



Inspirational Stories Encourage Community

I just finished reading a book that's been on my nightstand for quite a while. I thought it would be another chronicle of the sustainable agriculture movement, this time in Montana. Instead, I discovered in *Lentil Underground: Renegade Farmers and the Future of Food in America*, by Liz Carlisle (Avery Press, 2015), an incredibly inspiring and hopeful saga of grit, determination, love for the land, open-mindedness, and, most of all, community. Carlisle tells so compelling a story that I read the first half of the book out loud to my friend one delightful evening after watching the Missouri River flow for a few hours in central Missouri. At times, I was moved to laugh, and at other times I was sufficiently choked up that it took a few deep breaths to get the words out.

Lentil Underground tells the story of a small group of unlikely idealists, rugged individualists, philanthropists, academics, hermits, and regular rural folks who have worked together for nearly 30 years to generate a sustainable and profitable model for growing organic grains, meat, and vegetables. Central to the model is that their practices conserve moisture and actually build their Montana soils using ecologically informed, regenerative intercropping techniques. This is farming and ranching for thinking people who feel strongly about protecting their land and supplying clean, healthy, chemical-free food.

The story centers around the brainchild of a Montana grain farmer's son whose father and mother were OK with their intellectual, environmentally minded child coming home from a stint in graduate school to try some wacky agricultural practices on their land near Conrad, Montana. And when I say wacky, imagine agreeing to let your son plant a field, right by the road, with a common yard weed called black medic (*Medicago lupulina*) for the entire weed-free-fields-are-morality neighborhood to see! Fast forward many years to an incredibly integrative, multispecies

cropping strategy, as well as a seed-cleaning and seed-sorting cooperative facility (Timeless Seeds) that has now introduced its region to a new way of growing and a new way of eating. Imagine growing three crops in the same field at the same time, feeding the soil, and separating the grain post-harvest!

Native Montanan Liz Carlisle is a masterful storyteller with an uncanny grasp of the nuances related to going against the grain and building a community of respectful, enthusiastic minds to launch a true revolution in one of the stodgiest industries around, where bucking the mainstream could easily lead to being ostracized. And yet, in this story, lifelong friends on opposite sides of the agricultural fence remain sufficiently open-minded that, for the most part, they at least stay out of one another's way, and sometimes actually come together as partners.

If you ever feel like you're a lone voice in the wilderness, or are prone to despair, or just want to understand more about regenerative agriculture and how it works, definitely pick up a copy of *Lentil Underground* (see Page 64 to order). I think it will inspire you, as it did me, to endeavor to persevere, seek and give support in your community, and think more broadly about organic production and distribution. And now, when I see black medic in some of my drier pastures, I feel a sense of calm, knowing that my soil is being fed even as my livestock graze it off.

Reading is such a joy, and I'd love to know what books you have on your nightstand that help you to keep on keeping on in these interesting times. If you'd like to share, please feel free to send me an email at HWill@MotherEarthNews.com, and we just might put together a list of inspirational reads that we can all benefit from discovering.

See you in December,

Hank



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