



A pair of valley oak trees along Silverado Trail in Napa County, California. Helen took the photo when she lived in Saint Helena after graduating from San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1985 and was deciding whether or not to return to live in her home state of Iowa. Circa 1988.

A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE PANDEMIC

July 31, 2020

My mother's father from Utah, Jim Abbott (we called him Bompá), co-owned the George A. Lowe wholesale hardware company in Ogden with his brother, George Abbott. In the 1950s, the store had a large toy department, and each year Bompá would send or bring us gifts. One year, it was hula hoops, and our family was the first in the community to have the novel toy. It was then that I recognized that trends in the U.S. often show up first on one coast, then the other before gradually seeping into the Midwest.

In that era, it was easy to think we who lived in the Midwest were safe from such perils as a foreign attack, yet news on the television one afternoon after I came home from school in the mid-50s ruined that sense of security for me. Sitting on the couch in the basement by myself, I was terrified when I heard that the Russians had developed an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) that could reach the Midwest.

In January 2020, COVID-19 seemed like a problem limited to China and other Asian or European countries such as Italy but not so much for the U.S. Then it became a crisis for coastal states such as New York, Washington, and California that were recording large numbers of deaths while there had yet to be any serious virus detection in Iowa. On March 8, Governor Kim Reynolds announced news of the first Iowan to become infected, and the numbers continued to increase. By mid-May, Reynolds believed the trend was no longer as threatening and revoked some stay-in-place orders, and many retail stores and other locations opened.

A *New York Times* article updated on May 13, 2020, listed the Iowa towns of Waterloo-Cedar Falls and Sioux City among the top 10 U.S. metropolitan areas with the highest percentage rates of growth of COVID-19 infection in relation to the population of the city. The high rates of infection have been tied to conditions at meatpacking plants.

In January 2019, I began writing the second volume of this book and finished the task in September 2019. Although the ISU library's digital press worked on my book for many months in 2019, the library leadership and I met in January 2020 and decided it would be best for me to hire a commercial printing company to do the book. My relationship with Heuss Printing in Ames began about the same time as the coronavirus was making significant inroads into the U.S. In some respects, I felt my work paled in importance compared to the challenge of the pandemic. My exploration of loss, remembering a neighborhood and era, examining agricultural issues, and sharing some of my life's journey simply did not seem important enough to push toward completion. On the other hand, I had committed too many years to the project to simply wrap it up until the pandemic had passed. Who knew how long I could keep the mental clarity to finish the book, whether I could recover from another hiatus from the project, if a local printing company could keep its workers healthy and productive, and if the company could weather the economic strain created by the pandemic. I also realized that the issues I addressed in the book are integrally connected to some of the issues and challenges exacerbated by the pandemic.

It has been said many times, at many levels and in many ways that this pandemic will undoubtedly change our culture. A caveat, though, is that we have no clear idea what those

changes might be. My guess is that once the threat of the pandemic has passed, if that were ever to happen, systems and individuals will revert as much as possible to business and life as usual.



Farming practices that were intensive by the standards of the 1930s were some of the culprits causing the Dust Bowl during that decade in the southwestern United States. The classic scenes from photographs and films showing wind and dust wiping away entire farms may seem a part of the past. However, there are current environmental issues, especially in light of climate change and water quality, that are just as serious, and it's as if today's proponents and operators of status quo farming have not taken the lessons of the Dust Bowl to heart enough in the last 80 years nor have they reformed agriculture sufficiently.

Conventional farmers have removed fence rows from their fields and now plant corn or soybeans far into the road ditches of adjacent gravel roads or infringe on the banks of drainage ditches. For example, not many years ago a farmer grew corn to the edge of the steep bank of Crooked Creek diagonally across the road and bridge from a field where I have a 100-foot conservation buffer strip of native plants along the same drainage ditch. Not only was there evidence of agricultural chemical burn in his corn rows, Brome grass, and other weeds on the ridge of the ditch, which could contaminate the water flowing into the creek, but part of the bank had collapsed, causing erosion and the potential for soil to slide into the channel of water. I doubt this farmer likes to farm that intensively, but he rents from Shannon Family Farms, Inc. The corporation with its over 3,000 nearly adjacent acres of land, whose owners throughout the decades have never lived in Iowa, is now owned by an investor in Florida, who also owns other farmland. I imagine the farmer is like many other operators in believing he needs to farm every possible inch of the property in order to pay a high rate of cash rent.



Young, green cover crops growing in corn stubble following harvest. *Photo courtesy of Practical Farmers of Iowa.*

Nearly all of Iowa's corn and bean crop land lies bare in the winter. Environmentalists worried about the problems presented by that bare ground have been promoting the use of cover crops planted in the fall after the main crops are harvested.

The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program defines a cover crop as "a plant that is used primarily to slow erosion, improve soil health, enhance water availability, smother weeds, help control pests and diseases, increase biodiversity, and bring a host of other benefits to your farm. Cover crops have also been shown to increase crop yields, break through a plow pan, add organic matter to the soil, improve crop diversity on farms and attract pollinators. There is an increasing body of evidence that growing cover crops increases resilience in the face of erratic and increasingly intensive rainfall, as well as under drought conditions. Cover crops help when it doesn't rain, they help when it rains, and they help when it pours!"



Practical Farmers of Iowa T-shirt design to promote cover crops. 2019.
Image courtesy of PFI.

Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) works to educate policy makers, landowners, and farmers about cover crops and has a slogan, "Don't farm naked, plant cover crops."

Sarah Carlson, lead cover crop specialist for PFI, traveled with me to visit with my farm tenants, Jeff DeWall and Denny Flaherty, in September 2013. We met at the Pizza Ranch in Pocahontas and had a great discussion. I was ecstatic that Jeff and Denny agreed to try cover crops on a 40-acre field that year and work alfalfa into the crop rotation of yet another field the next year. However, those plans fizzled. Cereal rye and oat seed was extraordinarily expensive that year with the added expense of hiring a pilot to sow the seed aerially. Jeff and Denny could not sow the seed until late in the fall, and there was little to no precipitation to foster germination and growth. When spring arrived, there was no sign of rye growing in the field. Jeff and Denny said they would not try cover crops again and that if I wanted alfalfa included in my crop rotation, I needed to rent my ground to someone else. It was as though they were saying, "Been there done that, it didn't work and won't work," and did not realize that cover crops are a long-term investment that should benefit not only the environment but the farmer's pocket book. Jeff continues to farm 77-acres for me. Denny retired at the end of 2019. They are not alone in their reluctance to incorporate cover crop practices.

In 2019, the Iowa Environmental Council (IEC), a non-profit organization, published a critique of the state's Nutrient Reduction Strategy. "The NRS, which Iowa adopted in 2013, grew out of a stakeholder development process that originated in the multi-state Gulf Hypoxia Task Force, a coalition formed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1997 to address the growing 'Dead Zone' in the Gulf of Mexico. This Dead Zone has continued to grow despite efforts to address its causes. It is an area of water featuring little to no oxygen, caused by the growth of algae due to excess nutrients, which renders the water inhospitable to other aquatic life.

"The Nutrient Reduction Strategy seeks to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus contributions to Iowa's waterways through a suite of conservation practices, including cover crops, wetlands, and bioreactors. It does not, however, include specific reduction target amounts or timelines to achieve such reduction."

The IEC report continues, "The increase in the rate of cover crop implementation has slowed drastically. At the current rate of implementation, it will be 2110 by the time the state reaches the NRS goal of 12.6 million acres of cover crops." And in summary, it says, "Less than one million acres have been treated by the three practices in scenario one – just three percent of the 26.3 million acres of cropland in Iowa. At the same time, a recent study from the University of Iowa revealed that, despite adoption of the NRS in 2013, Iowa's nitrogen load to the Gulf of Mexico has increased by nearly 50% since 2003."

Iowa's conventional farmers, landowners, communities, and the state's treasury itself have become accustomed to and financially dependent on these and other unsustainable practices. The COVID-19 pandemic is now exposing the frail nature of those highly hyped practices.



The pandemic is harshly hitting meat-processing plants such as those in Sioux City, Storm Lake, Waterloo, and Cedar Falls, and their large number of COVID-19 cases has forced some to close. Unfortunately, there are people in power who unwisely are suggesting the plants be forced to remain open at what would be increased peril to the workers.

Wisconsin dairy farmer Jim Goodman wrote to the *Wisconsin Examiner*, whose motto is "Digging up the truth in the Badger State." In a May 4, 2020, column titled "That this system would fail was entirely predictable," Goodman says, "More than 40 years ago as a graduate student gathering research data, I spent considerable time in what was then the John Morrell plant in Sioux Falls, S.D." He then critiques the current meat packing industry:

The workers I knew were union members, they were paid well enough to buy cars, homes and send their kids to college. Over the past decades the workforce is increasingly made up of immigrants and minorities, people who have been a target for President Trump. Meat processing was always dangerous work, but COVID-19 has upped the ante. The recent executive order to force plants to re-open while relying on plant owners to determine what additional safety measures were feasible — as opposed to health and workplace safety experts, has highlighted Trump's disdain for the people who do so much of the backbreaking labor to produce Americans' food.

Meat industry experts claim, “It is not a broken system by any means,” and of course they claim plant “shutdowns were a Black Swan even”—meaning they were not predictable. Please. A highly consolidated system with millions of animals running through too few giant processing plants has always been a disaster waiting to happen. The system is not, as *Progressive Farmer* magazine calls it, “a well oiled machine,” while also noting that “USDA has initiated steps to limit labor shortages for critical tasks”—sure, bring on the forced labor of immigrants and minorities. Or, perhaps, let’s have less meat and more personal protective equipment?

When I was a child, the farms in the area where I grew up were much more diverse than they are now with many crops and kinds of livestock. Dad claimed a farmer would grow a few hogs as a “mortgage lifter,” meaning that the farmer could count on the sale of hogs to convert corn that was selling at a low price to meat that was selling at a more profitable rate and generate extra income to help with basic expenses and pay off the mortgage.

Many farmers grew a range of ages of hogs from farrowing piglets, raising them to market weight, and selling them directly to a stock yard. A farmer might even take a mature hog to the local butcher for processing and storing the packages of meat in a freezer compartment assigned to a family. Both the plant itself and the individual storage compartments were called lockers. We did business with Telmer Simes Refrigerated Locker, which opened in 1938, that became the Rolfe Food Lockers in 1959 on an acreage on the east side of town. An article in *The Rolfe Arrow* newspaper describes the 96x16 foot building as having a 36-degree receiving room and 16-degree locker room with 150 lockers “of the very latest pattern,” and the potential to add 100 more. Mother had a key, and I remember going with her, checking in, walking down an aisle of the freezing cold room with its white-faced lockers, finding our locker, loading a handful of packages of meat — all wrapped in white butcher paper — into a box — and taking them home. The Rolfe Food Lockers closed in 1971. Rolfe and most other small towns no longer have lockers.

The predominant organizing structure of hog production today is called “vertical integration.” Only a handful of large corporations control the industry, owning the hogs at each level of development from birth to piglet to mature hog as well as owning the slaughterhouses and controlling the retail market. Farmers do have a role, managing facilities and livestock but essentially operating as hired help for the companies. Some critics of the system suggest that anti-trust laws should be used to reform the industry and allow a more significant and profitable role for independent producers and processors. Although federal laws could apply to collaborations such as price-fixing among the top beef-producing companies, they don’t specifically address issues of vertical integration within one corporation.

Sudden closures at processing plants caused by the pandemic resulted, for a time, in livestock farmers, especially those with large CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) being unable to move their mature livestock to market. Instead, they are faced with the challenges of slaughtering and disposing of the bodies of huge numbers of animals.

Sally Worley, Practical Farmers of Iowa’s executive director, often reminds members that agriculture needs all kinds of farmers from large-scale to small-scale and conventional to regenerative to organic. She advises members to not have an “us against them” mentality. I appreciate her advice. My concern, though, is that agriculture is dominated by powerful corporations that endow university programs and have heavy lobbying arms, promoting large-scale conventional agriculture even though they might give lip service and funding to small-scale farming.

I am concerned, also, that government policy favors large-scale, conventional farming. It is easy, however, to err on the side of glib generalizations. So I wrote to the Practical Farmer of Iowa listserv, David Swenson, Iowa State University research economist, and Kelvin Leibold, ISU Extension agricultural business management specialist to get further perspectives.

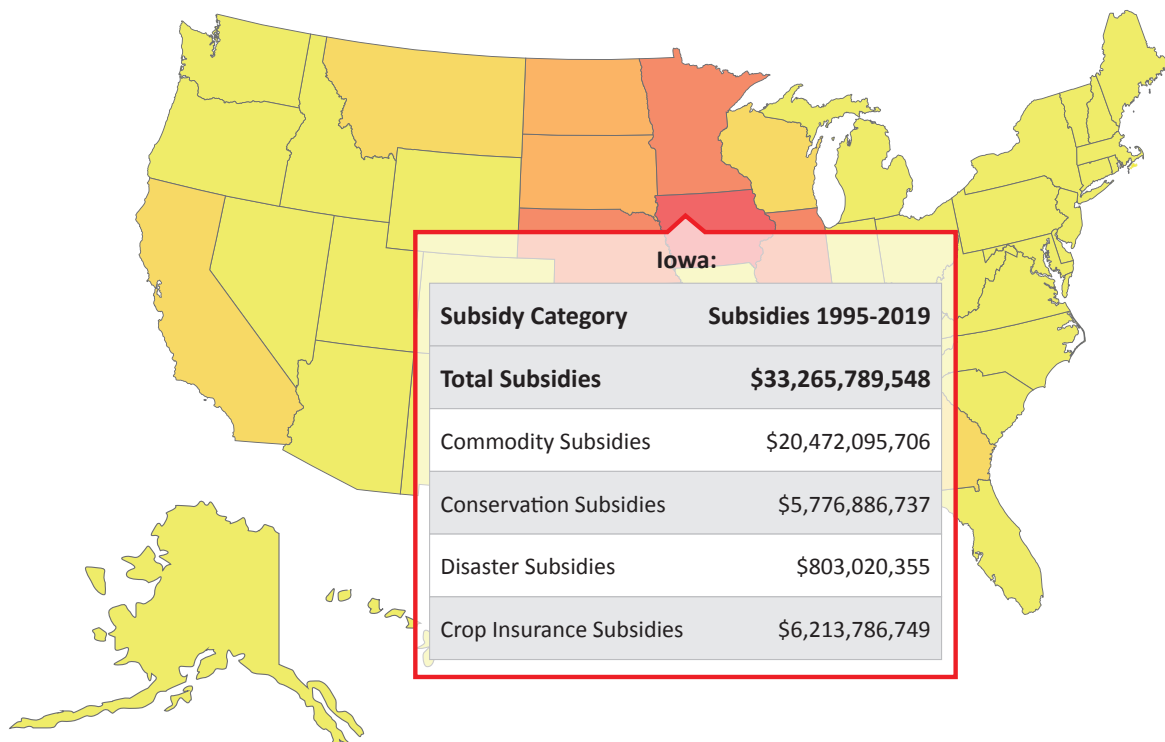
One PFI member responded, “All I know is government benefits those who can lobby. This needs to change. Government should be for all, however it is not.”

A second PFI member, “As long as the government is involved it will not get much better. Large scale farmers believe that they are independent and yet are completely dependent upon policies and payments. The government policies are set up to pay per acre or per bushel so that incentivizes farmers to get bigger. I wish that farm program recipients would at a minimum have to be good stewards of the land before they were paid, but I don’t find that to be true at all.”

There could be much debate about whether or not there should be government aid to farmers and landowners or whether the USDA programs need to be radically changed, perhaps putting strict caps on payments to wealthy recipients and basing payments on whether a farmer uses practices that have the potential to sequester carbon.

David Swenson wrote, “The thorough unwillingness of public policy to deal with serious ag externalities (soil depletion, nutrient runoff, ubiquitous water quality damage) is a major policy failure and a glaring market failure. Not tying public subsidy to best environmental practices (for decades) has been tragic.”

A third PFI member, Mark Quee, farm manager at Scattergood Friends School in eastern Iowa, sent a link to the Environmental Working Group (EWG) web site that provides data about who receives government subsidies. I doubt those figures lie regarding the USDA’s relative priorities for farm support. A page titled “Iowa Farm Subsidy Information” shows that from 1995 to 2019, \$33.3 billion in federal support went to the state’s farmers and landowners, second only to Texas. A total of \$26.7 billion was invested in commodity programs and crop insurance subsidies, which in Iowa are mainly for corn and soybean production. That total is 4.5 times greater than the \$5.8 billion invested in conservation.



<https://farm.ewg.org/region.php?fips=19000&statename=Iowa>

**Iowa, second highest state in USDA payments
to its farmers and landowners 1995-2019:**

Commodity Programs	\$20.5 billion
Crop Insurance Subsidies.....	\$6.2 billion
Conservation Programs	\$5.8 billion
Disaster Programs	\$803.0 million

Top USDA programs in Iowa 1995-2019

Corn Subsidies	\$19.4 billion
Soybean Subsidies	\$6.2 billion
Conservation Reserve Program.....	\$5.5 billion
Disaster Payments	\$69.1 billion
Livestock Subsidies	\$43.4 billion

**Pocahontas County, ranked 28th of the state's 100
counties in USDA payments 1995-2019:**

Commodity Programs	\$285.0 million
Crop Insurance Subsidies.....	\$75.8 million
Conservation Programs	\$29.8 million
Disaster Programs	\$2.6 million

Top USDA programs in Pocahontas County 1995-2019

Corn Subsidies	\$257.9 million
Soybean Subsidies	\$90.1 million
Conservation Reserve Program.....	\$28.6 million
Disaster Payments	\$2.6 million
Livestock Subsidies	\$1.8 million

Data for individual landowners can be misleading. For instance, in the years that my tenants and I operated with crop share leases, meaning we split the input costs for seed, fertilizer, and chemicals 50-50 and the bushels of corn and soybeans 50-50, I received half the farm program payments for the land directly from the government. Those dollars are listed as part of my payments on the EWG site. When I switched to cash rent leases in 2009, however, all program payments were paid to my tenants, with the EWG showing no record of income to me, even though the payment to the tenants helped them pay the rent.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) payments can also be misleading. I do not consider them to be subsidies. Instead, annual CRP income is a form of rent payment. The CRP money also covers an initial incentive payment to encourage a landowner to sign up for the program and the government's share of the cost of seed, sowing the seed, mowing, and prairie burning.

I have mixed feelings about deriving government farm aid for commodity crops. The payments don't seem fair, but my lifestyle would be much different without them. That being said, I am proud to rank 14th of the 1,558 Pocahontas County recipients of CRP during the last 14 years. Critics might say the CRP program takes land away from farmers. I would respond (1) that by putting 77 acres into a pollinator habitat and receiving rent of \$306 per acre from the USDA, I was able to lease a smaller, more manageable plot of land to Betsy Dahl, a young organic farmer, at the low rate of \$140 per acre. My income for the whole farm averaged \$223 per acre, which was comparable to what I was charging my more experienced operators, and I believed the pollinator project would benefit both her farm operation and the environment.

(2) Some morsels of land simply are not suitable for corn and beans. (3) Having corn and soybeans monopolize the county's landscape is not beneficial to communities, the economy, or the environment.



The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's blog includes a December 21, 2017, post that states, "A recent pair of reports from the Economic Research Service (ERS) confirms that federal subsidies to farms are increasingly going to larger and larger farms, thus supporting the cycle of the big getting bigger. Fewer and bigger farms mean less money circulating in local economies, fewer farm jobs in rural areas, and fewer opportunities for beginning and young farmers to get into the business."

The NSAC post continues, "Increased land prices and rents resulting from government subsidies have detrimental impacts on mid-scale, beginning, and young farmers. When government payments of all types increase, they make land more expensive to rent and buy, thus making it more expensive for those farmers just starting out. The payments also have the perverse effect of helping the largest farms (which receive the largest portion of the payments and indemnities) get bigger by allowing them to capitalize subsidies in order to bid higher for land or pay higher rents thus perpetuating the cycle. This was laid bare in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, where a farmer with over 10,000 acres in Kansas acknowledged the difficulty any young or new farmer would have in trying to outbid him for land."

The Civil Eats web site posted a review of the book *Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers, and the Battle for the Future of Food*, by Timothy A. Wise, on March 7, 2019. He is director of the Land and Food Rights Program at the Small Planet Institute and a research fellow at the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University.

Civil Eats introduces the book, "In country after country, *Eating Tomorrow* examines the influence of corporate agribusiness on policy, diet, and landscape. Wise explores the global expansion of genetically modified seed markets, international trade agreements, land grabs, and the biofuel boom and argues that philanthropic, agribusiness, and government bodies have formed powerful coalitions to shape food policies that feed corporate interests.



Ethanol plant between Ames and Nevada, Iowa. 2014.

“Agribusiness companies have such a powerful hold in the United States that they have convinced policy-makers and the general public—and even many farmers—that their interests are completely aligned with those of farmers,” Wise said. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Wise said in his interview with Civil Eats, “People forget that the expansion of U.S. corn ethanol, under the stimuli of the 2005 and 2007 Renewable Fuel Acts, was the most important driver of the food price spikes we saw in 2007-8. In a very short time period, we saw some 15 percent of global corn production diverted out of food and feed markets and into fuel tanks. It was a demand shock to the system.

“In Iowa, the impact was to take hundreds of thousands of acres out of the Conservation Reserve Program as farmers rushed to cash in. That only exacerbated the state’s water pollution problems. Farmers planted every inch they could, right up to the edge of waterways, eliminating the [buffer zones] that helped filter runoff. It is not coincidence that the ‘dead zone’ in the Gulf of Mexico has now reached record size. It is ironic indeed that the deadly mess flows south under the cargoes of corn and soybeans being shipped to Mexico and other destinations.”

David Swenson also wrote, “All subsidies contain inherent benefits to the recipients and, concomitantly, to the policymakers. But the most egregious policies in recent years involve, in my opinion, the persistent strong-arming by the corn lobby to create an ethanol golden calf that all politicians had to swear fealty to.”

I have also wondered about the effect county zoning laws, with what is called a 40-acre rule, have on small-scale farmers. Kelvin Leibold explains, “County zoning laws have been a long, contentious topic. Most of the counties (and it varies from county to county) that have the 40-acre rule do so to keep people from building houses in rural areas and then wanting county services like better snow removal and better roads. Rural acreages also may have to drill wells if they don’t already have rural water and have their own septic systems. So the 40-acre rule may have some impact on smaller farms but one still has the opportunity to rent small tracts like 5 acres and plant high value crops. . . Iowa does allow a lease up to 20 years.”

LaVon Griffieon, who is a founding member of 1000 Friends of Iowa, an organization focusing on land use, is also a landowner/farmer. She lives on the family’s Century Farm adjacent to the rapidly-growing town of Ankeny just north of Des Moines and that is nearly engulfed by residential sprawl. LaVon thought the rule to be a good one, “It reduces sprawl by limiting farmers from selling off a small parcel of their farm for development especially during hard times and along highways. I’ve seen proof of this in TN and PA. Houses line the road along highways and there will be a working farm directly behind the houses.”

The rule, though, means that the land will most likely stay in conventional, row-crop farming unless there is great legal pressure for changing zoning codes to allow the development of residential sub-divisions.

PFI member Teresa Troxel owns and operates Iowana Farm near Crescent in the Iowa Loess Hills in western Iowa. The 66-acre farm has hillsides of oak savannah and tall grass prairie. Teresa and her crew grow vegetables for their CSA on 6.5 acres at the site of her grandfather’s old barn yard and alfalfa hay on 13.5 acres—all certified organic. She wrote, “I have volunteers that come through my farm and many of them have a dream of their own vegetable farm and maybe small numbers of livestock. They are mostly looking for 5 to 10 acres with a house and a shed. That is the most that they think they will ever be able to afford.”

Teresa also wrote of the immense help she received as a beginning organic farmer from the USDA in 2008-2012 through EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) grants. The funds “paid for soil testing, cover crop seed, soil amendments, screening and cover cloth for my high tunnels. I now still use the same shade cloth bought with grant money to keep out

moths, grasshoppers, and deer. And I was also able to experiment with beneficial insects to control pest insects.”

I am concerned, too, about how some proponents of large-scale agriculture castigate smaller-scale, sustainable, organic, and local agriculture. Their argument is that those farmers will never be able to feed the world. What they have not said is that their own farming systems do not truly feed the world. Now the pandemic is showing that status quo agriculture and its supply chains are frail and definitely *not* feeding the world.

Messages posted on the Practical Farmers of Iowa listserv after the onset of the pandemic suggest that the demand for food grown by its smaller-scale members has increased tremendously. The challenge is not only how these smaller-scale and local farmers can grow more food to meet demand but where and how they will be able to have their products processed and distributed.

Amber Miller of Carney Family Farms delivered packages of frozen beef and chicken to my home earlier this spring, then later visited to dig up rhubarb roots to transplant at her home. As we worked together, I asked her perspective. She agreed with Sally that agriculture needs a wide range of farmers.

Amber likes to take pre-orders months in advance of processing her meat products, customers arrange to have freezer space at home to store the meat and are willing to pay the price for the higher quality and locally raised product. She declines to use the term “commercial” to describe her business but would call it a relational enterprise. For her, the term “commercial” could be considered interchangeable with the term “industrial,” in which consumers are not so concerned about the environmental and nutritional issues of the meat they buy, want easy access to picking up a pack of meat on short notice from the meat counter at a grocery store, and aren’t able or willing to pay a higher price for local, farmer-raised meat. She acknowledges that there is a huge demand for commercial meat and that there need to be farmers to produce it, but she simply is not in that kind of market.

The short-term challenge for Amber during the pandemic with increased demand for her meat products is that she does not have a lot of extra to sell. Instead, it is necessary for her to plan far in advance to grow the number of animals needed to produce the meat to fill the orders her clients place and committing to a delivery date at the locker to have her animals processed. The delivery date for her beef is scheduled a year in advance. She seemed confident she could increase production in response to increased demand and be able to schedule processors, considering she has an excellent track record of working with them for the past several years.”

I have often attended PFI field days out of interest in topics such as growing vegetables or apples and to gather video footage for PFI projects. My visit in 2010 to the Grinnell Heritage Farm for a field day was to do both. Andy and Melissa Dunham began operating the 80-acre farm in 2007. It sits near Grinnell, Iowa, and has been in Andy’s family for more than 150 years. Andy is a fifth-generation Iowa farmer and former Peace Corp volunteer. Melissa is from the Twin Cities and has served on the PFI board of directors. They have had as many as 22 acres of well-defined, lush plots of vegetables, high tunnels to extend the growing season, and a produce-packing house. Their place seemed like a poster farm for local, organic, Iowa-grown food production. Andy and Melissa, themselves, seemed to be naturals not only at growing food but educating and building relationships with field day guests, CSA shareholders, visitors to farmers markets, and managers at retail grocery stores. Of course, I saw only the surface of their operation and understood little of the complexities and challenges of their work.

When I reflect on what I know of friends and others who are in the business of growing food and selling it, I wonder, “How can any grower get a decent monetary return on their investments of time and money?” It was impolite, though, in Iowa-nice country to ask,

“Tell me, are you really making any money at what you do, especially taking into account all your hours of labor and the amount of infrastructure that you have had to build?” Infrastructure would include such features as a well, irrigation system, greenhouse, walk-in cooler, driveway, parking area, small tractor, produce bins, and a delivery van or truck. There could also be computer, certification, and insurance costs. The ease of access I have to buying quality produce from local growers is a privilege, and my pride in supporting the local food movement is and has been, to a certain degree, a matter of thriving from the efforts of growers who were passionate about their dreams of being local food producers but who whose enterprises would not survive.



Andy and Melissa Dunham, photo from their collection. Circa 2015.

On February 26, 2020, I realized that Andy was one of three guests on Iowa Public Radio’s program “Talk of Iowa” discussing how the lack of structural support in Iowa was crippling the local foods movement. It came as a surprise when host Charity Nebbe reported that Andy and Melissa would be making some radical changes in their farm operation. Not listening closely, I assumed they were closing the farm because they were experiencing too little interest in local foods or that other factors made it too hard for them to make a living from farming.

As the pandemic surged upwards in numbers this spring, crippling the food supply chain, and creating more demand for produce from local growers, I remembered that radio conversation and wondered if Andy and Melissa were sorry they had gotten out of farming before the boom of consumer interest in local foods. So, I called and talked with Andy. He corrected my misinterpretation, explaining that he and Melissa were not closing the farm but scaling back, selling some equipment, ending their CSA program, discontinuing sales to retail stores, and taking off farm jobs. They still were (and are) involved in direct marketing to customers who pre-order produce on-line to pick up at the farm. However, Andy says that venue has its own challenges in the face of the pandemic, with the farm needing to take extra safety and health precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at an added cost that farm sales are not capturing.

Andy was quick to say that he and Melissa have no regrets in letting go of what had been a distinguished part of their farm’s mission. Although he knows that the pandemic has increased the demand for food sold directly from farms to consumers, he does not believe the increased bloom will be a sustained one.

He also spoke about how nearly all institutions in the state, including schools, universities, hospitals, restaurants, brokers, and grocery stores, now order less produce than they did a few years ago and how there has been no demand from restaurants because they have been closed due to the pandemic.

Andy then talked about a disappointing relationship with a major grocery company (one that he declines to name publicly) in Iowa that practices what some environmentalists would call green washing. According to Andy, the company publishes slick flyers telling how it believes in the value of providing locally and organically grown produce. However, store management appears to use local producers to “local-wash” their many stores by substituting conventionally grown product from out-of-state corporate growers and putting that product on the produce counter directly under a Grinnell Heritage Farm produce sign.

Andy is also concerned about poor leadership, wondering why the government does not enforce anti-trust laws against some of the major corporate grocers. He told about inadequate distributions systems, noting how inefficient it is for several farms, each with someone driving a pickup truck or van, to deliver produce to a retail grocer and be paid only \$50 to \$100. He considers that a token transaction for a trip – meaning the farmer would go home with a net loss for his or her effort. Andy believes Iowa’s vegetable growers could produce and provide the state’s grocers with all the lettuce, kale, and Swiss chard needed for six months, yet some grocers have exclusionary, yearlong contracts with out-of-state growers. Also, the grocers have done nothing to create a centralized distribution system where a farmer could deliver a large quantity of produce in one cost-effective trip with the corporation routing shares of that Iowa-grown food to each of its stores.

The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach service and several other organizations collected data in 2015 that they collated and released in 2017 in a document titled, “Iowa Commercial Horticulture Food Crop Survey Results.” The report tells how in the late 1910s into the 1920s, Iowa was a top apple and grape producing state and led “the world in canned sweet corn production.”

LaVon Griffion says that in 1929, Iowa produced 52,915 acres of vegetables. According to the 2017 ISU report, by 2000, only 7,055 acres of Iowa land were used for horticultural production, and in 2015, that number dropped to 6,186.

The ISU report also said, “According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, 94 percent of harvested cropland in Iowa was field (not sweet) corn and soybeans, while only 0.05 percent was in edible horticultural crop production (vegetables, orchards, and berries).”

The report then takes on the onerous task of defining what the word “local” means. “Local foods usually are defined simply in geographic terms as those produced within a certain distance of where they are consumed. There is no commonly accepted definition of ‘local food,’ although the U.S. Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill defined it as a food product that travels less than 400 miles from its origin or stays within state lines. Furthermore, locally grown food also is commonly defined in terms of the relatively shorter ‘distance’ between farmers and consumers: i.e., through direct marketing arrangements or those in which there are far fewer intermediaries. Studies of ‘local food,’ therefore, can be tricky given that one local food buyer may define local as within the state, while another may define it more narrowly within a 50-mile radius or by simply knowing the farmer who produced the food. Unpublished results from a Leopold Center study showed that among buyers responding to a local food purchasing survey in 2013 (which included institutions, grocery stores, and restaurants), nearly half of the buyers defined ‘local’ as within a specified distance in miles of their institution, with an average of 113 miles cited.”

Whew, it is ridiculous that food grown 400 miles from the point of sale could be considered local. To me, that is regional food but simply not local compared to the 1950s when our family

arranged with the locker in Rolfe to butcher a whole hog from our farm or another farm for us. The ISU report partially answered my question about whether independent, local growers were able to make a decent income from their efforts to provide people with quality food. “Other data corroborate the suggestion that horticultural production is challenging in Iowa, as nearly one in three (31 percent) responding farmers in 2015 made less than \$1,000 in sales in 2015. Moreover, all three Iowa Commercial Horticulture Surveys for Food Crops (1989, 2000, and 2015) have shown horticulture producers derive only a small percentage of their gross income from the sale of these specialty crops. However, it appears that fewer and fewer horticulture producers receive significant income from horticultural sales. In 1989, 17 percent of respondents received 1 percent or less of their income from horticultural sales, which increased to 41 percent of respondents in 2015.”

Iowa’s inadequate distribution system for local foods was only one of the factors that forced Andy and Melissa to scale back their farming efforts. Andy talked on IPR about climate change also affecting the decision, citing how their farm experienced years of heavy rains in the spring at planting time and again in the fall at harvest time. The next year then presented an extraordinarily dry summer season, crippling the growth of plants.

With all the talk of the pandemic, it has been easy for the media and public to lose sight of the current and potential tragedies related to climate change. However, climate activists such as my friend Erv Klaas believe the risks can be even greater than those caused by the pandemic and are continuing their educational and legislative efforts.



Onion harvest at Helen’s urban farm. 2012.

I find it ironic, if not tragic, that Iowa, with its abundance of topsoil (recognized as some of the best in the world) and history of being a leading food-growing state, cannot support local growers in a viable way. For a population to be dependent on food grown far away is a matter of community and food insecurity. One would hope the pandemic will force policy makers and others to recognize the frail nature of our food systems. If there is to be change in response to the lessons learned from the pandemic, then large-scale, conventional corn and bean farming, with its detrimental effects, needs to lose its near sacred status and be examined with a new focus on smaller, healthier farms that actually grow food for the state.

The local food cooperative in Ames, Wheatsfield, strives to sell food grown by smaller, local producers who use sustainable practices. One week in May, the store announced by email that customers could buy only two packages of meat in a single visit to the store. I am reminded of the small book of ration stamps that I have in my baby book from the 1940s when the government rationed such items as sugar, meat, cooking oil, canned goods, and even rubber.

When I recently called Chuck Brekke, part of the family who owns Brekke's Town and Country Store, asking whether he could bring some cabbage seed when he delivered straw bales and chicken feed that I ordered, he said the store no longer sold vegetable seeds. Brekke's used to have a small room with a table, scale, and set of glass quart jars containing bulk seed. Customers could measure a small amount of the seeds of their choice into a paper envelope, weigh it, and pay by the ounce. Chuck, said, however, that the interest in gardening in recent years had gotten so low, that the store had stopped carrying seed. I assume it had also become easier to buy seeds at a wide variety of larger stores. Now with the pandemic and increased interest in gardening, Brekke's has many people asking if the store sells seed. He also said that this spring he has sold double the number of baby chickens he typically had sold in a year. Perhaps a survivalist mindset has crept in, and people are turning toward home-grown food production as well as buying food from small-scale, local farmers.

When and if the pandemic ends, will people remember how it revealed the fragile nature of our food supply system? Will government policies reduce support for corporate production and increase support to local, smaller scale producers? Will people use their time to grow food in their backyards?

The government directives for people to stay in place and not travel in order to slow the spread of the virus have reduced the consumption of fossil fuel to its lowest level in decades, drastically reducing the demand for gasoline and ethanol. The price of oil has turned negative, meaning oil producers who have a glut of oil and few, if any buyers, are paying for someone to take oil off their hands. The ethanol industry, which had been a huge income generator, albeit one heavily subsidized and inaccurately promoted as a renewable resource, had already seen plant closures in recent years, but even more plants are closing now with a ripple effect. Corn and soybeans are the mainstay crops of conventional agriculture. The price of corn, already low, plummeted in April to \$3.20 per bushel, but the break-even price per bushel is \$4.00 per bushel, meaning that farmers are planting fields of corn, knowing that they will lose money on their crop unless there are government subsidies. It is easy to fear that there will be suicides and other tragedies among farmers and in the state's rural communities similar to what there were in relation to the farm crisis of the early 1980s.

There certainly will be some regression to the way things were, but I cannot fathom how it would be possible to go back to the old normal. And just who would want to go back to the previous normal of CAFOs, slaughterhouses ripe for abuses to the immigrant workforce, or the heavily subsidized ethanol industry when none of these are sustainable or healthy for communities and the environment?

For over a century, the Iowa legislature has pushed its public schools to consolidate, resulting in larger schools meant to be more cost efficient and provide a better quality of education than smaller ones. In the 1932-33 academic year, there were 80 rural schools in Pocahontas County. By the fall of 1956, there were only eight schools, and they were all closed by the fall of 1957. My father attended the Roosevelt Township Number 7 school, a 28x28 foot wooden structure on an acre of land located a half mile from the farm where he lived. He then went to high school in Rolfe, graduating in 1935. Neither my siblings nor I experienced country school life.

Not all of the school consolidations resulted from legislative mandate. Some were ballot box decisions. In what *The Rolfe Arrow* newspaper (May 1, 1947) called, "the most important school election ever to be held in Rolfe," residents of Garfield, Lake, and Roosevelt townships and the Rolfe independent school district voted overwhelmingly to join together in what they called a "consolidated district." Then in 1959, the Rolfe and Des Moines Township school districts merged to become the Rolfe Community School District.



Left: rural school, Gillette Grove Township, Clay County, Iowa. 1939. Right: students at Doyle Township School #5, Clarke County, Iowa. 1943. *From the Loren Horton collection. Both photos courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.*

Although some of the other towns in the county were losing their schools in the mid-1900s, Rolfe residents probably never envisioned their town would not have its own school. As fate would have it, Rolfe graduated its last senior class in 1990. The next year, high school students from the Rolfe area would attend school in Pocahontas. By 2006, Rolfe's elementary and middle school students would also travel to Pocahontas, the seat of county government and now the only town in the county with a high school.

In 2009, following voter approval of a 10 million dollar bond issue, the Pocahontas Area Community School District began building a new middle and high school facility that was first occupied in 2011. The PAC website describes it as "a new, state-of-the-art, multi-million dollar building. The building includes the latest and most up-to-date innovations in lighting, technology, security, climate control and structural design."

The Gilbert Community School District, headquartered in the small town of Gilbert, where I lived from 1993 to 2006, covers 48 square miles, including northern subdivisions of Ames. Its enrollment is more than 1,500 students, which is greater than the town's population of some 1,174 residents. The Ames Community School District serves most of the Ames area and has an enrollment of over 4,500 students compared to a population of 67,962 residents in the university town. Although the distance between Gilbert and Ames has been about four miles, the development of new homes on the rural landscape is filling the gap. The two school districts, although located almost like two peas in a pod or two bugs snug in a rug when compared to Pocahontas County with its one high school, have each invested millions of dollars in renovations and new buildings in the past two decades. In the fall of 2013, Gilbert completed a new high school, and Ames is currently constructing a new high school.

Beginning this spring, school districts across the state, including Gilbert and Ames, closed their buildings as a safety measure in the face of the pandemic. It was wise to close the facilities and wise now to keep them closed even longer. One could question, though, if centralized, large schools had gotten too big and whether the pandemic would have been less of a threat had the districts of the state adopted a different format for education. Obviously, even if this were still the era of country schools, and more towns had their own high schools, it would still be wise to cancel classes in the face of the pandemic. This situation, though, is a reminder of humankind's fragility, considering that all the movement toward consolidation and investments in new facilities could not protect students and teachers from threat of the COVID-19 virus.

One must wonder what kinds of strategies that school districts will implement in order to open their buildings again and accommodate all the students in their districts. Will districts need to retrofit buildings to have smaller classes and keep staff and students a healthy

distance apart? Will hand sanitizer and face mask dispensers become as common as paper towel dispensers or electric dryers? Will there be signs saying, “No shirt, no shoes, no shield, no school?” Will school supply vendors promote face shields with fashionable designs that incorporate the school colors and mascots? Will there be automated systems to monitor body temperatures? Will students spend less time on campus and more time at home or at other sites such as a community center or church, but be connected to the school via the Internet? Will more families choose to homeschool their children?

The new Meeker Elementary School building, first occupied in August 2015, sits on the far south end of a nearly 12-acre property just north of where I live. The old building, which stood on the north end, has been razed and replaced with a playground. Considering the pandemic with its related issues of unemployment, the broken food supply chain, and the extra time that some people have on their hands, it would seem wise for the school district to establish community gardens at the school. However, I remember the multiple times, day after day, when semi-trucks loudly rumbled up and down Burnett Avenue with their earth-moving dump trailers, carrying away black topsoil, to prepare the Meeker site for its new building. Weeks later, the same or similar trucks returned with lower quality soil for excavation and fill purposes. It was not hard to tell that the school district had no intention of growing food on that land.

A friend, Shellie Orngaard, was director of the Volunteer Center of Story County in 2010 when the center and another organization known as Ames Unity, which was formed after city discussions about racial issues, collaborated with Trinity Christian Reformed Church to start a community garden on its grounds. The garden would be called the Service Patch and operated by AmesZone, a group of young people guided by AmeriCorps volunteers. AmesZone envisioned both growing food to share with people in need and growing healthy relationships.

Interest in community gardening spread, and the VCSC arranged for AmeriCorps and other volunteers to help two Ames elementary schools, Kate Mitchell and Abby Sawyer, establish school gardens. Prairie Rivers of Iowa, founded in 2001 in affiliation with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and now a non-profit environmental group with leaders from several central Iowa counties, also supported development of the two school gardens.

A Mitchell web site said its garden was started in “response to the issues of food insecurity and lack of healthy food amongst students of the school.” The volunteers and students successfully planned their gardens, worked the soil, grew vegetables, and organized not only farmers markets to sell their produce but also festivals that helped in building community spirit. Some of the student organizers were invited to join Michelle Obama in Washington, DC, when she kicked off the Fourth Annual White House Garden in 2012.

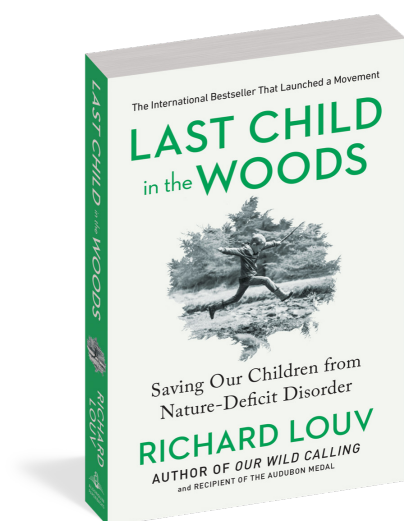
My friend Erv Klaas has been involved with Prairie Rivers since its inception in 2001. He says that principals and teachers at Mitchell and Sawyer told him the gardens fostered a whole, positive change in the atmosphere at their schools. Before long, though, both gardens were removed to prepare for site renovations. Erv recalls some of the district’s central office administrators telling him, “We don’t like these gardens.” The Trinity Church garden is still in existence but in collaboration with Ames Food at First program to feed the hungry and operated by the ISU Sustainable Agriculture Student Association.

A man I know through church, Mike Todd, visited Washington, DC, in 2019 to receive the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, the highest honor for a science teacher in the nation. Mike teaches at Ames High School, where he has organized, without extra pay, both an ECO Club and Garden Club. He is frustrated the school administration does not support school garden programs and that the AHS garden, although it has been on the high school campus since 2011, has been marginalized.

As an example of skewed priorities, Mike shared how the administration told the garden group in February 2020 that there would be no on-site space for a school garden for four years during construction of a new high school building and razing of the old one. However, the school had found ways to provide for football, soccer, and other sports, as well as fund a new \$80,000 shot put and discus field to be used only temporarily during the construction phase. Mike said that after he and other garden advocates raised a stink, the administration reversed itself and committed to a garden on school grounds in all but one of those four transitional years. However, Mike is saddened that many of the cool projects that the garden group has developed (rain garden, composting system, edible garden, and permaculture plot) have been demolished over the years. He also knows that students are motivated to engage in their education by many different elements and need different educational opportunities. He laments that the school is not meeting those needs and says the consequences are reflected in the number of suicides or suicide attempts by Ames students, as well as a lack of engagement in school by many students.

In 2016, Mike and another award-winning Ames teacher, Collin Reichert, began discussions with fellow educators to create an alternative school. By 2017, they had organized The Community Academy with the goal of it becoming a full-time, year-round school. Its mission: “to engage young people in authentic educational experiences that enrich our community and promote a sense of place in nature.” Its vision: “an educational model in which students form deep, meaningful relationships with staff, students, the community, the environment, and themselves.” The Ames school district does not actively support the program.

Tyler Harms, executive director of the Iowa Young Birders Association, is one of the people I have most resonated with in this neighborhood. In a conversation about the dearth of natural space at the school, Tyler told me about the notion of Vitamin “N” (as in nature) and the work of Richard Louv, author of the international bestseller *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*.



Louv wrote in an October 15, 2019, blog:

Although human beings have been urbanizing, and then moving indoors, since the introduction of agriculture, social and technological changes in the past three decades have accelerated the human disconnect from the natural world.

Among the reasons: the proliferation of electronic communications; poor urban planning and disappearing open space; increased street traffic; diminished importance of the natural world in public and private education; and parental fear magnified by news and entertainment media.

Since 2005, the number of studies of the impact of nature experience on human development has grown from a handful to nearly one thousand. This expanding body of scientific evidence suggests that nature-deficit disorder contributes to a diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, conditions of obesity, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses. Research also suggests that the nature-deficit weakens ecological literacy and stewardship of the natural world. These problems are linked more broadly to what health care experts call the “epidemic of inactivity,” and to a devaluing of independent play. Nonetheless, we believe that society’s nature-deficit disorder can be reversed.

I hope that my urban farm would be a haven for at least a few people, young and old, to experience nature in the heart of a suburban neighborhood although this is a far cry from being a truly wild space. I have tried to make connections with the school staff, but with little success. That’s okay. I have more autonomy in what I do here than if I had to meet the standards of a school district.

I also hope this urban farm with the opportunities it provides will allow me to carry on some of the agrarian hospitality most exemplified by stories that Don Grant, a childhood crony of my father, told me about his mother Addie Grant. Don remembered Addie’s large garden in the 1920s and 1930s and how she loved to preserve and cook food both for her family and to give away. “Mother was always taking a basket of something into town. When



Addie and Cap Grant. Circa 1948. *Photo from the Don and Rosie Grant Collection.*

we went to town whether by buggy or car, she knew somebody that needed something to eat. She would take a few jars of this and a few cans of that and give it to somebody.”

Much of my reason for being and having this urban farm is my desire to be hospitable. I love to host meals whether for a group of six friends around my living room table, a group of 22 seated in my office and living room for a solstice dinner, or a PFI back-to-school picnic the day before the opening of classes at Iowa State.

Normally, when I sow seeds for cucumber plants in the spring, I think of the pickles I plan to make, store, and serve at meals. When I pick and freeze fruit, I envision making compote to serve with ice cream or yogurt. When I buy 40-pound bags of wheat berries from the Early Morning Harvest farm, I envision making whole grain breads and sharing them. I have also accumulated a large supply of green cafeteria trays, 50-plus place settings of ivy-designed Corelle dinner ware, 70 homemade calico napkins, several chairs, and tables. I know of no other person or family so prepared to host meals without using paper plates, paper napkins, and Styrofoam cups and with so little, if anything, in the trash can at the end of an event. Since the beginning of the pandemic, though, I have not hosted a single meal, and I assume there will be no PFI picnic here at the end of August. I have met some of my need for sharing food by giving eggs and bread to friends and donating bread once a month to the Food at First community meals. In some respects, it has been a relief not to have to think about scheduling, maintaining guest lists, cleaning the house and yard, and making other preparations to host meals for guests. In other respects, I am saddened not to have the role of hosting meals.



Curtiss Hall, built in 1906 and known as Agriculture Hall but renamed in 1947 for Charles F. Curtiss, a long-time Dean of Agriculture. 2020.

The Des Moines Register reported on May 15, 2020, that the Iowa Board of Regents had cut 10 percent of Iowa Public Radio’s budget. IPR, an NPR affiliate and my go-to station when I want to listen to the radio, is supported in part by funding from the Regent universities, including Iowa State University, University of Northern Iowa, and University of Iowa. *The Register* article said, “The announcement comes two weeks after presidents at Iowa State University, the University of Iowa and the University of Northern Iowa told the Regents that the shutdown of classes due to COVID-19 cost will cost the schools \$187 million through the end of June. The presidents blamed added expenses as classes and administrative work moves online, along with a tuition refund the universities provided students because of campus shutdowns.”



Iowa State University central campus. Top photo: entrance to Curtiss Hall. Bottom left: the Fountain of the Four Seasons by Christian Petersen, Iowa State's artist-in-residence from 1934-55, near the Memorial Union is part of Art on Campus. Bottom right, Morrill Hall, constructed in 1891, is named after Senator Justin Smith Morrill, who created the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act. All photos 2020.

The article included an email by Josh Lehman, senior communications director for the Regents, that said in part, "The universities are needing to reallocate resources to support other core functions, primarily providing a top-quality education for our students. There will be many difficult financial decisions to come, none of which are easy nor made lightly."

More than a month later on July 29, Charles Flesher of *The Register* reported, "Iowa's three public universities will take a \$65.4 million cut this budgeted year as a result of declining enrollment amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and an \$8 million cut in state funding approved by the Legislature last month." Flesher continues, The universities expect to bring in \$53 million less in tuition this year as a result of the enrollment decline and an across-the-board tuition freeze approved by the regents in June."

Not many years ago, Iowa State boasted of an increased enrollment. I had heard from reliable sources that the bubble was due in part to reduced admissions standards created to improve the health of the university pocketbook. I recall riding my bicycle to church and every week for a few months seeing horse paddocks and pastures removed along 13th Street and replaced with rapidly built apartment complexes and parking lots. This spring, due to the pandemic, the university closed the campus, ousted students from dorms and other housing, and offered its classes on-line only. After the pandemic subsides, what will happen to the level of enrollment, nature of classes, and those new apartment buildings and parking lots? Will there be another bubble with unemployed people enrolling in the university for something meaningful to do and needing on-campus housing? Would potential students be able to pay for tuition or willing to take on student loans? Or would they decline from attending the university because of its diminished capacity or quality as the result of slashed budgets? Or opt for community colleges and tele-learning? If there would be less student demand for housing, would anyone dare suggest offering university apartments to low-income residents for affordable housing?

My parents and five of us siblings are ISU alumni. Mother and Dad started bringing us to football games when we were youngsters. They groomed us to believe that Iowa State was like a golden castle on a hill—the epitome of a place to attend school — and Ames was an ideal place to live. We cheered for the Cyclones and learned the words to the “Fight Song” and what could be considered a university hymn, “The Bells of Iowa State.” When my siblings and I were students at Iowa State in the 1960s, the school was on a quarter system that consisted of three 10-week terms compared to today’s semester system with 18-week terms. Clara, who graduated in 1964, remembers tuition was \$100 per quarter for Iowa residents and \$200 per quarter for non-residents. The current rate for in-state residents is close to \$4,000 per semester with the cost for non-residents close to \$11,000. The much lower rate in the sixties may have been in part because the state was healthier financially, and the public believed more in supporting its institutions of higher education than it does now.



Left: Deane and Marion Gunderson with family and friends at an ISU football game. Right: Deane and Marion pose with the ISU mascot, Cy, in front of a statue of Cy that Deane built and donated to ISU in the 1970s. Both photos are from 1981, the year Deane was named as Cy’s Favorite Alum. *Photos from the Clara Gunderson Hoover collection.*

Dad and Mother, especially Dad, were avid Cyclone fans. He had football season tickets and attended games until the last year of his life, and the tales of his devotion to the program are numerous. I have wondered what it was deep in his psychology that propelled him to have such unfettered loyalty to a football program. Fortunately, he and Mother supported a variety of projects at the university, and Iowa State was only one recipient of their philanthropic contributions.

Other members of the family have continued to convene at games in the section where they used to join Dad and Mother. Myself – I weaned myself from an interest in college sports decades ago. This fall will be the first season that sister Clara and her husband, Hal, will not be coming to the football games from Omaha. In part, their change in plans is a letdown, considering how on at least one of their game day trips they would take the time to visit me.

Clara and Hal's interest in traveling to games had already waned before the pandemic. Now the university athletic department is deciding whether it can host games in a way that ensures good player and public health. I well remember with cynicism how the department highly promoted its goal of filling the 60,000-capacity stadium in recent years, even when the football team was doing poorly. I found it easy to wonder what the carbon footprint might be of encouraging such high attendance that could only happen if lots of people burned fossil fuel to get to the stadium either in passenger cars or the large RVs, used for tailgating parties, that clogged the roads to the stadium for hours, if not a day, before a game. I also wondered whether it would have been wiser for the department to reduce its expectations and provide satellite viewing on large monitors at remote sites hosted by the likes of a county Cyclone club. I know that my criticism and creative ideas would have been folly to many people, especially when one considers how the football and basketball programs draw fans to Ames and in turn generate income for the community, but look what is happening now. The athletic department has allowed those people who have prepaid to defer use of their tickets until the 2021 season, which Clara and Hal have opted to do. The athletic department is also considering restricting attendance to 30,000 spectators who will be asked to sit a safe distance apart. Frankly, it is hard to imagine how the security crew will be able to police and otherwise maintain good social distancing if there is a lot of fan vigor. Even more recently, Ames has become a national hotspot in terms of the rate of increase in the virus here, and the Story County Health Board recommended that the university not allow fans at its football games.



It is not a great stretch of the imagination to worry the pandemic is a long-term or permanent catastrophic event and that doomsday or the apocalypse might be near. I look, however, to events in history that were as horrific, or more so, when societies found the resilience to recover, even if extremely slowly.

This winter, when researching my Norwegian heritage, I was shocked to read that when the Black Death sacked Norway in 1349 to 1350, two-thirds of the nation's population died. Another site estimates that Norway's population would have been 300,000 to 400,000 with deaths numbering between 180,000 and 240,000. That same site estimated that 60 percent of the European population, or some 50 million people, may have died from the Black Death.

I recall hearing that my farming grandfather, John Gunderson, was quarantined in his farm home a century ago from September through December, not able to help with harvest and dependent on his workers to take care of the farm. When I have told people the story, they automatically asked if it was the 1918 influenza pandemic. I did not know. When I asked sister Clara and brother Charles what they remembered, they said they had not heard of the story. I needed to learn the scope of the 1918 flu. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "It is estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected with this virus. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States. Mortality was

high in people younger than 5 years old, 20-40 years old, and 65 years and older. The high mortality in healthy people, including those in the 20-40 year age group, was a unique feature of this pandemic.”

It is not as though pandemics are entirely new happenings or that a pandemic will inevitably wipe out humanity. COVID-19 is extraordinarily scary perhaps because it is so worldwide, affecting people whose lives may have seemed secure, and hitting close to home. The pandemic is also causing record numbers of unemployment in the U.S. and damaging the nation’s economy — all of that happening during the tenure of a president who is pitting state governments against the federal government and standing in the way of experts in health and science, sometimes denouncing them, and preventing them from leading effectively.

From what I know of my family history as far back as 1900, the only encounter we have had with a wide-sweeping disease was something I did not know until recently after asking Clara and Charles about Grandpa being quarantined. They both said Dad had suffered from scarlet fever when five years old. A search of the digital archives of *The Rolfe Arrow* newspaper shows two articles on the same page of local news called “Local Diddings” on May 15, 1924. The first article reported on my grandmother’s mother. “Mrs. Emma Lighter was called to the country Tuesday to assist in caring for her grandson, Dean [sic] Gunderson, who contracted scarlet fever six weeks ago and who has been having a serious time with it. His ears have



Deane Gunderson. Circa 1923. Photo from the Marion and Deane Gunderson collection.

gathered and broken and he is carrying considerable fever. We hope he may rapidly change for the better under grandmother’s care.” The second article reported, “... the Gundersons are under quarantine, the son, Dean [sic], having a very prolonged siege of scarlet fever.”

A June 5, 1924, *Arrow* article said that Grandpa and Grandma had brought Dad home from Webster City, a town about 60 miles away, where Dad “had been in a hospital recovering from the after effects of scarlet fever.” Clara and Charles explained that the fever damaged Dad’s ears, perforating an ear drum. I knew of his damaged ear but had heard it was due to his being

near a mechanical accident. In either case, the damage resulted in Dad being exempted from military service during World War II, as well as being extremely hard of hearing, especially in the last decades of his life.

The pandemic has not changed my lifestyle all that much. For years, I have stayed relatively close to my urban farm. However, I had become dependent on going to Wheatsfield Co-op three or more days a week for meals from the cafeteria hot bar. Those trips motivated me to get out of the house and ride my bicycle downtown. They also were a key part of my social life, considering that I often had great conversations with old friends, new acquaintances, and staff while there. I had wondered what I would do socially if Wheatsfield ever went out of business. The store had been vulnerable when the franchise store Fresh Thyme, akin to Whole Foods, set up shop in Ames in 2018, but the new store announced its closure at the end of 2019. Wheatsfield survived but has indefinitely closed its cafeteria bar. I don't miss being able to dine at Wheatsfield as much as I had imagined I would. The conversations were great. The food was healthy, varied, and tasted good. Yet I have discovered there is enough social life around here, and I am doing more home cooking and enjoying the process of making good food.



Helen at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. April 2020.

Cutting my own hair for the first time has been the most novel event for me during this social distancing phase. On March 9, I had my last hair cut appointment at the JC Penney salon. When I arrived there, I told Suzanne Clark, the stylist, how frustrated I was with my short but stubborn hair. I also anticipated that the salons might be forced to close due to the pandemic. I asked, "Can we do a buzz cut?" She said, "Sure." We had a wonderful conversation, and gave me a great cut, but it was not short enough to be truly considered a buzz cut. That was fine with me. I suspected neither of us was ready to risk something shorter. Not many weeks later, I watched some YouTube demonstrations of how a person could cut her own hair. It was men doing the shows, but I was bound to do a buzz cut, and gender did not matter. Then I asked my interior designer friend, Lou Cathcart, who had been a stylist in a former lifetime, about

what kind of clippers to buy, then ordered a Wahl clipper and hair cutting scissors online. Never in high school had I been good at putting curlers or bobby pins in my hair, and I was clumsy using a curling iron the few times I tried one. As I anticipated cutting my hair, I was apprehensive about whether I had the courage to cut my hair and worried just how bad it would look. However, I also knew that this season of self-isolating would be the best window of opportunity in my lifetime to try such an adventure.

Last fall, anticipating my 75th birthday on April 19, I reserved a house at Four Mounds Retreat and Conference Center in Dubuque for 21 to 22 (Earth Day) and invited a dozen friends to go on a two-day retreat there and visit the Convivium Urban Farmstead. On March 14, I cancelled the plans and was disappointed but relieved. Spring is a full season for me with gardening responsibilities, and now I could stay in place, engage in my projects, and not worry about the logistics of hosting the retreat.

Sunday, April 19, was a slow day. I stayed home alone, changed the sheets on my bed, did laundry, ate good food, watched a Netflix film, and visited with friends on the phone. I felt just fine, but Monday morning, I felt blue with little ambition. Yet I asked myself, "If not now, when?" Gradually, I rose to the occasion and cut my hair. I did well and loved the new look and the idea that I might make it a habit to cut my own hair even after the threat of the pandemic. Fortunately, my friend Betsy Wentzel, who had cut her husband's and sons' hair decades ago, trimmed the hairline at the back of my head. I shake my head occasionally, wondering about all the fuss with permanents and hair curlers in my younger days and what life would have been like if I could have had a buzz cut all along.

My life may have been different if I had known of short-haired women role models in my developmental years. I recall attending a retreat at the Prairiwoods Franciscan Spirituality Center near Cedar Rapids and seeing a video presentation by Zen priest Joan Halifax. She was both beautiful and handsome with shaved head or hair slightly grown out in a buzz cut style. She was wise. The same could be said of images of Zen priest Pema Chodron, whose book, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, is relevant to people wanting a sense of how to proceed during this pandemic.

Since 2009, I had gone without owning a car, getting around town mainly on bicycle and enjoying that mode of travel. Then in November 2019, I bought a 2008 Honda CRV and appreciated having it during the winter, considering that I am not as comfortable with cold weather as I had been for a long time. Now with the pandemic and stay-in-place directives dictating there are few places that I can or want to go, I seldom drive the car but loan it to my renter, Diane, for her personal use and to do errands for me. I wonder if I had known the pandemic was coming, would I have bought a car?



Many of my Ames friends, who are in their sixties and older, have moved from their single-family homes to apartments or town houses in retirement communities. As examples, Erv Klaas moved a year ago to Green Hills Retirement Center on the south side of town, and another friend Janie Lohnes moved several years ago to Northcrest Community Center on the near north side of Ames. Both places have a range of health care services, supporting residents throughout their later stages of life from full health, to assisted living, memory care, and long-term care. As the Northcrest website says, "Moving to Northcrest is a choice that provides you with carefree independent living for the rest of your life..."

I might be in denial when I say I want to live out my life in this small home. I do want to be in an inter-generational, mixed income neighborhood where I can see families walking or biking their children to school. I do want to have my urban farm and have it be easily accessible so a variety of visitors can see my chickens and their elaborate set of tunnels that lead to roosting pens under the cherry trees. The question, although greatly repressed, has haunted me. “Just how long can I stay here, and when I can’t, what will I do?” I have feared that if I wait too long to consider moving, I might not be in good enough health to qualify to enroll in one of those places. Fortunately, as time passes and baby boomers age, more retirement and assisted living options, including stay-at-home care programs, are becoming available in Ames.

The pandemic has put a whole new spin on the matter with the Green Hills and Northcrest residents now having strict guidelines from upper management in order to get permission for leaving, then coming home to their facilities. Each time they return, staff members ask them a battery of questions and take their temperatures. Erv is thankful, putting it this way, “The Green Hills management is taking extra good care of its residents.” I believe him. The management at both communities most likely does care personally about the well-being of each resident. They presumably also are being pragmatic, knowing their residents are in the age range most susceptible to the virus, and their public image would suffer if there were to be a COVID-19 outbreak at their sites. Janie says that Northcrest residents are even asked not to visit one another in their apartments.

Erv and Janie often remind me that different people have different needs and most likely recognize I would not fit into the social atmosphere at their facilities. I can be obstreperous. Then again, Janie can be spunky. The last time I talked with her was in a 10 p.m. phone call. She told me how she had been working in the Northcrest gardens with a staff gardener. Later, the gardener learned he had contracted the virus, and when the administrators learned the news, Janie was told to stay in her apartment for two weeks. She can be dutiful, but that night, she was waiting until everyone else in her section had retired for the night so she could skip out of her room and take her trash to the garbage pickup room without anyone knowing of her trip. In an email this week, she says, “I have been free from quarantine for a week and it feels so good to be able to go outside. I spent seven hours in the garden my first day out!”

The challenges for residents of nursing homes and their families can be even greater than those that Erv and Janie are experiencing. Jeff Dewall farms for me. Age 60 and single, he lived with his mother Geri Dewall in their farm home until early March 2020, when Jeff and his sisters moved Jeri to the Pocahontas Manor, a care facility. Geri is 90 and has been widowed since December 2002 when her husband, Don, died. Jeff and his sisters were able to visit Geri a couple of times before the Manor locked the doors to guests. Geri has been dealing with congestive heart issues, has dementia, and does not understand why family members cannot enter the facility to visit her. They can merely stand at her window and attempt to communicate through the screen, which makes for a difficult conversation since Geri has a hard time hearing. Jeff says some of his sisters rise to the challenge, remove the screen, and stick their heads through the window to visit more clearly with their mother.

Earlier this year, former PFI director and friend Teresa Opheim, who lives in Minneapolis, moved her parents, Barb and Wayne Opheim, from north central Iowa into assisted living facilities. However, due to COVID-19, it was not possible for them to be together in the same place. Now Barb, age 84, is in Eagan and Wayne, 91, in Bloomington – both southern suburbs of Minneapolis.

In a June 9 email, Teresa acknowledged, “This is a really hard time, just taking it day-to-day and need a lot of silence. My mother’s memory care unit has had 17 COVID cases with residents and 10 with staff. No new ones in the last five days, so perhaps they are getting

this under control. I haven't been able to see or help my parents for several months now, and have no idea how my mom's care is, as she cannot tell us."

I wrote back, telling her about Jeff and his mother. Teresa responded, "I wish I could stand outside a window and see either of my parents! Dementia is awful already, without COVID. My mother had a fever last night, so they have given her another COVID test and I should hear the results today. It is a good idea to document the COVID reactions — I keep telling myself this is an unusual time, and it is not a surprise that it is hard. I sob every couple days, which is unusual for me."

In an update, Teresa added, "Her place has no COVID cases now. They are not being transparent about how many of those people who had it were hospitalized or died. But they seem to have gotten it under control for now. The only thing that made her happy was seeing her family, and she cannot do that now. Like Jeff's mom, she doesn't understand from moment to moment why we cannot visit and walk up and down the hall all day. When we admitted her, our plan was to visit regularly, wash and color her hair, take her on walks, love her. And we cannot do that. My dad has bounced back some from his hospital stay. Several of us talk with him every day, and it is a delight to do so. I was reminded on Father's Day that I have had almost 60 years with this man guiding me. What a gift."

Fortunately, for me, this urban farm and small one-story home make for an ideal place to self-isolate with an occasional guest or work crew. Generally, we wear masks and keep an appropriate distance, but we can get lax. Workers for Andersen Windows installed a picture window that I ordered last fall for my bedroom that doubles as my yoga studio so I can have an excellent view of the farmstead. Rachel Knapp from Early Morning Harvest Farm has delivered 50 pounds of wheat berries for baking bread. Friends stop to get eggs or homemade wheat bread, and I deliver some to neighbors. Passers-by see the sign at the end of my driveway offering free tomato or pepper seedlings. They email and arrange to pick up their plants. One of the people who rents my house next door, Diane Ercse, is my key helper doing a variety of jobs and running errands. Also, I have my four cats and 10 chickens to keep me company. By mid-to-late May, I had ventured out to three retail stores: Wheatsfield, Ace Hardware, and Brekke's Town and Country to shop. I also went to Heuss Printing for a meeting about my book. Yet, based on the advice I read or hear from experts, who suggest the worse is yet to come with the pandemic, I am not eager to go into those stores again, and for sure, not often.

In May, *The Des Moines Register* reported that J.C. Penney, Inc., was declaring bankruptcy and would close selected stores. I have heard nothing about the status of the Penney's store



Signs for free pepper and tomato seedlings near curb at Helen's urban farm. Pepper sign by Izzy Ercse. 2020.

in the North Grand Mall in Ames, but that is a place I like to buy items such as my billfold, sheets, pocket T-shirts, and socks. The store also has a beauty salon, and Suzanne has cut my hair for many years; however, she has opted to take early retirement on July 30. Although the governor has said that salons can now open again, I am not ready to go back to a salon and may continue to cut my own hair. The Penney's store and salon, however, were places I could count on even though the store has shown signs of diminished vitality in recent years. I did not mind so much when the North Grand Mall lost Sears, then Younkers. But I would mind if it lost Penney's.

Herrick Dental, Ames Yoga Center, Ames Acupuncture, and Ames Center for Health and Harmony where I get massages are all closed. However, Ruthann Hadish of the yoga center is now offering classes via Zoom. No need to change clothes or leave home. Some of my cats attend class with me at no extra charge, and it's fun to see the homes and cats of other students via Zoom. Late in May, the dental office wrote to say it would be opening again but with an entire restrictive set of safety procedures. I was definitely ready to have the hygienist, Deb Penney, clean my teeth and thankful I had prescheduled an appointment with her on June 3. Deb has cleaned my teeth for nearly 20 years and at age 71, she kept being urged to stay on for just another day; however, she finally retired completely in late June.

Fortunately, my major medical challenge of the past year, having cataract surgery in both eyes, was completed in December 2019 at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames, and by mid-January, before the COVID-19 virus had spread significantly to Iowa, I had new glasses with a new prescription. Had my surgeries been scheduled later, I would have been anxious about going to a hospital in general and specifically about being in an operating room.

It is easy to succumb to thinking I will be just fine during the pandemic, considering that I have been generally healthy and never critically sick. I can be smug about how well life is going here with many meaningful projects, a good inventory of food on the shelves and in the freezer, access to fresh eggs from my chickens and fruit and vegetables from my orchard and garden beds. I also have meaningful people connections, yet I get to live alone in a single family home and don't have to deal with cigarette smoke wafting into my space from a nearby apartment or second hand noise from hate-spewing radio and TV commentators or proselytizing televangelists.

I am reminded, though, of the wise words that the sixth century Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, wrote in the *Tao Te Ching*: "He who knows, does not speak. He who speaks, does not know." There may be ways that keeping busy with farm projects and writing extensively these days serve to create a sense of bravado that masks the underlying fear of my fragile nature. I know how freaked out I'd be if I came anywhere near being homeless, my bank account was empty, and my credit cards would not work. I recall the angst of my overnight stay in the hospital after a bicycle accident in 2015, crying out like a panicked child when I had acute leg cramps at 3 am and could not get prompt attention from the nurses. When two did come to my room, the more experienced one checked my vitals while the other, who seemed like an inexperienced aide, did not know how to deal with the cramps. I found it hard to be tolerant and accept her level of experience.

There have been other times when I have gone to the emergency room for concerns that seemed minor but were of the nature that the First Nurse hotline and friends advised I go to the ER. Events such as my mind going blank and forgetting the last half of a sentence even when I would start the sentence over, remembering the first half. The diagnosis was that of a simple TIA (transient ischemic attack). Or there was the evening while resting on the couch after eating too much at a community Thanksgiving Day potluck when I had a heart rate of 150 and felt a small, but tight band around my chest. Both of those ER visits resulted in the doctors arranging for me to take several tests and sending me to a hospital room

where I experienced long waits between tests and before I was allowed to eat any food. In the worst instance, I felt I lost control of my life – that the doctors and nursing staff had not communicated well with each other and I had few, if any, alternatives except to simply wait out the time there. I could get pissy, but often with no results. Thank goodness, though, for the staff person, no matter at what level, who would listen, empathize, and make at least a little difference in my circumstances.

Now with the medical industry frail from so much demand for pandemic services, I can imagine that were I to get the virus, especially if I had to leave my home, I would feel even more desolate, out of control, and panicked. I would want to be considerate and kind, understanding I was just one of thousands in a similar condition, but I would feel overwhelmed.

This is the scariest time some of my friends and I have known in terms of health, environmental, social, economic, and political issues. Yet I am privileged and understand that other people may have had so much duress in their lives in other eras that their perspective would be different than mine. What might the results be if an all-encompassing brain scan could be processed of the population of our country or the world, measuring how scary this era is for every person? I imagine there are people who would say this is not the scariest of times for them, especially if they have lost family members in school shootings or to opioid misuse; lived through forest fires, hurricanes, floods, droughts, famine, political insurrection, or civil war; experienced domestic violence or workplace harassment; suffered from mental illness, homelessness, hunger, or poverty; or found themselves on the brunt end of systematic racism and police misconduct. What may be unique in relation to the pandemic is its ubiquitous nature. It is creating tragedy everywhere, whereas, in the past, the news might have been focused on the forest fires in Paradise, California, or hurricanes in New Orleans.



Political and social conditions before news of the coronavirus crept onto our radar screens were already complex and overwhelming with the global spread of the pandemic making them even incomprehensible. I suspect the pandemic will last at least another year, there always will be some threat posed by COVID-19 or similar virus, and the economic and social spillover could last for a decade if not more.

The New York Times headline on the day before Memorial Day (May 24, 2020) said, “U.S. Deaths Near 100,000, An Incalculable Loss.” The sub-headline added, “They were not simply names on a list, they were us.” The newspaper filled all the columns of the front page with names of one percent of those who had died from the virus and a few words about each.

A bold red-letter headline on the evening of the first Wednesday after Memorial Day (May 27) on *HuffPost* shouted, “American Carnage, 100,000 Dead.” The next morning, I could not find the headline again. Instead, the media had turned its focus to the May 25 incident when Minneapolis white police officer Derek Chauvin was processing the arrest of a Black man, George Floyd. The latter allegedly had passed a counterfeit \$20 bill at a Cup Foods grocery store to buy a package of cigarettes. Chauvin knelt over Floyd, who was handcuffed and lying face down on the ground, with a knee on Floyd’s neck for nearly nine minutes. Although Floyd gasped more than once that he could not breathe, Chauvin did not back off nor did any of his fellow police officers stop him. The result,

Floyd died. Since then commentary about systematic racism and police brutality along with news of protests, riots, damage, demands for legislative changes, and Floyd's memorial service have dominated the media. *HuffPost's* phrase, "American Carnage," could aptly be used not only to describe the enormous loss of life and disruption of social systems due to the pandemic, but it could refer as well to how the nation's systemic racism has again been exposed with an inflamed response in the form of protests, some violent, in cities and towns across the country.

The killing of George Floyd is one of a long list of incidents of Black people dying at the hands of police officers acting brutally and with apparent impunity throughout the years. Yet his death and the death of Michael Brown in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, have happened close to home. I know little about Missouri, but I have lived in Duluth, Minnesota, and Fargo, North Dakota, just across the river from Moorhead, Minnesota. I have had great respect for what I have known about the twin cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul with their cultural opportunities, mass transit system, bicycle trails, and easy access to the rustic north woods and lakes. Over the years, I sometimes have thought I might want to live in that area, being envious of what seemed like its progressive nature. The news, though, of the murder of George Floyd has taught me that Minneapolis is not as shining of a city as I had thought it was. A June 2, 2020, excerpt from National Public Radio's "Planet Money Newsletter" under the header "America Reckons with Racial Injustice" and titled "Minneapolis Ranks Near the Bottom for Racial Equality" sought to find data about Minneapolis. The article claimed, "So about Minneapolis... we found it, and the Twin Cities area more generally, has some of the most abysmal numbers on racial inequality in the nation."

It is wrong for any person to misuse the power of his or her authority – whether a parent, pastor, physician, caretaker, teacher, treasurer, lawmaker, or other. To have a police officer kneel on the neck of a handcuffed human being of any race, lying face down on the street and gasping, "I cannot breathe," with no fellow officer stopping the killing is a terrible misuse of authority. The situation is even more tragic when the assailant is a white police officer, the victim a Black civilian, and the city's numbers on racial inequality are known to be abysmal.

The killing of George Floyd precipitated a range of protests from peaceful ones to those of looting, violence, and destruction. My friend Teresa Opheim in Minneapolis said in an email that her home is a couple of miles from the site of Floyd's murder and 10 blocks from the police precinct headquarters. Teresa shared, "Many of my neighborhood businesses are gone, we have had smoke and sirens and helicopters and all kinds of chaos. It is unbelievable. And I am shocked at what happened to the neighborhood I love, but I now know what many people in the world face on a daily basis."

The American Civil Liberties Union website carried a June 3, 2020, report by staff attorney Brian Hauss and director of the Minnesota ACLU, Teresa Nelson. They said, "Throughout the George Floyd protests, there have been numerous, well-documented instances of deliberate abuse against journalists by law enforcement officers."

The ACLU post continues: "These attacks violate the press's clearly established First Amendment right to report on public protests and police activities. An open society depends on a free press to keep the public informed and to bear witness to government actions. When law enforcement officers target members of the press with impunity, they strike at the root of our democracy. Law enforcement officers who perpetrate these abuses must be held accountable for their actions to the fullest extent of the law."

A set of incidents occurring from early Friday, May 29, to the evening of Monday, June 1, 2020, provides a vivid and scary example of the president's immaturity, inflammatory style, and desire for his office to have unbridled authority.

Referring to the Minneapolis protestors in a 12:53 a.m. tweet on Friday, the president said, “...These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won’t let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!”

USA Today published, “A timeline of confrontation, contention and confusion surrounding Trump’s photo op at Washington church,” prepared by Karl Gelles, Veronica Bravo, and George Petras originally dated June 5, 2020, and updated on June 11. The events on the list begin on Sunday, May 31, “Demonstrators set fire to the basement nursery of St. John’s Episcopal Church at about 10 p.m. The fire is extinguished by District firefighters. Church officials say the nursery is destroyed and the church is later boarded up.”

In an *Associated Press News* article on June 1, 2020, titled, “Tear gas, threats for protestors before Trump visits church,” Jill Colvin and Darlene Superville describe what then occurred on Monday. They wrote the president had intended to address the nation from the White House Rose Garden at 7 p.m., but at 6:30 p.m., “law enforcement officers were aggressively forcing the protestors back, firing tear gas and deploying flash bangs into the crowd to disperse them from the park for seemingly no reason.” The story continued, “With smoke still wafting and isolated tussles continuing in the crowd, Trump emerged in the Rose Garden for a dramatic split-screen of his own creation.”

“‘I am your president of law and order and an ally of all peaceful protestors,’ he declared, before demanding that governors across the nation deploy the National Guard ‘in sufficient numbers that we dominate the streets.’ And he warned that, if they refused, he would deploy the United States military ‘and quickly solve the problem for them.’”

In introducing their *USA Today* timeline, the authors reported, “U.S. and military police drove protestors out of Lafayette Square, located between the White House and the historic St. John’s Episcopal Church, shortly before a presidential photo op with a Bible at the church on June 1.”

They continued, “White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said the president wanted to send ‘a very powerful message that we will not be overcome by looting, by rioting, by burning’ and compared Trump’s visit to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s inspection of bomb damage during the London Blitz in World War II.”

The president is no Winston Churchill. He does not exude the oratory skill, confidence, and leadership that Churchill presented in inspiring the British people in response to the German invasions of World War II. Nor does the president exude the mature and reassuring leadership of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the years of the Great Depression through WWII.

From my perspective of watching *Washington Post* and Fox News video footage, the president was awkward and indifferent during his trip to St. John’s. Dressed in a plain navy blue suit, he strode through Lafayette Park, alone, several feet ahead of his phalanx of colleagues with security officers herding civilians away from his path. He had a sour look on his face, was neither comforting nor inspiring, showed no familiarity with or care for the Bible that his daughter, Ivanka, handed him but fidgeted with it before holding it aloft in his right hand. When asked if it was his Bible, the president responded in terse one-line phrases: “We have a great country. That’s my thoughts. Greatest country in the world. Gonna make it even greater, and it won’t take long. It’s not going to take long. We’re coming back, and we’re coming back strong. We’ll be greater than ever before.”

His notions about greatness stand in sharp contrast to at least one central teaching of Christianity, expressed by Jesus of Nazareth in a conversation with his disciples as recorded in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9, Verses 33-36. The Biblical passage says:

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

On June 2, CNN's Paul LeBlanc reported the Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, Episcopal bishop of Washington, as saying, "Let me be clear, the president just used a Bible, the most sacred text of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and one of the churches of my diocese, without permission, as a backdrop for a message antithetical to the teachings of Jesus." She added, "This was a charade that in some ways was meant to bolster a message that does nothing to calm — to calm the soul and to reassure the nation that we can recover from this moment which is what we need from a President, and that's what the faith communities stand for."

On June 4, CNN's Steven Collison wrote, "In a true Washington bombshell on Wednesday evening, former Defense Secretary James Mattis, a warrior revered by his troops, told Americans they must come together without the President:

"Donald Trump is the first president in my lifetime who does not try to unite the American people — does not even pretend to try," said Mattis, who has kept silent since resigning in 2018.

"Instead, he tries to divide us. We are witnessing the consequences of three years of this deliberate effort. We are witnessing the consequences of three years without mature leadership," said the retired Marine general in a statement, criticizing Trump for threatening to deploy regular troops to quell unrest in a flagrant threat to US political stability.

I am reminded of a documentary motion picture class at Montana State University in 1971, when I first saw the 1935 German film *Triumph of the Will* produced by Leni Reifenstahl. The highly acclaimed, artistic filmmaker produced the documentary for German chancellor Adolf Hitler, showcasing the Reich Party Congress, its rallies, and marches in Nuremberg in 1934. Reifenstahl took great care in selecting scenes and symbolism to manipulate the viewer's emotions.

The film opens with a long sequence of large, dark cumulus clouds edged with sunshine filmed from the cockpit of a plane, followed by aerial views of the castles and streets of Nuremberg, including a massive military parade. The camera then moves to ground level with shots of the airplane — what could be considered the German equivalent of Air Force One — flying over the city. The clouds have cleared, and the plane is basked in sunshine. It lands at an airport where large crowds wait and salute as the door opens and Hitler steps out. The soundtrack consists of inspirational, symphonic music — the Nazi anthem, also known as the "Horst Wessel Song." One can imagine that Reifenstahl had intended that Hitler would appear to have descended to earth from the heavens.

Blogger Maksym Chorny, on his web site about war documentaries, analyzes the opening of the film. "After the shots of the airplane filled with mysticism and symbols, we can observe Hitler himself, facing the public. The visual narration presents us with its main character — the central part of the entire Nuremberg Congress. In a scene when the Fuhrer motorcade moves through the streets of the city of Nuremberg, he is presented as the long-awaited Messiah of the German people, receiving enthusiastic applause, smiles and even flowers from a little girl. Sunlight breaks through his palm raised in the Nazi salute and it seems, even a cat on the windowsill of one of the houses is waiting for a chance to see the leader of the nation."

Mistakenly, I recalled that Reifensahl had used a cathedral and the Bible as two of the symbols in *Triumph of the Will*, but when I recently reviewed the entire documentary, looking for those symbols, I found neither. The Third Reich Congress, however, did hold rallies in a large hall that appeared somewhat like a church gathering, and the film did include many scenes of Nazi banners, as well as flags on flag poles, each topped with an ornamental, golden eagle.

Germany had been worn down by World War I (1914 -1918) and was bearing the weight of the harsh stipulations the Allied nations demanded in the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed on June 28, 1919. Many Germans called the treaty a dictated peace.

A series of titles at the beginning of *Triumph of the Will* establishes the timing of the 1934 Reich Party Congress as “sixteen years after the start of the German suffering” and “nineteen months after the start of Germany’s rebirth” in January 1933, when Hitler had been appointed as chancellor. His mantra could just as easily have been, “Make Germany great again.”

Reifensahl most likely would never have choreographed a scene as awkward and ineffective as the one of the U.S. president at St. John’s Episcopal Church on June 1, 2020. His walk there, escorted by enablers who should have known better, was a matter of authority gone awry. The events of the day may be a signal that the president is coming closer to implementing, or at least wanting to implement, legislation called the Insurrection Act that dates back to 1807.

On June 3, 2020, Ian Shapira of *The Washington Post* explained the Insurrection Act. “Originally signed by Thomas Jefferson and amended over the years, it states: ‘Whenever there is an insurrection in any State against its government, the President may, upon the request of its legislature or of its governor if the legislature cannot be convened,’” send in military troops.

In case governors don’t comply with Trump’s demands, one provision of the law, passed in 1956, gives him the power to act unilaterally: “Whenever the President considers unlawful obstructions, combinations, or assemblages or rebellion against the authority of the United States, [that] make it impracticable to enforce the laws ... in any State ... he may call into Federal service such of the militia of any State, and use such of the armed forces, as he considers necessary to enforce those laws or to suppress the rebellion.”

Even before the murder of George Floyd, systematic racism was a factor in the COVID-19 pandemic with people of color afflicted and dying in significantly greater numbers from the virus than white people. Then with the confluence of the pandemic, Floyd’s death, and the increased roiling of racial tensions, the role of government authority became extra complex and the population extra vulnerable.

People were still being advised to shelter-in-place and not attend large gatherings in order to flatten the curve of the pandemic. However, there are those who feel and felt strongly about the need to take action in response to systematic racism and police brutality that they are and were willing to attend congested gatherings such as protests. Society itself is also extra vulnerable to police or state and federal government officials who would opt to overstep their authority to deal with the pandemic and the protests.

The result of the president’s trip to St. John’s Episcopal Church may have been different had he asked Bishop Budde to host a silent vigil, prayer session, or mediated listening session with leaders and other participants from all kinds of faith traditions, as well as for those who claim no prescribed faith, with a focus on seeking wisdom, generating compassion, facilitating healing, and implementing legislative and policy changes.

Although I distrust Republican presidents the most, I also have reservations about Democratic presidents and candidates, considering how hard it is for any one person to court

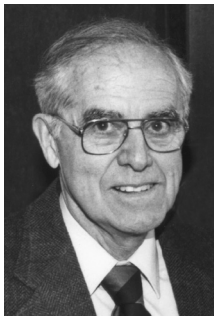
the support of the country's power mongers and raise the money needed to be elected to the Oval Office while maintaining any semblance of purity.

I have said that Dwight D. Eisenhower was the first president I voted for. Of course, that's an attempt at humor, considering I was only seven and not of the age to vote when he was first elected in 1952. Yet I grew up in a Republican family, and Eisenhower was the first presidential nominee whose name I would recognize. Admittedly, his being a West Point graduate, five-star Army general, and Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe during WWII would mean he knew how to operate within spheres of elite influence and that he was not as pure a person as his gentle persona with an easy, wide, gentle smile would lead one to believe. I remember, though, proudly wearing my one-inch round campaign button that said, "I like Ike." My fondness for Eisenhower, who was 62 when first elected, was like that of the endearment a child might have for a kind grandfather.

Eisenhower's foresight and wisdom in his final speech to the nation on January 17, 1961, is impressive and needs to be invoked now about the perils of the military-industrial complex:

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

It is three quarters of a century since 1945 when I was born on April 19 and Adolf Hitler and his long-time companion and wife of fewer than 40 hours, Eva Braun, took their lives in a bunker on April 30. Then on May 7, Germany surrendered to the Allied Forces.



Roger De Wall



Deane Gunderson



Joe Reigelsberger



Verle Howard



Don Grant

In September of that year, my parents, two older siblings, and I moved from Waterloo, Iowa, where Dad worked for the John Deere Tractor Company, designing tail hooks for Grumman aircraft for the war effort, to the farm where I grew up. This project has documented many of the changes in that rural neighborhood, as well as regionally and nationally, and it is appropriate to wonder what Eisenhower would think of today's president. Or what would the men and women who grew up during the Great Depression and fought in WWII or in other ways helped win it think of him? Surely, they fought against tyranny and would not have expected it to come here in such a conspicuous fashion.

There are people who would disagree 180 degrees from my perspective and point to what they view as the tyranny of today's liberals. However, it was a shock when I encountered such a difference of opinion this spring. I had been corresponding by email as part of fact-checking for my book with a person I have known and admired in my home county. They responded in a friendly, helpful way. They also wrote of the pandemic, reporting that they wear their face mask wherever they go and there had been only three cases of the COVID-19 virus in the county. They added, "It is a challenging time but I think the Lord is trying to tell us something and too many are not listening!!!!"

Although I understand Lord or God language, I generally choose not to use it. However, I realize there is a lot that can be learned from the pandemic, and if I were to use God talk, I would say God is not manipulative and does not create tragedies for the sake of providing teachable moments for human kind. Tragic events such as pandemics do happen, and there is potential to learn from them.

When I called the person to clarify their information, I referred to their comment in the email about the Lord. I knew them to be well-educated and a community leader and thought their concerns might be similar in nature to mine about how the pandemic has exposed some of the frailties of society, including racism or classism. Or perhaps they were hopeful the pandemic would force people to be more compassionate toward other people or pay more attention to their personal spiritual lives and practices. That was not the case. They responded with great vigor with a long rationale to the effect, "Oh, don't you know, what Nancy Pelosi [Speaker of the House] and Adam Schiff [U.S. Representative who led the presidential impeachment hearings] have been up to? It is simply terrible how they are treating that man [President Trump.] He is doing a great job, and they should just get out of his way."

Whew. I was silent, listened out of respect, and wanted to avoid a complex discussion or even a hint of a fight. Finally, I simply and quietly spoke, "This is where I have to disagree with you." They responded that I had a right to disagree. Yes, this is a democracy. I wonder, though, at what point is it most helpful, on one hand, to drop a conversation or, on the other hand, to explain my perspective to a person who so wholeheartedly holds an opinion that I believe to be so wrong. In this instance, I sensed the case was closed. I still think highly of my friend even though I am disappointed and recognize they are not alone in their attitude. It runs rampant in most of the counties of this congressional district.

For the record, Republican State Senator Randy Feenstra defeated incumbent Republican U.S. Representative Steve King, who has been in Congress since 2003, in Iowa's June 2020 primary election. Feenstra received 45.7 percent of the vote. King 36 percent. I was flummoxed that 28,977 people voted for King, considering he has received so much negative publicity over the past three decades for his white supremacist language that many people perceived as an embarrassment to Iowa and prompted his own party in Congress to censor him. Among his many controversial remarks, King has claimed he would like America to be a more homogenous country where people looked more alike and criticized multiculturalism, saying "Diversity is not our strength."

I wish the Democratic nominee, J.D. Scholten, well and am supporting him as he continues his current campaign to become the fourth Democratic representative in Iowa's delegation of four in Congress, but conservative Republican ideologies have a lock on politics in this district. The business manager for Scholten's campaign said their team plans to attack Feenstra's loyalty to President Trump. Considering how much the president is sliding in popularity polls, Scholten's strategy might just work.

Enough about politics. Even in less volatile times, I have felt that news of the presidency dominated news cycles and social conversations way too much. Yes, there is need for awareness and vigilance. However, becoming fixated on presidential news can be a distraction from

being present to who we essentially are in the moment in a mindful way, having deeply meaningful conversations, and finding ways to effectively be of service.

Independence Day was different in Ames this year. The mayor and city council members did not serve their traditional pancake breakfast. The city hosted no live band concert, no fireworks celebration, no parade. Wheatsfield did not serve a hot dog and brat lunch, and the 10-million dollar Furman Aquatic Center with lazy river, water slides, and other features built just a decade ago is closed for the season.

I have a suggestion for celebrating this day creatively. The day is called “Independence Day” because our founders wanted independence from the tyrannical rule of a king. Continuing to celebrate and pursue that ideal is more relevant now than ever. Why not think of the day also as “Interdependence Day,” considering the interconnected nature of people, especially in the face of the pandemic, racial and class tensions, economic struggles, and environmental challenges such as climate change? Recognize and resist the idolatry of rugged individualism and militarism. Recognize and resist the idolatry of privilege. Recognize and resist tyranny and other misuses of authority. Have a gentle Interdependence Day that includes consideration of neighbors when shooting off fireworks and a choice of other elements such as solitude to reflect on what is important, good food and companionship, discussions with family and friends about privilege or what patriotism means, reading alone or to another person, writing, painting, making music, throwing a Frisbee, walking the dog, brushing the cat, acts of kindness, being of service, and participating in a protest to name a few options.



Flag at the Velma and Verle Howard farm home. 1989.

During my years enrolled in San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS) in the 1980s, several students were heavily involved in social justice activism, especially against U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua. Some activists appeared to be caught up too easily in the outer focus of spirituality without being grounded in the interior dimensions of spirituality. Others of us erred in being too focused on the inner life, not taking the risks that our classmates were making. I may be continuing to err in the direction of inner spirituality even now. However, there is a place for practicing yoga, mindfulness, and meditation as well as learning more about the issues, being open to self-reflection, and discerning how to be involved to make a difference.

The protests and riots this spring and early summer are beyond my comprehension. I have stayed my distance, partially due to not knowing how to get involved but mainly out of fear. That said, I do admire the resolve of people who have stood against racism, promoted the overhaul of police departments, and lobbied state and federal governments. I have heard the criticism directed at white people — that if they are not finding a way to take a stand against racism, they are just as culpable as anyone else for the misuse of authority. Mea culpa. Even from a young age, I have felt conflicted about classism and the privilege I have had being part of a family that owned more than 3,000 acres of land. Admittedly, this book is about a white neighborhood and heritage; however, I am not new at understanding that systemic racism exists and being part of a racist society means that I, too, am a racist even though I am uncomfortable with accepting that label.



My spirits are heavier these days than in April when the pandemic and the practice of staying in place were still novel. Often, I have nightmares such as one last week when I found it hard to awake from a plot in which I suffered from dementia, was homeless with no friends or other support, and possessed no privilege in the streets of Oakland, California, where nary a soul was to be seen due to the pandemic. Each day, it takes a while for me to find ambition, especially after a disturbing dream such as that one. However, I am not giving up on the future as if doomsday is here. Even if it were at our doorstep, I will continue to nurture the baby apple trees that I grafted this spring with scionwood carrying the DNA of the wealthy apple tree at my grandparents' home and find homes for them. I will transplant one in my back yard and give the other trees away even though I do not know yet where they will find new homes. No matter where they are transplanted, there will be at least five years before they produce their first apples. I will water and weed my pepper, tomato, collards, kale, and cabbage plants and take produce to the Food at First pantry in Ames and make bread for FAF meals. I will continue providing a place of hospitality, albeit much less than usual due to the pandemic and its distancing. And I will be a catalyst, helping others who want to begin or continue growing food at their homes.

This urban farm is a great teacher. One of the biggest learning opportunities relates to the value of diversity. In 2006 when I bought my home in Ames with visions of growing food here, Mark Runquist, a church friend, gave me the book *Gaia's Garden* about permaculture and its principle of fostering diversity. I was mesmerized as I read. Originally, I thought the word was a combination of "permanent" and "agriculture" and meant using the land in sustainable ways. There are, however, many kinds of permaculture principles that can be applied to many planning disciplines.

Farm fields developed with permaculture principles look far different from those of the 21 million acres of Iowa farmland planted only to corn or soybeans. With the latter, there is hardly any variation of plant size within a given field, due to the use of high-tech hybrid seed, and nary a weed, due to the use of herbicides. Urban lots developed with permaculture in mind look far different than the vast number of city, town, and suburban lots with neatly-manicured and chemically-treated lawns.

I do my best to practice permaculture. The principles foremost in my mind are (1) working with nature instead of against it, (2) growing plants and animals that serve more than one purpose, (3) planning with a long-term perspective rather than for immediate gratification, and (4) developing diversity.



Backyard view of Helen's urban farm. 2020.

In our attempts to work with nature at my Ames urban farm, we have developed a large plot of prairie in a low area at the back of the rental lot, an area that floods almost every spring. We start far more apple trees than we will ever need and in a variety of areas we believe are conducive to their health to see how well each terrain suits them. We don't expect all trees to thrive, but the ones that do thrive get to stay. We consider how plants and animals might serve different purposes. For instance, the cherry trees provide habitat and food for birds and bees, cherries and the recreation of picking them for humans, shade for chickens, and beauty to behold. The mixed breeds of chickens provide eggs, fertilizer, insect and weed control to a certain extent, entertainment, companionship, and again, beauty to behold.

Creating diversity is the most obvious principle we incorporate here. The farm is a collage of what some guests might consider to be a random, motley assortment of prairie plots, garden beds, fruit trees and patches. In many locations, it is hard to tell where the native plants end and the domestic plants begin.

The "Three Sisters guild" with corn, beans, and squash growing next to each other is a common example of growing diverse plants together for their common good. We tried growing a Three Sisters plot only once, losing the corn to raccoons. The equivalent here, though, is our apple guilds with yarrow, rhubarb, and comfrey nested around each apple tree to benefit each other. We also grow basil beside tomato plants and sweet alyssum in our cabbage beds. There are no large garden beds with only one vegetable growing in them. We annually rotate our crops, knowing, for instance, that it would be folly to grow only tomatoes in one large space year after year, risking extensive blight damage that would mean no more tomatoes or other members of the night shade family (peppers, potatoes, eggplant) in that space for at least three years.



Bowl of Helen's mystery tomatoes. 2020.

Our mystery tomato plants are one exception to the diversity principle. I eat few, if any tomatoes, during the summer, due to their effect on my digestive system, so my only purpose for growing them is to make pizza sauce and dehydrate some for wintertime snacks. I don't require a wide variety of tomatoes like some culinary enthusiasts might demand. Also, I had been disappointed for nearly a decade with how the various heirloom tomatoes that I grew, more often than not, were disappointing with sunscald, blight, cracks, not ripening fully before the first freeze, and other problems. Then in 2016, I discovered a volunteer tomato plant just south of my house. I saved seed from it and have continued to grow that line of tomato in my plots while Diane next door grows a greater variety for her place. I call the volunteer "Helen's mystery tomato plant" and start several each year, giving some away and transplanting nine here with three each in three different areas of my yard. These mystery tomatoes usually are about the size of a tennis ball, smooth, dark red, beautiful with no blemishes and ripen from late July through the end September. Although they defy any measure of diversity, they are an example of working with nature.

We grow several cultivars of apple trees, and for most of our vegetables, we intend to grow at least two kinds of seed, getting much of it from Seed Savers Exchange near Decorah, Iowa. Our peppers include sweet ones such as Carmen and Revolution and the mildly hot Poblanos and Anaheims. Diane insists on growing even hotter ones, including Jalapenos, which I will not touch.

For kale, we plant Red Russian and Winterbor seed. For collards: Champion, Georgia Southern, or Vates. For cabbage: Copenhagen, Early Jersey Wakefield, Farao, or Murdoc. This place also has its own perennial, if not native, supply of green, leafy vegetables: purslane, lambsquarters, and another that is a relative of the Amaranth family and high in vitamin A.



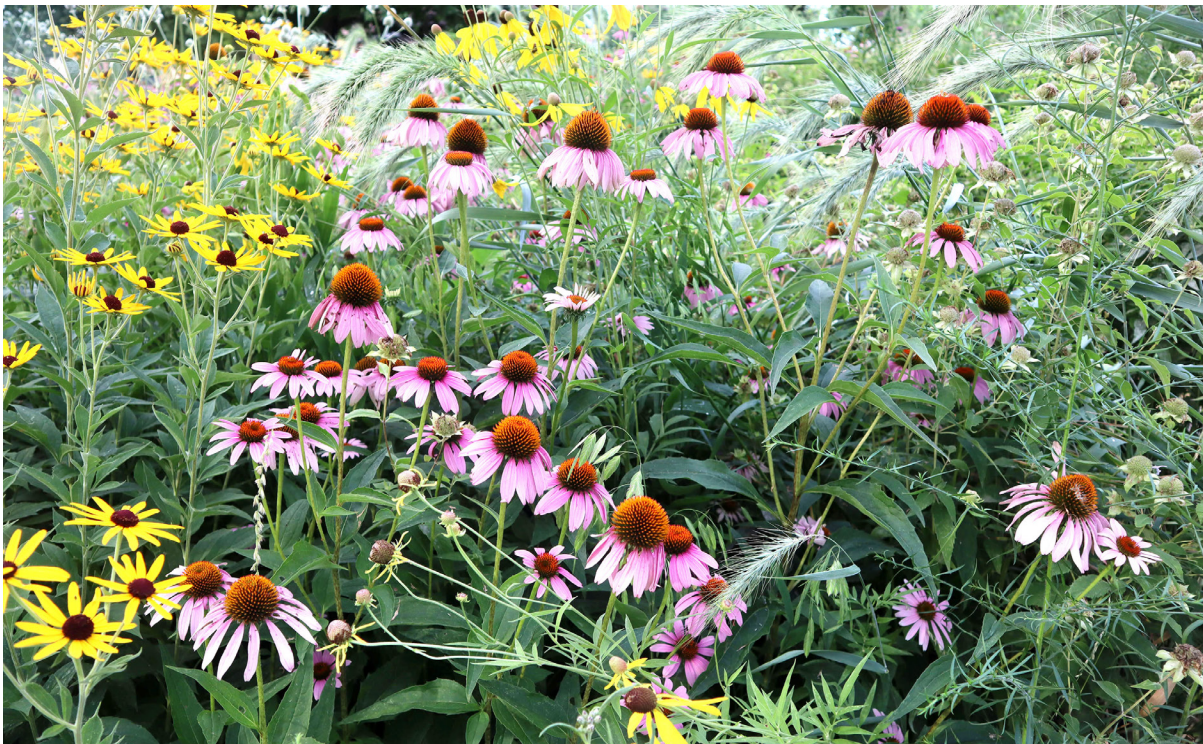
Bloodroot pigweed



Lambsquarters

Huong Nguyen, the weed specialist doctoral student who lived next door and pointed the latter out to me, said it is known as Redroot Pigweed. Although the three plants are generally considered to be weeds, I am having fun harvesting, cooking, and eating them, as well as freezing some for winter meals.

Diversity is one factor in our ability to grow many kinds of vegetables well without synthetic fertilizers and chemical herbicides. Diversity also means that many birds, bees, butterflies, and other insects are at home here. It also adds to the intrigue of the place and the way in which so many people, myself and guests included, enjoy simply meandering around the farm or sitting in a chair on the orchard deck for conversation or solitude, appreciating nature and feeling whole.



Prairie patch at Helen's urban farm. 2020.

I am not new to understanding that nature provides good examples of the value of diversity. Decades ago, while listening to public radio when driving north through Minnesota, I heard prairie scientists explain a research trial in which they had started several identically-sized test plots, I imagine about 10 x 10 feet each. They planted only one prairie species in some plots with increasing numbers in the others. The scientists observed and concluded that, as the diversity of prairie plants in the plots increased, the health, as well as the bulk of vegetation in the plots, increased.

Bret Lang, a friend who used to work at my urban farm and is now an environmental specialist with the Iowa Waste Reduction Center at the University of Northern Iowa, sent me an example of prairie diversity on 25 acres of land just north of Ames. “Doolittle Prairie is able to support 223 native species (and 42 non-native species) of plant life as well as at least 61 species of birds, 31 species of butterflies, and several mammal species. I couldn’t imagine how many species of insect live there.”

The prairie projects I implemented from the late 1990s to 2016 on my Pocahontas County farmland through the USDA Conservation Reserve Program involved restoring row crop acres to prairie. Most likely, they will never have the extent of diversity found at Doolittle, which is considered a virgin prairie. The 220 acres in Des Moines Township northeast of Rolfe, that I call DeElda Farm in memory of my grandmother, DeElda Gunderson, has a large variety of native flora and fauna. It provides a wonderful environment for monarch butterflies and is home to at least one “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” in Iowa, a small songbird known as the bobolink.

My 17-acre permanent pasture covered with Brome grass and scattered pockets of native plants has never been tilled due to its hilly terrain even though cattle grazed on it as late as the 1970s. My greatest hope lies with my 77-acre CRP pollinator habitat, considering its size and that the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is overseeing its development and arranged to have some 35-plus species of local ecotype prairie seed sown there, beginning in 2016. Shaped like a wide, rectangular picture frame, the pollinator project surrounds a 90-acre field that Abram Frank farms organically.



Aerial view of land that Helen calls “DeElda Farm” northeast of Rolfe, Iowa. Drone photography by Abram Frank. Camera faces south with the town barely visible in the upper right hand corner. 2020.

Another lesson at Burnett Urban Farm relates to how easy it is to become overwhelmed with all that is wrong and not remember that my attitude is what is important. Way too many thistles are blossoming and about to go to seed in my garden and prairie patches. Volunteer maple, mulberry, walnut, redbud, and other saplings can show up almost anywhere and are an ever-present challenge. The screened porch with three cat litter boxes and the workshop area in the garage are often cluttered. Inside the house, there are too many days when the kitchen is messy and the dirty dishes neglected for too long a time or when there are fuzz balls of cat hair floating in the air and spots where the cats have upchucked their food on the floor or furniture in other rooms of the house. I need to be patient and let go of the need for perfection. I also need to admit the work is too much for me and find help. Other times, I must overcome complacency, rise from a nap, and find the energy to take on at least one small task such as sweeping the porch, cleaning the litter boxes, watering the garden beds, feeding and watering the chickens, and taking pruning shears in hand to go after the thistles and saplings. Amazingly, doing one small task can generate enthusiasm to do more projects. I am not all that elderly and still have the ability to take responsibility for this place, especially for my plants, chickens, and cats who would not survive without me.

If I am wise, I will approach the day and its tasks with the attitude exemplified in the Zen saying, "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water."

Each year, there are some aspects of the farm that fail. This year's cherry crop was only five percent of normal. The cucumber vines died early. The apple and elderberry trees and patches of gooseberries and raspberries are flourishing as are herbs such as anise hyssop, beebalm, lemon balm, mint, oregano, and perilla. The lesson: not to be bummed by something that fails. Life is a matter of balance — especially of yin as yang — at any given moment.

I try to avoid being overwhelmed by news and thinking all is terrible or for naught, and yet, not err by denying the tragedies. I need to remember that the information I receive through the portals of listservs, organizational web sites, internet news sites, and public radio represents only selected streams of the whole of life and may be distorted either innocently or intentionally. I also need to be present to the close-to-home, daily reality as I experience it. The latter means being grateful for a range of wonderful and not so wonderful experiences. Fortunately, this week I can find plump, sweet red raspberries and plump, sour red and green gooseberries on my farm, pluck them from their patches, and eat them on location.

Could not the same be said about my relationship to the larger issues of society? To work on my attitude, learning more about the ways I am privileged? To acknowledge there is much, if not too much, that needs attention, yet learn to be patient and let go of perfectionism? To find balance and not be immobilized by guilt or be lulled into a privileged complacency? To realize I still have the capacity to be responsible? To recognize there is much that is good and be grateful?

What I learn from Ruthann, my yoga teacher; Eric Daishin McCabe and Sara Jisho Siebert, who are Zen priests living just down the street; and Pema Chodron, author of *When Things Fall Apart*, is the need for people interested in spiritual growth to feel their pain and learn from it. It is not as though a mindful person tries or can escape feelings such as anger, grief, and depression or the circumstances that precipitated those feelings. However, the lesson is for people to let go of the judging what the pain means and be attuned to the essence of who they are under the crust of those feelings. As Chodron says in her book:

Life is a good teacher and a good friend. Things are always in transition, if we could only realize it. Nothing ever sums itself up in the way that we like to dream about. The off-center, in-between state is an ideal situation, a situation in which we don't get caught and we can open our hearts and minds beyond limit.



I was age 36 when I enrolled in seminary and 40 when I graduated in 1985. During those years, I often felt like I was in a midlife crisis and was fortunate to be able to attend non-credit weekend seminars on spirituality. I believe author and philosopher, Sam Keen, was the guest leader whose advice continues to resonate with me. He said, “If we are lucky, we will experience a midlife crisis.” His metaphor — an acorn — suggesting that unless the shell of an acorn is cracked open, an oak tree will not emerge and that in our own personal growth, we too, must undergo transitions that are not always comfortable. Admittedly, some people do not make it through the crises of midlife but succumb to tragic circumstances, if not suicide. However, individuals can grow from midlife challenges, which could happen at any age and multiple times, and become a people they never envisioned they could become.

A nation, too, can grow from its challenges and become better than its people had envisioned it could be — not idealizing the past but open to possibilities that blend the best of the old and the new. One could pray for humankind to transcend the difficult times, learn, and arrive at new attitudes of decency toward each other as individuals, groups, communities and nations, existing together on this planet — our shared home.



Oak tree, known as “Big Beauty,” on land owned by Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation near Pella, Iowa. 2015. Photo by Tylar Samuels, INHF conservation easement specialist, and used courtesy of INHF.