

On Being a Good Husbandman

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When our children were young we lived among the fertile rolling hills of York County Pennsylvania, a half hour from Amish country. We raised chickens; grew almond trees, corn, gigantic sunflowers and made our own bread and apple sauce. We pressed grapes from our vines and ate ripe juicy tomatoes, blue berries, fresh spinach, squash and strawberries from our garden that had been richly fertilized with sheep manure from a local farm and rotted wood shavings from a local saw mill. One day our four year old daughter wouldn't eat her fish sticks. She said she didn't like them.

"They like you." I said

She protested, "They're dead!"

"You can make them alive again by eating them."

Her six year old brother chimed in, "They'll turn into Christi (her name). But part of them won't!" He had obviously been paying attention to at least part of God's grand design.

I said, "That part will go back to the earth and the plants will eat it. In the garden nothing is wasted."

That's how it used to be... for a few million or so years. Our ancestors walked the land as holy ground revering and loving the earth as a precious garden of which they knew themselves to be an integral part. They had names for everything—not mere technological labels—but creative heart sounds like *brother fire* and *sister water* which carried with them the sense of personal connectedness to all living things. Our bodies belonged to the earth whose body was itself part of the great body of the larger cosmos all the way to infinity where it touches the face of God. The Creator's presence in the garden was like a cool

breeze, mingling with the breath of our ancestors in an intimate embrace. Everything danced to the music of the Spirit in a full circle around the Creator, each part feeding another to bring the whole to life.

Judging from history and current circumstances it appears that at some point our ancestors lost their sense of belovedness to the Creator and each other. They got too big for their britches and started making decisions without respect for the whole, something which we have continued. The Sacred Circle of life depicted in the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden was broken. In family systems therapy we use the concept of *isomorphism* to explain how what happens in one relationship gets reproduced in others and *family generational transmission* to talk about how the dysfunction of the ancestors passes down to the rest (“The mothers and fathers have eaten sour grapes and their children’s teeth are set on edge.”). From this vantage point we can say that our relationship with God is clearly reflected in our relationship with one another and with Great Nature and vice versa. We can diagnose our problems with God by looking at our problems with the world and with each other and vice versa.

Increasingly we live at a too rapid pace in a virtual reality world without evidencing genuine appreciation for how things fit together; one part depending on the rest to be healthy. We turn on the tap easily enough to satisfy thirst, but gratitude remains dried up. “Sister” water denotes nothing more than a commodity to be used so we can justify dumping sludge at sea as if the water 12 miles out won’t eventually burn holes in the tongues of bathers 12 miles in, as it has the crabs and lobsters below. Without a twinge of remorse we can eliminate 3,500,000 acres of untouched Tasmanian rain forest as if 400 year old eucalyptus trees are nothing but *lumber* and irrelevant to any function other than

the corporate interests of number-crunching corporate accountants seeking to feed the inflamed appetites of consumers. Twelve billion dollars was spent in a single year by the largest company employing a cadre of psychologists to study behavior and brain wave patterns to enable them to target marketing more specifically so as to elicit greater demand for “stuff” that is desired by afflictive passions taking root in our hearts. The Desert Abbas and Ammas instruct us to flee attachments to such things in order to prevent the fragmentation and erosion of our authentic Passion for life and one another. And yet, the very economy of the United States appears to depend on making sure precisely the opposite happens. Without becoming deeply enmeshed in consumption, many companies and their products would fail.

How can we expect culture to unfold differently than the values each of its members live by? How can we expect to be healthy ourselves – medically, psychologically and spiritually, when our relationship to the rest of life on earth is neither harmonious nor sustainable? We take so much more than we give back and in modern culture so much is wasted. There is a tension within each of us between exploitation and nurturing which we need to be responsible for, but which we must first become aware of and learn to bear long enough to begin to find motivation to respond. Why?— because a good farmer pays careful attention to the difference in order to succeed not just for the short term for generations.

“The true measure of good agriculture is not the sophistication of its productivity, but the good health of the land. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter’s goal is money, profit; the nurturer’s goal is health – his land’s health, his own, his family’s, his

community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce *dependably* for an indefinite time?)”¹

The true measure of the health of an organization or a civilization is not its speed, technological superiority, the efficiency of its work force or its GNP. Rather it is the degree to which each of its employees or citizens understands and owns his or her responsibility for good husbandry. It's the degree to which the Sacred Circle of Life is unbroken because of loving awareness and loving sacrifice for the whole and not just a few privileged parts. The body of the earth and all its life, including the people of every nation is our shared body. We live and die together. What hurts one of us hurts us all. We are each responsible to the whole for everything we consume and everything we put back in, fish sticks included. In the garden, nothing is wasted. As Orthodox Christians we must not presume to know and serve Christ without attempting to heal and preserve the commonwealth of the environment around us and within us. We hear a lot about the global war on terror, but the roots of terrorism have always been and continues to be instigated by “powers and principalities” who like false prophets proclaim “peace and prosperity” while ignoring the fact that it is increasingly only for a few while there is less and less for the rest. For example, as of 1998, the top 1 percent of Americans owned 95 percent of this country's assets. Globally it is no different. The assets of the world's richest 200 people equals that of 41 percent of the world's population.² This wealth has come at the hands of exploitation of the earth and of many

of its peoples. As we do unto the least of these, we do unto the Lord of all...and so unto ourselves.

As Orthodox Christians we must not think of the world primarily in terms of ethnicity or nationality. In Christ “there is neither east nor west” and the essence of our Lord’s Way is best captured by the miracle of “love for one’s enemy.” Our children are educated first and foremost by what they see us actually choosing in our lives, by what we are doing and how we are responding to those around us. This shows what we are living for and indirectly, what we are willing to die for. Icons in the Church and home are beautiful, but they are useless to us if they fail to teach us to honor the living icons all around us on a daily basis. Similarly, the Divine Liturgy is not an activity that invites us away from the world but a doorway that reveals the way home to the real world as God intends it. As it is written, “I am the door. No one enters life unless they enter through me” says our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. For we are born not to witness the divorce between Spirit and body, but rather to enter into the joy of the Wedding feast given for the Bridegroom who in embracing us and all creation in marriage, unites heaven and earth in an insoluble union of love.

This seamless union between Spirit and “dust” is at the core of our faith which was clearly affirmed in the seventh ecumenical council which ratified the teaching of St. Gregory of Palamas regarding the authentic Christian spirituality as practiced on Mt. Athos among the hesychasts. St. Gregory, in contradiction of the teaching of the philosopher Barlaam, who suggested that the soul must be mortified by punishing the body, is that God wishes to bring us to true Passion for life rather than draw us out of it. St. Gregory Palamas corrects Barlaam’s misanthropy when he observes that “holy

dispassion,” does not mean a lack of passion or a destruction of the flesh, but rather

“We (Orthodox Christians), oh philosopher, were taught that impassibility does not consist in mortifying the passionate part of the soul, but in removing it from evil to good, and directing its energies to divine things, turning it away from evil things toward good things.”³

Our hearts will forever groan and ache until this wedding between heaven and earth is consummated. Our children should *feel* our yearning to love the world as God loves us and see us struggling to pick up our crosses and participate in paying the price of love in our daily lives and choices. It was the story of these things that caused the hearts of the pilgrims on the road to Emmaus to burn as they talked with a stranger who was later revealed to be the Lord in their midst. This stranger is the face of every discounted person in every neglected corner of our earth. Apart from becoming good husbandmen who see the unity of all things and are willing to work within creation rather than presuming to stand outside it and gain power and control over it for the sake of profit, the best education, health care and quality of life in the world amount to very little indeed. St. Isaac the Syrian asked, “Can these things be truly known from ink? Does the taste of honey pass over the palate from books? Therefore: Who will read these things and yearn?” It is written, “Unless the Lord builds the church, those who build it build in vain.” So it is with the church of the earth, the church in the home and the church in each of our hearts as well. Our children’s education just as our own individual salvation is vitally related to how seriously we give ourselves to this truth not just once in a while and on Sunday, but on a daily basis in the small corners of our lives over a lifetime which best reflect our real values.

¹ Berry, (1977) pp7-8

² Inchausti, R. (2005) *Subversive Orthodoxy: Outlaws, Revolutionaries, and other Christians in Disguise*. BrazosPress:Michigan. pp85-86

³ St. Gregory Palamas. Triads. 2,2, 19. CWS:London, p54.