

DEFINING WEALTH

Mary-Howell Martens (with Klaas' help)

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The other night, our new friend Henry leaned comfortably back in his chair at our table after a good meal of our homegrown pork, and captivated us with wonderful stories about his experiences as the Peace Corps country director for Mali in the 1960's and of the interesting people he has met since as a horticultural journalist. Tales of African dancers performing for President Jimmy Carter's mother blended vividly with descriptions of artists, mechanics and others he has met who share a common love for organic gardening.

In the morning of that same day, Adam and Kimberly came into the mill with some terrific news. For the past several years, they have struggled hard to make their hill-farm pay, but the soil and location are simply not well suited to organic row crops. They've spent the winter renovating their barn, just the two of them to save money, and finally their first shipment of organic milk was picked up this week. Kimberly said that when the milk inspector came last week to approve



their barn, they received a score of 100% for the milk house they've worked so hard on. I commented, "I bet that makes you feel good." Kimberly's round face glowed, radiant as a child at Christmas, her strawberry blonde hair bobbing up and down, and joyfully she breathed "I just bubbled inside!"

Over the past 5 years, our cup has been filled with so many wonderful people. People who have sat at our table and shared our food, our children, and our home. People who have shared their food, their children and their

homes with us. People we have met briefly, people we have had the privilege to get to know well, and many email and phone friends we have never actually met face to face.

There's Lisa and Carl who are building a log cabin by hand and from scratch in the woods with their two small children and sharing countless hours teaching others how to farm organically. There's Mike and Gayle who grow just about everything on their 1500 acre organic farm but somehow still find time to homeschool their 7 children, and despite major challenges and setbacks, are always so cheerful and appreciative.

There's young Menno who is invariably optimistic when he come into the mill, interested in trying new things on his small organic dairy farm and confident in success. There's Steve who, in his retirement, is energetically organizing discouraged farmers in Indiana to consider alternative approaches and ideas. There's Sister Miriam who makes everyone near her feel good, healthy and strong through her deep calm faith and her belief in the unity and goodness of nature.

There's Regina and Brent, who supplement their organic dairy income by giving sleigh rides through their Vermont woods during the winter.

There's Beth, Ted, Anu, Laurie, Karen, Steve and many others who are working within the Cooperative Extension and university system to help organic farmers do a better job and to quietly and subtly convert die-hard conventional farmers to see the organic light. There's Ronnie and Brett who we have delightedly watched grow in confidence and ability as they see that their conversion of 3000 acres to organic really works, to the astonishment of doubting family members.

There's Mike and Maria, who are renting out their organic farm for a few years to volunteer Mike's agronomic skills and Maria's medical skills as missionaries in Nicaragua. Our children's world has also been greatly enlarged by other organically-connected children, places and ideas, from tow-headed Jamie who has spent a week each summer for the past few years on our farm, to the two little girls that our kids bounced around the hog barn with at the state fairgrounds in Lafayette, Indiana this past February, contra-dancing with a bunch of hopelessly inept but laughing adults.

The list could go on and on, we have met so many great people through organics, and we are truly enriched by all those who have touched our life even briefly. For the most part, these folks are not the 'names' of the organic community - they are simply good organic farmers, researchers, educators, inspectors and processors who are trying their best to do a good job and help others. These are not folks for whom 'everything has always gone right'. They have had their share of disappointments and challenges, but they are optimistic, they are happy, and they share their success with others. These are people who, for the most part, do not measure their success in money alone, and we are incredibly wealthy ourselves by knowing them.

We are especially privileged to be part of the truly remarkable and egalitarian team at our feed mill and on our farm - Daniel, Norm, Chuck, Robert, Lester, Shawn, Todd, Greg, Clark, Kevin. We range in age from 18 to 70+, our education level ranges from an 8th grade one-room Mennonite schoolhouse to Cornell graduate school with everything in between. None of these differences matter much as we enjoy each other as people and friends, equally contributing our different experiences and skills, and working together toward a common and worthwhile mission. Sometimes I look around at the group of us and realize how blessed we are to be here, now, as organics grows, as our opportunities increase. How fortunate we are to be in the center of the exciting geometric growth of this new industry with such neat people to share the experience with.

There are many doors into the organic community. Some folks come in through their alternative lifestyle, some come desperately seeking ways to save their farms, some are merely attracted by high organic soybean and dairy prices. This is a community that is growing and changing. Increasingly the new organic farmers are conventional farmers seeking more profitable approaches, but we have also been truly impressed by the number of young people that we met this winter at organic conferences who are not from farm backgrounds. Hopefully as we get to know each other and learn from each other, we will realize that our similarities are far greater than our differences.

The calendar says that it is now spring, though as we write this column, it is the first week in April and we are encased in an ice storm, the trees are glistening, cracking and breaking under the weight of the ice, the fields are sodden, and no field work has started in New York. We have had only a few days of that wondrous early Spring warmth, that feeling of an 'incredible lightness of being' when the air is soft and gentle, coats are shucked, the earth is spongy and richly fragrant, the apple tree buds swell, and at night, the tree frogs make a deafening roar down by the pond. Impatiently we wait for the weather to break, for we know all too well how much work needs to be done,

The days of Spring will come though, they always do, and we are ready. The seed sits in the barn. The equipment that Robert and Klaas have been working on all winter is ready to go. When those days come, the fieldwork will take precedence over everything else and our days will run very long. Farmers everywhere will leave their community with other people and will sit alone on their tractors, deep in that silent, intense communion with the soil, the air, the seeds, and the sun. The soft whoosh of the grain drill, the muted jangling of the corn planter, the smell of freshly turned warm earth behind the plow, the warm sun on our backs. It is the primal Spring urge that defines a real farmer, that irresistible urge to merge one's very soul with the soil and start the process all over again.

Those days will come, very soon, and we will be ready.