A History of Farming as Therapy

by Jack Kittredge,

In Europe and much of the rest of the English-speaking world terms like Green Care, Farm Care and Farming for Health are well known and represent a growing movement. That movement involves farmers and the health-care community working together to create an environment in which the care and nurturing of plants and animals is an important aspect of therapy for disadvantaged individuals. A key element of this movement is that this therapy takes place in the context of a profitable agricultural business (the farm). This transcends therapy using outdoor experiences that provide nature opportunities without the personal responsibility of caring for nature.

Here in the United States these terms do not have this meaning, nor is this approach to the sustainability of small family farms apparent. Although the USDA acknowledges that “a key component of the future of agriculture” is improving human health, it sees this happening through the production of food, not by providing health-care services or preventative or therapeutic outdoor agricultural opportunities. In fact, the modern medical and health-care community has, until quite recently, failed to see the negative health impact of relocating the nation’s population from rural to urban environments over the last century.

Agriculture and health care

During the Middle Ages many hospitals and monasteries looking after the sick traditionally incorporated arcaded courtyards to provide outside shelter for patients and created beautiful gardens in their surroundings. The earliest recognizable ‘care programs’ that used what may be called ‘green care principles’ were at Geel in Flanders in the 13th century. Here, ‘mentally distressed pilgrims’ came to worship at the holy shrine of St Dympna and stayed in a ‘therapeutic village’ where they were sympathetically cared for by the residents. This was a rural agricultural setting, and the main work activity for everybody was to work on the land. A range of structures and procedures were in place for taking care of these individuals in the context of local families and wider village life.

With the influence of Enlightenment thinking in the 19th century, the belief grew that by improving the quality of care, patients could be cured. This approach also reflected prevalent middle class notions around work and social conformity. The idea was that to be a part of society one must have regular work habits and “fit in” as a perceived productive member of society. As a result, 19th century asylums maintained these societal norms and incorporated them into treatment plans with the expectation that they could eventually reintegrate patients back into society.

Dr. Benjamin Rush, a professor of the Institute of Medicine and Clinical Practice at the University of Pennsylvania, was one of the early people to call attention to the benefit of labor for psychiatric patients. In his 1812 book “Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon Diseases of the Mind”, he says that “It has been remarked, that the manics of the male sex in all hospitals, who assist in cutting wood, making fires, and digging in a garden, and the females who are employed in washing, ironing, and scrubbing floors, often recover, while persons, whose rank exempts them from performing such services, languish away their lives within the walls of the hospital.”

Thus agriculture has, in some form, played a role in treatment, rehabilitation and/or residential care of disabled individuals over the last two centuries. During the nineteenth century most psychiatric hospitals included agricultural components. In 1817 patients at the newly-opened Friends Asylum for the Insane, in Philadelphia, worked in vegetable gardens and fruit-tree planting.

More detailed and thorough observations are to be found in the records of the old Victorian asylums, most of which had their own farms and market gardens. Farm work was considered a useful way of keeping the patients out of mischief and of providing them with an interesting pastime. It also allowed them the opportunity for a variety of different sensory experiences that were considered to be therapeutic. The following is an extract from the Report of the Commissioners of the Scotch Board of Lunacy:

“It is impossible to dismiss the subject of asylum farms without some reference to the way in which they contribute to the mental health of the inmates by affording subjects of interest to many of them. Even among patients drawn from urban districts, there are few to whom the operations of rural life...
The Value of Farming as Therapy

by Jack Kittredge

This issue of The Natural Farmer focuses on the ways that working with plants and animals helps people — prisoners, autistic children, the mentally disturbed, the emotionally abused, anyone with a troubled soul — to heal.

That such healing happens sometimes on farms has been well known for centuries. It is validated these days by many studies and PhD programs, and I believe many farmers have experienced it as well. We have certainly felt it on our own farm.

For years now Julie and I have been hiring young men (and at least once a young woman) who have been in trouble with the law — mostly for drug-related offenses. Their status as ex-prisoners made it hard for them to find jobs (discrimination, revocation of drivers licenses, lack of vehicles to get to work, required absences for drug testing, probation meetings, etc.) But once hired some of them stayed for several years and became not only excellent employees, but trusted friends.

A boy at High Meadow Farm, for those with learning disabilities, cuddles a goat kid, a supported work environment for those with learning disabilities & a stepping stone towards recovery. Helping to create a connection with nature, animals and the soil. High Meadow Farm educates, informs and champions ethical and sustainable farming. It is also an active volunteering hub for all generations within the community. Being around the horses, the oxen, and plant-based activities to veterans' hospitals after World War II. The Corps' convalescent hospital in Pauwling, New York, in cooperation with the Red Cross, used animal-assisted therapy and the men were encouraged to work on the center's farm with hogs, cattle, horses and poultry.

A boy at High Meadow Farm, for those with learning disabilities, cuddles a goat kid.

by William Payne, courtesy High Meadow Farm.

These are people who have been through hard times – broken families, unhappy relationships, truncated schooling, loss or betrayal by friends, jailhouse withdrawal. They have been thrown back onto themselves, I dare say, harder than most of us have ever experienced.

Yet a few days of planting seeds and caring for new life, feeding baby animals and moving cows to new grass, somehow touches that loneliness and can point the way to wholeness.

None of us knows how healing happens. But it has something to do with trust, with responsibility, with care for the helpless and with witnessing the miracle of life. Perhaps Wendell Berry says it best:

"Healing is impossible in loneliness… To be healed we must come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation."

And where better to attend that feast than on an organic farm?

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A horticultural-therapy greenhouse was opened in 1959 at the famed Institute for Rehabilitation Medicine at New York University Medical Center. Recruiting garden staff for support, however, often proved more successful than involving the medical staff. This ultimately led to the recognition of horticultural therapy as a profession.

In 1947 the Ross Family founded Green Chimneys, located in Pelham County, New York. Green Chimneys was a private school to allow children healing benefits from interaction with farm animals. In 1959 the first Camphill program was established in North America, based on the philosophy that "the path to wholeness involves relationships of mutual respect, education and (or) meaningful work, real participation in community life, including community decision-making, a healing rhythm of daily activities, seasonal celebrations, a rich artistic and cultural life, natural therapies, and acceptance, individual recognition, and dignity for everyone".

This path is founded in the teachings of Camphill’s founder, Dr Karl Koenig and the philosopher who inspired him, Rudolf Steiner. It is designed for all Camphill community residents, not just for those with special needs. Also in 1959 the Colorado Boys Ranch -- a home for wayward boys -- was founded in response to a need for an alternative to correctional facilities for disadvantaged youngsters.

In 1960 “Therapy through Horticulture” was published by Dr. Donald Watson and Alice Burlingame. Melwood Agricultural Training Center was founded in 1963 by parents who had raised their mentally handicapped sons and daughters at home and had no wish to place them in an institution. Melwood focused on a community-based on-the-job-training model for training and employment.

Boris Levinson published “The dog as a ‘Co-therapist’” in 1962, reporting significant progress with a disturbed child when Levinson’s dog, Jingles, attended therapy sessions. During the 1960s therapeutic riding centers developed throughout Europe, Canada and the United States. The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) was founded in 1969, based on earlier work done in Europe, to serve as an advisory body to the various “riding for the disabled” groups.

In 1972 the first horticultural-therapy curriculum in the United States was established between the activity therapy department of the Menninger Foundation and the Horticulture Department of Kansas State University. Clemson University offered a graduate degree in horticultural therapy in 1973. Also in 1973, Michigan State University started its undergraduate horticultural therapy option, which included 12 weeks of practical training at the Clinton Valley Center, formerly Pontiac State Hospital.

Given this background, it is clear that programs related to use of plants and animals in therapy are seen as beneficial for individuals in treatment or rehabilitation. The greatest focus for these two programs currently is among the aging population. Animal-assisted therapy, however, continues to grow rapidly in rehabilitation for physically and visually impaired individuals, and horticultural therapy is expanding among programs for youth-at-risk.

Psychiatric patients are now treated with drug intervention and outpatient talk therapy, limiting their use of plant and animal-based therapies. Likewise, such programs have been reduced for developmentally disabled youth by that population’s inclusion.
in the general classroom. Changes in the way that rehabilitation and therapeutic services are offered, however, have occurred concurrently with new types of programs being developed. There are now treatment programs involving plants and animals to address physical, mental, psychological, social and spiritual needs. Treatment audiences include: individuals with AIDS, cancer or other health issues, acquired or genetic physical and developmental disabilities, dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, brain injuries, chronic pain, substance-abuse problems and learning disabilities, adults and children with psychiatric disorders, mental retardation and developmental disabilities, speech and hearing impairments, physical disabilities and neurological impairments.

The activities that are used in effective programs are as varied as the participants, facilities and professionals conducting the program.

Both food and non-food crops are used extensively within horticulture-based programs. Activities can range from making cuttings of indoor plants to running large greenhouse operations; from working in tomato container gardens to market gardens; from pulling a few weeds to contractual landscape maintenance of large facility grounds.

Animal-assisted therapy is generally conducted on a small scale with pets, or the clients visiting a facility where they can have interaction with small animals including rabbits, ducks and chickens. Animals in pet types of programs, compared to the farm programs, are treated as non-production animals. Hippotherapy focuses on riding horses and requires space for the animals as well as the clients.

Farm programs often have vegetable gardens and large animals (cows, goats, llamas) as well as small ones. While some may be treated as pets, production and marketing for both crops and livestock is an integral part of what occurs.

The therapeutic activities involve different levels of responsibility that the client has for the life of the plant or animal. In some the plants and/or animals are responsive to the client's care; properly making cuttings, watering plants, feeding the animal on a schedule. Lastly, the products and/or by-products of the plant and/or animal are used in treatment programs such as cooking, crafts, shows and demonstrations, etc.

Some individuals may only experience one level of responsibility within a program while others may experience several levels. This may influence results, in terms of meeting the goals of a specific activity; for example someone working in the greenhouse making a dried-flower picture from flowers they helped grow, harvest and dry may respond differently to the activity as compared with someone working in a windowless hospital room with flowers purchased and donated by a stranger.

Despite limited official recognition at this time, the potential for growth in the field of Farming as Therapy (care of plants and animals for therapy and rehabilitation) in the United States is quite significant. Here are some examples of successful programs that can serve as models and inspiration:

Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth is a New York statewide non-profit social-service organization with a 116-year history of success working with at-risk children and their families.

Colorado Boys Ranch is a national residential-treatment facility that provides mental-health services and accredited education to at-risk boys, ages 10 to 21, from Colorado and across the United States.

Green Chimneys in Brewster, NY, is a nationally renowned, non-profit agency recognized as the leader in restoring possibilities for emotionally injured and at-risk children.

Crossroads Group Home treatment program is a South Carolina organization based on the Green Chimneys model, using an animal-assisted therapy.
program for girls from 10 to 18 years old who have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused.

Camphill in North America consists of ten independent communities, home to over 800 people on over 2,500 acres of land, and is dedicated to social renewal through community building.

Red Wiggler Community Farm was founded to create meaningful jobs for adults with developmental disabilities through the business of growing and selling high-quality, home-grown vegetables in Montgomery County, Maryland.

Moody Gardens in Galveston, Texas began with a hippotherapy riding-program for people with head injuries, but it has expanded beyond the original goal to become an integral part of the general community for persons with a wide range of physical and emotional disabilities.

Log Cabin Boys Ranch, nestled in the Santa Cruz Mountains, is the San Francisco Juvenile Probation Department’s detention centre for boys 15 to 18 years old who are learning native-plant propagation, habitat restoration and organic farming.

Melwood, in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, is a leader in the advancement of services for people with developmental disabilities.

Urban Meadows, in Chicago, is the nation’s leading psychiatric recovery centre as an outgrowth of its horticultural-therapy program.

Tranquility Farm Equestrian Education and Renewal Center, Inc. is a non-profit organization whose main goal is to develop a symbiotic relationship between man and equine to help deal with high stress, trauma, a physical, emotional or situational problem or injury.

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by Julie Rawson, Many Hands Organic Farm, Barre, MA

Yes, it is therapeutic for at least certain people to farm. It has become crystal clear to me, as one of those “earth types” (according to five element acupuncture system), that farming is how I regain balance, feed my soul and my psyche, get my exercise, my vitamin D, build and enhance my human, plant and animal relationships, and get that bonus of feeding the bodies of me, my family, our staff, and all of our customers. I knew at a very young age that being in the soil was what “fed” me like nothing else. My fondest and most centered memories go back to spending long summer days with my brother Tom and my sister Sue at our creek on our farm in Illinois, playing in the mud. It is interesting that today the three of us are still avid farmers or gardeners, and still get immense pleasure from working in the soil.

Over the past 32 years on Many Hands Organic Farm hundreds have passed through to work, talk, laugh, cry, argue, and eat. I am an unapologetic Tom Sawyer with many a fence to paint, and a certain knack to get folks to not only find something that they can accomplish and feel good about, but be of use to our farming system, that, not unlike most farms, can suck up tremendous human resources in the name of growing food.

We have gone through many labor pool periods over the past 3+ decades, but in 2007 we entered our ex-con period. All of a sudden there were about 10 recovering addicts showing up on a Friday and working all morning on whatever task was the most important that day. Having just been in a particularly dry period for masculine labor, we regaled in the machinery repairs, heavy lifting, rototiller and mower operating, and carpentry skills that came our way. Soon we were hiring recovering addicts who had successfully completed various jail initiated recovery programs, supported by Dismas House in Worcester, MA.

Relapse! Nothing is more traumatic for the new employer of recovering addicts than the inevitable relapses that will happen, in a high percentage of cases. The first time it happened, Jack and I were distraught. When one gets involved in the lives of one’s employees, sees the world through their eyes, hears their heart rending stories of abuse and neglect that plagued their lives as children, and comes to empathize with the tenuousness of their hold on reality, stability, employment, and a viable future, watching all the gains dissolve with the return of heroin or crack into their lives can be heart rending. And from a business standpoint it is highly risky if this person has become one of the most high performing and reliable members of the farm staff.

But then life is a high risk/high gain proposition. What does a responsible citizen or parent or employer do with a person on their watch when self-destructive behavior rears its ugly head? We had some practice this very week when we took action with an employee who we suspected had returned to heroin. When you are around recovering addicts for long enough, the signs (just like the impending downturn in animal or plant health to the observant grower) are there to be read. Slight changes in behavior like anxiety over small mishaps that might not generally cause upset, changes in demeanor, a diminution of carefulness, distress at the end of the day, oversleeping and being late for work, borrowing money, weight loss, and loss of appetite are all potential signs of a relapse in progress. All of our recovering addict employees have always told us that once a guy is in the throes of the addiction, he’ll lie, try to cover, and eventually steal when available cash runs out, in order to feed the beast of addictive substance.

Twice in the past two weeks I asked our employee in question whether something was wrong, was there anything I could do to help. All was okay, just a little tired. Jack and I agreed to buy a drug store urine test and surprise him with a request to take it. He capitulated and told Jack not to waste his money, as it would show positive for heroin. He capitulated and told Jack not to waste his money, as it would show positive for heroin. And then he left. And we didn’t hear from him for two very long days. The good news for him is that he did get in touch, tonight. One of the ways that we have toughened up is that we will no longer allow relapsed addicts to return to our employ until he is back in a recovery program, has met the requirements there for attendance at meetings, is taking regular urines, and can demonstrate a willingness and diligence to “right his ship” once again. In this case his farm hours have been passed out and the employment window is closed. Tough love for us also includes regular visits to jail for three of our former employees who let the relapse turn into a return to crime to support the habit. And forgiveness includes rehiring after the jail sentence is completed and they seem to be on solid footing again.

A couple of years ago we were approached by a teacher of a local school/institution for boys who have been involved in juvenile sex or violence crimes. All of a sudden we have entered our “bad boy” period. They came for morning stints of working on the farm to help them get ready for re-entry into society and de-institutionalization. That is still the case, and this spring we hired our first teen from the program. We are now about to hire our 4th. Each boy comes with his own set of “issues” but also his own set of amazing talents, perspective on life, and contributions to our farm community.

Over the past 8 years we have figured out a balance of “regular” employees who are generally stable, plus working shareholders who offer a ½ day per week for food, plus some recovering addicts, and then these wonderful male teens who bring that young competitive energy in the summertime when the work swells out of normal proportions.

Jack and I have learned to live for the moment –like the 14 hour chicken slaughter where we all bonded in an unforgettable way as we slogged through into darkness to finish the day, or watching one of our high performing teens gently and patiently guide the work of one less functional. It can be as mundane as watching our 35-year-old addict artistically prepare a growing bed with the tractor and tiller, or helping one of our staff members execute a hog slaughter workshop and build an on-farm smoker. The beautiful life is all about the little connections between people, the building of trust, and compassion, the completion of a day’s or morning’s work by all the collaborative hands, the celebratory farm lunch at the picnic table, and the peals of laughter as we filthy ourselves up picking vegetables in the rain or chasing pigs in the woods.

The multi-talented labor force at Many Hands Organic Farm. This time preparing to use their poultry-slaughtering skills!

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Guerilla Horticultural Therapy at Natick Community Organic Farm

by Becca Toms

“The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.”

— Masanobu Fukuoka, The One-Straw Revolution

I know this may be a difficult concept to grasp if the potato beetles have completely overrun your crop this year, but I think the goal of most therapy is to inspire hope. If farming does indeed provide this hope, why not try to foster its growth within an agricultural environment? Enter Horticultural Therapy.

What is Horticultural Therapy

To fully understand this concept, we need to have a proper understanding of what the word “therapy” means. “Farming,” I would assume, is pretty self-explanatory: Weeding, mulching, sowing, and reaping the benefits of your hard earned harvest. So how does “therapy” fit into this paradigm? I think we can all safely agree on a definition that refers to efforts which are intended to relieve, and if we’re lucky, even heal a person. It seems strange that frustrations, like weeds overtaking your carrots, again, can be helpful to someone who is struggling with depression. Horticultural therapy attempts to use even those experiences for the benefit of the individual.

An exciting new approach for many therapeutic programs, horticultural therapy has started to see a rise in institutions that serve troubled youth, the elderly, and individuals with developmental disabilities. What is horticultural therapy though? The bare bones definition is using plant life and plant care practices to improve the mental, physical or spiritual well-being of a person. The beauty of this method, however, is that definitions cannot fully reign in the work that horticultural therapy entails. It can be adapted to different peoples and their needs. It can be adjusted to the varied environments in which these individuals live, such as the deserts of Nevada, or the rich soils of New England.

History until Now

I don’t think there are many psychoanalysts who would willingly admit that farming equals “best therapy practices,” but we could agree that building someone’s sense of purpose, ability, and accomplishment can’t hurt. Farming provides the opportunity for those experiences to be realized, and on a pretty consistent basis. The benefits of this go as far back as the 19th century. Horticultural therapy really began to take root in the 40’s and 50’s as veterans came back from war and needed assistance coping with the horrors they had experienced.
Farming offers a safe environment to explore success and failure. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that farming is not always the idealized version of life that can be portrayed by so many “local food movements.” There are bean beetles that must be decimated to protect the crop from beans, and hornworms, which ruin tomatoes, not to mention blight, powdery mildew, drought, insufficient nutrient content in the soil, etc., etc. When faced with these sorts of problems, how could farming be even remotely therapeutic? It doesn’t, however, mean that individuals can’t learn about expectations that are not met, what it means for all your best intentions to come to nothing, or just plain old failure. The ideal is to provide an environment in which this is expected, and in a way accepted. When this is part of the status quo, it helps individuals learn about coping with the failures that they are going to face outside of the confines of a controlled piece of land. As Ruth Stout has said regarding the character of the farmer, “Farmers are philosophical. They have learned that it is less wearing to shrug than to beat their breasts.”

Why It Matters

So why would someone opt for a new therapeutic approach that is still gaining its validity through research as opposed to the traditional office visit? As an individual who has practiced therapy for a few years, I have come to understand that therapy can be most effective in environments that are outside of the traditional realm. A previous supervisor used to call this “guerilla therapy” -- engaging in therapeutic activity with the intent of a defined “seeding.” Though I don’t work as a therapist at Natick Community Organic Farm, my current employer, I see this sneaking its way into our work. As a non-profit, education/community oriented farm, we are constantly barraged with volunteers, children, and teens that come through our programs, and even help our farm to function. Though in my positions I have involved myself in practicing therapy here, I see this “Guerra therapy” taking place, and have even been inspired to pursue a certification for Horticultural Therapy. Every staff person has been this “therapist” for each other, or for volunteers and program members at some point; much of this being done unconsciously. It’s what we expect to do because we work in community.

So what are the things that are brought up in this community setting? Individuals not only bring the joys of life (births, graduations, etc.) but the pains as well. We work in community. As I observe this in comparison to the practice I observe in the ground and breaking the hard soil, or having the quiet reflection that weeding provides. This is why it matters to me and it gives me another reason to have my hands in the dirt. So why does this matter to you, the reader of The Natural Farmer? We farm to provide food for ourselves, we farm to be responsible to nature and the environment, we farm to provide a living, etc. But what about our holistic well-being? There is the cause and effect, the feeling of accomplishment that is continually available when you feel the deeper satisfaction of weeds disappearing, crops unhindered and thriving, and plucking the first pepper you have tended and grown away from the client when the work is over because they are learning skills they can carry into their personal lives.

Why should this matter to you?

There are times when there are no cures for the experience of life but plugging my pitchfork into the ground and breaking the hard soil, or having the quiet reflection that weeding provides. This is why it matters to me and it gives me another reason to have my hands in the dirt. So why does this matter to you, the reader of The Natural Farmer? We farm to provide food for ourselves, we farm to be responsible to nature and the environment, we farm to provide a living, etc. But what about our holistic well-being? There is the cause and effect, the feeling of accomplishment that is continually available when you feel the deeper satisfaction of weeds disappearing, crops unhindered and thriving, and plucking the first pepper you have tended and grown away from the client when the work is over because they are learning skills they can carry into their personal lives.
Farm Therapy: A Natural Approach to Improve Sensory Integration

by Lois Hickman, OTR
http://jenlofarm.vpweb.com/

Occupational therapy on a farm, with real jobs that must be done regularly to maintain the land and the animals, improves sensory integration, self-awareness, and relationships with others. Farms, like children, involve growth, nurturing, hard work, and down-to-earth fun! The connectedness inherent in this way of life can promote healthy change at all levels for children with developmental delays.

The interconnection of the natural rhythms of weather, seasons, daily responsibilities, play, music and dancing, story and song can bring especially important life experiences to individuals with physical, emotional, or intellectual challenges.

Children with an aversion to touch may overcome this defensiveness when they are preparing a soil bed for flowers or carrots, or brushing angora rabbits to collect hair for spinning and weaving. An incentive for conquering the fear of being off the ground may be climbing the ladder to the barn loft to get cartons before gathering eggs. Children with physical challenges or self-regulation issues can improve the grading of their movements by scattering chicken scratch gently enough not to startle the chickens, or by gathering eggs from underneath a hen without disturbing her. They may also learn how to brush the rabbits or groom a horse.

For children whose therapeutic goals include emotional, or intellectual challenges.

Music can be an integral part of farm therapy, just as music has been part of the everyday life of “primitive” cultures. There are plenty of animals, birds, and nature sounds to imitate! Songs of introduction and recognition when groups meet at the beginning of a session, songs for transitions between activities, songs describing the steps within a chore, and songs of farewell at the close of a session don’t require an operatic voice! Spontaneous songs, perhaps sung to a familiar melody but with words that describe what is happening in the moment, become part of the fun and the learning.

Employing the ideas and principles of farm therapy is possible, with or without an actual working farm.

Sklar is a non-verbal three-year-old with autism, but he expressed the importance of this connection quite well. One day he walked hand-in-hand with his therapist as she sang in cadence with their steps about what they saw along the path. They happened upon John, who was transplanting strawberry plants. Sklyar stopped abruptly, saw what was going on, and elaborately walked over to John and crocheted beside him. Sklyar picked up handfuls of the rich soil and glowed, seeming to say, “This is good. This is beautiful. Keep it up!” While the farmer and the therapist stood in awe, Sklyar arose, took his therapist’s hand, and they continued their stroll down the farm lane.
Farm Therapy at Vermont’s Spring Lake Ranch

by Jack Kittredge

“The highest reward for a person’s toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it.” - John Ruskin

In the center of Vermont, high in the mountains just a few miles north of the tip of the Green Mountain National Forest, sits a beautiful spring-fed lake. It is not reachable by road and has thus remained rustic and primitive, even by Vermont standards. It does, however, sit right along the Appalachian Trail.

So it was that Wayne and Elizabeth Sarcka discovered it. Wayne was from a large Vermont family and had worked during and after World War One with shell-shocked soldiers. Elizabeth was from a prominent Manhattan family and had experience with charitable and non-profit work. They married in the late 1920s and honeymooned by hiking the Long Trail in Vermont.

“We ... completely lost our hearts to the area,” wrote Elizabeth later. “The land was going for a song, so we bought a stretch of it with the idea of having a summer place.” That was in 1932, at the bottom of the depression. That first summer the couple brought boys up from the settlement house they were working with in Manhattan to help clear land, build roads and repair buildings. Afternoons they left for recreational activities.

During the third summer of this work-play camp the sons of a prominent New York psychiatrist, Dr. Bernard Glueck, and one of Dr. Glueck’s patients joined the group. Amazed by the leadership growth of his boy and the progress in his patient over the summer, the doctor urged the Sarckas to pioneer the first halfway house for the mentally ill in the United States.

The couple agreed. The ranch started to grow, the Sarckas hired people to help them, built houses for the staff, and it has been evolving ever since. It has mostly focused on people with mental illness, but for a time there was a focus on people with alcohol problems.

The work program has always been the central strength of the program. The whole idea is getting people out of their heads and into their bodies, and regaining a sense of self and purpose by being asked to make a contribution to the community through work.

When they arrive, residents are given a choice to be on the garden crew, which works with vegetables and flowers, the farm crew, which works with livestock, hay and pasture, the woods crew which cuts and splits wood and directs the sugaring operations, or the shop crew which builds and repairs furniture, structures, etc.

According to the ranch, the work program allows individuals to take appropriate risks, become leaders and work together as members of a group. They believe that self-esteem and confidence grow out of concrete accomplishment and individual contribution, and that work creates the opportunity to develop reciprocal relationships based on trust and respect. The work program provides a constructive metaphor for life by helping to shift an individual’s thinking away from symptoms toward a positive focus. Working in the woods, interacting with animals, growing one’s own food, building, repairing and creating, all establish connections to people and systems beyond one’s self.

According to Alice McGarey-Martin, Outreach Director at the Ranch, most residents come from an environment where they have been hospitalized for psychiatric treatment. But some come from home. Social workers at hospitals or treatment programs are aware of Spring Lake and it’s program already. Families find the ranch through the web.

“For the last 10 to 15 years,” says Alice, “most of our residents have been in their late teens to early thirties. Before that, they were slightly older. But diagnosis of mental illness is happening at a younger and younger age. The typical time in a person’s life when it begins is when they are reaching adulthood and transitioning out of the family home – often on leaving for college. What happens is the stress of that, combined with a predisposition that has been there a long time, tips them over into symptoms that are more serious. They end up back at home for a period of time and get quickly stuck because they become very isolated from their peers.”

There are more men than women as residents, and a mixture of psychosis and mood disorder is the most common diagnosis affecting residents. Examples of mood disorder are bipolar disease or depression with some psychotic thinking – which is a failure to recognize reality.

Many of the residents have some sort of personal disorder as well. Lisa Gardner, the staffer who serves as Crew Head for the Garden program, explains: “Our old boss here went on to work with people who have developmental disabilities – things like autism and Down’s syndrome – who maybe couldn’t do as complex things as some of the people here can, but they are far more reliable and easy to work with than someone with a personality disorder. People with personality disorders often don’t know who they are and try to fill that void with substances – drugs or alcohol – or with sex, by manipulating others, by self injury. Their personality didn’t really get to form and they can’t function well in the world or with others.

“There are some pretty serious things going on for residents,” she continues. “Suppose you were trying to get up and go to work but heard voices? Could you concentrate on getting to work? I don’t mean...
Fall, 2014

The internal voice most of us have, but one you really think you hear from outside. Or several different ones!

The ranch is comprised of 600 acres on a mountainside, most of it being woods. The recommended length of stay is 6 months. When a resident arrives he or she is assigned three staff people: first a house advisor, who is really a mentor or guide to give good advice, and second a team leader to support them and push them when they need pushing and to create consequences when their behavior is disruptive. The third staff is one of the clinical team leaders. They are involved with all the residents and help the staff guide and lead people.

“A lot of people who come here,” Lisa explains, “have been kind of isolated. So part of the program is to help them develop relationships. Our psychiatrist describes our program as being ‘relentlessly social’. Being in a community and being on crew we eat together, work together, play together. It really gives an opportunity to form relationships. That’s a really important part of being a human being!”

“Motivating people,” Lisa continues, “is a lot of what the staff does. A lot of people here have failed in the past. So they might appear lazy, but a lot of that is trying to protect themselves from failing again. Pushing yourself to do something that you are worried may not turn out well is hard. Especially when you are pushing through depression, the side effects of medication, the symptoms of your illness.”

Although the residents are all 18 years old or older, there are rules about what they can and cannot do. Residents can’t drive vehicles, for instance, but can run some equipment, depending on what it is. Smoking, while frowned on, is allowed in a special “smoking gazebo” — many staff believe there is a definite connection between smoking and mental illness. Some houses are co-ed and although romances between residents aren’t allowed, they can’t be totally prevented.

If a resident’s behavior is sufficiently disruptive, they might be grounded for a weekend and not get to go on a trip with everyone.

“That’s not ideal. These are adults,” admits Lisa. “The most meaningful consequences are when people understand how their own actions affect the community and their own personal growth. But some people are a little immature to get all that, and need something outside themselves to motivate them.”

At any one time Spring Lake Ranch can accommodate about 30 residents, and employs about an equal number of staff, from groundskeepers to highly trained psychiatric workers. When residents complete the program at the ranch they have an option to move to Rutland, a few miles away, where they can get jobs and apartments. The Ranch still maintains case managers and some staff there, but the residents have far more independence.

At the ranch residents work 5 hours a day during the week with their work crew, from 9:30 to 12 in the morning, and 1:30 to 4:00 in the afternoon. During the middle of lunch. At other times there are meetings and entertainment taking place. Each crew has a department head or crew chief and three staff who work with it as well as living residents. The Ranch has expanded their business to the house advisors do chores as well as help with recreation.

The ranch is located on a 600-acre property on the outskirts of Rutland, VT, with a pond and a river running through it, plus 200 acres of fields, and 300 acres of woods. The recommended length of stay is 6 months. The recommended program is 3 to 6 months, with residents being able to move on to other programs as they wish.

A small-business success story? Indeed — and shaped during a decade not known for prosperity. However, the impressive trajectory of the Cashen’s business hasn’t happened by chance. Early on, Chris and Katie Cashen, owners of the Farm at Miller’s Crossing, have expanded their business to include CSA (Community Supported Agriculture), summer and winter shares. Their products include fresh vegetables, eggs, and meats.

According to the Cashens, the longevity of their relationship with Farm Credit East offers another benefit — familiarity. “It’s always a simple phone call to my local office to get the information we need. We don’t need to explain our history with Farm Credit East to see us through,” said Chris. “They understand the risk and seasonality of our business better than other lenders do — and when you factor in their competitive rates it makes for a great long-term relationship for us.”

Credit East has been able to lend us what we need to stay an efficient operation,” said Chris. Despite their consistent growth, the Cashens face many challenges specific to the cycles of a CSA. “In the spring, our CSA payments haven’t come in yet, so we rely on our line of credit from Farm Credit East to see us through,” said Chris. “They understand the risk and seasonality of our business better than other lenders do — and when you factor in their competitive rates it makes for a great long-term relationship for us.”

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Angie Craig heads the farm crew, which takes care of the livestock at the ranch. She has been there a little over a year and a half and previously worked at Gould’s Farm, a similar operation in Monterey, Massachusetts.

“Our teams usually average around 8 residents,” she says. “With advisors who also work on a crew they could be as large as 11 or 12. Every Wednesday residents get to fill out a ballot where they list their first, second, and third choice of work. So they can switch crews every week. Most people stay where they are so maybe there will be one new person per crew each week.”

Many of the residents make connections in this process with the work — they want to be around animals or they really enjoy the garden — or with the leader or some member of the crew. Making those connections, and building upon them, is fundamental to the therapy at Spring Lake Ranch.

The garden crew uses largely organic seed and practices rotations and making compost. Their market is the ranch kitchen, which serves 60 diners a day.

“We set aside part of the garden area for people to have their own plots,” relates Lisa. “Sometimes people who like to create order will find weeding very therapeutic. We had one young woman who never planted anything in her plot, just weeded it! People who like to create order will find weeding very therapeutic. We had one young woman who never planted anything in her plot, just weeded it!

A few specialty items produced at the ranch like maple syrup, pesto, granola and yarn are sold at the farmers market in Rutland, and the proceeds do support the farm staff.

The garden crew also makes food for ranch events like a fundraiser to be held the day after my visit.

I spoke with one of the crew, an intern named Ollie, who had been a resident, moved to the Rutland program, and then applied back to the ranch for one of a few internships available there.

They had an opportunity here to come and be an intern,” Ollie says, “and work for a wage. When I came back I chose the garden program because I have a degree in horticulture and I’ve done a fair amount of apprenticeships at other farms. I have bipolar disorder. I was going to be a farmer and used to go to all the NOFA Summer Conferences. But it was hard to hold a job because of irritability issues. Also I’d have grandiose moments when I thought I was a Prophet of God. That’s not very conducive to taking orders from an employer (laughs). I had struggled with it without knowing what was going on for a long time. When I finally figured it out my mom and her partner wanted to help me deal with it. So I came here and I really think it helped. I was mostly on woods crew when I was here. I did gardens for a fair amount of time, but I really liked splitting wood! But that was in the winter, so there’s not much gardening going on anyway.

Once I discovered I had bipolar disorder,” he continues, “they prescribed me mood stabilization medications. Once you start medications, it takes a while for your brain to heal — to get your cognitive abilities back in check. I think why Spring Lake Ranch is so great is that the work keeps you in a structured environment, whereas in group focused programs you’re in group for three hours a day and the rest of the time you aren’t doing anything. But here you have five hours a day when you are working and seeing the results of that in your products. I think the way your brain heals in this kind of environment, because you are doing simple physical activities, is more basic. I think that is more conducive to healing than sitting and passively receiving something in a group setting. I expect to be on
Lisa thinks the intern program is one of the best things about Spring Lake Ranch. Only a few residents come back to intern — maybe one per crew — but other residents are able to see someone like Ollie doing well and that serves as a real inspiration.

As one might expect, the farm livestock is a major attraction at Spring Lake. With 45 acres of pasture available, grazing animals are a natural focus. The ranch needs about 12 cows a year to provide enough beef for the kitchen, so Angie is building up the herd to make that possible. They have a Beefalo cross bull and the cows are Herefords, Black Angus crosses, Belted Galloway crosses, and a British White.

Spring Lake Ranch currently does not have a dairy program. I asked why, given their use of a lot of dairy products, that it was Angie’s specialty at the University of Vermont, and the potential therapeutic value of hand milking.

“To go into dairy,” Angie responded thoughtfully, “would cost a lot for start up — for the animals, the equipment, etc. Then we have to be careful because dairy cows put you on a schedule every 12 hours that isn’t during normal working hours for the crew. So staff might end up doing a lot of the work, which isn’t the purpose. People with mental illness can be very unreliable. But I might propose one or two cows, which we could milk by hand, and see how it goes.”

The ranch also features a flock of 10 ewes, some kids and a ram. While I was there residents were erecting a strong permanent fence for their pasture. Despite being surrounded by wilderness and forest, the ranch has not experienced many problems with coyotes or other predators.

The sheep are there for their wool, not their meat, says Angie: “Many residents don’t want to eat the lambs because they’re cute.”

Livestock cuteness, however, is shared by the lambs with a small flock of pygmy goats that the residents simply love and can’t get enough of!

Hay-making is a special time, as on many farms, when everything stops and all hands help to bring it in and stack it. The crew still makes square bales there, so individuals can manage them by hand.

The ranch also has grain-fed livestock — chickens, turkeys and pigs. They don’t buy organic grain because of the price, but supplement the animals’ diets with food residues, cider mash, etc.

The 75 chickens are all layers and production averages 30 to 35 eggs a day, which go to the kitchen. With the number of mouths the ranch has to feed, chickens for meat are unwieldy, Angie says. That purpose is filled better by turkeys. Currently they are raising 17 broad-breasted bronze that will be quite large by Thanksgiving — which is a festive occasion at Spring Lake with many families coming to be together for the day. All the birds not eaten then will be frozen for meals the rest of the year.

Currently the ranch raises a half dozen or so pigs a year, buying them in the spring for fall slaughter. But Angie is thinking about keeping a sow and starting their own breeding program.

Similar in importance to haymaking in the summer, sugaring in the late winter trumps everything else. They eat a lot, sell a lot, and have a mail order syrup business. Last year they made over 400 half gallons, and some years have come close to 600. The woods crew organizes the sugaring, but everyone works and takes shifts at boiling. Spring Lake has

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some collection lines, but most of the sap is collected in buckets at the tree. As with so many other activities at the ranch, this is partly to keep it so that there are lots of jobs involved and all the residents can help.

All the furniture at Spring Lake – dining room chairs, beds and desks in the houses – is made by teams in the shop. The facility is equipped with a number of woodworking hand and power tools, as well as some for making metal parts. When I visited they were busy making toy lions with moveable legs to auction at the upcoming fundraiser.

One of the women in the shop, Tricia, has had considerable experience with Spring Lake Ranch: She was a resident about 6 years ago, then moved to the Rutland after-care program and was a client there. Last December she became an intern with the shop crew, and now is in a staff role. She wanted to get more familiar with the different machines in the shop because she has become interested in woodworking and will be starting an apprenticeship at a boat building program starting in September.

"I was here initially for depression," she recounts. "It was very helpful to be here. I had been through 20 years of all different kinds of medications that I had tried. They didn’t work. I had been hospitalized 3 or 4 times, I had tried electro convulsive therapy – electro-shock therapy, I had 2 courses of that. Nothing was working. I got to the point where I pretty much didn’t leave the house for about a year.

“I found Spring Lake Ranch on the internet,” she continues. “I was looking for a work-oriented type of program. When you stop working your self esteem goes down and you become discouraged about ever working again. I was looking for a place where I could do the work but in an atmosphere where people might be conscious of the fact that I might be struggling. It was very helpful to be here.”

Tricia was particularly attracted to Spring Lake Ranch because it had the Rutland after-care program. When she had been in a hospital, she said, things would improve. But then she would go back into life and things would return to where they had been. The hospital would remove some of the stresses of life, but she didn’t learn the skills she needed for self-care.

“It didn’t give me the tools,” she recalls, “to work through the issues that I needed to work through. Part of that, of course, was that I wasn’t ready. Here is such a nice place, compared to a hospital. I can be outside, I can be productive, and I can deal with my issues.

“I will always have to take medications,” she says. “I believe there is a component to depression that

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Residents make cider to drink year round at Spring Lake Ranch.

is biological. My grandmother and my grandfather had depression. There is also alcoholism through my family. So there is a biological component. But I think there is an environmental one as well. You need to learn the skills to manage your particular issues!”

One thing which makes the whole facility at Spring Lake so attractive, besides the carefully thought-out work and clinical therapies provided, is the simply natural beauty of the place. Well landscaped lawns and pathways, magnificent views, a stunning lake, and rustic wooden structures make it seem more like a resort than a therapeutic farm.

As Alice puts it: “The natural environment is a specific part of the healing process for a lot of people. They are in a beautiful place – away from home, where things might not be going so well.

Another comforting aspect of the environment is that some of the staff live on campus with their families.

“The head of our woods crew,” points out Lisa, “has his family here with him – he has two boys. They love it and it is a great addition to the atmosphere. It feels less like a treatment center with kids around, and it signals that this is a safe place if someone is raising an eight-year-old here.”

Recreation is also an important part of having a meaningful life, and therefore of the program at Spring Lake.

“A lot of our residents are addicts,” says Lisa, “and their recreation has been alcohol or drugs. They don’t necessarily know other ways to have fun. But having fun isn’t only about a good time – it is about creating relationships, getting your brain going, doing things which make you feel good about yourself. If you just focus on what you’re not doing as in “I’m not drinking now” then you’re not focusing on -- now that you are more stable and have more time and money and health -- what comes next. So we have activities on the weekends, things that are both around the ranch and in town, that people can take part in. It is not mandatory, but is definitely encouraged. People develop hobbies here that they take with them and use the rest of their lives.”

In the winter people do quilting and sewing and skiing, in the summer ball games and hiking. Cards are really popular, different sports come and go in different years. There is a tennis court, basketball court, and musical instruments hang in the main lodge. Spring Lake itself is beautiful, surrounded by woods, and residents skate on it and cut ice from it in some months, then canoe and swim in others. There are cross country and hiking trails on the land, and the ranch sponsors trips to downhill skiing areas nearby.

“One thing I’ve discovered here,” adds Lisa, “is that having fun is a lot harder than working. It may not be intuitive, but it is easier to get people to work than to play. Play is open ended. Work you kind of know what is expected of you, you can fulfill that but play is a lot trickier. So we’ll be playing softball here in this pasture this afternoon. We’ll do it for the last hour of work crew. And the softball game is mandatory. We call it ‘mandatory fun’! Not everyone has to play, but you have to come up and participate. Often that calls on things from people that are way complicated.

Naturally all this – a beautiful spot, room and board, plentiful staff, tractors, shop equipment, sap boilers, trained psychiatrists – isn’t cheap. The base fee residents pay is $350 a day. That is a lot of money, especially because it is a 6 month length of stay. That comes to almost $64,000.

Of course when you compare it to hospital treatment, which is $1500 a day, it is a lot more reasonable. Sometimes families have insurance that will help cover it, but mostly the fee is paid privately by families. The ranch itself raises money for a financial aid program, to which people can apply after their second month in residence. All the products that they sell (pesto, syrup, wool) support the scholarship program. The fund provides assistance for up to 40% of the fee for up to a year.

Over the last 82 years, since the Sarckas first initiated a work camp on the site, the ranch has evolved a lot. It has gotten bigger, better known, and the therapeutic world in which it works has gotten enormously more complicated with new disorders, new treatment modalities, new medications. There is more demand now for programs to have a serious clinical component. So Spring Lake now has three clinical staff members plus a psychiatric nurse and a psychiatrist.

Yet much has not changed since the beginning. The therapy still happens by empowering people through working and living together, and seeing the results of that in products and relationships, on a beautiful piece of land by cutting and working with wood, growing vegetables, and caring for animals.
November 10, 2006 was a beautiful fall day. I had finished my afternoon chores early so I hung Christmas lights on my house. I was set to move in the next day. All summer my family and I had been renovating the house that had been my Grandpa Dewey’s, and were proud of the work we had accomplished. Especially my brother Tom.

We had both taken over the family dairy farm from my dad and uncle. It’s been in the family since 1817. He had just finished delivering a load of green chop for the cows and we were getting ready to go up to our mom’s for supper. On the way we stopped to let his cows across the road.

I offered to send my border collie Maggie after the cows but he said no. They were meandering down in groups and he didn’t want to rush them. We had just about finished getting them across the road when a pick-up truck crested the hill.

Tom was standing in the road, waving his arms, trying to alert the driver that the cows were coming but he never stopped. I was standing a few feet from my brother when he was hit. The truck killed him, and then crashed through the fence. The driver was not injured.

My whole world changed in an instant. Family and friends rallied around my mother and me immediately. Especially my best friend Debbie Vanderbosch. Over the next few days and weeks many difficult decisions had to be made.

I wanted to keep my brother’s cows but I was over-ruled by my sister and mother and to add insult to injury I was forced to help load them on the trucks. People thought they knew what was best for me but they didn’t. Lucky for me I had a working relationship with Cornell Cooperative Extension educator Joan Petzen. She knew how much the farm meant to me and helped set me on a path to recovery.

We contacted NY Farm Net and worked some with Don Peterson on the business and also a counselor to help with the grief and other issues. It helped to talk to him but it became apparent to me that I had a much bigger problem so I contacted my county’s Department of Community Services and began seeing a counselor there.

I was depressed, guilty, confused, angry, anxious — especially when outside about the time of day Tom was killed — sad, lonely, frantic, had trouble sleeping, lost my appetite, lost interest in doing things I used to love, was weak and shaky and couldn’t stop crying. I was diagnosed with depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and we began my journey of recovery.

I was offered drugs to treat my condition but I declined because I don’t like using any chemicals on or in my body and I felt it was important for me to learn how to deal with the problem, not cover it up with drugs. Lucky for me, I still had my farm.

I would have liked to have curled up in a ball and stayed in bed all day but my cows and my dog needed me. It was hard getting through that first winter, but thanks to all the people who helped me, I made it.

The world always starts to look better when spring comes around. Farmers always look forward, especially in spring. The world starts to awaken from winter and the new year holds so much promise. The plants green up and the summer birds come home and there’s fresh maple syrup to be made and it just feels good to shed your winter clothes and breathe the fresh air and feel the warm sun and sink your fingers in the newly turned soil while you plant the seeds that will feed you with delicious vegetables in a few months. Pretty soon new babies both wild and domesticated will be born and hatched and you realize that life goes on.

Joan helped me keep my business going and together we worked on my future plans. She told me it’s important to hold off on major decisions until the shock wears off so you don’t do something you may regret later. Unfortunately, I had to sell most of my cows and get an off-farm job — but now I also have the opportunity to re-invent myself and my farm.

I started going to workshops and pasture walks that I never had time to do before and it has opened up a whole new world for me. I have met so many new and interesting people these past few years and learned so much. I have learned to manage my depression and PTSD without drugs and I don’t have to go to counseling anymore.

I have learned a lot about survival from observing my cows. When they lose a calf they acknowledge their grief and then after a few days they let it go. They don’t dwell on it. Life goes on. The important thing is to let yourself grieve. Let yourself be angry. Don’t let it consume you.

Be a survivor, not a victim. Don’t obsess over what happened and realize that people grieve differently and at different stages and rates. Some people never

This is my brother in the barn, how he always was.

get past the anger. Some people can’t forgive. I have forgiven the driver that killed my brother but that doesn’t mean I will ever forget what happened.

Make a list of how you feel now and look at it from time to time. You’d be surprised at how far you’ve come. Don’t always look at the mountain you’re climbing. Look back sometimes and see how much you’ve accomplished. Set measurable goals for yourself no matter how small. Just getting out of bed in the morning is a reason to pat yourself on the back.

Explore your options. Surround yourself with positive people. Use a bad experience as a chance to grow. I wasn’t happy to have to get another job but I have many new friends I would have never met without it. There really is a silver lining around every dark cloud. You just have to look for it.

Dare to follow your dream even if everyone seems to be against you. Joan sent me a story about a little green frog that I often think about. A group of frogs decided to climb a tall building. A crowd gathered and all the people said they couldn’t do it. One by one they fell off except for one little green frog. When he reached the top, a reporter asked him how he succeeded when everyone else failed. It turns out he was deaf and couldn’t hear people say it couldn’t be done. He accomplished his goal because he believed in himself. I picture a little green frog in my mind every time I run into an obstacle.

There is nothing that can’t be worked out. The impossible just takes longer. Make a list of positive and negative outcomes for every major decision you need to make and you might be surprised. I’m still not where I’d like to be but at least I’m still moving forward.

Being a farmer is the best therapy there is. I am a part of the land and the land is a part of me and I am so grateful for it. My dad had a poster that said “I share creation, kings can do no more.” We as farmers are so lucky to share creation. We understand so much more than the people who have become disconnected from the land.

You can survive life’s obstacles. You will survive. Remember that just when the caterpillar thought her life was over, she became a butterfly.
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Digging out from Prison: A Pathway to Rehabilitation
by James Jiler

San Quentin, what good do you think you do?
Do you think I’ll be different when you’re through?
You bent my heart and mind and you may my soul,
And the memory of it will be a little cold
May your walls fall and may I live to tell.
May all the world forget you ever stood.
And may all the world regret you did no good.
-- Johnny Cash

Johnny Cash sang these lyrics to a live crowd behind walls at San Quentin Prison in 1962. The roar of approval from the crowd of inmates on that day needs little explanation. Life in this Northern California prison typified the inmate experience as an egregious stain in an ungodifying human warehouse—a system bent on punishment rather than any form of rehabilitation, and one, as stated by the former head of a California parole board, “lacking in any human decency or dignity.” For inmates paroled or released, the best they could expect was a marginalized role in society. As felons they had lost the opportunity to vote, serve on juries, or acquire government employment; the stigma and trauma of time served would follow them for life. Most inmates left prison harder, angrier, and less willing or able to assimilate in society. “What is served by the failure of the prison?” asked Michel Foucault in 1979 (Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, page 272, Knopf Doubleday, New York, 1979).

Three decades later, Foucault’s question is more relevant and disturbing than ever. The United States prison population, which totaled less than 150,000 inmates when Cash sang his condemnation, seems quaint compared to the numbers today. By the start of 2013, the United States had almost 2.3 million people incarcerated—roughly one-fourth of the entire world’s prison population. Of that figure, almost 80 percent were in for nonviolent, often drug-related offenses. With state funding based on the number of inmates incarcerated, states were incentivized to build and to keep inmates in prison. With that financial investment, the United States locks up roughly one-fourth of the world’s prison population, and with virtually no constructive results to show for it. The United States is as close to a prison complex as any country on the planet.

Today, the United States spends more than 80 billion a year on its criminal justice system. In states such as New York, Florida, and California, more is spent on keeping people in prison than is spent on higher education. In California, for example, it costs almost $45,000 to keep an inmate in prison for a year, while only $15,000 to send that same person to the state university system. For all the money allocated to locking people up, very little targets rehabilitation. In the 1970s and ’80s criminologists determined that education played a key role in preventing inmates from returning to prison. Data proved that those who received a college education while they were incarcerated were more likely to lead crime-free lives after their release. But in 1993, in an effort to dispel the budding perceptions that incarceration was soft on prisoners, the Pell Grant, which paid for college programs, was eliminated from prison. State, city, and county budgets from around the country allocated limited resources instead to security within existing prisons and the construction of super-max facilities—a one-size-fits-all prison environment that leaves little room and imagination for positive social interaction.

To make matters worse, those released from prison of whom 60 percent will be released—keep going back. The overall recidivism rate in the United States hovers around 67 percent from ex-prisoners committing new crimes or violating parole. Released felons tend to congregate in marginalized neighborhoods, where rent is cheap and work is rooted in the underground economy. Simply leaving one’s house for a cup of coffee risks a score of parole violations, some as innocuous as contact with another felon. These core neighborhoods have a disproportionately high percentage of families torn apart by incarceration. One in three black males under the age of 30 will spend time behind bars. Children of parents in prison have a 55–60 percent chance of becoming incarcerated. The trend is a downward spiral that drags communities of their tax bases and turns them into wells of underemployed and undereducated residents unable to compete in an increasingly technological economy.

It’s no wonder that these taxpayer dollars have not demonstrated any efficient return on capital investment. The concept of social investment in our prison system has been completely neglected. But these institutions must hold some culpability for returning inmates to society in worse shape than when they arrived. The real question criminal justice authorities need to be asking is how to re-engage prisoners with positive social, educational, and employment activities that will make them better citizens after release. Though no silver bullet exists, our prison system has been completely neglected. But these institutions must hold some culpability for returning inmates to society in worse shape than when they arrived. The real question criminal justice authorities need to be asking is how to re-engage prisoners with positive social, educational, and employment activities that will make them better citizens after release. Though no silver bullet exists, our prison institutions must start somewhere.

For 15 years I have worked in jails and state prisons in both New York and Florida and advised in numerous other states throughout the country, both building and administering educational-based horticulture therapy programs. While these programs operate on a small scale relative to our prison-industrial complex, they offer an important counterweight to the prevailing concept that the harshness of prison will prove a deterrent to crime. In fact, gardening and organic horticultural practices in prison contain a valuable counter of activities and opportunities, lending powerfully to human recovery.

For one, inmates, especially repeat offenders, have to see success in their own work in order to build their self-esteem, reliably damaged through the shame and social stigma of incarceration. It does not take a high level of education or skill to experience initial success in gardening. And for many inmates who have experienced much failure in life, a little success goes a long way. But to develop the skills needed to find a job later on takes a higher level of education and articulation. That is a major and essential difference between programs and work details, the latter popularized by the image of prisoners tending long rows of produce under the watchful eye of guards on horseback. The former is rather a process of curriculum formation, language, experience, decision making, and skill development.

Through programs that teach the science of gardening, inmates learn that knowledge is empowerment. They shed their identity as inmates and become students. As a result, they take a greater interest in what they do, and become more skilled and passionate gardeners. I say this because I have witnessed it, time and time again. The hopelessness of ever finding a skilled job after release, a job that provides enjoyment and dignity in a complex technological world, is replaced by a greater sense of purpose.

On Rikers Island, New York City’s main jail complex, the Horticulture Society of New York administers the GreenHouse Program—a 6–8 month, hands-on horticulture curriculum that also provides inmates transitional employment as gardeners throughout the city after their release. As director of this program from 1996 to 2008, I worked with almost 650 individuals and found that I could train a majority of them to become professional gardeners, many capable of earning $35,000 a year as horticulturists with New York park conservancies and other public or private agencies.

But keeping a job is often more difficult than finding one. A number of ex-inmates lost good, professional jobs because they relapsed, displayed undependable work habits, or violated parole. In most cases, the same psychological issues that brought them to jail led them back. Beyond education and job placement, it is essential to address any mental health struggles undermining the prisoners’ best intentions to lead successful lives.

Because the country has criminalized mental illness—data suggests that almost 30 percent of all inmates in the United States have some form of mental illness—the criminal justice system must use prison as a way to heal. However, prison facilities have expended little in expanding psychiatric wards. Conversely, prisons often exacerbate destructive behavior by isolating inmates in traumatizing conditions like solitary confinement. Against this trend, too, gardens prove helpful.

In contrast to the punishing experience of sensory deprivation in prison, gardening provides an avenue for mentally ill inmates to begin a process of healing. Gardening requires a connection to nature and natural processes, two elements bleached from the prison environment but with demonstrated therapeutic benefits. Whether people are convalescing in a hospital, recovering from trauma, or suffering from psychological illness.

At Rikers we worked with horticultural therapists to counter the triggers of depression, drug use, fear, and other psychosomatic disorders among inmates.
We did this in a way not practiced in traditional settings, using garden design specifically centered on sensory stimulation. Inmates could lose themselves in moments of silence and solitude. Animals such as chickens, rabbits, ducks, and turtles, along with the myriad wild birds that visited the garden, offered opportunities to nurture. Everything created at the two-acre greenhouse garden countered what was happening in the criminal justice system’s approach to building and running a prison.

Concern for the physical condition of inmates was also taken into consideration in designing the program. Outdoors work and the consumption of freshly grown food was once believed to have a transformative effect on human behavior, a concept formalized in early-twentieth-century U.S. prison reforms that defined a new concept of rehabilitation. Yet today, prison work farms have given way to surplus work details, using garden design specifically centered on sensory stimulation. A worker in the Washington State Sustainability in Prisons Project. In some cases, part of the harvest is delivered to local food banks, reconnecting inmates with their community.

In some female facilities, where the HIV rate can reach 20 percent, health care is a constant expense. Nutrition is also thought to play a role in behavior. Oxford University is currently conducting a study that looks at the relationship between nutritional intake and incidents of violence. The study builds on research carried out in 2002 that showed “violence in young offenders fell 26 percent when given nutritional supplements—and serious offenses dropped even more sharply, with a 37 percent reduction in acts like fighting, assaulting guards, and taking hostages” (Lawson, W. Fighting crime with nutrition: Is a poor diet to blame for crime? Research shows it could be. Psychology Today, March, 2003).

The National Institutes of Health has looked specifically at the effects of omega-3 supplements on behavioral patterns, and found that patients with violent records, when taking such supplements, showed one-third less anger and hostility. Supplements can be replaced with appropriate food diets. Despite the fact that prisons seem to have both plenty of land and labor to grow highly nutritious fruits and vegetables, there are few programs to speak of.

In my experience, student inmates who gardened, learned about what they were growing, and uncovered the effect of nutrition on physical and emotional health became increasingly receptive to eating fresh produce. Foods rich in vitamins and protein, such as kale, spinach, broccoli, berries, vine tomatoes, and fresh eggs from the hens, played a steady role in changing poor eating habits. When I asked students for words to describe how they felt after three months of gardening and eating fresh food, those expressed most commonly were: healthy, relaxed, at peace, strong, hopeful. Most of the inmates mentioned they would be more conscious of the food they and their families ate once they left prison.

Unfortunately, prisons are not always receptive to the changes described above. At a prison in South Florida, where I currently run a gardening program for elderly men, the institution has effectively prevented us from growing enough food to provide the kitchen with produce. Tools, supplies, water, mulch, and kitchen compost are severely limited. Corrections staff randomly remove plants and trees. At one point, over 50 papaya trees in the garden site and three small loquat fruit trees were cut and disposed of; fresh fruit, I was told by the warden, could be made into alcohol.

Any foodstuff in prison is a potential source of alcohol, as every warden knows. But papayas along with their potential as moonshine stock are a rich source of antioxidants, which can help prevent heart attacks and strokes as well as digestive ailments as severe as pancreatic cancer.

Prison officials cite any number of reasons why programs can’t work: security, budgets, officer shortages. From my experience, it seems mostly a lack of will, if not a lack of interest. In South Florida, for example, despite an abundance of silt and hay outside the fence line, or free manure available from surrounding animal farms, inmates working in the garden there form soil by pulverizing and scraping substrate coral rock with the tops of tin coffee cans, then adding kitchen waste to the residue. It can take up to three months to ready a three-by-eight-foot bed for planting. Seeds are smuggled in or plants appear by chance from kitchen compost. Whatever

In a Florida prison, inmates manage a small garden. They make soil by pulverizing rock with tin coffee cans, then adding kitchen waste. It can take up to three months to ready a three-by-eight-foot bed for planting.

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food and herbs are grown, the gardeners consume themselves, perhaps staving off the inevitable medical costs incurred by elderly prisoners. With material support from the prison, we could easily quadruple production, as well as grow food and seedlings for community gardens and food banks.

In 2009 I approached a women’s prison in the same region and offered to start a horticultural therapy and job skill program, at no cost to the state. I was rebuffed for two years until my funding ran out.

These are not encouraging outcomes.

In contrast, the country of Norway has embraced a different path in the operation of Bastøy Prison, also known as the world’s “eco-greenest” prison. Bastøy has solar panels and a wood-fired heating system instead of oil heat. Prisoners tend organic gardens, which supply their food, along with 200 chickens, 40 sheep, and 20 cows. The inmates also maintain the fields surrounding the prison and a 30-foot fishing boat.

For Norwegian officials, an institution like Bastøy is critical if the prison experience is to make a lasting impact on prisoners and give them somewhere to reflect, interact, and learn new skills. The thinking, rightly, is that most individuals serving time in Norway will be integrated back into society and therefore rehabilitation is essential.

Following suit, the State of Washington created the Sustainability in Prisons Project. Their showcase facility is Cedar Creek, a state medium-security facility. There about 60 inmates are selected for a “greening program” where they compost the prison’s food waste, tend an organic vegetable garden, collect rainwater for gardens, raise bees, and hand-sort recyclables. Other projects include the Washington Correction Center and the Mission Creek Corrections Center, both established for women and centered on organic food production and the promotion of individual and family health. Mission Creek inmates also harvest and deliver food to a local food bank, thereby reconnecting prisoners to the outside community.

Programs such as those in Washington and Rikers Island, along with other programs sprinkled discretely throughout the country, can demonstrate the value of horticulture as a cost-effective method for changing destructive human behavior. Whether such programs will soon spur a dramatic shift in our criminal justice system, or will simply be adopted by the idiosyncratic interests of particular wardens, remains to be seen.

What is known, however, is that our criminal justice system is under fire to prove that the huge social and economic cost expended in warehousing inmates offers some reward. The consensus among lawmakers and the tax-paying public is that the system is broken. The growing demand to fix it calls notably for programs to return inmates from prison in better condition than when they arrived. Horticulture and related green jobs programming are a small but cost-effective step in turning a punitive prison culture into one of rehabilitation—one grounded in dignity and decency for the individual. Reform-minded officials need to develop programs further with a best-practices curriculum—a standard model that can be replicated throughout the country—until the prison farm once more has a meaningful and powerful role in prison.
Bella, a 3-year-old heifer being raised as a pet in Pennsylvania, was sweet, but unaware of her own size. Rubbing her head on and jumping on people became a problem as she grew, and she was eventually donated to Green Chimneys Farm and Wildlife Center in Brewster, NY. Around the same time, a teen-age student began at Green Chimneys educational program, and was testing boundaries constantly with adults and peers. He seemed to need a challenge, so Bella and the student were matched to work with each other. The student was coached about handling her gently but firmly. Bella pushed the student, the student learned how it feels to be tested, and the student learned to respond in a way that resulted in a more positive interaction with Bella.

“She was being who she is, he was being who he is, and together they came a long way as a team,” said Michael Kaufmann, director of Green Chimneys and the Sam and Myra Ross Institute.

Do our farm animals really have the potential to improve our lives, and even assist in reaching therapeutic goals? Those in the field of animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy say ‘yes’.

“Humans can’t make fundamental behavioral changes unless we feel safe,” said Gail Lilly of Farming Connections LLC, a nonprofit farm in Guilford, Vermont. “The safety that the animals create by giving us nonjudgmental feedback is a key component in making this therapy so powerful.”

Lilly explained that earning an animal’s trust is reinforcing, and the steps to earn that trust are arduous. She shared several stories of students with challenges like severe Autism. She’d offer some breathing techniques and basic guidelines and then observe what unfolds as a flock of chickens approaches and one eventually hops on the patient’s lap, or as a patient approaches a horse to ride for the first time. “First the animal meets you, then they size you up by your movements and the energy you are putting out. For a lot of us, anxiety is a huge issue, so calming is a wonderful skill to develop, and the positive animal response helps reinforce that.”

Kaufmann agrees that every animal, from a chicken to a horse, brings different opportunities for interaction. When the interactions are purposeful and well-planned, he says, there is a long list of potential psychological, physical and social benefits: Self control, empathy, self-worth, hand-eye coordination and sequencing, to name a few.

Animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted therapy are not one and the same though. Animal-assisted activities can be anything that brings animals together with people on the farm or elsewhere. “Profound impact is possible, but the interaction is not goal directed,” said Kaufmann. But in order for the interaction to qualify as ‘therapy’, the person conducting the activity has to be an occupational therapist, a physical therapist or other such trained provider. “The therapist layers in contact with an animal with the overall medical plan and goals.”

Kaufmann grew up in Switzerland and, when he was a child, his parents would vacation at farms and guest farms all over Europe. His interest in agriculture and farm life and farm animals came from that. He became sure that farming environments open us up, and has since been exploring theories of biophilia (a hypothesis that suggests there is an instinctive bond between human beings and other living systems) and ecopsychology (the study of the relationship between human beings and the natural world through ecological and psychological principles).
Therapeutic Cows and Chickens, Really?

Some question the validity of claims that interacting with animals can be therapeutic or otherwise beneficial. Such skepticism, practitioners say, is holding back the field, especially in terms of funding from insurance companies and donors. Kaufmann and others feel the time has come to do the research that takes the claimed benefits beyond anecdotes.

“We have had this farm and have had children visiting here since 1947, so we’ve gained a lot of experience,” says Kaufmann. “It is time to share and make our experience available to others, which is why [The Sam and Myra Ross Institute at Green Chimneys] was created. We provide a living laboratory, showing how what we do works.”

Researchers like Kaufmann are also partnering with universities and private foundations to develop quantifiable evidence. Many projects have explored how the three-dimensional movement of riding a horse can support therapeutic gains for people with physical disabilities. Others have looked at the long-term impacts of witnessing animal cruelty, while still others have researched the importance of animal companionship. There is a long way to go, but organizations like the Sam and Myra Ross Institute, as well as the Institute for Human-Animal Connection in Colorado and the Horses and Humans Research Foundation in Ohio are helping pave the way.

Where Do Animal Therapy and Animal Production Meet?

“The sustainable agriculture movement is a big theoretical support for getting folks interacting with farm animals,” said Kaufmann. “We have made the choice not to do animal production agriculture here [at Green Chimneys] because the children here require animal bonding, and it would be difficult to succeed in that bonding if they knew they’d be headed to slaughter.”

“But,” he adds, “it is possible to create educational programming with animals that introduces the animals in a production model. There is an honest way of educating the community about how you do animal production. You build a relationship, but it’s understood that the animal will be butchered at some point. The more honest you are and the clearer you are, the better it will resonate. It also will start growing an audience who appreciates how you do it. People want to know that they can eat their animals in good conscience, that the animals had good quality lives, social lives, healthy lives. Not enough farmers are trying to do that. Europe, for instance, has a model with a much more educated consumer.”

Lilly echoed her support for organic and sustainable farming operations getting involved in this type of work. “My kudos to folks for making an effort to be respectful,” she said. “I know it makes farming more difficult.”

Lilly suggests that if you don’t have a clinical background, it’s probably best to have help getting a therapeutic-focused program started on your farm.

“Contact a clinician in your area. Make your animals available to them for a therapy session. Share your precious resource.”

Kaufmann says to remember that farm-based education includes all types of human service and educational outreach through farms and the farming environment, for those with or without special needs. “Farmers know they need relationships with their community. Being product-based is good, but educating urban communities and other groups as to why you do what you do will only help the long term success of your farm.”

Janet Wilkinson is executive director of NOFA-NH and has worked for organizations doing animal-assisted therapy. She still does some contract work for the Horses and Humans Research Foundation.
Residents at Spring Lake Ranch in Vermont bring in the hay, one of many experiences—like logging, sugaring, apple cidering, planting and tending gardens, raising livestock and poultry—which use traditional farm work as a way of grounding and healing troubled individuals.

This newspaper contains news and features about food and farming in the Northeastern US as well as a Special Supplement on **Farming as Therapy**.