

Biodynamics

RETHINKING AGRICULTURE
FALL 2018 / #293



TRANSFORMING THE
HEART OF AGRICULTURE



BIODYNAMIC
ASSOCIATION

Biodynamics

Fall 2018 #293

Biodynamic Association

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Printed in the USA

Biodynamics is a publication of the Biodynamic Association.

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TRANSFORMING THE HEART OF AGRICULTURE

JIM EMBRY

Four years ago I attended the North American Biodynamic Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, which was my first direct connection with the Biodynamic Association (BDA). On the last day at the close of the plenary session, I spoke up from the floor appreciating the conference for its inspiring sessions and keen attention to biodiversity. In the same breath, however, I offered respectful criticism for the lack of ethnic diversity at the conference within every level of participation. After this session ended, I received several appreciative comments that my observations were accurate and needed attention by the BDA. Several months later, Thea Carlson invited me to join in the organizational effort to improve diversity at the 2016 conference and beyond. I was impressed

I agree with Einstein that we need some big ideas to guide us in this transition from the dominant financial-scientific-technological period to the ecological period in which agriculture will serve as a lens to view the world. In this article I will share some of those big ideas and a few small ideas that are needed to bring about this transformation of human culture, agriculture, and the BDA as an organization.

As we develop our resolve and capacity for out-of-the-barn thinking, we will understand that our work is not only to transform the heart, but also the lungs, liver, skeletal structure, brain, and all the essential body elements of agriculture. Our concern here is not solely with some minor adaptations to our human condition,

When we transform agriculture, then we will also be in the creative cauldron of transforming every other institution within our human culture.

with her statement that “the Biodynamic Association is committed to an organizational shift” that would ensure that social justice, equity, and diversity were part of future conferences, as well as overall organizational direction. Four years later, after opening my big mouth in Louisville, I find myself writing this article, which allows me this printed space to reflect on the conference theme and my 2018 conference presentations.

Transforming the Heart of Agriculture through the lens of **Soil. Justice. Regeneration** is a challenging and timely theme for the 2018 Biodynamic Conference. Agriculture, which developed some 12,000 years ago, is the foundation and is, thus, at the heart of modern human civilization. When we transform agriculture, then we will also be in the creative cauldron of transforming every other institution within our human culture. The enormity and complexity of this transformation process challenges us to not just have ideas that are examples of thinking out of the box; we need to think out of the barn.

“We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

—Albert Einstein

but with the most serious transformation of human-to-human and human-to-Earth relationships since the rise of the Industrial Age 300 years ago. Thomas Berry calls this human adventure towards an epochal shift, “The Great Work.”¹ Thomas Berry writes that The Great Work is this transformation of our modern industrial civilization, which is exiting the terminal phase of the Cenozoic Era and transitioning into an emerging Ecozoic Era. During this transition, we will move from an anthropocentric to a biocentric measure of progress. Through this lens, we can place the 2018 Biodynamic Conference theme **Transforming the Heart of Agriculture** into a much larger framework of transforming human culture.

The central premise of The Great Work is that the human and other components of Earth form a single community of life. Every mode of being has inherent rights to their place in this community, rights that come from existence itself. The intimacy of humans with the other components of the planet is the fulfillment of each in the other and all within the single Earth community. The Great Work is a spiritual fulfillment and commitment that guides our economic, educational, and cultural aspirations. It is a commitment, not simply a way of

survival, to being very present in the moment when we witness the dying of the Earth in its Cenozoic expression and the life renewal of the Earth in an emerging Ecozoic Era. This renewal or regeneration of the Earth, under its current conditions, gives us a special urgency to regain our sense of the sacred in any sphere of human activity. We will recover our sense of wonder and our sense of the sacred only if we appreciate the universe story² beyond ourselves, as a revelatory experience of that numinous

A legal system designed exclusively for humans has outlived its purpose. Even as we move from our current anthropocentric concern for rights and move to an embrace of responsibilities, habitat of all species must be given legal status as sacred and inviolable.

It is exciting and inspiring that this movement has already begun! Bolivia passed the world's first laws granting all nature equal rights to humans. The Law of Mother Earth ("Ley de Derechos de La Madre

A legal system designed exclusively for humans has outlived its purpose. Even as we move from our current anthropocentric concern for rights and move to an embrace of responsibilities, habitat of all species must be given legal status as sacred and inviolable.

presence whence all things come into being. Indeed, the universe is the primary sacred reality. We become sacred by our participation in this more sublime dimension of the world about us. Quantum science and traditional religious traditions now together teach us that the universe carries within itself the norm of authenticity for every spiritual as well as every physical activity within it.

The well-being of the soil and plants will be a primary concern for humans in this Ecozoic period. Disruption of the biological integrity of the planet is the indictment that must be brought against the extractive economy with its industrial forms of agriculture. Only a regeneration of the biological integrity of the planet within its various bioregions can assure the integral survival of Earth, as we presently know it, into the future. Our primary concern must be to restore the organic community of the entire planet. This means regenerating the entire range of life-systems of the planet. All are needed. It means also that we must establish our basic source of food and energy in the sun, which supplies the energy for the transformation of inanimate matter into living substance capable of nourishing the larger biosystems of Earth.

As The Great Work gives new definitions to our legal system, we will need a jurisprudence that will provide for the legal rights of geological and biological as well as human components of the Earth community.

Tierra")³ redefines the country's rich mineral deposits as "blessings" and is expected to lead to radical new conservation and social measures to reduce pollution and control industry. The law, which is part of a complete restructuring of the Bolivian legal system following a change of constitution in 2009, has been heavily influenced by a resurgent Indigenous Andean spiritual worldview that places the environment and the Earth deity known as the *Pachamama* at the center of all life. The law gives nature legal rights, specifically the rights to life and regeneration, biodiversity, water, clean air, balance, and restoration.

Bolivia's law mandates a fundamental ecological

reorientation of the country's economy and society, requiring all existing and future laws to adapt to the Mother Earth law and accept the ecological limits set by nature. It calls for public policy to be guided by *Sumaj Kawsay* or *Vivir Bien*⁴ (an Indigenous concept meaning "living well," or living in harmony with nature and people), rather than the current

focus on producing more goods and stimulating consumption. In practical terms, the law requires the government to 1) transition from non-renewable to renewable energy and 2) develop new economic indicators that will assess the ecological impact of all economic activity. How can the North American Biodynamic Conference begin to incorporate this big idea



Photo Credit: Cathy Sutphen

of *The Law of Mother Earth* into organizational vision and practice?

Coming from a very similar conceptual framework as Thomas Berry and *The Law of Mother Earth*, my friend and deep ecologist, Joanna Macy, gives us another big idea to guide our work. She calls it “The Great Turning.”⁵ Twenty years ago while serving in Detroit as the Director of the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership (www.boggscenter.org) and working closely with my longtime mentor Grace Lee Boggs,⁶ I attended and helped organize the “State of the Possible” retreats (1999–2004). These retreats were summarized in the document *Movement Building for Transformational Change*,⁷ which is still available on the *YES! Magazine* website. It was at these retreats that I came under the spell of Joanna Macy and her Great Turning framework. The Great Turning and The Great Work guide my activism every day and encourage me to work to combine three levels of activism and thought.

Joanna says that, as we remove the blinders that obscure the collapse of ecological, social, and agricultural systems, the ongoing oppression of people of color and other marginalized groups, the mass extinction of species, and the accelerating disturbance of our planet’s climate, we have some really big work to do. Our Great Turning work is to contribute every day



to this essential adventure of our time—this epochal transition from an industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization. According to Macy, there are three dimensions of our work that guide The Great Turning that are mutually reinforcing and equally necessary, with no exact order or sequence of importance. We can start at any point, and beginning at one place naturally leads into the others. It is for each of us to follow our own sense of rightness about where we feel called to act. The three dimensions are:

1. **Holding Actions** to slow the damage to Earth and its beings. These are essentially what we normally call activism or direct action. It’s being out there in the streets and saying “No” to the violent and unjust practices that are happening around the Earth. It’s putting

bodies in the way of an out-of-control global economic system that leads us towards forms of deterioration or collapse.

2. **Structural Change** analyzes structural causes and creates structural alternatives. This is where we actively work to build new societal forms, new economies, new ways of being together and organizing. The North American Biodynamic Conference, with new directives towards greater inclusive forms of relating, is an area of creating structural alternatives and represents a small vortex of change within a greater turning.
3. **Shifts in Consciousness** are where we do the work of inner spiritual and psychological transformation. We open ourselves into wider spheres of identity with the Earth, cosmos, and the whole of humanity. These structural alternatives cannot take root and survive

without deeply ingrained values to sustain them. They must mirror what we want and how we relate to Earth and each other. They require, in other words, a profound shift in our perception of reality, both as cognitive revolution and spiritual awakening, while reminding us again that our world is a sacred whole, worthy of adoration and service.⁸

This spring I was invited to be part of a visioning process of co-creating a “vivid picture” of the future of the North American biodynamic movement for 2024 (the 100th anniversary of the Agriculture Course).⁹ This vivid picture would be woven into a shared vision for the future, as well as a roadmap of how we as organizations and individuals committed to a biodynamic future can work and act in concert. Are the three dimensions of our work as outlined by Joanna Macy in *The Great Turning* and the concepts of *The Great Work* by Thomas Berry usable additions to this visioning process? I think so, and will be sharing this at the conference.

The State of the Possible retreats held twice a year are an important model for how we structure our work of building a movement for change at the state, bioregional, and national levels. This retreat model could also be used within organizations like the Biodynamic Association to

build greater internal capacity, trust, and shared vision, particularly around concerns for equity, diversity, and inclusion. Related to the theme of *regeneration*, at the conference we will talk about connecting biodynamics with regenerative agriculture, permaculture, organic, agroecology, holistic management, natural medicine, associative economics, and the many other movements

of life on Earth. As we move into our work of visioning the biodynamic movement as being more inclusive and committed to equity, we can benefit from insights within *Race and the Cosmos*.

“Biodynamics, Indigeneity, and Social Justice” is the title of a keynote panel session in which I will participate at our November conference. As I consider my

Our conversation looked at the role of dark matter and dark energy in the universe as a way to transcend our cultural negativity around symbols of darkness.

for positive change. What if thirty to forty of these food, agriculture, and health organizations agreed to come together twice a year for five years using “Movement Building” as a model to build collaborative actions and collective vision? The outcomes would transform how we currently do the work of our individual organizations and greatly enhance our collaborative work with each other. We would better understand how working in silos, as we do so much now, does not build a movement for transforming the heart of agriculture.

Another important big idea that arose from the State of the Possible retreats is embodied in the book, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently*.¹⁰ I think it was during our third retreat that we got very stuck in our discussion of race and oppression. I mean, we were really stuck, as often happens with these more difficult and personal conversations. We got unstuck when retreat participant Belvie Rooks¹¹ of Los Angeles asked us to travel with her through this book, *Race and the Cosmos*, that connected thoughts of religion, quantum science, and the cosmos to questions and realities of race and oppression. This deeper diving allowed us to see better that diversity on planet Earth is a microcosm of diversity in the universe. Our conversation looked at the role of dark matter and dark energy in the universe as a way to transcend our cultural negativity around symbols of darkness. Our reading and conversation allowed us to understand that the lens of quantum science and the story of the universe are important tools to better understand every aspect

preparation for this conversation, I remember the tour of Detroit that I gave to a Hopi elder and his grandson in 2002, as part of our “Adamah” or “Greening of Detroit Project.”¹² Our tour included stops at the Detroit River, with signs warning against drinking the water laden with mercury and other heavy metals; brownfield sites all over the city with high levels of soil contamination; and the Detroit incinerator, billowing smoke into the air from burning city garbage. We ended our tour at the Detroit Summer Art Garden, where we had a colorfully painted turtle made from straw-bale construction. At this art piece of a turtle, the Hopi elder kneeled, prayed, and cried for a long time. Upon arising from his knees he said to me:

“I prayed for the air, the water, the soil, the animals, the plants, and the people of Detroit. I prayed that the people who live in Detroit now would love this region of Turtle Island¹³ the way my people love our land and all of her.”



In all my years of activism, I had never before witnessed anyone from Sierra Club, Green Peace, or any other environmental activist

cry for and about the abuse of nature. That experience inspired me to have a much deeper sense of connection to all our natural elements, to see them as family members, and to dig deeper into traditional peoples’ knowledge of nature, food, and agriculture.

What is the role of Indigenous peoples’ cultural and agricultural traditions within the biodynamic movement to transform the heart of agriculture? This

plenary conversation will be one of the most important conversations to be held at our conference. The First Peoples of this continent have much to teach us concerning intimate presence to this continent and how we should dwell here in a mutually enhancing relation and spiritual intimacy with the land. The original peoples living in North and South America are now recognized as having influenced the larger course of history economically and politically, as well as intellectually and spiritually. Their cornucopia of medicinal plants used

overuse of commercial fertilizer and suggested compost, nitrogen-filled plants, and manure as a better alternative, and encouraged crop diversification as a practice to regenerate the cotton-depleted Southern soil. Carver believed that “plants are just as sensitive to narcotics and drugs as a human being.”

Carver and Steiner both understood the need to provide an educational experience for children that included an agricultural curriculum. In 1919, Steiner began to work with others to found the first Waldorf

Even though he was writing and lecturing about all of these topics, George Washington Carver is not mentioned at all in writings that describe the history of organic farming, conservation, and environmental education movements in the United States.

as new pharmaceutical agents became the basis for modern medicine and pharmacology. Throughout these centuries, despite wars, cultural oppression, poverty, and diseases, Indigenous peoples have maintained diverse communities committed to self-determination, homelands, and ancestral traditions. It is a tragic and a long-continuing story that endures into the present. Yet there is a sense in which the First Peoples of this continent, in the full range of their bearing and in their intimacy with the powers of the continent, have achieved something that guides and instructs all those who have come to live here.

“George Washington Carver and the Biodynamic Movement” is the title of a workshop that I am presenting at our November conference. In this workshop I will offer connections between the work of George Washington Carver (1860-1943) and Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), who were contemporaries with very similar views about the spiritual and scientific dimensions of agriculture. Even though he was writing and lecturing about all of these topics, George Washington Carver is not mentioned at all in writings that describe the history of organic farming, conservation, and environmental education movements in the United States. From the beginning of his teaching career in 1898 at Tuskegee University, Carver voiced his skepticism of the

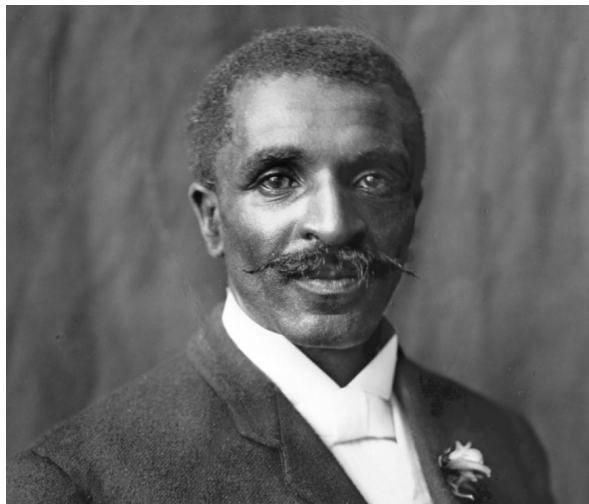
school in Germany. In 1898, Carver, as the most recognized agricultural educator in the South, prepared the first of many bulletins on nature study and school gardens for children. He wrote:

“...a very large part of the child’s education must be gotten outside of the four walls designated as class room....the most effective and lasting education is the one that makes the pupil handle, discuss and familiarize himself with the real things about him... There is probably no agent more productive of interest than children’s

gardens, which embody almost if not quite every phase of practical rural nature study. If properly presented new revelations and discoveries will constantly be unfolding before the pupil, increasing his enthusiasm and gradually enlarging his educational horizon. Let all the methods of nature study be brought down to the every-day life and language of the masses. The highest attainments in agriculture can be reached only when we clearly understand the mutual

relationship between the animal, mineral, and vegetable kingdoms, and how utterly impossible it is for one to exist in a highly organized state without the other.”¹⁴

Carver recognized that the abuse of the soil in the South was directly related to the injustice and oppression



experienced by his people. In 1914, Carver wrote an article in the *Negro Farmer* that connects our conference themes of *soil and justice*:

“Unkindness to anything means an injustice done to that thing. If I am unkind to you I do you an injustice, or wrong you in some way. On the other hand, if I try to assist you in every way that I can to make a better citizen and in every way to do my very best for you. I am kind to you.

“The above principles apply with equal force to the

soil. The farmer whose soil produces less every year, is unkind to it in some way; that is he is not doing by it what he should; he is robbing it of some substance it must have, and he becomes therefore, a soil robber rather than a progressive farmer.”¹⁵

Can we transform the heart of agriculture without transforming the Biodynamic Association as an organization and our national conference? Of course we can’t. But that will be a subject of a future article.

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1. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York, USA: Three Rivers Press, 1999).
 2. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994).
 3. Nick Buxton, “The Law of Mother Earth: Behind Bolivia’s Historic Bill,” *YES!*, April 21, 2011, <https://www.yesmagazine.org/planet/the-law-of-mother-earth-behind-bolivas-historic-bill>.
 4. “Law of Mother Earth, the Rights of Our Planet: A Vision from Bolivia,” World Future Fund, accessed August 23, 2018, <http://www.worldfuturefund.org/Projects/Indicators/motherearthbolivia.html>; www.ecoterra.net/.
 5. “Joanna Macy and the Great Turning,” Video Project, accessed August 23, 2018, <https://www.videoproject.com/Joanna-Macy-and-the-Great-Turning.html>.
 6. Jim relates: “In 1974 I met Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs after reading their article, ‘Beyond Nationalism,’ in *Monthly Review*, which was a challenge to move beyond Black Nationalism. It was their book, *Revolution and Evolution in the Twentieth Century* (1974), that introduced me to the concept that the purpose of revolution was to provide a leap in human evolution. Our political comradeship spanned 30+ years and included the formations of the National Organization for an American Revolution, Detroit Summer, and the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership, which I directed from 2000-2004.”
 7. Frances Korten and Roberto Vargas, *Movement Building for Transformational Change* (Bainbridge Island, WA: The Positive Futures Network, 2006), accessed August 23, 2018, www.yesmagazine.org/pdf/Korten&Vargasprinter.pdf.
 8. “The Great Turning,” accessed August 23, 2018, <https://www.ecoliteracy.org/article/great-turning>.
 9. Since January, leaders in the United States biodynamic movement have been engaged in a collaborative process to create a shared vision for the future. A series of focus groups with sixty individuals from across the movement were convened this spring, followed by a survey to the broader community in early summer. The emerging “vivid picture” will be shared and discussed at the North American Biodynamic Conference. Jim has played an active and guiding role in this process.
 10. Barbara Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002).
 11. Belvie Rooks, “How To Look At a Brownfield and See a Flower Garden, The Search for Authentic Signs of Hope,” accessed August 23, 2018, www.reimaginepe.org/8-1/rooks; “Healing and Revisioning” interview with Belvie Rooks, accessed August 23, 2018, www.coursera.org/lecture/journey-knowledge-action/healing-and-revisioning-belvie-rooks-66H9w.
 12. Curt Guyette, “Down a Green Path,” *Detroit Metro Times*, October 31, 2001, www.metrotimes.com/detroit/down-a-green-path/Content?oid=2172567.
 13. “Turtle Island” is a term used by several Native American nations as the name for the continent of North America.
 14. George W. Carver, “Nature Study and Garden for Rural Schools,” *Bulletin of the Tuskegee Agricultural Experiment Station*, no. 18 (1898), p. 3.
 15. John Ferrell, *Fruits of Creation: A Look at Global Sustainability as Seen Through the Eyes of George Washington Carver* (Saint Paul, MN: Macalester Park Publishing, 1995), p. 29.



Jim Embry, who considers himself stardust condensed in human form, was born in Richmond, Kentucky; a grandson of small farmers who were also social activists. This family legacy of activism was passed down to him as a ten-year-old participant in the Civil Rights Movement. Often times called an “eco-activist” or labelled as Black & Green, Jim has worked to connect social justice, food justice, and environmental justice within other social movements for the past fifty years. Jim now serves as Director of Sustainable Communities Network and cultivates collaborative efforts at the local, national, and international levels with a focus on food systems.

Jim will be a keynote speaker at the November North American Biodynamic Conference in Portland, Oregon, as well as offering the workshop, “George Washington Carver and the Biodynamic Movement.”



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NORTH AMERICAN BIODYNAMIC CONFERENCES:
A COMMUNITY TRADITION



Lunch at 2007 Biodynamic Conference - Fair Oaks, CA



Young farmers at 2010 Biodynamic Conference - Chestnut Ridge, NY



Community altar at 2012 Biodynamic Conference - Madison, WI



*Hands-on preparations at 2014
Biodynamic Conference - Louisville, KY*



Danza Azteca at 2016 Biodynamic Conference - Santa Fe, NM



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In addition to the feature article, "Transforming the Heart of Agriculture" by Jim Embry, this issue of *Biodynamics* includes:

Judy Bluehorse Skelton: Reclaiming The Urban Forest For Food, Medicine, & Ceremony

Stewart Kahn Lundy: The Individual Path Of Personal Biodynamic Practice

Heberto Rodas-Gaitán: Conscious Science

The Biodynamic Association's statement on Diversity, Equity, And Inclusion

PLUS, information about the upcoming Biodynamic Association conference
Transforming the Heart of Agriculture: Soil. Justice. Regeneration.
November 14-18 in Portland, Oregon.



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