

Conversations on the way to Conservation

by Ralph C. Martin

In order to engage with another person, we listen and observe body language, or may look for emoticons, within 140 characters. A conversation is not a monologue, but rather a dialogue, at several levels of awareness.

We commonly refer to land management or perhaps even land stewardship. However, such approaches may be monologues. Land and our ecosystems as a whole deserve the engagement of conversations. That means listening and observing the signs of holistic functioning, or on the other hand, stress.

Recently I was asked about the impact of the accelerating speed of change in rural Ontario. It's taken me awhile to develop a better answer. Commercial representatives come down farm lanes promoting products and practices that will surely help the promoter, if not the farmer. Formerly, these ideas were sifted contemplatively, during chores or with field work and as many loops around the field, as required, to determine if there was value. My grandfather talked things over with the cattle. Today, electronic connections, buzzing for reactions, disrupt Zen-like considerations.

It pays to assign time for evaluating how a change will affect the agrology and economics of the farm as well as the social networks and ecology linked to it. Farm families, especially those who have been there for several generations, tend not to think in one dimension, although they are increasingly hustled about advantages that may only narrowly apply. It takes ongoing time for reflection and confidence to intuit, think and then decide on the basis of how the whole farm will be affected.

North American aboriginals have traditions of listening to and observing the land, trees and other plants, animals and the sky. Albert Marshall, a wise Mi'kmaq elder from Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, advises two eyed seeing. He says that his tradition allows him to observe the nuanced and integrated signs of nature, while science provides very precise information, based on certain assumptions. "We see more fully, when we have both eyes wide open."

One year in my youth, I co-managed a farm near Ottawa. On a June morning I was keen to cut a forage field for hay but hesitated when sensing a risk of rain. Eddie,

who had noticed just about everything on that farm since the day he was born, 85 years previously, sipped his black tea beside his equally well established geranium plant. Every morning he boiled enough water for 2 cups of tea; one and a half for him and a half for his trusted companion.

He often pointed out to me how tree leaves were turning or the wind was shifting. “Eddie, do you think it will rain in the next three days?” As he peered from under his bushy eyebrows, out the bay window, at evidence not apparent to me, he replied “I don’t know. I haven’t seen the paper yet.” Another two eyed seer.

At the other end of the food value chain, consumers also contribute by pausing to converse about their daily nourishment. Food warrants the appreciative attention of touch, listening to the sizzle, smelling success before the oven bell and viewing before tasting, the final offering. Sharing conversation and food, with gratitude for the meal, evokes bonding at its most basic level and with new energy, possibilities emerge.

People also converse with how they live. Mary Jo Leddy in Radical Gratitude says “we each have one significant word to say with our lives.” Such words are impactful.

Ray Anderson in Mid-Course Correction reflects on his epiphany when he read Paul Hawken’s book The Ecology of Commerce. Anderson describes how he took this internal conversation to a new environmental task force within, Interface, his carpet company. “I gave that task force a kick-off speech that, frankly surprised me, stunned them and then galvanized all of us into action.” He further explains their strategy to reduce, reuse, reclaim, recycle, and redesign. To accomplish this list of Rs, “the nominal decision unit, the enlightened, self-interest guided individual, should be replaced by persons in community,” with more conversations.

It is possible to transform the dreaded word ‘meeting’ to an occasion when, instead of participants focusing on talking, they listen, with emotional and psychological awareness, before advancing positions or responses. Ideas that might otherwise zip by each other in urgent transmission, can gain synergistic potential in the context of collaborative shaping. Time can be saved and bruised egos, healed.

We don’t yet have the most effective ways to meet challenges to conserve or develop our mental and physical health, vibrant communities, profitable businesses and

resilient ecosystems. Conversations, in the spirit of inclusiveness and addressing real needs, offer options.

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