare to tell them I don't know. The point is that my grounding had been natural development and natural growth. Having raised my kids to a certain age I was determined that they should not become what I saw these other people are. I wanted them to maintain a bit of humanity.

Plants are lessons in ambiance and aesthetics in themselves. You don't teach a person to look 5000 years ahead. You can't teach a person to view the future. It is not the Homo sapien's predisposition to see it. You can't train that, but you can acquire that. So if one goes out and plants a tree that he gets fruit from in seven years, that's one lesson. You plant another tree that you get fruit from in 15 or 20 years, that's another thing. Then you plant a tree that you get fruit from in 200 years, that's another lesson. See what I mean? You will never have a view of the whole scenario unless you have all three trees.

When my granddaughter was born I knew I had to establish a home here. I did not want to create a home according to contemporary society value systems, “socially acceptable”. I wanted a home that could be experienced as a mecca. First I fixed the totally dilapidated, vandalized house. I put a roof on it, I put windows and doors in it, then I began to enlarge the space with the lot next door, and then the next one, and the next one... This is like a parameter of security the child can develop in. At the age of three she can lie down and eat strawberries every morning. No eggs and bacon, you go down in the yard and eat strawberries. There's something about this experience that makes a child uniquely human.

– When did you decide to open your garden to the neighbourhood?

Oh, the minute I started gardening! You have to simultaneously develop the land and the community! The community is an essential part of the development process. More kids around here eat our produce than we do! But before we came here they had never experienced that. They will be the peer group my granddaughter will be living with. If they are not included, then she grows in isolation. Teams and groups are the basis of human development, you have to include that in its rudimentary formations. So instead of building buildings, we build people. And we are doing so by growing plants.

I grew 700 pounds of watermelons on four square inches of land. I hung them on fences. I did so to demonstrate that it is possible even when you don't have land. First thing they did was stealing it. And every time I watched a guy stealing I said: “There's some more over there! Tell your cousin, I saw him the other day, he wants some, too!”

– What happened next?

That's how you get them! Once in a while a guy says: “I want to do that.” “You really want to know? Come over in the evening, if I have some time, I show you how to do it. Over there where you live you will raise them this big, the whole neighborhood will be visiting you at that watermelon time.”

I don't wanna miss one child that I can influence with the positive aspects of natural development and natural growth. I don't go to Chicago to recruit people. I go next door, across the street, down the street, and if I do that properly, THEY go to Chicago. My project is not for instant gratification, it's for millenniums. It's like the microorganisms: They will never see the whole process complete. I will find one or two to take that seed of destiny onto the next 1000 years because he will teach his kids. Not because of what I said, but because he becomes convinced of by doing the way I do it.

– You also produce your own seeds?

Yes! I can't take the chance that within 100 years the agrobusiness holds a patent on every damn seed that exists!

Annette Weisser & Ingo Vetter, Detroit 2000