

**FARM TALK**

# The new agrarianism Thoughts on our rural lives

BY MELISSA MATTHEWSON



There is an emerging desire in a new cross-section of people here in the Applegate Valley and in other parts of the country. It is an urgent yearning to re-connect with ancestral land values, a yearning to renew relationships with human and natural communities in ways that are sustaining and nourishing. These yearnings lead people to be interested in rejuvenating community relationships and values through farming, trading, conversation, family interactions, home place, ecological responsibility and appropriate land stewardship. This yearning has a name. It is called agrarianism in much of the current literature on land, culture and community.

My in-laws once asked me what they should call me and my husband to their friends or family. "You aren't hippies, right?" they asked. Well, it depends on your definition of hippies and they said "Well, aren't hippies lazy and don't they do drugs? You guys aren't like that." I thought about this for a moment, exchanged knowing glances with my husband and then thought about all of our human tendencies to identify ourselves as someone or something. In general, I thought it was a funny question, but I could just imagine the conversation that might have taken place between my in-laws and their friends. "You know, they are like nature people. They like plants, gardens and recycle, go camping and hiking, preserve their own food." Or something like that. Right around the time I was having this conversation with them, I had just finished graduate school, moved to Oregon and landed on what is now our farm on Thompson Creek Road. I had just finished studying agriculture and community food systems and was now starting my own farm. I knew just what to tell them. "Call us agrarians if you like." Of course, a short conversation ensued in which we explained who agrarians are and what they do. I'm not sure if they fully understood what we explained or how we defined agrarianism. There are others more articulate than I at defining the subject, such people as Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and Gene Logsdon to name a few, so I looked them up and did some reading.

Agrarian comes from the Latin word agrarius, which means, "pertaining to the land." Wendell Berry is probably considered the most famous of the agrarian thinkers. He continually challenges us to think in new terms about our rural lives and to celebrate the world in which we live. He validates our choices as farmers and homesteaders, helps us remember why lives lived on the land are meaningful in so many ways. I like this—he says: "I am not bound for any public place, but for ground of my own where I have planted vines and orchard trees, and in the heat of the day climbed up into the healing shadow of the woods. Better than any argument is to rise at dawn and pick dew-wet red berries in a cup." Yes.

I think it suffices to say that most local agrarians will talk about aspects of their life in terms of quality—of family life, land relationships and general well being. Agrarians share in a few common things—the land is the heart of their existence and passion. It is where they begin and where they end. All of their economic transactions (or most of them) come from the land. They raise their families as part of this and develop community relationships centered on everything that comes from the land, i.e. sharing food and preservation, growing gardens, raising animals or even creating social gatherings on the land. Everything is measured by the land and its virtues. There is permanence here—agrarians are interested in creating a robust life that has some sort of stability and resilience, something that will last into the future, a good life to be remembered by all the folk who continue on. Most agrarians would agree that they are seeking a life that is balanced, fair, happy, simple and good.

An agrarian can live in the urban setting, too, raising ducks in the backyard or canning flats of peaches for the winter. It is all a matter of values and then action reflecting those values. But really, farming is at the heart of agrarianism. And it is more than just the physical labor of farming. In 1905, Liberty Hyde Bailey said, "Every piece of farm work is also an attempt to solve a problem, and therefore it should have its intellectual interest. It needs but the informing of the mind and the quickening of the imagination to raise any constructive and creative work above the level of drudgery." So often, my father asks me, "How could you possibly like to farm? It is so mundane." I often am at a loss to answer his question eloquently. I usually blurt out, "But farming and working on the land is an intellectual pursuit as well as physical." But I can never articulate why. I like this quote from Bailey. It answers my father's question about the qualities we need in order to survive and flourish in our rural lives, to be agrarians: imagination, problem solving and a quick mind. I think I'll use this the next time he asks.

In general, I'm so encouraged by this "new agrarianism" that is budding everywhere I go, especially in the Applegate Valley. I'm particularly grateful for the new interactions and relationships with agrarians I am developing through my work life. I am continually amazed at the dedication and passion of each one of them. As I work with these new agrarians and hear their stories, failures and triumphs, it feels like we are all moving in the same direction with the same values, but each path is a different variation or color of

agrarianism. Whether it is through conservation of our forests or through small-scale dairying, each one of us is establishing a life built on hope, trust, creativity, responsibility and preservation of a life that could quietly disappear if we let it. On a regular basis, I get stuck in my day-to-day life of work, farming and motherhood and sometimes only focus on the stress of balancing these three "jobs." But when I remember what I'm doing here and take a moment to cherish the life I'm creating for myself and my family, my heart bounces. We are all doing this in some manner—changing the landscape (physical, intellectual and emotional) for the better, impacting the way we all live and work together from the ground up.

Melissa Matthewson  
541-776-7371 ext. 208  
melissa.matthewson@oregonstate.edu



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