

THOUGHTS ON AN AUGUST AFTERNOON IN 2020 – Eliot Coleman

Every Saturday this summer I have taken the opportunity to chat with our farm stand customers while they are waiting in long lines in their cars (only six people at a time are allowed in the farm stand for social distancing.) I often mention to them, what is to me, a most significant fact in the recent history of “science”: When I began as an organic farmer back in the 1960s, the counter-propaganda against the idea of organic farming was overwhelming. Every agricultural expert at the USDA and every agricultural scientist at every university in the country believed and taught that commercial production of pest-free, naturally grown, beautiful and high-yielding crops was impossible without chemical aids. Impossible! Yet that impossible scenario – we use no pesticides (neither chemical nor organic) because they are unnecessary once a biologically active fertile soil has been successfully established - is exactly what our eager customers can see growing all around them in the fields encircling our farm stand.

It took over four decades for that scientifically-accepted, industry-influenced supposed “truth” to be effectively disproven by successful organic farmers. The new truth, organic farming, which became increasingly irrefutable in the US every year, began with the activities of a bunch of us determined hippie organic farmers with a passion for food quality, and eventually became part of large scale agriculture.

The success of those untutored hippies in subverting that dominant paradigm by focusing on soil care systems that instill “positive” health in the crops, logically asks a follow-up question: Are there other examples of equally misinformed, yet popularly accepted, industry-influenced scientific “truths” that rule daily life in our society today to the continuing detriment of human well-being?

My first target is obvious; the embrace by the medical profession of pharmaceuticals as the answer to health maintenance, to the exclusion of investigating the potential of higher quality food as the foundation for building a healthy human population. The parallel with the discussion above is inescapable. In both cases, agricultural chemicals and medical drugs, the huge industrial interests behind them have relentlessly promulgated their point of view and successfully biased public understanding to foster reliance on their products.

The potential for influencing human-health with properly grown food from compost fertilized soils was a key subsidiary interest of the earliest organic pioneers, which they expressed in many books and articles during the 30s and 40s. Many of them were involved with a 1930s investigation of human health improvement conducted in southeast London and called the Peckham Experiment. That experiment inspired a lot of discussion about the idea of creating a new medical science, comparable to the creation of the new agricultural science of organic farming, to apply this “positive-health” concept to the health of human beings. The two British medical researchers who led the Peckham Experiment, Scott Williamson and Innes Pearse, proposed in *Science, Synthesis and Sanity* (1966) to name the science “ETHOLOGY”, which they defined as *“the study of that state of order and ease forming the background against which disorder and disease become manifest . . . we need knowledge of how to cultivate order, even to a greater extent than knowledge of how to cure and prevent dis-order. . . how lost health can be patched and palliated presents a different challenge to the scientist from how health can be cultivated - grown - within the dictates of bionomic order. These two aspects – pathology and ethology – involve two different scientific adventures.”*

The latter of those two scientific adventures, “ethology” (my 1980 edition of Webster’s New World Dictionary defines the word as – “the scientific study of the characteristic behavior

patterns of animals”), is a logical continuation of the revolutionary ideas about plant-health, successfully practiced and popularized by the European organic pioneers and taken up equally successfully by the 60s organic hippies. However, establishing the validity of a non-drug-dependent approach to positive human health similar to the non-pesticide-dependent approach to plant protection will be a much more difficult struggle given the cure-oriented prejudice of the medical profession and the power and influence of the drug companies. Of course, the value to human well-being of succeeding is incalculable.