

Cultivation & Formation

A New Generation Rolls Up its Sleeves

By Heather Kuhnau

"Just maybe it could all be that way again—living simply, values clear, life focused on family and close relationships and on a wise partnership with the land that goes far beyond just making a living."

—Ben Logan, *The Land Remembers*

What is it about the small American family farm that people admire so much? To some, it is just senseless work. A person who finds working a straight 15 hour day, in dirty conditions, with little pay and no benefits "fun," is simply crazy. This is often times true, especially in this day and age with an agricultural crisis that has made the feasibility of a small conventional farm close to impossible. Yet, I have met many people who still hang on to that inkling of a dream that "maybe it could all be that way again." People who have that yearning to reconnect with animals and the land—people who believe a simple life of labor is conducive to holiness and happiness.

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Life on the Farm

My family and I live on the outskirts of the Driftless Region near Sauk City in South Central Wisconsin. Our farm has been in the family since my great-grandparents bought it in the 1950's. In those days, they milked 20 cows with surge bucket milkers. Today, we currently milk 70 cows and crop 150 acres in corn, soybeans and alfalfa.

Our dairy herd is comprised mostly of Holsteins, although we are growing our Jersey portion of the herd and also own a few Brown Swiss, one Ayrshire and one Bavarian Fleckvieh. Our cows are housed in a sand-bedded freestall barn and milked in headlock stalls in our old dairy barn. We feed a TMR consisting of haylage, dry hay and corn silage, with a ground corn and soybean meal top dressing that is fed during milking. Our milk is sold through the Foremost Farms cooperative.

My older brother and I run the dairy. I milk cows morning and night, feed calves, keep the breeding records and help with fieldwork, cleaning, and the many other chores that make up our endless list. My brother milks with me and takes care of much

of the feeding, cleaning and fieldwork.

In addition to dairying, I also work part-time at the Tower Rock Farmstead bakery. My boss, and now close friend, began her bakery on the small dairy farm that she and her husband operate. They grow all of their own wheat and mill it in the bakery. The wheat is never sprayed in field or fumigated for storage, since it is kept in cold storage. I help bake all of our artisan breads and take our products up to the Baraboo farmers' market on Saturdays.

I am also really into gardening! I have had to scale my garden back a lot in the past few years due to a lack of time, but I was able to focus mostly on my strawberries this year with my boss being so kind as to let me sell them at the farmers' market! One thing I have noticed most farmers share is the ambitious habit of always taking on more projects than they can handle.

Changing Landscape

I am blessed to say that I was born into farming. I love it. I love cows. Once a farmer, always a farmer. I think no matter where life takes me, I will always be looking for the opportunity to

enjoy the miracle that makes life shoot forth from tiny, lifeless seeds. Every time, the miracle is new.

I am only 18 years old, and still the farming landscape has changed dramatically even within my lifetime. When I was a little girl, just about everyone in our area milked cows. Most were simple, small, stanchion-barn old dairy farms. Farm expansions soon started increasing rapidly. A few farms have borrowed themselves deep into debt in order to build huge facilities that are now owned by the bank. Some of them have been bought out by even larger corporations that are trying to take on vertical integration. All of the local milk plants have consolidated and are overflowing with milk. Now, dairy seems to have gone pretty much belly up, and I do not think it will ever go back to what it used to be. Milk prices have started to rebound somewhat, but the damage caused is too deep.

The small dairies that are left, ours included, have come to a crossroads about trying to keep going for the long term. We have been making it, but we are so hard pressed for labor and time. Hiring extra labor is unafford-

able, expansion is expensive, yet decreasing a herd or selling the cows is not very cost efficient. The weather has not been cooperating for anybody either! Our future in dairy is uncertain, but change is not always a bad thing. It could be for us the opportunity to take up a newer, more sustainable farming enterprise.

Cultivation and Formation

It makes me think of an article written by our bishop for the Diocese of Madison's newspaper about Jesus' message of trust during the storm at sea. Our bishop wrote this concerning unexpected changes in life: "In such moments we can either wring our hands in fear or open them in welcome. We can either live in the golden nostalgia of the past or grab the bracing opportunity of the present moment."

Growing up on a farm has been a large part of the formation of my youth. The everyday challenges of being a farmer exercises the mind. It draws out the untapped creativity and ambition of a largely insipid generation of young adults that occupy our nation's colleges.

A farm has always been an ideal



place to learn the practice of the virtues. Prudence becomes necessary in making wise decisions for the future. Justice moves a farmer to give themselves to God and others. It moves us to recognize—in all of creation—the spark of the divine, which calls us to care for living things with respect and dignity. Fortitude grants the strength to accept and face obstacles, no matter how unpleasant. Temperance should be practiced in a farmer's workload or rate of farm expansion, always keeping in mind the good of the land, the local community and care of one's family. During times of failure, a farm requires of us the humility to admit our own faults, forgive the faults of those we work with,

accept the hardships we cannot change, and by the grace of God, pick ourselves up and begin again with a new direction.

A farm can be an excellent place for growth in the spiritual life. First and foremost as a farmer, I get to witness how creation truly speaks of the beauty of the Creator as "the heavens declare the glory of God." Psalm 19:1. I believe people in rural America, in general, have a deeper reverence and understanding for this truth.

Charism and Purpose

Often times, farming walks a fine line between virtuous growth and the temptation to believe only in our own abilities, abandon our trust in God and put work above



our neighbors and families. During my lowest points on the farm, I have come face to face with my own falling into this attitude of pride. Farming requires us to gain strength from frequenting the sacraments, especially Confession and the Eucharist—and to take up the tasks at hand with an attitude of joy.

These opportunities have unfairly faded from the lives of our youth. I have known a lot of young people who have a natural charism for farming. Those who simply love producing food, even if it can only be on the scale of a backyard garden. It is unfortunate that a career in farming has become so difficult to attain, especially for those who were not

born into it.

This is what our young people are yearning for. Not simply a re-living of the idealistic nostalgia of an old fashioned farm, but rather a deeper purpose in life that cannot be found in just showing up to a job seeking nothing more than an income.

New Generation

Farming is in many ways an institution like the Church itself. They go hand in hand. An era of selfishness and over-industrial modernity in both the Church and in farming has eroded these God-given institutions, leaving a chasm of confusion for our young people. God is calling us to roll up our sleeves and bring new

life to the Church and to farming with the values and traditions of Catholicism that have been tried-and-true for the last 2,000 years.

God knows better than we do. We may see nothing but negativity and hardship in agriculture, but with a new generation of farmers who are willing to work with change rather than complain about it, I believe the future of agriculture might be brighter than we think. The whole small organic farming movement has been largely secular, but I see this as an opportunity to bring change in our otherwise secular culture. It is an opportunity to, first of all, love all people with the dignity they have been created with and then to show an example of a more beautiful way of living: a way of life that is rooted in the truth, beauty and divine genius of Catholic Christianity.

So many people I know have fallen into believing that there is no hope to change the world. Christianity offers not only that hope, but that certainty. The vocation of farming, small agrarian family farming, is our outlet to make that change.