

## COMMENTARY

## Growing up dirty



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The problem with dirt is that it's dirty, but that's also its glory.

Most dirt will do just about anything you ask of it, if you ask right, so dirty done right is a glorious state of being. We've mostly forgotten that, because most of us no longer rely on dirt as a friend.

Instead, we see dirt as something to admire from a great distance, as long as it doesn't get into our homes, onto our clothes or bodies, or spread over the faces of our children.

What does this portend, exactly? I have no idea.

But I do know that about 98 percent of Americans harvest nearly all of their food from super-refrigerated markets conveniently placed along the roadsides of cities and towns. Not from the dirt. (Growing a few tomatoes in your backyard dirt doesn't count as harvesting your own food.)

And supermarkets harvest most of their food from so-called middlemen.

And middlemen get their food either from other not-quite-so middlemen closer to the source, or from farmers.

So, the food-supply chain is an elaborate construction of logistics about as fathomable as advanced physics, and just as invisible in our daily lives.

Spread across the nation and beyond, it relies on farmers wealthy enough to buy high-production farm machinery; farmers who actually get dirty (sometimes known unsym-

pathetically as laborers); vast squadrons of vehicles including trucks, airplanes and trains that have to be maintained; hundreds of thousands of miles of roadways, bridges and tracks that also have to be maintained; an endless fuel supply, much of which comes from Saudi Arabia, that (you guessed it) also has to be maintained; buyers, shippers and sellers of food who have to be paid to buy it, ship it and sell it; and terminus sellers, known as grocery stores.

Oh, and don't forget the army of government employees that has to be maintained to make sure the food is edible.

The security of our entire society, and perhaps many societies, rests upon that dazzlingly overextended system.

Like most of us, I've relied on that system for much of my life. I don't think twice anymore about wandering into a Publix or a Winn-Dixie. I've come to expect my food in copious amounts, fresh as the dawn, all the time: morning, noon and night, in spring, summer, fall and winter. I'm like a baby with a nipple.

So let me let me just pose this question: What if the whole system came to a grinding halt, even for a mere 30 days?

What if our fuel supply was interrupted, or several key roads or bridges were destroyed leading to a few major cities, or power — the power that allows big stores to refrigerate food — was cut off, or some other problem occurred to put the economy on its side?

What if a significant percentage of the few young people who still know how to farm, and do, just decided to quit, and go do something else?

I doubt it will happen only because I remain deeply infected with an obvious medical con-

dition known as foolish optimism. But if it did happen, what would we be able to do about it, most of us?

Right quick, we'd have to get dirty.

And I would like to know that my children could do that with some pleasure and knowledge, relying on themselves to get food by growing it, catching it or shooting it, and then preserving it. I'd like to know that my neighbors and friends could do the same, and that all of us would be able to function for a time.

It would be a lot easier on our children, for example, if they were taught, early, to see dirt as a friend, and to consider "dirty" as a glorious state of being, like once upon a time.

Talking to farmers and ranchers in Lee County, I'm once again reminded of how gracious, how smart, how capable and how considerate most of them are. I learned this about farmers and ranchers previously in several places, including on the big cattle ranch where my mother and her sisters and brothers grew up, and on the farms where I worked briefly, later, both during and after college.

All of these farmers could be teachers, if young people were just encouraged to get dirty and learn.

On my road alone, in Alva, I can think of a bunch of folks who "can survive," to quote a feisty old country song by Hank Williams, Jr.: "I can plow a field all day long/ I can catch catfish from dusk till dawn...And we can skin a buck/ We can run a trot line/And a country boy can survive/Country folks can survive...."

But more than merely survive, some of my neighbors can still romance the dirt here — poor sandy soil by the look of it, to me, but rich as Eden, to them — in ways that suggest not only survival, but poetry and art as a function of food production.

There are hundreds of people like that in Lee County, many of them now old.

Lloyd Marsh, for example, is the Thomas Jefferson of one Alva road, I'd say. Not only

does he adapt to the environment here, he innovates. He's experimented with scores of fruits and vegetables on his small acreage, and he uses and reuses most materials — he has irrigation systems, garden structures and fencing built from everything up to and including old bed springs and used PCV. He can trap hogs or fence them out or probably shoot them, if need be. And he grew up on farms in Nebraska and Iowa in the 1930s and '40s, if I remember rightly, so he has decades of knowledge.

Why couldn't this be taught to our children? Why can't Lee County public schools, for example, establish garden programs at each school, and invite people such as Mr. Marsh, or Ruth Danforth of Dan's Nursery (on Tuckahoe), or Burdie Baker of Charleston Park, or Robert Ritchey of Ritchey's Farm Fresh Produce, or James Daniels of Persimmon Ridge Road, to spend a little time teaching?

As Jefferson himself once wrote to James Madison, "It is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of a (society)."

At Monticello, Jefferson cultivated a vegetable garden 1,000 feet long, which he divided into 24 beds. He tried 170 varieties of fruits and 330 different vegetables over time, and he's credited with introducing Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, eggplant and broccoli to America.

In other words, Jefferson got dirty, and he encouraged getting dirty (just like Hank Williams, Jr.).

So why not develop a program for young people, provide them with seasonal gardens, and teach them to be productive, and to get dirty, too?

Why not teach them all to farm, in other words, and therefore to be truly self-reliant?

That's growing them up right, and dirty. ■

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