

MAKING PEACE WITH THE LAND



The gate sign for Sunrise Farm. The Western Meadowlark is a symbol of the sensitivity inherent within ecological communities for the Ruzickas.

On Contentment...

What does it mean to be content? In today's world, I fear that we have forgotten what it truly means to find contentment within ourselves, our surroundings and others. I whole-heartedly believe that the land holds the answer. I came to this conclusion when I first met Don and Marie Ruzicka last year. They graciously welcomed me to the farm, and I came to the realization that their agrarian model that embraces the spirit within the land is the key to contentment. As we travelled out the the farm for our course field trip, thoughts of contentment began to flood back into my mind.



Cabin overlooking Ruzicka Creek, Sunrise Farm.
Photo: Marie Ruzicka



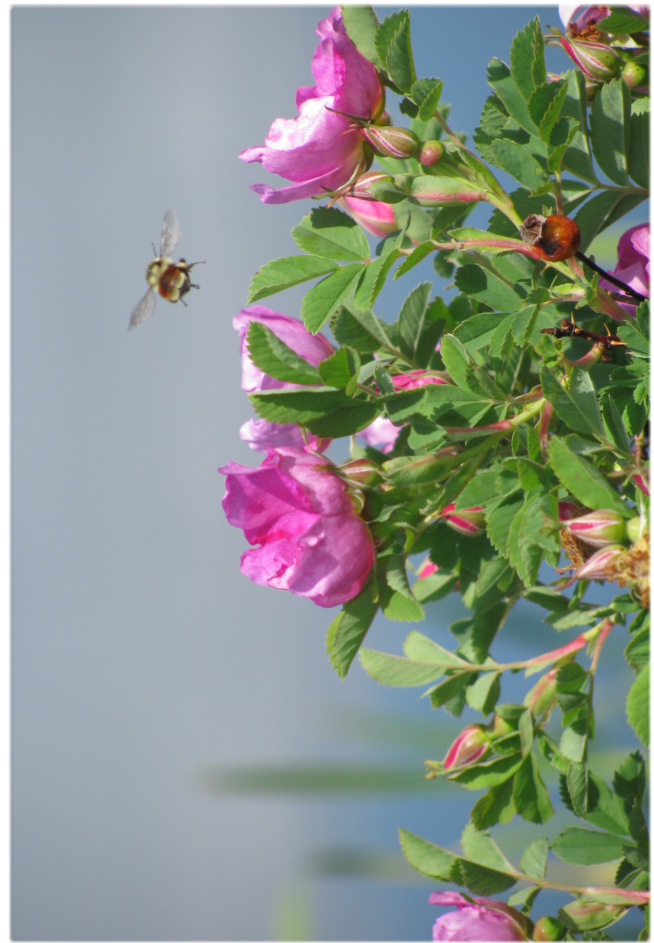
Grass-fed pork at its finest.

waste on the land that has become a part of them, to become part of the ecological cycle once again.

The cover crop, composed of several different species including sunflowers, purple turnips, daikon radishes, kale and various other species was our next stop. Each plant grown extracts nutrients from a specific level within the soil, effectively moving them to the surface to allow for increased fertility in future years. Moreover, the carbon added to the soil from the plant biomass effectively acts as a sponge, increasing the water-holding capacity of the soil substantially. This may prove to be a saving grace as climate change creates many uncertainties regarding natural water regimes. The crop also provides an essential forage not only for cattle, but also for the pigs, which in turn minimizes the stress on the pasture. Once again, all manure is recycled back into the soil as the livestock move around.

We soon made our way to see the chicken shelters, which Don re-vamped this spring, enlarging them, and using grain bag plastic for the roofs. The pullet shelters were modified to include a back door that allows for easy access when collecting the eggs. This was followed by a discussion and tour of the pollinator plantings, designed by an ecologist. Given the demise of bee populations as a

Following a brief introduction, we toured the farm, as Don explained the various aspects of their current model. We stopped at the grass-fed pigs, who never cease to make me laugh. There is a glaring contrast between the industrial pig barns with sanitization procedures and cramped quarters compared to Don's pigs. Nobody could argue that the pigs raised on Sunrise Farm are done so without care and attention. They feed off the green grass, albeit with some ground organic grain to substitute their diet. It is the perfect recycling system, as they excrete their precious



One of Alberta's estimated 300 bee species flies away after collecting some pollen from a wild rose on Sunrise Farm. Photo: Marie Ruzicka

result of colony collapse disorder, due to the use of neonicotinoids in industrial agriculture, the need for natural habitats is essential. The planting is composed of a wide array of native species to allow for successional flowering throughout the entire season, which is the perfect buffet for native pollinators!

The wildlife habitat plantings were the last stop of the tour, as we crossed the dam constructed by Ducks Unlimited across Ruzicka Creek. The plantings add immense diversity to the prairie landscape with white spruce, red alder, buffaloberry, sea buckthorn, willow, oak, Siberian larch and hedge rose along with many others. They are offered up as habitat and food for the wildlife that call Sunrise Farm home. To deter underground foraging by ground squirrels and pocket gophers, sizer milk vetch was planted along the rows. Across the water, toward the south, Don and Marie's cabin sits, the perfect spot to contemplate the natural world and our place within it...

Aldo Leopold once said, "we shall never achieve harmony with the land, anymore than we shall achieve absolute justice or liberty for people. In these higher aspirations the important thing is not to achieve but to strive." Last year, when visiting the farm and discussing the importance of respecting the spirit of the land with Don and Marie, Don recited the above quote by Leopold. To me it speaks volumes, as it places emphases on striving—the endeavour or attempt—rather than the achievement.

"...the most important thing is not to achieve, but to strive."

-ALDO LEOPOLD

We have become consumed by the achievements of our present world, such as prestigious awards, educational recognition, career advancement, high salaries and material goods and fail to appreciate the time-bomb of our existence on the planet we all call home. However, the future is not entirely grim, for it is people like Don and Marie, and the Spirit of the Land team that continue to *strive* in the face of adversity, to create and perpetuate meaningful change with regards to our perception and relationship with the land we call home.

Now, back to contentment. When I first met Don and Marie, I asked about their gate sign. Why the meadowlark? Don had explained that prior to the holistic model that they employ now, he was heavily vested in the industrial paradigm and it resulted in a heavy exploitation of the land. As such, the native flora and fauna began to disappear from the land that Don and Marie farmed, one key species, the Western meadowlark was soon absent from the pastures. Don felt solely responsible, which lead him to pursue a course in holistic management, and the meadowlark now stands as a symbol of the transition from the industrial agriculture to the current model of embracing the profound spirit of the land. The meadowlark's presence on the land is a source of contentment for the Ruzickas, something that strikes a strong chord in the hearts and souls of both of them.

I too, being a birder, have a fascination with avian diversity. For the last 17 years on our conventionally managed farm I have never heard or seen a Western meadowlark...until early June of this summer. It was dusk, and I was outside tending to my strawberry patch, pulling weeds, bonding with the land in a profound way that many people have yet to discover. In the distance, I heard a whistle and liquid warble...I stopped dead in my tracks. I knew this call—the call of the prairies. I grabbed my

binoculars and ran out to our native pasture, hoping and praying that I wasn't hearing things. The sun was setting, and in the distance the soulful song of the Western meadowlark emanated across the pasture. It was at this moment that I had discovered the profound sense of peace and contentment that Don had realized many years ago. After 17 years I had finally heard a meadowlark on our land. I often find myself contemplating this moment in times of anxiety or stress, for it is the unique song of the meadowlark that calms me, grounds me, and brings me back to a healthier mental state. I look forward to next year, hoping to welcome the meadowlark back to our native pasture once again.

I am fascinated with the dichotomy of worlds that exists within our modern society. To me, I find solace and contentment with the land that Don and Marie call home. This is the *real world*, where I am fully present and aware. The stresses of our 'artificial' modern world cease to exist when I'm visiting their farm, and every time I leave, I once again feel the weight of the modern world on my shoulders. I need to take more time to enjoy the outdoors. Ironically, I pursued this degree in environmental science to become more connected with the land, but school has forced me into the classroom, and taken time away from finding the sense of place and contentment that the land so willingly offers. At times, I resent university for doing this, for holding us captive in the classrooms, discouraging us from pursuing what we love for the sake of excelling within the academic realm.

I've come to realize that the natural world in all its beauty has the profound ability to ground me, and make me feel alive again. I came to this conclusion over the summer—on a life-altering trip to the Arctic with Morten and ten other students. There are no words to explain the trip, but what I can explain is how I felt and to some extent still feel now. I have never felt so alive. To see the plane take-off on the tundra and fly back to Yellowknife as we started our journey of over 300 kilometres to the Arctic Ocean, a wave of relief and calm washed over me. Some people, I would imagine, would feel a sense of panic or anxiety when the realization that the only connection to civilization is flying away at full throttle, but me, I finally felt free. I will never forget that feeling. Over the trip I became rejuvenated by the land, the plants, wildlife, and community. We bonded over the expedition, and I learned a great deal about myself, and hope to carry the memories with me for life.

Perhaps one could equate my experience on the tundra with the life that Don and Marie live. Their lives are completely immersed within the natural world. They have become attuned to the spirit that flows through the land and its wildlife, and allow it to flow through them. I believe being caretakers of land is the solution to many of our problems we face—we have become disillusioned, disconnected and discouraged. It is imperative that we bring our focus back to the natural world, reclaim the rights of the land, foster a sense of profound community and learn to live as socially responsible individuals. Einstein knew this many years ago when he said, "look deep into nature, and you will understand everything better." Now, what are we waiting for?