

FARMING FOR HEALTH AND WELL BEING

A community of caring individuals in the Berkshire mountains of western Massachusetts discovers that farmwork is therapy ... and healing is a two-way street.

By Dan Sullivan, Posted November 23, 2004

Editor's note: In order to protect the privacy of guests at Gould Farm, only their first names have been used in this article. Therefore, we've omitted all surnames in the egalitarian spirit of the community and for consistency.

Nestled into the gentle, time-worn hills of the Berkshire Mountains 7 miles east of Great Barrington, in western Massachusetts, lies Gould Farm, a therapeutic community and working farmstead. The daily routine here includes growing organic vegetables to supply the community kitchen, an on-site farm stand and a bustling roadhouse café; running a dairy and beef operation to serve the community's needs, provide raw material for value-added products such as cheese and butter, and for limited use by the café; a maple syrup operation and bakery (for the community and for sale); careful management of a nature trail and sustainably producing forest; and the treatment of 42 guests with psychiatric challenges such as severe depression, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder.

With a belief that emotional healing can manifest through hard work and service to one's neighbors—in other words, through earnest participation in community—visionary religious thinker William J. Gould and his wife, Agnes, purchased a rundown 650-acre farm and surrounding forestland in 1913 and put Will's beliefs to the test. They began inviting guests—some marginalized by society because of physical or emotional challenges; others seeking a rural lifestyle and a chance to serve—and soon had a fledgling community under way.

Gould's spiritual contemporaries wrote of his vision with profound awe and respect: "For years I have lectured to classes about the Kingdom of God, the rule of whose life is set forth in the words of Jesus in the Gospels," wrote Professor Clayton R. Bowens from Meadville Theological School in Pennsylvania. "After I had been at this Gould Farm for a week I said, 'This is it.'"

Will Gould literally gave his life in service to his community, perishing of a heart attack in 1925 at the age of 57 while fighting a fire that broke out on the farm. Four years later, Agnes set Gould Farm up as a nonprofit trust. And this is how Gould Farm operates today. It accepts no insurance and no state or federal money. Those guests who can pay for treatment do so, which helps to offset the cost for care of those who cannot. Endowments, grants and the farm's growing moneymaking enterprises also help keep things running...along with a wing and a prayer.

It's 7 a.m. and a clear, crisp July morning as I walk the half mile from our guest quarters—where I've left my family to rest up following a late-night journey—to Main House for breakfast and morning meeting. Just past a field of broccoli and cauliflower ripe for picking, a handful of community members—guests? workers? it's difficult to tell—try to redirect a cow that's conquered the fence and found its way to the road.

“Animals and people; nobody likes to be penned in,” says Executive Director Cate as I relate the morning’s excitement over farm-baked French toast dripping with farm-harvested maple syrup and farm-churned butter.

Just outside the dining hall, the community forms a circle for morning meeting. Announcements are read (comings and goings; visitors introduced), everyone joins in song (“This Train” accompanied by a farm guest on acoustic guitar), the quote for the day is shared (“It is not what you have that is your greatness; it is what you can give”) and other business is taken care of before everyone splits up into morning work parties.

I’m assigned to the garden crew, and it’s right back to those beautiful heads of broccoli and cauliflower, this time armed with harvest bags and a paring knife. Longtime community member Steve has just taken over management of the garden. “The therapeutic value of farming—just planting a seed—it’s just amazing,” says Steve, who arrived here as a volunteer in 1992. Like most workers at Gould Farm, Steve lives here with his wife and children. While it’s no longer a stringent requirement—Steve himself recently bought a neighboring parcel of land and plans to build there eventually—workers are encouraged to live onsite with their families in order to engender a real feeling of community. (Housing is one tangible reward of a job that’s pretty much 24/7.)

“I call out the different things that need to be harvested, and people do what they’re interested in,” Steve says as he demonstrates the proper technique for liberating a head of broccoli from its stalk.

Chard, kale, lettuce, spinach and green beans are also on today’s list. Once the morning’s harvest is complete, it’s hauled to the bottom of the Harvest Barn for cleaning, weighing, packaging, labeling and storing. Some goes to the kitchen, some goes to the Roadside Store & Café, and some goes into the freezer for winter.

“We’re not certified organic, but we follow the practices,” Steve explains. “That’s what we tell people.” Those “people” are farm-stand customers who show up weekly to buy produce at the farm’s recently built Harvest Barn. In the late ’90s, the farm-stand model took the place of a CSA, which was deemed too labor intensive for the farm’s main focus.

“It kind of took away from the energy of working with the guests,” Steve explains. “It was too hectic; it just wasn’t good energy.

“We used to have a small farm stand by the roadside store,” Steve says, explaining that this was also tricky considering logistical challenges such as lack of adequate refrigeration. “This new farm stand [complete with walk-in cooler] requires the least amount of energy and certainly fits what we are doing here. And it opens up another opportunity for leadership for guests.

“The CSA was certainly our most profitable, but in spite of the profits it just didn’t seem to fit.”

This sentiment is echoed repeatedly throughout my two-day immersion into Gould Farm: the place exists first of all for the well-being and healing of the guests. As garden manager, Steve has to consider, for instance, how guests on medications might react to harvesting on a hot, humid day and be flexible enough to make adjustments in the schedule.

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"A lot of times you're balancing what's good for the people with what's good for the garden," he observes. "You try to match it but if you can't, you always go with the people. We're not dependant on what we grow, but we do depend on trying to make the program as meaningful to guests as possible."

'Patient' is a word you'll never hear at Gould Farm. In fact, one of my first observations as a visitor was that I could not readily discern between worker, guest and volunteer. As Cate tells me sometime during my stay, people are not defined by their condition here, but define themselves through their contributions to the community.

"This isn't so-and-so with bipolar disorder," she says. "This is John the person who happens to be dealing with this challenge."

Chop wood, carry water

"There's certainly nothing more grounding than having your hands in the dirt and being outside," says Gould Farm guest Damian. While the freedom offered from day one here can be a challenge to adapt to, especially for someone coming right out of a clinical setting, it's also literally a breath of fresh air, he says. "I don't think it's natural to be inside all day."

"They're not training people to be farmers; they're training them to have good work practices. When I leave here I'll have the confidence to say, 'I've worked for two years; I can hold down a 30-hour job or hold down school, because I've been doing it.'"

Guests are assigned jobs based on their particular limits and challenges, Damian explains, within comfort zones that also exercise those limits. "If your challenges are social, you might go to the kitchen because you'll have to interact with people." With the diversity of jobs at Gould Farm, he says, it's usually possible to match a person's particular therapeutic needs to a task that needs doing.

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Following a fabulous lunch of tempe stir-fry (vegans and vegetarians are readily accommodated here) and a salad bar stocked with fresh garden produce, I climb into a truck with AmeriCorps volunteer C.J. and head down the hill to meet the farm team, a few of whom are just returning from a 12-Step meeting in town. It's the farm team's responsibility to keep all the farm machinery in working order and to keep the farm animals healthy and producing. Farm products include milk, pork, beef, chicken, eggs, butter and cheddar cheese.

Like the working guests who invest their love and labor at Gould Farm, the farm animals, too, are sometimes given special deference—or given special roles—compared to what life might be like on a more conventional farm. Wilbur, a behemoth boar who can't stand fences—and hasn't met one that could stop him—is spared from the breakfast plate for sentimental reasons. The community votes to give a beloved cow whose calf died in utero an expensive C-section to try to save her life (it failed). Two Gould Farm

workers smuggle a newborn calf into a psych ward to lift the spirits of a community member who'd taken a downturn (it worked).

For this community, therapy is not a one-way street, but rather resembles the spokes of bicycle, with the human heart as the hub. "It's not just the therapeutic value that we deliver to guests," Cate explains. "It's the therapeutic value that we derive ourselves from the same situation."

"You go to Forestry and Grounds on your first day here; they hand you a maul and they get you to chop wood," says Reid, a two-year guest and integral member of the farm team. "Which is very bizarre if you've just come out of a hospital where you're not allowed to have shoelaces or not allowed to have a razor. It's very surreal."

The value of that—besides offering a liberating feeling of independence—says Reid, is the sense of responsibility to community and what that brings. "If we don't get the wood chopped before it gets cold, people will freeze," she says matter-of-factly.

That sense of service, and the appreciation it cultivates, translates to all the various jobs on the farm, she says, and it's what ultimately motivates people. "If I miss milking, that cow is going to be in a lot of pain... Every job here impacts everyone, it's not just mindless. I think that's how they get people engaged."

For most guests, Gould Farm is a place to get one's bearings and build the social skills necessary to get back out into society. For a few, it can also be a door to a new vocation.

"I'm from New York City; I've never lived in the country, and I've certainly never touched a cow, so this was all new," Reid explains, taking a quick break in the shade before leading the cows in from pasture, my 5-year-old daughter squealing in delight alongside her. "When I leave here, I'm going to go work on another farm and then go to vet school."

Gould Farm is a far cry from Reid's former life working on Wall Street, an existence that also included psychiatric hospitals, traditional therapies and halfway houses. "The biggest therapy for me has been getting to spend time with the animals. I've participated in five live births—talk about life affirming."

Reid says she realizes that the special nature of Gould Farm also means that she'll face some challenges when she moves to another operation. "These cows, they're like puppy dogs. People don't usually treat their farm animals like pets. I don't eat them...it makes me sad. I have to think, how much of this can I handle?"

She confesses that part of the reason the farm spares the cantankerous Wilbur is because she saved him when he was a wee little pig. She also admits casting a vote for the unsuccessful C-section.

"They're not looking at the bottom line, and they've allowed us to be this way," she says. "It's not how most farms are run."

Reid also views the work-as-therapy model as somewhat of a tradeoff.

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“Here, I believe that work—doing work and improving one’s state of mind—is the primary therapy, and that’s a big controversy because it is not going to address really deep-seated issues. We all work together to run this farm. It’s pretty special, but there is very little traditional therapy.”

Part of that, she says, stems from what’s at the core of Gould Farm—all-inclusive community. “In traditional therapy, you don’t know the therapist. Here, you know your therapist, you know where they live, and you probably just had dinner with their kids.

“You can’t get as deep because there are too many lines crossed here. It has its positives, but it does inhibit the traditional side of psychotherapy.”

Another less traditional component of treatment at Gould Farm—which involves five clinical caseworkers and weekly visits from a contracted psychiatrist—is intense participation by family and core community members. “My family knows the whole farm team, Reid says. “And my team leader has been involved in a lot of my therapy sessions.”

Gould Farm has been through many changes since Will and Agnes first arrived here in 1913, but the belief that each person has something valuable to contribute to the community regardless of mental or emotional limitations remains a cornerstone philosophy.

Today, says outgoing clinical director John, modern developments such as advanced psychotropic drugs offer individuals with even the most severe biologically-based psychiatric disorders a chance to participate in society that just wasn’t an option 20 years ago, much less in the Goulds’ day. And, John says, the community atmosphere of Gould Farm offers them a safe place to practice those skills.

“I often tell people, ‘You’re going to have a therapist here, but that might not be your most therapeutic relationship. That might be Wayne on the Farm Team, or Emily in the kitchen, or my dog or my kid. And that’s okay. But you’re going to have a therapist and a program to keep you on schedule.’”

Nine years ago, says John, the farm shifted its policy from placing no time limits on how long guests could stay to setting a maximum of three years (the Gould Farm program also has group housing in place in more urban settings in order, in part, to help facilitate gradual transition back into the mainstream). “What we do well here is develop skills that help people to be more independent and help people transition...so that they use this more as a stepping stone.”

While many guests write back to say “thank you”—the community’s old newsletters are filled with these heartfelt messages—some come back to share their gratitude in the form of service. “If you’ve been out a year and you’re out of treatment and living independently, you can apply to come work here,” John says, acknowledging as he says this that the timeframe between treatment and employment might be a little on the short side.

The volunteers from AmeriCorps and various youth groups from around the country come to Gould Farm to serve, John says; they go back into the world with a deeper understanding of mental illness, serving as emissaries to help wipe out the unfair and inaccurate stigma of the disease that affects so many. (According

to the National Institute of Mental Health, about one in five Americans over the age of 18 suffers from a diagnosable mental disorder in any given year.)

Work it on out

As in any community--or any family for that matter--contradiction and conflict are also part of the daily routine.

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Wayne, director of agricultural operations, shows me a central boiler furnace that pumps hot water into both the farm ops building—where heat is crudely dispatched through car radiators hung from the ceiling—and into radiant tubing encased in the floors of the new state-of-the-art, 4,000-square-foot timber-framed Harvest Barn constructed with funds from a recent \$750,000 capital campaign. Both the contrast in destinations (gum-and-clothespins old versus high-tech new) and the image of water at a boiling point serve as apt metaphors for a conflict that's about to erupt at the weekly community meeting.

While the stated purpose of the Harvest Barn was to expand Gould Farm's commercial enterprises in order to generate revenues—a licensed commercial kitchen for preparing value-added products and a new marketing office are both housed there—and to provide for more public outreach as well as realistic vocational training for guests, many of those guests (and, it's implied, some of the workers and volunteers) feel that too much focus on enterprise will take away from the farm's core mission and, worse yet, perhaps hinder access to the program for those who cannot afford it.

“We realize that Gould Farm is moving toward more commerce,” says Reid, reciting a laundry list of capital projects that require funding, including new staff housing and a residential building in Boston. “I assume most of the money comes from us and from donations,” she tells the gathered circle. “There are a lot of people here on a sliding scale and through donations. If there was less of that, it would be a shame. Gould Farm is a community that helps people and takes them in.”

Executive director Cate—whose been burning the candle at both ends to close the deal on the new building in Boston since my arrival —suggests a day-long forum “around the whole financial piece” in order to facilitate transparency. “As a community, we need to define our priorities,” she says.

Other suggestions include full financial disclosure at community meetings and having a guest attend board meetings. “How can you make decisions without input from the guests?” a guest named Nick asks.

Cate explains the level of guest involvement in the Boston project, where the abrupt sale of a property that had been rented for next to nothing for 27 years necessitated the search for a new home. The message from guests there was loud and clear, she said: “Don't abandon us.”

“We are all participants at any given time, but we're not owners,” offers Donna, who came to work at Gould Farm with husband Wayne in 1984 and who lost a son to the ravages of mental illness. “I have a role. Part

of it comes from the idealism of a pure democracy...and the other comes from gathering our best ideas and trying to live them as perfectly as possible in an imperfect world.

"...What our goal has to be is to not have roles define our value. We have to affirm that."

In the old days, someone reveals, Roma would sometimes bottle maple syrup until 1 a.m., then get up at 6 a.m. to help put breakfast on the table.

Roma is ancient. During my second breakfast in the dining hall, I notice her tapping her foot to the morning music and thoroughly enjoying herself (on my first morning she marched right up to me and asked pointedly who I was and what I was doing here). She came here as a guest, Cate tells me, during the Great Depression.

I think about how elders are so often put out to pasture in our society—probably way too kind a euphemism—and how here at Gould Farm, Roma is dearly valued and treated with love and respect, even reverence. In turn, she continues to give back.

In the old days, someone reveals, Roma would sometimes bottle maple syrup until 1 a.m., then get up at 6 a.m. to help put breakfast on the table. Now, her main task is to assign seating for each evening meal. She does this by placing individually crafted napkin holders marked with guests' names onto the big square tables that fill up the hall. Roma takes her job seriously, considering each choice carefully, sometimes changing her mind in the process.

I want them to be happy," she says earnestly as she goes about her task. "I want them to be comfortable."

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