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Community

By David Kline

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It has been said that community is like an old coat—you aren't aware of it until it is taken away. I became aware of what community is when I was drafted during the Vietnam War and served two years working in a hospital in a big city. My comfortable coat of community was taken away. But that is getting ahead of my story.

It is often said that a man standing in his own field is unable to see it. I think that was the case with me growing up: I had my nose too close to the picture.

That changed somewhat when I was about twelve years old. During the Eisenhower presidency and the USDA's Soil Bank days, the government told the farmers how many acres of wheat they could grow.

In order to verify farmer compliance, the government sent a technician out to measure the field. If there was too much wheat, it had to be cut for hay or ensiled. When the young technician visited our farm he had a large aerial photograph of the entire neighborhood, which he spread out on the hood of his car. Dad then showed him which field was sown in wheat.

I looked at the map and marveled at the landscape from the air: the view the red-tailed hawk had when it soared high over the fields. There, meandering through the pasture field, was the creek where we fished and swam. And the woods with all its interesting creatures. There was the one-room schoolhouse with its massive white oak by the front entrance and the red oak next to the baseball backstop. I could already smell the freshly oiled wood floor and felt myself looking forward with anticipation to September when the new school year would begin. It was there on those three acres, after all, that the study of nature and creation and language and music and arithmetic and softball became one.

From that photograph my horizons broadened. But it was when I moved to the city to start my Vietnam War conscientious objector service that I began to realize what community is really all about.

I started work in November, and within a month it snowed. Going to my landlady's garage, I found a snow shovel and started cleaning off her sidewalk along the street. Ah, this was more farmwork again, hands-on labor! I got carried away and shoveled off the snow several houses down and up the street. When I returned to the house, my landlady was extremely upset.

"What?" I asked.

"You cleaned off Mrs. —'s sidewalk ... and I don't like her!"

I wised up in a hurry. Not only did the people dress differently in the city, they thought differently, too.

When I had left the farm for the city, I thought I might not return. Maybe I would gravitate toward a higher-tech life. But I did return to the farm, where, as Bill McKibben writes, "humus and human meet." Where, instead of Peyton Place, I watched orioles and butterflies and listened to what the land had to teach.

I returned to a community that choose to work with their hands, believing manual labor is close to godliness. A community where technology is restricted and "book learning" is frowned upon. Where even the hymns are passed on without the notes being written down. In this culture, you learn from a master. There is always someone who possesses the arts and skills you need.

I soon noticed on returning home that my role models were local people, neighbors instead of entertainment celebrities. My uncle, who lived on the next farm and was a voracious reader, enthralled me with dog stories—"The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come" and "The Voice of Bugle Ann." Another neighbor, a fine horseman, taught me a great deal about handling and loving the gentle draft horse. When he lost his larynx to cancer (no, he didn't smoke), his horses responded to his slightest touch of the lines and he continued to farm.

Most of these role models are now resting in hillside cemeteries on farms throughout the neighborhood. I often hear that our people came to America (on the invitation of the Quaker William Penn) for religious freedom. That is true, but they also came to have their own farms. Practically all of the first settlers are buried on the land they tilled—on the land that nurtured them and their families.

Of course, the fact that we stayed with horse farming and animal traction when the rest of society switched to fossil fuel traction didn't go unnoticed by us younger boys. We had never heard of Ned Ludd, and we would say to our father, "Dad, if we would get rid of these horses we could milk ten more cows."

His response was always the same: "But then we wouldn't have all that good horse manure, and besides, tractors compact the soil."

If we Amish in northeastern Ohio look at our community and all its small villages—Berlin, Mt. Hope, Charm, Farmerstown, Fredericksburg, Kidron—that are thriving in spite of a Wal-Mart ten miles away, we can see it is because of the horse. Seldom do we travel farther than five or six miles to do our business. Some may go to Wal-Mart, but not on a weekly basis. The standardbred horse helps us, even if we think globally, to act locally.

These small towns and their markets benefit the outlying counties. A while back I took some eggs to the weekly auction in Mt. Hope. As I carried them in I noticed a car with its trunk open and an elderly farmer lifting out a case of eggs. The license plate was from several counties west of us. Why, I thought, do they have to bring their eggs all this way to flood our market?

Then I realized that their small towns and markets are gone, and my heart softened.

Welcome friend, we are delighted to have you here.

With horses and the help of his family and friends, David Kline farms 120 acres in Ohio. He is the author of Great Possessions: An Amish Farmer's Journal, Scratching the Woodchuck: Nature on an Amish Farm, and Letters from Larksong: An Amish Naturalist Explores His Organic Farm.