



Garlic harvest at Helen's urban farm in Ames, Iowa. 2011.



## Completing a Project

A 2019 Perspective  
from Ames, Iowa  
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During my sleep on most nights, I have vivid dreams. Some nightmares. Some blissful. Some complex. Many make no sense. Most vanish as early as noon. Some have been prophetic, and I remember them clearly even though they occurred decades ago. I can best describe one such dream from the early 1990s as being an icon of truth that has kept reminding me of the importance of my project about the road I grew up on.

The dream begins with a classic plot line that has occurred often in my dreams. In the spring of my senior year of high school, I have been skipping classes and fear I will not be able to graduate with my peers. One of the school's two English teachers, Barbara Olerich, meets me in the shadows at the end of a hallway near the top of a stairwell, where I have lingered alone during the lunch hour, and talks privately with me.

In real life, Mrs. Olerich did teach at Rolfe High School. She was also a friend of my parents, Marion and Deane Gunderson, and an active Republican with committee roles on both the state and national level. She was a proud, opinionated woman who in the decades since has often reminded me of Phyllis Schlafly, an outspoken, articulate attorney and Republican matriarch who turned the tide against the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment with her successful STOP ERA campaign in the 1970s.

Mrs. Olerich was not my favorite teacher, and having her speak to me in the dream scenario should have been daunting. Instead, it is not. She is understanding and supportive. Mrs. Olerich confides that the school board, administration, and various teachers have discussed my truancy. They have concluded that if I would choose and complete an interdisciplinary project, it would not only fill my course requirements and allow me to graduate with the rest of my class, but it would also be of service to the community.

My intention in the era when I had the dream was to choose one documentary project from a list of several possible topics. I would decide to focus on stories of people related to the neighborhood where I had been raised; however, even the version of the book that I had completed in 2004 contained a significant amount of memoir and opinion. Now after a 15-year hiatus and with the addition of new chapters that I wrote this year, the book has morphed into even more memoir and commentary. Not surprisingly, the project has turned out to be not solely about a fixed five-mile road in a specific geographical area, but about my journey along that road and beyond. I probably have always wanted, even if subconsciously, to write a memoir, but it took starting with a collective project before I could be more authentic in giving voice to my own story.

To understand the significance of the dream, it is important to understand that era of my life. In 1981, I had enrolled in San Francisco Theological Seminary. The school had just developed a visionary center for spirituality based on the teachings of psychologist Carl Jung, who was an advocate of using dreams to seek wisdom—even what some people might call divine insight. I had not intended to become ordained but had gone to SFTS to learn

more about Christianity, faith, and spirituality. For a while, however, especially with all the talk by fellow students who seemed self-assured in believing they felt a sense of calling to be parish pastors, I bought into the notion that being ordained as a pastor would elevate my stature. In some respects, it seemed that becoming ordained would make me feel more whole, analogous to how a bride might anticipate she would have an ideal life by becoming married in a high church wedding ceremony. It became clear, however, during visits to a career planning center in Oakland, California, that professional church work was not my calling and I should take my long-term interests in photography more seriously.

It did not take many years of hindsight for me to become convinced that too much emphasis is placed on the errant belief that a person, who is seeking to be ordained, possesses a calling that is more special than the callings that other people of intention experience. Also, I believe that in many circles, too much deference is given to members of the clergy simply because of their being ordained. Members of the clergy are no more or less divine and no more or less human than non-ordained people.

As graduation approached in May 1985, I felt I was walking off a gangplank into the great unknown of what I would do with my life. I returned to St. Helena, California, the town where I had done an internship at the Presbyterian Church, to be close to friends. By the fall of 1989—30 years ago—I began traveling back to Iowa on photo forays, and by 1992, I knew I wanted to focus my documentary work on the neighborhood where I had grown up.

Even a few years into the project, I had some bummed attitudes about it. I often chided myself that to travel back to Iowa for a photo project could be considered regressive—a falling back to familiar turf and pretending to be a photo/video documentarian but not really moving forward in life with my seminary degree or otherwise earning my own way. Although I have enjoyed many aspects of working on my project, my journals include plenty of entries about self-doubt, blue moods, fatigue, and procrastination, and at least one time when I wrote, “That damn road project.”

The road project, which at times seemed like a regression, has educated me, giving me a foundation for being more involved in farm conversations and decisions, including managing my own farmland and helping me find a lifestyle that is diverse and remarkable. One of the biggest lessons from all these years is that life is not linear, and what one perceives as a default choice can lead over time to something quite wonderful even if there are no guarantees of how one’s story will unfold. As is often the case, the key is to take one step at a time and, as my therapist often advised, “Trust the process.”

The project has gained considerable visibility: grants from Humanities Iowa, the Iowa Arts Council, and State Historical Society of Iowa; a seven-minute feature on Iowa Public Television’s *Talk of Iowa* show; exhibits at libraries and galleries; sections of the book posted to my website; and a 10-minute video on YouTube.

The most affirming event happened on February 12, 2018. The students in Iowa State University’s Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture invited me to speak at their colloquium held in Curtiss Hall, where I had taken undergraduate classes in sociology and education. I never did take a course in the College of Agriculture. Yet, there I was—someone, who as part of what had seemed like a regression following a seminary education in California, had come back to her home state, wondering if it were the love of her life or a default, and had woven together a life worth sharing with young people at what might be considered the mecca of agricultural education and influence. I felt as though the words of Mrs. Olerich in my dream from the early 1990s had come true, and that I had succeeded with my interdisciplinary project far past the level of earning a high school diploma.

Another life-affirming element involved the discovery of my home in Ames that I bought in 2006. Then I bought the next house in 2013 and have converted the two residential lots into

a wonderful urban farm that covers nearly a half-acre. The farm and my documentary work have both become interdisciplinary projects that have served both the community and me.

In December 2018, Beth McNeil, Dean of the Iowa State University Parks Library, whose Special Collections Department houses my documentary materials and personal papers, told me at a lunch meeting that the library was creating a digital press and would be willing to publish my book. Then in January 2019, elements of the universe seemed to align, and I was motivated to invest months of work in finishing my project.

I am grateful that Adam Blake Wright has been available to be, as he said, my “spirit guide and cheerleader,” as well as editor. Adam came to Iowa State from North Carolina and earned one master’s degree in Sustainable Agriculture and another in Creative Writing and the Environment. He also worked two seasons at my urban farm before traveling to New Zealand.

To my good fortune, Adam returned to Ames temporarily in January 2019 while his friend, Molly, worked as a chef at The Café, and he looked wide and far for a full-time job. I do not believe he knew of my documentary work or writing prior to returning to Ames. Even so, I knew we had deep respect for each other and asked if he would help me finish the book. Our friendship has been a sweet one, much akin to the deep fondness that a grandparent and grandchild might share, and our working relationship has been beautiful—the timing has been perfect. After a few months in Ames, Adam returned to North Carolina to hunker down with family and continue to look for work. In August, he finished line-editing the book before heading to Colorado Springs, where he now works as the agricultural arts teacher for a K-8 Waldorf School called Mountain Song Community School. I am also grateful to my sister Clara and brother Charles, especially for help with researching family and Pocahontas County history.

One might ask why it took so long to finish the book. Although it is easy to reply that I have procrastinated a lot and had plenty of self-doubt along the way, it is important to acknowledge that it would have been hard for me to express myself fully and make the book available while my parents were still living. Also, I had long intuited that I would not be able to finish the project until “the story was finished,” which would be when my parents and their farmhouse were gone. Mother died in 2004. Dad died in 2010. Finally, in 2018, after the house sat empty for eight years, my sister Clara, who owns it, had it razed.

In the days shortly before my father died, a new friend, Marilla Fox, who was a retired psychotherapist and developing a grief support group at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames, offered to meet with me and other family members at my home. Clara, Charles, and his wife, Gloria, were the only ones who took up the offer. Yet considering how Clara, Charles, and I make up what feels like the first of two families of my parents, the meeting was wonderful and a great help for me in processing grief and related issues. I am grateful to Marilla for her support and ongoing friendship.

My life’s focus shifted significantly in 2006 when I bought this residential property that has evolved into an urban farm. When I told Clara my plans to buy it, she reminded me that most people of my age, 61, were starting to reduce their commitments. I replied that I had never really had the chance to be a farmer, even a casual farmer.

It had not been enough for me simply to tag around the rural neighborhood where I had been raised, photographing true farmers. Instead, I wanted to be the farmer who would be working the soil, growing plants, cooking with homegrown produce, and developing a place with a rural feeling of hospitality. The downside of this urban farm was that I found it nearly impossible to be both a farmer and someone trotting off to document the lives of other people. I no longer had the time nor the intense interest I once had in visiting the turf of my childhood.

Becoming a farmer in my own right on my own urban farm also meant that, on occasion, I needed help visually documenting what I was doing here. I am grateful for Dennis Goodrich, a friend of some 27 years and now retired from a career in video production at Iowa State, for his willingness to bring his camcorder and record my efforts in my childhood neighborhood and on my urban farm.

My interests in using locally grown produce and hospitality carried over to my membership at the Unitarian Fellowship. From 2007 to 2012, I recruited people for what was simply called The Meals Group. We organized several Sunday noon meals each year, including an annual “Iowa Grown” meal with the idea that the food we provided would come, as much as possible, from ingredients grown locally or from around the state. I took great pride in providing homemade bread and pint jars of dill or bread and butter pickles—one for each table.

My interest in food hospitality has shifted to my urban farm where I have hosted many different types of meals. They have included a Fourth of July picnic, a luncheon after a graveside service for a friend, a farewell party for other friends, solstice dinners, and what is becoming an annual Practical Farmers of Iowa-sponsored potluck for Story County and ISU’s Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture on the Sunday evening before the beginning of Iowa State’s fall semester.

Also, my friend Jonah Powell and I make bread made from Iowa-grown grains for the Ames Food at First community dinners that the ISU Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture coordinates once a month.

In the 1990s, I took cooking classes through the Magic Beanstalk Community Supported Agriculture organization that focused on using locally grown ingredients. That’s when I first met Mary Sand and Kim McDermott, who were excellent teachers and tolerated my obstreperous behavior well. They, as well as chef Donna Prizgintas and former caterer Janie Lohnes, have not only been good friends but are people I can call on short notice with cooking questions. And of course, the ISU Consumer Hotline has also been an excellent source for advice on food preparation.

I am grateful for the nearly 25-year-old friendship I have with Joy Leister, whom I first met when we both lived in Gilbert, the small town just north of Ames. She and her husband were the first to rent my next door house, then they moved to Indiana to be closer to their grandchildren. Joy and I still visit by phone several times a week, and I believe she knows me as well or better than any family member or friend.

I also am fortunate to have known the late Janet Klaas, Ames librarian and historian, who delighted in editing opinion pieces I had written for the *Ames Tribune* and church newsletter and encouraged me to forge ahead with my writing.

One incentive for finding a house in Ames was to have sufficient space to grow at least one new apple tree started with scionwood from the Wealthy tree at my grandparents’ farm. This year, for the first time, the all-organic orchard that I have established has produced a bounty of cherries, plums, and apples with enough healthy Wealthy and Sweet 16 apples to make 22 pint jars of applesauce and a substantial stash of dried apple slices. I am a happy camper, especially when I bite into a Wealthy apple and the taste of it makes me feel as though I am a seven-year-old child on the homeplace farm.

Health issues have also motivated me to finish this book. In the past few years, I have visited the emergency room at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames four times with three overnight stays in the hospital. The first incident was when I did the dumb thing of trying to use my cell phone while riding my bicycle. It ended in a bad fall that injured my left hip. The other visits were due to mild symptoms that could have been related to stroke or heart problems. The worst diagnosis was that I had experienced a TIA (a mild stroke that



does no damage). The good news is that these ER visits have been wake-up calls, reminding me that life does not last forever, and even if relatively healthy over the next decades, my ability to think and write alertly could deteriorate to the point that I could not finish the book. Fortunately, I have the support of many people, including yoga teacher Ruthann Obrien Haddish, acupuncturist Michelle Ybarra-Rojas, massage therapist Christina Morton, health coach Amy Miller, and a network of friends who have helped me maintain good health and feel at home in Ames and the universe.

In 2015, many of those friends helped me organize a dinner for more than 120 guests that featured Iowa grown food, followed by contra dancing and music by local musicians to celebrate my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Unitarian Fellowship. It was certainly a festive event, and I do not know of any other time that I have felt such exquisite and sustained joy. I had requested that any gifts be in the form of financial donations to Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), and the party generated nearly \$1,000 for the organization.

I am indebted to Teresa Opheim, director of PFI from 2006 to 2016, whose grandparents, Vera and Bill Fisher, had lived in the Rolfe area and were friends of my grandparents, DeElda and John Gunderson. Teresa has long been an ardent supporter of my writing, video production efforts, and growing involvement in managing my land. In preparation for the 2015 birthday celebration, she researched an archive of my written materials and presented a wonderful toast, reading some of my words and adding her own commentary about me, the state of agriculture, and the role of PFI. Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Teresa.

Over the past decade, I have often asked myself if I really needed to complete the book, or if I could be satisfied with the work I had already done and satisfied enough with who I am that it would make no difference to my self-esteem if I simply detached and moved on from the project. The answer had always been, “Well, sort of, yes, I could be satisfied.” Now the answer is that I absolutely want to finish this book while I am capable to get the job done.

Some people might ask if working on the project has been cathartic. My response would be, “Not really.” Yet completing this 30-year project is a major relief. Certainly, my perspectives and opinions about my rural heritage will continue to evolve, but I will not be so caught up in thinking about them and deciding how to express them.

To set some context, in 1995, I met with a history professional, Ed Purcell of Des Moines, who had been recommended to be a consultant for this project, using grant funds from the State Historical Society of Iowa. I had plenty of photographs and fragments of written materials to share with him but no sense of how to proceed. It could be said I was expecting “an expert” to pull a rabbit out of a hat and finish the book. After our one meeting, he wrote a candid letter saying he would not be able to work with me in light of career changes and having reservations about my dedication to finishing my project. On March 16, 1995, I wrote in my journal:

I met with Ed, my consultant, last week. I think I “get” what he is saying. The task is not one of “being productive” by societal standards but of engaging in the creative process so that I will learn more about myself and my rural heritage in a manner that can happen only by engaging in the process and then sharing the creation for others to view and participate in. I owe this to myself and others. He said he is impressed with what he has already seen of my work, but that he wants to see/hear more. He was gently firm and pragmatic.

As it turned out, I hired Mary Helen Stefaniak, an author and friend I had met when she worked for the Iowa Humanities Board. She is now a Professor Emerita of Creighton

University after teaching 19 years in the school's English department. I am grateful for her friendship, motivation, and insights.

I feel a gentle, deep sense of well-being akin to breathing in the aroma of lavender oils wafting through a room or the refreshing smell from brushing my hand through the leaves of a cilantro plant in a garden bed shortly after a soft rain. The recognition of this new spirit is not a sudden aha experience but the kinds of slowly evolving maturity and insight that come from several factors: encouragement from other people, creative engagement with the materials, the passage of time, greater wisdom, new perspectives, and the practice of mindfulness and gratitude.

I am both proud and humbled. I smile. One might expect I would be humming "Pomp and Circumstance." Instead, I find myself, nearly daily, humming the tune of the song, "Today," made popular by the New Christy Minstrels in 1964.

I was a counselor during the summers of 1965 and 1966 at YMCA Camp Manito-wish in northern Wisconsin. Its evening fireside gatherings in the main lodge with exterior walls constructed of boulders and wooden timbers provided some of the best songfests I have experienced. That's where I fell in love with the song "Today" written by Randy Sparks, made popular by the New Christy Minstrels in 1964, and performed by John Denver, the Sandpipers and other musicians within the decade. The guitar melody by itself is pensive, nostalgic and hopeful. It generates complex feelings. Tears of both grief and appreciation come to my eyes. Sorrow wells up in my chest, yet I smile. The lyrics are about events that are simultaneously mundane and exquisite such as tasting fresh strawberries and drinking sweet wine. The lyrics remind me to appreciate the present moment and know that although time does pass, the joy I have had in the bounty of friendships and other dimensions of life such as my urban farm in Ames or as far back as visiting my grandparents at their farm in Pocahontas County will remain with me even though circumstances have changed drastically and will continue to change. Indeed, when I hum or listen to "Today," I feel a great deal of wholeness and joy in general and especially in completing this book even though much of it is about loss and disturbing changes in rural America.