



Philosophical Ponderings of a Farmer

What Constitutes Success?

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"You are the most capitalist person on the farm," a friend of mine remarked. (He was comparing me to the other small farm businesses that operate on the same land that I do.) When I heard those words, I felt like I had been slapped in the face! Me, a capitalist? The term certainly has negative connotations in my life - my personal values are aligned with community, the environment, and equity, not monetary profits above all else. And while I do run a business that is (sort-of) based on capitalism, I have no plans for expansion and truly wish I could just grow veggies and give them away for free. Unfortunately, I live with at least one foot firmly planted in modern society, and am trying to make Hopscotch a sustainable business that provides me with a real living wage.

But over the last year, I have come to realize that my friend was 100% right. While I may not be capitalist in the mainstream sense, I have spent a lot of time trying to figure out how my small farm and cannery can be as profitable as possible without compromising the values upon which it is based: human-scale, low tillage, organic ingredients, minimal outside inputs, quality over quantity, ecosystem health, etc. I participated in several programs aimed at helping growers figure out how much it actually costs them to produce their products. And after many, many hours, I do have a sense of, well, what it costs me to grow. Sort-of.

Despite all the time and effort I put into tracking my time and expenses, farming is highly variable. Crop yields are dependent on so many factors, a lot of which are out of the direct control of the farmer. Will we experience another heat wave in June that will bring an earlier than expected end to the snap peas? As a micro-farm, I can't spend all my time tweaking the numbers for every unique possibility because I really need to be in the field or in the processing kitchen. So while I now have a sense of "what it costs me to grow" (which has helped to make some important decisions regarding my business), I will never know exactly. And I've decided that is okay.

In fact, I've decided that focusing too much on the numbers started to diminish all the qualitative reasons that I love farming: working outside, managing my own time, hanging out with baby veggies, feeding my community, getting to know people at the farmers market, and playing a role in increasing our community's food sovereignty.

By tracking all my time so specifically, I got into the unhealthy mindset that the farm should fit into a perfect little box, an 8-5 day. I put pressure on myself to increase profitability by trying to increase

efficiency and thus production (yup - I fell into the capitalist trap). I started to feel that I needed to ensure that my business was profitable to justify the rigid boundaries it puts on my life outside the farm with my non-farming partner. But farms are not offices that you can just leave at the end of the day - they are living things, and farming is a lifestyle in addition to a profession.

So why do I feel the drive to succeed, the urge toward productivity? Why do I want Hopscotch to be the most profitable that it can be? How did the bottom line become so important? And for that matter, why do we as a society feel that success is defined by how hard you work? Aren't there other more important factors to consider, like friends and family, non-work priorities and values? Maybe in order to get true fulfillment out of life, some types of inefficiency (like using human power) should be celebrated.

While it is still important to me to make Hopscotch financially sustainable, and I am so appreciative of what I learned during my deep dive into the financial picture of my business, I am also trying to find balance, to release myself from the structural capitalism that is ingrained in me. It's hard. But perhaps a good first step is recognizing I don't need to spend a ridiculous amount of time analyzing all aspects of production; maybe instead it would be better to use that time to simply enjoy farming.