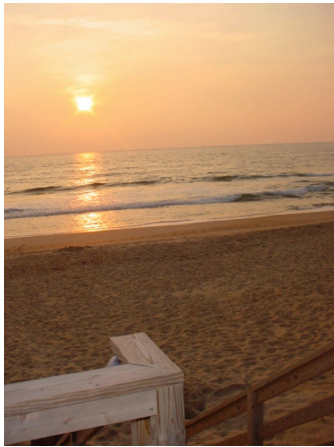


The Trouble with Making the 'Right' Decisions

Mary-Howell Martens (with Klaas' help)

The sun is brilliantly sparkling on the water, the waves a gentle and steady rhythm, and the ocean breeze is warm on my arms. The children, sun-blown and tanned, are laughing as they play cards with their uncle before lunch, my father is reading by the window, and I can hear the murmur of my mother, aunts and sister talking in the kitchen.



Earlier in the morning, the kids and I had a wonderful time, jumping waves and playing in the surf, the mighty Atlantic welcoming its children back with open and familiar arms. The vacation would be perfect, if only Klaas and our oldest son, Peter, were here. When we planned this trip last winter, we figured the farmwork would be pretty much caught up by the last week in August. But this summer's difficult weather has disrupted all our careful plans, everything has taken longer than it should and they will have to join the family later in the week.

We bravely started this year with the hope that surely, some luck was due to us Northeast farmers who have been battered by four tough seasons. Surely since we needed a good year so badly, it would happen. Surely this year, we could make decisions and actually do the things that we SHOULD do, rather than scraping by doing only the things that we

COULD do.

Instead it has rained. And rained and rained. The spring was too wet and cool to plant most crops with any semblance of doing it 'right'. The tractors got stuck in the mud trying to cultivate. Much of the wheat and the other small grains lodged and sprouted before harvest. So little hay has dried in New York that a dairy farmer friend recently quipped that at least he's adding lots of organic matter to his hay fields. And now as August draws to a close, many of us are wondering whether there will be enough warm days left to mature the corn that is just barely tasseling.

A season like this shows clearly how difficult and stressful it is to make 'right' decisions when confronted with complex, changing and unpredictable situations. The desired crop rotations, tillage plans, timing for cultivation, and ideal percent grain moisture at harvest just go right out the window when day after day passes and we can do nothing in the fields. Probably the hardest thing for a farmer to do is to sit idle, watching the rain and thinking of all the work to be done.

Nuances in Farming

This year's political campaign is spending a great deal of time and money debating the concept of 'nuances', that is, whether we should focus on all the myriad shades of gray in each situation or should we attempt to distill issues down to more clear-cut black and white.

We farmers know well the problem with gray, working daily as we do with the natural world. Most of our decisions are highly "nuanced," very few are clearly black or white. Farmers must make careful but often rapid decisions, weighing of benefits and costs, and then make the best choice they can,

knowing that both the predictable and unpredictable consequences will be their responsibility for years to come.

A tough year like this one makes those decisions and their consequences more difficult, mistakes are more costly and wet soil is less forgiving. In hindsight, some of our careful decisions look abysmally stupid, some look surprisingly brilliant, and many have produced totally unexpected results. But tough years can be valuable if we use unusual situations as learning opportunities, trying to determine what factors caused certain problems, identifying new diseases or insects, learning better ways to cope with disaster and stress, and consulting with older farmers who have seen and learned much from similar situations in the past.

Trying to make 'right' decisions for the 'right' reasons

Each January, we submit our organic certification renewal application, complete with the charts carefully filled in with our intended field cropping plans. We write down the right rotational crop in our ideal cycle - "if this field was corn last year, it WILL be soybeans this year, and it WILL be wheat with clover next year." After thoroughly studying our soil test results, cropping histories, weed pressure, recommendations, and, of course, the OMRI list, we list the amendments we plan to use.

In that ideal world of an organic certification application, everything looks so black and white, so predictable, so "un-nuanced". These are the things we know we ought to do, they are what we want and fully intend to do. How can there be any doubt that by August on Field 24, there will be a fine crop of soybeans growing in soils that were perfectly tilled and cultivated at the proper times, with amendments applied just as planned? How can there be any doubt that our crop rotations will be exactly as we so carefully state, clearly demonstrating the superiority of the organic system in every way?

By mid Spring our certifier has reviewed our plans, determining they meet all requirements and goals, and off we go. But then when the inspector comes in July and drives around to look at the fields, there's confusion. Weren't we SUPPOSED to have corn growing in that soybean field? Why didn't we get the lime spread as planned? Wouldn't it be wonderful if those troublesome little inconveniences, like rain, broken equipment, limited finances, and too much work and too little time, didn't stand so frequently in the way of doing the right thing?

Making 'bad' decisions for the 'right' reasons

Nobody intentionally makes 'bad' decisions. Unfortunately incomplete reasoning, incorrect assumptions, or just a change in weather can turn what should be a good decision into a bad one in a flash.

Take for instance our snapbeans this year. With all good intentions, we plowed and tilled the battered soil in late June, wet and hardened by the rains of May. We knew this was no way to treat our precious soil, but we had signed the contract, we promised a certain number of acres, and the seed bags sat in the barn. The variety we agreed to plant produces top quality slender petite snapbeans that make a really premium frozen product. Unfortunately, the seed is small and weak, highly susceptible to crusting and root rot, and on our organic farm, they must grow without the chemicals that conventional

farmers use to protect against pathogens in cold, wet soil. After two weeks of rain, the field looked like it had mange. spotty and ragged, the few scattered beans plants that emerged were weak and slow growing.

In hindsight, we'd be money and time ahead now if we hadn't planted the snapbeans at all, but we were trying to honor a promise and a contract under poor conditions. It wasn't really a stupid decision to plant the seed, we probably would have gotten a decent stand had it not rained so much after planting. But the rain came relentlessly and the beans died. At least we have crop insurance which is good protection against decisions that turn out bad.

It is helpful to believe what a friend has told us, that the worst business mistakes are frequently made in the paralysis and fear of indecisiveness. Actually making what looks like an undesirable decision can often be better than making no decision, but when faced by a crisis, reaching a balance between making faulty decisions and being indecisive is not easy.

Making 'good' decisions for the 'wrong' reasons

This spring, we reluctantly decided not to plow under several fields of cover-crop wheat and spelt to plant the soybeans that we had planned for those fields. These grains were planted on erodible fields after sweet corn last fall, just to keep the fields covered over the winter. When the Spring got too late, Klaas decided it would be better to leave the cover-crop to reduce further soil damage and add some useful organic matter. Sometimes it pays to just walk away. It was with some surprise that Klaas noticed in July that those 'abandoned' fields were heading up a decent stand of grain that yielded quite well.

We had a similar situation a couple of years ago when we walked away from a field of cover-cropped clover that we couldn't plow on time, only to come back to an excellent crop of clover seed. As with the wheat and spelt this year, the unexpected crop of clover seed made us more income than we could have made by knocking ourselves out to plant more mudded-in soybeans.

We're having another success with several fields of soybeans this year that were drilled as the season got too late. We decided to get these fields planted as quickly as possible using only tine weeders for weed control. Weed pressure drops considerably on crops planted in late June. Amazingly, these soybeans are doing great, they may actually be our best-looking crop this year. One point on this technique – when soybeans are planted late, the amount of time for pod formation is reduced, thereby reducing the yield per plant. Drilling soybeans at a higher population compensates for this reduced per plant yield.

Making a decision when there are NO good choices

Sometimes there are crops that won't grow, grain that spoils, or a piece of machinery turns out to be a lemon. Sometimes there are sick animals that can cost a lot to cure and may never be profitable. Sometimes all the available choices stink. When faced with such a situation, it is essential to remember that the loss due to panicking and making poorly planned decisions can be greater than the actual loss due to the disaster.

We've seen numerous cases of farmers who panic and sell their slightly sprouted grain for any price possible, afraid that no one will want their crop. Dealers will then buy this damaged grain at a deep discount, dry and clean it, and perhaps blend it with better grain to make a product that is eminently salable later. Other people will panic and mix moldy grain in with good grain, hoping to average things out, only to be surprised later that the mold has spread and spoiled the good grain too.

Being able to thoroughly clean and dry grain on farm can often salvage a possible loss, especially if it is possible to store the clean, dry but slightly damaged grain for several months until the supply is shorter. However, mixing bad grain with good is almost always a mistake. As we learned from the old nursery rhyme, mixing bitter butter with good butter doesn't make the bitter butter better, but sometimes with a little forethought, it is possible to make a bit of "shinola" out of a not-quite-perfect product.

Food grade soybeans are a little different. If there is mold of any kind, staining or off smells, we are usually money ahead to sell them for whatever discount we have to take or sometimes to even use them for fertilizer. Those aren't easy decisions, but it can much better than putting moldy beans in a bin with good beans and trying to clean them up later.

Sizing up the situation correctly is the real trick. The first step is discerning whether you have an irreversible or deteriorating situation that you need to cut loose, or whether there is still hope. Being aware of all available choices and their likely consequences, being conscious of the hazards of panic, AND staying calm under stress are critical in managing the apparently "no-win" situations successfully.

The real danger making the wrong discernment in the heat of panic. Klaas' dad used to say, "our first loss is our cheapest". We may choose to take a loss of the crop to quickly stop a much greater loss compounded from more labor, time and materials – or we may try to salvage the grain. Making the right decision as to whether the crop is worth saving is the key.

Consequences and Connections

In his book and PBS TV series 'Connections', historian James Burke eloquently shows how one event in history can impact a surprising number of other developments that superficially do not appear related, setting off complex webs of cause-and-effects that resonate throughout human history. For example, he traces the rise of education, books, the printing press and modern thought in Europe back to the Black Death in the 1300's. This plague that killed a third of the population produced a surplus of rags and old clothing, making paper less expensive and more available for the first time in history. Education in turn empowered the middle class, leading the rise of trade and exploration. Just consider all the events, even in today's news, that have radiated out from that development!

Here on the farm, if we take the time to look, we can trace similar connections and consequences spreading out from many of our activities each year.

In order to get the snapbeans planted, we took the calculated risk of working the soil too wet. Klaas fully knew the risk he was taking but he felt that honoring the contract and the probability of an adequate crop was worth the potential cost. He thought he was making the best decision, but failure is

very stressful, both to plant and man. The crop insurance may cover our costs this year, but it will not reduce the expensive consequences that will radiate from this unfortunate crop. The structural damage caused by a couple of hours of tillage on wet soil will last for years, affecting the crops, the income and the way we will have to farm those fields. We know this all too well, because we're still dealing with soil damage from the past 4 tough years.

Preparing soil and planting winter grains for next year's harvest is one project we can't let up on now. Even though this year has knocked us silly, we have to do everything we can to get next year's crop off to a good start. That means applying compost and gypsum on fields where we have just harvested small grains, preparing the land and plowing for winter grains and planting cover-crops on land that is destined for spring grains and row crops next year. After all, our good decisions have just as long-lasting consequences as our bad decisions.

Good decisions, in hindsight!

One of our recent risky decisions has had truly amazing consequences. In the fall of 2000, Agway offered to sell us the feed mill they were closing in our town. After much deliberation and worry, with very little idea of what we were getting into, we naively agreed to purchase it. Since then the mill has grown enormously, impacting so many people's lives in many different ways.

A few weeks ago, Laurie, one of our feed customers, called to order her weekly supply of chicken and pig feed. At the conclusion of the call, she thanked me saying "By doing what you are doing, you make it possible for me to do what I am doing". I've thought about that comment many times since, about the customers who buy her meat and eggs, about her family and her customers' families, about the farmers who grew the corn, soybeans and oats in that feed, and the land that she and they are healing. About the 8 people who are given decent employment by our mill and whose hard work and creativity make the mill operate smoothly, about the animals on the farms we supply that are treated with dignity, and especially about all the people who make it possible for us to do what we do.

In hindsight, the decision to get into the feed business has turned out to be a very good one. This is partly due to luck at buying the mill at the right time when the organic feed market was growing rapidly, and partly due to an incredible amount of hard work, planning, support, resources and risk by many people who, collectively, have the right combination of skills, dedication and interests at the right time.

The Most Important Connections

Spending a week in one cottage with 3 generations of extended family truly puts the whole concept of decisions, connections and consequences into an interesting focus. This particular group of people here this week, ranging in age from 8 to 88, exists because of the chance meeting of two people, my grandparents, nearly a hundred years ago. That one event has resulted in an expanding network that has included countless other people, opening to encompass spouses, children and friends, and still constantly creating new networks, woven together by love, shared memories, real friendship, mutual respect and common need.

Within this circle, we share the delight and impatience of childhood, the uncertainty, wisdom and fear of old age and declining health, the endless work and attention demands of middle age, the delicate balance of changing patterns of family responsibilities and leadership, the careful compatibility of people who inhabit very different worlds the rest of the year.



Within this circle, we hopefully can put into better perspective the battered snapbeans and stiff knees of our lives, all those little problems that command an inordinate amount of our attention when we lose a firm connection with the truly important things in life.

We leave you with one final thought. Many of us suffer from an “either/or mentality” when it comes to our decisions. We assume that either we have to be completely competent at all times or we automatically conclude that we are hopelessly incompetent. Probably the truth is somewhere in between - usually we are good at most things, but occasionally we do something that is astonishingly stupid. Most of the time we really do make the right decisions for the right reasons, but we tend to focus more, and agonize much more, on our mistakes.

Especially in a tough year, it is important to celebrate our successes because without a doubt, they do exist!