

Showing Up

Elaine A. Heath, Ph.D.
Abbess, The Community at Spring Forest
Hillsborough, NC

September 14, 2020

Paying attention, or showing up, is the foundational practice for every aspect of farming and for life. One of the mantras for our community at Spring Forest is “Show up. Pay attention. Cooperate with God. Release the outcome.” Showing up is counter-cultural in our high tech, fast-paced, distraction-filled world. At this time of COVID-19 when most of us have been forced to slow down, travel less, and spend more time at home, we have a unique opportunity to practice showing up. Some of the “showing up” practices of natural farming can serve as important metaphors for everyone at this time.

Take for example, the practice of composting. When we began to farm our land, we showed up to the soil by taking soil samples from different crop fields to be evaluated for what they might need in order to support the flourishing of crops. While we awaited the test results we showed up and paid attention to the contours of the land, noting drainage patterns during rain, and discussing how we might leverage those patterns to support the creation of a small frog pond, which would help with insect control. We noticed that one crop field had embedded, forgotten plastic mulch from a previous farmer which was impossible to remove manually, and which prevented use of the weed-covered field. Meanwhile we began to save our grass clippings from mowing several acres of fields, to begin our compost pile.

Upon receiving the test results back, we learned that the soil needed nitrogen in all the crop fields. In keeping with natural farming methods we planted leguminous cover crops in all the crop fields except the “test garden,” a plot where we planned to try out several types of vegetables in order to learn how they would grow in this climate, learn about pests and natural pest control in this area, and learn the climate and its effects upon the crops. Leguminous crops fix nitrogen in the soil, provide beans or peas for harvest, and dried vines for the goats.

We hired a contractor to remove the plastic from the large crop field, which meant he also had to remove a layer of topsoil. As soon as the plastic was removed we tilled the field and planted the first of two sequences of cover crops in the field. Meanwhile our compost pile grew with grass clippings and a generous supply of well-rotted manure from a neighboring farmer who raises cattle. (We trade cookies and produce for his manure. He says he always gets a sweeter deal.)

Composting creates humus—the building block of life—by turning organic waste back into nutrients for the soil. Nothing of the plant is wasted or lost. Everything contributes to the cycle of life. This year we have had abundant crops, especially in the field that formerly was useless and only grew sparse weeds because of the plastic. By showing up and paying attention to what the soil needed, cooperating in meeting its needs using the resources already at hand, the soil is now alive with micro-organisms and nutrients. The people and animals in our community have nutritious food because of paying attention, and as we continue to compost we can feed the soil, the plants, the animals and ourselves into the future.

Of course we have to daily release the outcome of our practice of showing up, because some factors in the cycle of life are beyond our control. Climate change, for example, is

wreaking havoc on the natural world in unprecedented ways and affects us, causing us to have to adapt to dramatic weather change. Large scale factory farming and market volatility make it almost impossible for natural farming practitioners like us, on small acreage, to earn a living through farming, so we have to have other jobs to support our way of life. Will we be able to sustain our way of life at Spring Forest for decades to come? We don't know. We keep releasing the outcome. But for this day, this week, this year, we continue to practice our spirituality in forming community around growing and sharing food naturally, because we would not want to live any other way. This way of life brings joy, so we keep showing up, paying attention, cooperating with God, and releasing the outcome.