



Soil, Soul, and Society

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By Martin Ping

“What we are founding here is a seed—the seed of a living organism. The organism is essentially threefold—pedagogical, artistic, and agricultural—as reflections of thought, feeling and will. Each needs the others if the whole is to flourish. All are interrelated... for young and old alike, this work together will create a place in which to *become*, in the true sense, a full human being.”

~Karl Ege, Hawthorne Valley Founder

On July 30, 2012, Hawthorne Valley Association marked the 40th anniversary of working the soil of agri-culture on its land in the Hudson Valley of New York. In all that time it has been Hawthorne Valley’s mission to inspire by example social and cultural renewal through the integration of education, agriculture, and the arts. The significance of place and the ability to connect intimately to and through place provide compelling evidence as to why our localized agriculture can be understood as a foundational activity upon which *all* humanity depends—not just for producing food.

Hawthorne Valley does produce its share of food. Situated on 400 acres and leasing another 400 from neighboring landowners, Hawthorne Valley Farm is a diversified biodynamic farm with dairy herd, on-site dairy processing and creamery, 14-acres of vegetables, four CSA groups, five Greenmarkets, an organic bakery, a vegetable processing kitchen, and the Farm Store, which is a full-line organic grocery store featuring Hawthorne Valley products along with many local and regional artisanal food and value-added offerings.

Acknowledging the challenges facing small independent farms in the late 1960s and early 70s, a group of pioneering biodynamic farmers in the U.S. were looking for a viable way to keep land in agriculture without having to rely on family succession as the sole alternative to a monolithic agri-business model. Valuing land as more than commodity and de-coupling it from market forces that clamor for “best use” (i.e. most profitable) was viewed as a healthy and necessary step towards reshaping the future of farming.



Fortunately, a group of Waldorf teachers spent summer vacations on one of these biodynamic farms. They were concerned about children's meaningful interaction

with the natural world. As the forces of materialism, mechanization, and technology infiltrated childhood at increasingly earlier stages of development, they wanted to be sure the possibility would remain for these young people to form a living connection to the earth they would one day be called upon to steward.

Hawthorne Valley came into being as a response to these emerging issues. By purchasing property with the intention of making it a viable, working biodynamic farm providing hands-on, practical learning opportunities for children and adults, the founders of Hawthorne Valley set the stage for what would develop over the next forty years, touching the lives of thousands along the way.

The natural landscape at Hawthorne Valley has provided a living classroom for the numerous agricultural, educational, and cultural offerings that take place on the farm. The Farm Learning Center administers training and education for biodynamic farmers, including a two week biodynamic intensive and an apprenticeship program. Just across the road, in the heart of Harlemville, sits Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School, an independent day school serving students from pre-K through Grade 12. The Alkion Center for Adult Education provides Foundation Studies in Anthroposophy, Waldorf Teacher Training, and intensives in the arts. It is the integration of these initiatives (and more) under one umbrella that contributes to the vitality of the Association. The humble seed planted 40 years ago has now grown to 160 co-workers manifesting a common vision through this variety of activities.

Hawthorne Valley Association's service is to a broader constituency than local residents. Visitors come from across the region to experience Hawthorne Valley Farm. In the fall of 1972, the first group of visiting students came from the Rudolf Steiner School in New York City. Since then, over 600 children each year have spent a week or more on the farm as visiting students or summer campers. Comments like "Wow, food comes out of the ground?!" are not uncommon when children set to work in the fields. The joy and satisfaction with which a nine-year old mucks out a cow stall is always gratifying to witness. And, to see the reverence with which a child carries a warm egg in the palm of their hand, as if they had just wrested the golden egg from the giant's goose, is telling of the deep resonance we can all feel when connecting with the source of life.

This connecting, or re-membling, is at the heart and soul of Hawthorne Valley's work. Restoring the possibility of nourishing relationships is essential to our

mission of social and cultural renewal. By engaging with the natural environment and all that it provides, students, co-workers, and visitors can explore critical pathways toward connecting with each other in new social forms, and at the same time for each one to sense her or his own purpose and highest sense of self. Through direct experience with nature we are given an open invitation to reclaiming our full humanity. The resulting wholeness is the foundation of health, both individually and societally. By honoring the interdependence of all, we build the bridge to a consciousness which includes the well-being of everyone.

With many activities and initiatives, Hawthorne Valley Association is a constant work in progress as it responds to the needs of the community and region. What began with a gift from three individuals to purchase the land has grown into an economic enterprise rooted in place. From the beginning, as cows were introduced and milk began to flow, the possibility was there for economic relationships to develop—one could ladle milk into one's own bottle or slice off a piece of cheese. Direct sales and on-farm value-added processing immediately emerged as the center of Hawthorne Valley's financial stability. Since the early days, the farm and the Association have largely operated on an earned income model. This has made it possible for the delivery of goods, education, and other cultural experiences to grow with the broader community.

The surrounding area of Columbia County, which was once one of the poorest in New York State, is growing into a vibrant local living economy. Most notably, a number of the 60 new farms that have started up in the county in the last decade can trace their lineage to Hawthorne Valley, along with cultural initiatives like the Nature Institute. Although tucked away in a little hamlet in upstate New York, Hawthorne Valley recognizes its work in a larger context and is connected to many individuals and organizations nationally and globally. We feel an especially deep affinity for RSF Social finance, which was housed on the northern edge of Hawthorne Valley Farm until 1998. While the focus of our work may be local, the consequences of our actions can be global.

Hawthorne Valley is called an Association because of the intention to consciously weave the very distinct yet integral parts of agriculture, education, and the arts into a holistic thriving organism. This means that a governing board of trustees stays in close touch with the varying needs of each of the Association member organizations as well as understands what and how each participant contributes to the health of the others. From an operational standpoint for example, a transactional value chain is created as the farm sells fresh milk to creamery for processing. Through a number of other transfers, the cheese arrives at the Farm Store, to be purchased by the local community or denizens of New York City in the case of the Greenmarkets. This creates one beneficial financial cycle that supports the larger associative economy.

Through this diversity of activities, and through conscious collaboration with the wider community, Hawthorne Valley hopes to expand its contribution as a farm and food hub, and generative cultural engine, towards co-creating a resilient, local living economy. Though it can often be a challenge to balance the more commercially-oriented production enterprises with the learning and research programming, this inherent tension zone, when navigated gracefully and with good will, provides the creative spark that enlivens the being of Hawthorne Valley and spawns the experiences that comprise her rich biography.

It is a high honor and privilege to walk to work each morning to a learning community that is committed to creating a place in which it is possible to become, in a true sense, a full human being. Where people heal through the experience of working with land and each other, working with animals, preparing meals together, hearing the joyful noise of a thriving school community, all in this very special place. That is the primary intention of the Hawthorne Valley Association—to participate in the birth of a new consciousness story, one that

tells the human story and the earth's story in a way that strives to set an example of some of the highest ideals of community.

Martin Ping is the Executive Director of Hawthorne Valley Association and has been there for than 20 years. During that time he has taught practical arts in the High School served as director of facilities at Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School, and served as project manager on several million dollars of new construction projects. For the past nine years as Executive Director, he has focused his attention on developing the working relationships amongst the Association's diverse enterprises, the 160 co-workers, and the broader community in the Upper Hudson/Berkshire region. He has been instrumental in initiating several new programs at Hawthorne Valley and supporting similar initiatives nationally and globally.

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