

Back to the Garden

How we dream about the family farm

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My grandparents Floyd and Alva became migrant workers in

1937, the year after my mother was born. They had been tenant farming in North Dakota, were choking on dust and doctors' bills after my mother's underweight birth (less than three pounds, as my grandmother always told it, though Alva was not known for her strict adherence to the truth). Like many rural families before and after them, my grandparents gave up the farm, sold the workhorse, piled the older kids and their tiny baby into the Model T and headed west to Washington State to pick other farmers' crops.

If their life in the Yakima Valley wasn't exactly *The Grapes of Wrath*, it was only because my grandparents were too conservatively Midwestern to reimagine themselves as part of an enlightened Steinbeck-style rural labor movement. They dreamed of owning a proper farm with a proper house, and for the next twenty years their family did little else but work to realize that dream. Along the way they picked pears and cherries and apples; Floyd tended orchard smudge pots so other farmers' fruit trees wouldn't freeze; Alva put on a hygienic white cannery uniform to put up other farmers' pears and tomatoes; my mother cooked and cleaned while the boys weeded the garden, milked the cow, tended the pigs, steers, and chickens that would later end up on the table. Every once in a while they took a night off, sat down and listened to a brother-in-law play his fiddle. By the mid-1940s, my grandparents had bought five acres in pasture just north of a dusty one-stop-sign town called Hara. They put up a white-painted clapboard house—two rooms down with a ladder up the wall to the kids' attic bedroom, water from a pump just outside the kitchen door—and then they kept working. Only in the late 1950s, after two decades of relentless effort, were they able to build a bigger house—four rooms, and their first indoor plumbing.

By the time my grandparents had finally labored their way to that dream farm, my mother could think of nothing else but getting

away from it. The minute she hit her twenties, she headed for an office job in the nearby town of Yakima. Then followed the futuristic glamor of Seattle, where she could drink mai tais at Trader Vic's, click down office corridors in pointy-toed high heels, and look out her apartment window at the Space Needle, just built for the 1962 Seattle World's Fair and pointing its metaphorical way to a technofuture where food would grow and cook itself, machines would clean the house, and meat wouldn't be a matter of tearful goodbyes, just a product shrink-wrapped onto styrofoam trays. She looked homeward only as often as Thanksgiving and Christmas demanded.

My mother's move to the city wasn't entirely the generational rebellion I make it out to be. Her mother Alva had dreamed of owning a farm because the only alternative within reach was working on someone else's. She had also dreamed, all her life—while helping to wash and dress and feed her seventeen brothers and sisters, while picking cherries and canning pears—of a half-Hollywood, half-*True Story* magazine life of shiny cars and appliances and romantic adventures. My grandmother was caught between two different versions of the American dream: the one where we want to own land, and the one where we want to get away from working it. What we really crave is that Edenic ideal, the garden that produces without human intervention, the place of abundance without labor. Since what we've got instead is the real-world necessity of working hard to help things grow, we split the dream in half: on the one hand, abundance, land, and labor (in other words, farming); on the other hand, ease from physical labor, but the rootlessness and dependence that come with our modern suburban-dwelling existence. Most of us, given one extreme, will pull toward the other. Consider Cain, the first-ever Boy Who Couldn't Wait to Leave the Farm. Angry that his foolish parents had traded the good life for a single apple (a bad farming decision if there ever was one), hating the vicissitudes of postlapsarian agriculture (he toiled endlessly in the fields, but his best customer still passed him over for the guy selling grass-fed

meat), he threw it all away in a single fratricidal instant. We know Cain's story ends badly, in a lifetime of wandering exile and desperate yearning for the life and land he'd lost. But still we cycle on and off the farm—even though, whether farming or not-farming, we never really make it back to Eden. My mother and two of her brothers grabbed the get-off-the-land half of Alva's dream and moved to cities; the other brother caught onto the coattails of his parents' land yearning, bought a farm of his own, raised horses and dairy cows and drove a back-hoe on the side to make ends meet. Now my farming cousins have grown up to leave their farm—and I, in turn, dream of going back.

I didn't always have this dream. When I was a child, my mother taught me that farming was hard work and heartbreak. She talked about sweating through the long summer afternoons when she tied up young hop vines, crying as she said good-bye to "her" steer when he grew big enough to butcher, trying to bottle-feed a Yorkshire piglet after its large white mother broke its leg, struggling with her family to make their way out of poverty. She never mentioned her fiddle-playing uncle. Raising her own daughters in the city in the 1970s, my mother continued the hard work of farming; she had done so much for so long that she didn't know how to stop. Sure, on sunny days we could see the Space Needle from our Seattle back yard, but we saw it while planting lettuce, weeding carrots, and tying up the tomato plants that edged the stairs marching down to a dark basement where we stored potatoes and onions. In the summers, my grandmother timed her visits for the weeks when berries were ripe. She and my mother, my sister and I would all pile into the Chevy Nova in the dewy daybreak hours to drive to the U-Pick farms an hour outside the city. We would spend our mornings in the hot sun picking and our afternoons in the hot kitchen canning a year's worth of strawberry jam or blueberry syrup. I learned to cook and sew and knit and make do, and caught from my mother the fear of idleness—the fear, period—that Depression-era farming built into those who

lived through it. I learned about the hard work of farming, but never about the abundance, the richness and rootedness of living on the land.

My husband, who spent long stretches of his childhood in the countryside of southern France, learned a very different lesson about rural life. Les Vidaux, in the Var region of Provence, is barely even a village, what the French call an *hameau* and the English a hamlet: a knot of houses centered on a patchwork of fields. It's such a tiny place that its single street and stone houses were not named and numbered until France joined the European Union in the 1990s, and sufficiently isolated that when my husband was a boy the old people still spoke Provençal, not French, as their primary language. Charles's grandfather spent his life in the country, cultivated pears and bamboo (which he sold to make fishing poles), and was a member of the local *coopérative vinicole*, where the small growers took their grapes to be fermented on shared equipment. When he came of age Charles's father left for the city, but he and his cousins brought their families back to the country on weekends and all summer long, not just when the strawberries were ripe.

Charles had the farm's abundance without any of the farm's hard work. In the arcadian days before the arrival of street names, the fields were full of bees and butterflies and lavender. Unless one of the local farmers was out on his Marshall Plan Massey-Ferguson tractor, a wandering boy could lie down in the rows of grapevines, look up at an impossibly blue *provençal* sky, and listen to the perfect stillness of southern France in summer. In those days, fruit trees were still scattered through the vineyards, and he would climb up whichever ancient tree had the ripest fruit and eat cherries or plums straight off the branches until his mother rang the bell to call him home. Sometimes he would fish. Sometimes he would trap or shoot small birds and roast them in a wood-fired clay oven he built himself. Sometimes he would bicycle to Pierrefeu, the nearest large village, to buy bread from the artisan baker (still there—this is France, after all) and watch the village blacksmith at work with his

coal-fired forge (long gone—even in France). While my grandparents had neither abundance nor ease, Charles's grandfather had both. He paid the French and Portuguese equivalents of Floyd and Alva to prune his vines and pick his grapes, let them live for the few weeks of *vendange* in Les Vidaux's own migrant worker housing. Unfortunately for his descendants, he maintained this abundance-and-ease rural lifestyle primarily by selling off land.

Charles still owns part of an old stone farmhouse and a dozen or so tiny vine-filled fields scattered around Les Vidaux. But given a simple mix of modern-day agricultural economics and partible inheritance, we can't live there. Even in Charles's childhood, it wasn't all arcadia; conventional vineyard practice, especially once those Marshall Plan tractors hit the fields, meant and still means chemicals (though the farmers no longer use the arsenic formerly favored as an anti-fungal), depleted soils, and more than a little hillside erosion. There aren't many bees and butterflies these days, and the old cherry and plum trees have fallen before the god of efficiency. The vineyards are still productive enough for the farm's co-owners to lease them to a neighbor, who grows for quantity, not quality, and takes the grapes to the government-subsidized cooperative to produce a mediocre sparkling rosé *vin de table*. The income is sufficient to pay taxes and upkeep on the old stone house, but not nearly enough to support a family, even if the multiple owners of that little stone house and its dozen fields could be persuaded that the income should support ours. This generation's version of Eden, meanwhile, is just across the road: a biodynamic winery with cover crops bursting up green between the rows of vines, a restaurant-guesthouse that's a new star on France's agritourism map, and a fermenting and bottling room filled with an utterly unattainable million euros' worth of gravity-controlled fermentation and filtration equipment.

When Charles and I married in 2000, we started dreaming about a farm of our own. We had figured out, by then, that most walks of life involve hard work, that life off the farm wasn't the stuff of my grandmother's Hollywood-and-magazine dreams. Crunching

the numbers on someone else's spreadsheet or teaching someone else's college seminar wasn't so very different from tying up someone else's young hop vines, except that the number-crunching and teaching happened in a climate-controlled box and the hop-tending under open sky. By then we had both moved more times than we could count; we wanted the place-specific farming life, the concrete joys of nurturing abundance on our own land. Not surprisingly, though, we thought about a farming life that would be more like Charles's grandparents' and less like Floyd and Alva's. A little less village, a little more *villeggiatura*. And that's where the dream took a wrong turn.

There's an expression in French, *le mieux est l'ennemi du bien*—the perfect is the enemy of the good. You can't have your cake and eat it too, try to have it all and you may end up with nothing. We might, at that time, have started saving to buy a farm. With a down payment and a mortgage, Charles would have had to work away from the farm, drive a long commute to pay the mortgage while I tried to jump-start a market garden—but at least we would have been on our own land, planting our own trees, building up our own soil. Unfortunately, in the generational determinism of our respective families' on-and-off-the-land cycle, we had been raised to see education as the answer to every problem. Even if all those carrots and tomatoes, butterflies and bees had formed the backdrop against which our childhoods were staged, the principal actors in our American and French family dramas were parents who had grown up dreaming of getting off the farm and who, in our childhood years, wanted the same bright urban-industrial future for us. We weren't farmers' children, we were farmers' children's children: both my mother and Charles's father dreamed that their offspring would have educations, professional careers, lives where we would never need the farmers' skills they couldn't help teaching us.

We had already followed those dreams to a lot of education, if not to ease and prosperity. My years in Yale's history Ph.D. program had led to a collapsing and geographically impossible academic job

market; Charles had received a free *Grandes Écoles* education as an officer in the French army—that’s the kind of French professional formation that sets you up for lifetime employment, long lunches, six weeks’ annual leave, and a predictable pension—but then he left the army and left France. His French military engineering degree didn’t give him much security in the American job market, certainly not the geographical security that could guarantee a job in the same place long enough to pay off the mortgage on a farm. So we pushed the dreams of our parents’ generation to their logical extreme. We took a huge bite from the shiny apple of American higher education, fell hard into the temptation to borrow now against promises of greater economic security later. We took out massive student loans; Charles went to law school; I stayed home with babies and tried to write a doctoral dissertation in my nonexistent spare time. This turned out to be the home-economics equivalent of “We had to destroy the village in order to save it.” Trying to reach a perfect modern-world garden (a farm backed by money earned doing something else), we drove ourselves so far away from the good-enough garden that it’s now unclear if we will ever make it back. We turned ourselves into an overeducated twenty-first-century variation on Floyd and Alva in the 1930s: undermined by this century’s version of global economic crisis, moving rootless over the landscape to follow work, and only dreaming of a day when we might be able to settle permanently on our own land.

Why don’t we live on a farm now? Because we are too heavily indebted to choose where we live. After Charles graduated in 2007—especially during that first year, when law firms stopped hiring and he worked as a lobbyist for a Darfur-based Sudanese opposition party that couldn’t afford to pay him—our family economy looked like Argentina in the 1990s. By 2012, we had managed to pass Greece (debt-to-GDP ratio then 127.8 percent), and now we’ve set our sights on the United States, depressing as it is to describe the appalling U.S. debt-to-income numbers as a target, especially since the IMF doesn’t care about micro-economies like ours. Charles has found

a career niche advising in construction disputes for the resource industry, which means he needs to work, and therefore to live, in places where huge corporations are developing petroleum and iron deposits. We spent two years in the dust-stormed desert near Abu Dhabi, then moved to Perth, Western Australia, an isolated outpost on the western edge of the Great Australian Desert. We are damned souls wandering in the wastelands of the global oil economy: could we possibly travel any farther outside the garden of rural sustainable living?

I didn't start out talking about my grandparents because I think I'm entitled to compare our struggles to theirs. We're not Floyd and Alva. The twenty-first century has produced its own crop of desperate rural migrants, pushed off the land by North American agribusiness and trading their farm skills for substandard wages and housing. We're rootless, yes, but we have enough to eat and pay the doctor; we have indoor plumbing; our children aren't tying up hop vines or mucking stalls for wages to support the family; we can afford to buy organic eggs, right now, though only if we keep paying interest on something else. We can't clear our debts by selling a horse, it will take us years to climb back up to zero, and we won't be able to buy a farm for years to come. But on a daily basis, our life isn't too hard. My husband's skills have a solid market value (the global economy is less interested in my specialization in French North American history), as long as we are willing to migrate whenever and wherever that market dictates. Are we like my Depression-era grandparents? Only in our dreams.

Dreaming about farm ownership is easy. You can dream your way to a different farm every night. You can imagine your life in super-modern modular eco-housing, in an old stone house, a converted water-mill, a log cabin, an earth-sheltered concrete bunker (that last is my husband's version)—the variations are endless. You can produce organic flowers and vegetables, heirloom chickens and free-range eggs, raw-milk cheese and biodynamic wine. On my dream farm there is a freestanding writing studio. On our teenage

daughter's dream farm, the stable backs right onto her bedroom window, and draft horses do all the hauling and plowing. After our years in Abu Dhabi, our environmental debts are high, too, so we sketch in solar panels, wind turbines, and geothermal heating. If you're going to dream, why not dream big? We're in the wintertime, seed-catalog phase of the calendar: for the moment, we can grow and be anything we want.

The hard part is figuring out how to live right now. Do we rent cheaper housing far out from the city so we can save money and be closer to working farms, and then burn up more time and money and carbon driving for work and the food we can't grow or buy from neighbors? Do we live close to work, and close to public transportation, gaining more family time and reducing our carbon footprint but paying higher rent, and thus postponing the day when we can be free from debt and save enough to buy our own farm? Do we go home to visit grandparents, when the price of four Perth–Seattle plane tickets could be a solid down payment on five acres of undeveloped land in Washington State? If you are saving to buy a farm someday, do you opt for eggs from the conscientious farmer who, Joel Salatin–style, lets his chickens be chickens, or do you buy the cheap battery-hen eggs in the grocery store and bank the \$2.50 you just saved? If you live in a desert, does it make sense to build up soil from sand or use desalinated water to grow kale? Can you commit to animals when you work in an industry so volatile that you don't know where you'll be living a year from now?

Failing to understand the power of our instinctive human yearning for a unified state of rootedness, productivity, and ease can lead to some highly counterproductive decisions: our family is now much farther outside the garden than we were ten years ago because we had internalized our parents' resistance to the hard labor and potential financial downside of farming. Now we're living an extreme version of the twenty-first-century's deal with the devil: education as a precursor to physical ease, but also to debt, dependence, and rootlessness. We're obviously not the first Americans struggling to

find the good-life balance: a nineteenth century's worth of utopian agricultural experiments, and the more recent successes and failures of the 1960s back-to-the-land movement, show how difficult it can be to balance our competing desires for abundance and ease. Inspirational back-to-the-landers Helen and Scott Nearing complained that many people who showed up at their homestead in the 1960s and 1970s didn't understand hard work was part of the deal. Even American suburbia itself—the life that many neo-farmers were and are rejecting—can be seen as an unsuccessful attempt to reconcile natural abundance and physical ease, with its illusory rootedness (on average, Americans now move every five years), and the illusion of effortless abundance that emanates greenly from its many quarter-acres of unproductive lawn.

Life on the outside, when you're trying to get back in, is full of frustrations and contradictions. Sometimes the farming dream pushes you to the right action for the wrong reason: I do buy the right eggs. I buy local organic vegetables and farmer-direct, free-range meat and eggs from happy hens. And, yes, there is a little bit of slow-food movement rational thinking involved in this decision: the consumer is a co-creator in a more sustainable food system; my food dollar is helping to build someone else's dream farm on someone else's five or ten or fifteen acres; I'm supporting an economy I might eventually hope to enter as a producer. But truly my trips to Perth's farmers' markets are anything but rationally motivated. I'm there for a vicarious taste of other people's connectedness, searching for the you-are-what-you eat moment when I can pretend that eating traditional brine-cured olives from Redtail Ridge Farm connects me to their land in Mumballup, Western Australia, that cooking organic broccoli and brussels sprouts from TurnOrganics gets me closer to a farm in Cookernup. Industrial-agricultural conglomerates know all about our collective farming nostalgia, which is why they paste cheery watercolors of red barns and windmills on packages of CFO-produced beef and eggs from caged hens. That same nostalgic yearning can, of course, also support small-scale biodynamics and all-but-certified organics. If I'm going to be the

food-economy equivalent of a symbiotic nitrogen-fixing bacterium latched on to someone else's roots, I can choose to give my nitrogen to the kind of farm I dream about. But the bacteria aren't motivated by altruism, and neither am I.

More problematic is when the pull "back to the garden" makes you do the wrong thing for the right reasons. In fertile North America, you know it's good to grow some of your own food, at least to eat local greens, since the calories they contain are dwarfed by the calories typically burned up to chill and transport them. But what does it mean to "grow local greens" in Abu Dhabi, especially if you don't live there long enough for your compost pile to finish cooking? It means building up beds with imported peat moss and imported soil—and watering with desalinated water in a country where annual rainfall is less than an inch, where the groundwater supply is entirely depleted, where water reserves will last the population only two days if the desalination plants break down. Growing any kind of vegetable in Abu Dhabi is like filling your car with ethanol—doing something that feels green but really has a net-zero or even a negative environmental impact. Since the vegetable alternatives in Abu Dhabi are either European and American world-travelers or the products of local air-conditioned hydroponic greenhouses, there's really no blameless way to eat greens there.

I did grow kale and lettuce in Abu Dhabi—and Charles and our daughters planted Omani melons, Saudi date palms, and other plants less morally problematic because more drought-resistant—not because it made economic or environmental sense, but because the simple act of planting helped us feel closer to a place where growing our own food would be good both for us and for the world. More logically, our Abu Dhabi farming experiments should have been about keeping chickens, which, like the insects they eat, thrive in the desert heat. Many Emirati families have completely free-ranging flocks—unfenced and unwatched—which means that a drive through certain residential neighborhoods is a joke in perpetual motion, at every turn a chicken wondering why it crossed the road.

But I was reluctant to add harvesting the chickens to the long list of good-byes that our children must say whenever we move, and I never managed to get past the local dealer's rooster-with-every-hen pullet policy. Thankfully now, in Western Australia, although the soil is still poor and sandy, we can grow the same plants with more rain and less guilt; I still haven't committed to chickens but still think I should, especially since Perth farmers understand that their customers don't need or want back yards full of roosters.

Most dangerous of all—and hard to escape, whether you are living on or off the land—is the false dichotomy in which one is either geographically rootless and ruthless, excluded from the garden and therefore not bound by its rules, or geographically grounded and therefore reconnected to the natural seasons and cycles of life. That logic says I should only buy the cheap eggs now, that it doesn't matter how I get to my dream farm as long as I get there quickly, that I can't live a more grounded life until I can do it on my own piece of ground. I can't always get outside that dichotomy, not after a lifetime of exposure to a commercial world that considers any unfulfilled desire a problem to be solved as quickly as possible (American advertising screams, *Cain, drive your way straight back into Eden in this brand-new Ford F-150 pickup!*—and I want to hitch a ride). I know, too, that there are real-time farmers who think nothing I do matters—except perhaps as a cautionary tale—until one way or another I've bought the farm. But on my best days, those blue-sky days when the birds sing and there's still a loaf of sourdough spelt bread left when I get to New Norcia Bakery, I remember what my grandparents could have told me decades ago if only I had been listening: waiting is part of life's natural rhythm.

Even in our current exile—and I hope that “our” might embrace the many people who dream of farming but for reasons much better than mine can't yet make the leap—we are already reconnecting to a natural cycle that America forgot during the decades of easy credit, a cycle where people wait for their dreams to reach maturity, wait with the patience of the oak tree or the date palm that may bear

fruit only after a decade. In the seasons of life, most of us have fallow wintry periods when all we can do is save and plan and dream; some of us may live through longer winters than others. My grandparents' migrant worker life gave way only very slowly to the tiny house with the pump outside, and only after many years of waiting and working did they find their way to the very outside edge of most Americans' field of dreams. In my university years I learned many things my grandparents never knew, but now I can learn from them how to wait, how to be grateful about what I have and patient about what I don't, how to stop working from time to time and listen to the fiddle. That's the greatest challenge in a life of debt and dreams: learning to keep one eye on where you want to be, and the other on the beauty of where you are right now.