

Prayer, Hard Work and Cooperation

Ancient Wisdom on the Travails of Farming

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I remember well the old farmer telling me about his life experience. “Do you have any idea what it’s like to see your newly sprouted field overrun one day by a sea of plant-eating ants? Or your field of beautiful vegetables destroyed by a hailstorm? And all you can do is watch.” My answer today is the same as it was then: No, I don’t.

I suppose it is all too easy for those of us whose livelihood does not depend *directly* upon the soil, the weather, and varmints of all kinds (of course, *ultimately* we all depend upon them) to theorize about what it is like and how “beneficial” it can be to live close to the earth. In sharing this reflection rooted in my reading of ancient and contemporary authors, and an all-too-limited life experience, I hope to keep in mind my own limitations.

What strikes me in reading ancient Greek authors, especially Hesiod (contemporary of Homer, 8th/7th century B.C) and Xenophon (contemporary of Socrates, 5th/4th century B.C.) is how they take a big-picture view in considering life, homestead and agriculture. Both of these men lived and thrived in a deeply agricultural civilization, and they also shared two key convictions: first, the ultimate human vocation is to live a good human life, no matter one’s

station in life, and second, working the land is uniquely suited to cultivating the good life.

The writings of each reflect a real sense for the demands and vulnerabilities of an agricultural livelihood. You will find in their writings no sugar-coated reflections about how good it feels to be close to the earth. Rather, when they write of the salutary character of this way of life, they inevitably turn to how it puts people in a uniquely excellent context for chiseling in them good dispositions of soul. Well aware are they that this is far from sure-fire—some farmers simply become embittered and/or all the more fixated on bigger yields. As with all human contexts, there will always be an essential element of free choice and an issue of docility: will we allow the hard circumstances of life to grow us or to break us.

According to these authors, there seem to be three main dispositions that the vagaries of the farm vocation tend to bring about in the willing and docile farmer: prayer, hard work and a cooperative spirit.

PRAYER

“Pray when you start plowing, just as your hand grasps the handle and the whip comes

down hard on the backs of your oxen as they tug at the strap pins.”

—Hesiod, *Works and Days*

“Sensible farmers, I can assure you, worship and pray to the gods about their fruits, grain, cattle, horses, sheep—yes, and all their property.”

—Xenophon, *The Estate Manager*

What most strikes me here, is the conviction that prayer belongs at the beginning and that it concerns everything. If a farmer really learns to pray—not simply out of fear but from the conviction that we need God’s help from the start in all we do, and that God will answer prayers, especially earnest and persevering prayers—has he not learned something at the center of all human life? Has he not benefited from the fact that in his specific vocation, our total dependence on God—which is just as real in all areas of life—just so happens to be repeatedly and sometimes forcibly brought to his attention through his working the land?

One might reflect that certain kinds of work—especially those associated with technologies that insulate us from the contingen-

cies of the natural world—expose people to the danger of living in forgetfulness of our dependence on nature, and on God. The agricultural professions call for a unique and wise blend of being savvy in preparing for various eventualities, while also recognizing that we must move forward in faith and confidence, knowing that certain things are beyond our control.

HARD WORK

“Let there be order and measure in your own work until your barns are filled with the season’s harvest. Riches and flocks of sheep go to those who work. If you work, you will be dearer to immortals and mortals; they both loathe the indolent.”

—Hesiod

“The land provides the greatest abundance of good things, but doesn’t allow them to be taken without effort.”

—Xenophon

Not all work is hard work, and not all hard work is good work. Ebenezer Scrooge worked hard in his business, and his hard work paid off—financially, but not humanly. We should value hard work that is good work—good in the ends it serves and in how it fulfills those who do it. The land calls for good, hard work, and it rewards it commensurately, at least in the long term. The vagaries of weather can seem unfair, undermining the productivity of our work. Xenophon says the earth gives up its fruits only to the diligent. Perhaps contingencies such as the weather can be seen

as one more aspect of the earth’s calling for our labor—a foresightful, careful, patient labor.

It can seem harsh, but at the end of the day, might not precisely such predictably unpredictable in agriculture be just what we need to form habits of hard work which at the same time do not lead to over self-reliance. This

The tight bonds of an agricultural community are proverbial. Few things provide such broad-ranging sustenance to human life, and the consequences of the loosening of these bonds today can hardly be measured. The simple fact is that the challenges of rural life bring people together in an unparalleled fashion, and



can help us to discern the delicate balance between our working hard and the ever-present reality of *gift* in any fruit of our labor.

COOPERATION

“A good neighbor is a boon to him who has one.”

—Hesiod

“Agriculture also contributes toward training people in cooperation.”

—Xenophon

bad weather and natural disasters are uniquely powerful catalysts of this bonding.

It’s not that anyone would choose the disasters in themselves. Yet there is a treasure of great worth in the spirit of cooperation, community and belonging that springs from shared tribulations and working through them together. At the end of the day, to have had the opportunity to give or even to receive assistance in the event of these disasters is itself yet another aspect of the gift that is the farming life.