



# Saugeen River CSA

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## Manual Labour and Climate Change

So here is an important question: Why is the vast majority of hand labour in the fruit and vegetable fields in North America done by migrant workers? Exploring this question brings up the complexity of economic, social and cultural aspects of modern life. All economic activities have been moving more in the direction of mechanization.

Mechanization in fruit and vegetable production exists, however it is limited, since there is a great deal that is dependent on making subtle judgements about fine movements that a machine cannot do as well, such as the pruning of trees and bushes, and harvesting based on ripeness and readiness. This is why the plant breeders are working for uniformity in the timing of ripeness and durability in handling. This would allow machines to do more of the work, sacrificing flavour and variety in the process, as well, as we will see, sacrificing labour.

Farm labour is usually paid for in two ways: either it is paid by the hour (the minimum legal hourly wage for farm workers is lower than other jobs, by the way), or it is by piece when harvesting, which means the faster you pick, the more money you make. These two factors are why the labour in fruits and vegetables is dominated by migrant workers who are looking for a better opportunity than what they can get where they come

from. Even at the lower minimum wage, they are making more money than they can at home, and they are usually sending most of their earnings back to their families. Most North Americans would not want to work that hard for such low wages, so they look for something else. Also, most North Americans do not know how to do this work efficiently. The word “manual” labour implies working with your hands, and I would say there are many North Americans who are quite capable of working with their hands quickly and efficiently. However, most of the manual labour that goes into fruit and vegetable production is more of a whole body activity, not simply standing at a counter, or sitting at a table. There is a great deal of moving about, stretching and reaching, bending over, crouching, lifting, all of which needs to be done quickly and efficiently, and for long hours, day after day. This, most modern North Americans are not able to do. Or more importantly, they don’t want to do it, and have not been forced to.

This has some unfortunate consequences. I read a book recently, *Work Songs* by Ted Gioia, which has a very interesting perspective on this. I’m going to quote a significant portion from the Epilogue titled “The Calling”, since it expresses something important very well:

This book is about work just as much as it is about songs. And, from the start, this aspect of my subject has been as much on my mind as the melodies and rhythms, the sharps and flats, the recordings and

transcriptions, and the singers and instrumentalists that make up the musical substance to the story I have told. By cherishing the musician, I have not forgotten the pressing needs of the laborer.

Put simply, I am convinced that this music opens for us a window onto our working selves, and it offers a much-needed opportunity to re-experience the dignity of human labor, and comprehend the potential elements of play and self-expression that are latent in all directed activities and enterprises. Some readers might be surprised by this perspective. For them, the work song tells us about the indignity of work and the abuse of human labor. And, true, the conditions that surrounded this labor were often degrading and corrupt. But the work itself – whether sowing or reaping, building or lifting, herding or weaving – could not be demeaned. The work of the poorest laborer is still a process of creating and of making something where before there was nothing. And such activities always carry something magical and awe-inspiring about them. The worker's song has always been part of this magic, and it serves as an important reminder that music and labor share an affinity – both are creative efforts with an aesthetic component that even the most crass commercial motives cannot totally negate.

... It is worth recalling that the institution of slavery left both former slaves and masters with a sense that labor was inherently demeaning;

that to work with one's hands was undignified and to be avoided at all costs. The reasons for this attitude were all too understandable. For the former slaves, manual labor was associated with their previous state of servitude. The former slaveowners, for their part, had felt that their social status was based on deigning not to work with their hands. As a result, the insidious view took root that only leisure and giving orders to others were compatible with a healthy sense of self-esteem and personal worth.

...The work song, with its emphasis on community, its integration of individual efforts into a more powerful whole, and its focus on mastery over the immediate demands of the here and now, reminds us of a different set of attitudes to life and labor. Although unfamiliar, these perspectives may be all the more valuable given the fragmented nature of our modern work world. From such a viewpoint, the call-and-response of the classic work song can serve as a useful metaphor for us even today, distant as we are from the world in which this music was made.

The concept of the "call" reminds me of the way people once spoke about their work and livelihood. It was a calling, a vocation – from the Latin *vocare*, to call. Recall, too, that this same Latin word serves as the source of many words associated with singing and chanting – "invocation" to "vocalist." In our work is our song. Yet without the response, the call is meaningless; the calling

makes sense only within a context in which there are others who are helped, even if only in some small way; others who respond with their own energy to our invitation. And in the modern world what we need most is a model of our interacting lives as a type of call-and-response, rather than as a collection of isolated individuals pursuing separate paths to self actualization.

Today, we seldom hear the words “vocation” or “calling.” They strike the ear as quaint and old-fashioned. More often we speak either of “careers” or “jobs.” But these various terms are not interchangeable: a career is pursued for our own ends; a job is done for somebody else. But the terms calling or vocation convey the clear sense of usefulness to both others and ourselves: our calling finds its meaning only when we do something for others, and its benefit to us exists only to the extent that our labor reaches out into the surrounding community – perhaps only the community of our fellow-workers, although at times to larger social units. The calling involves, almost by definition, a responding.

There is a great deal said in these couple pages. A friend once expressed to me, “I would much rather be paid for my ideas than for my labour.” Loving the work that I do, as primarily consisting of physical labour, I was shocked and reminded that many people do not like physical work, or at least feel a certain limitation within it. This is the inheritance of the “work is a job” and the insidious attitude that labour should be avoided at all costs.

One of the big motivations I have had over the years in offering apprenticeships on my farm is to reintroduce this idea of physical work as a calling. This gives people the opportunity to experience doing physical work for a known beneficiary, the CSA members and Market customers, in a relationship that can provide direct feedback. Providing this for North Americans is social justice in two ways. One, it looks at the injustice that exists when a certain undesired occupation is almost exclusively relegated to a particular culture or ethnicity. But it is also social justice to reintroduce the idea that physical work is part of being human, and it can and should be an honorable part of being human. Our cultural attitude of connecting physical labour to servitude, denies a deep part of ourselves. We do crave physicality but it is often reserved for recreation, as that seems to be a sign of progress if we don't *have* to labour so much.

Here's where we start moving into the climate change piece. Over the years I have worked at minimizing the use of fossil fuels on the farm. What is very obvious is that most of the technologies that are based on fossil fuels are made to save labour. Some of it is made to make a job easier, but most of it is based on saving time. A simple example: to plow one of our half acre garden sections with the horses takes about 4 hours; to disc plow it with the tractor takes about half an hour. These two ways of doing things are not equal in their quality result, but I have to make a judgement call based on if I think it is worth sacrificing the quality of the work the horses do on the soil with the amount of time it takes. This is a microcosm of our economic relationship to the Earth: finding the balance between quantity and quality.



One of the challenges we face with this climate change issue is how do we cut back on our fossil fuel use as humanity. Our society is addicted to a system based on fossil fuels used to save labour. This past week the Ontario government proposed an increase to the minimum wage. This is an attempt to try to balance out the grossly disproportionate salaries between those at the top and those at the bottom of a corporate structure. Capitalism run amok disgusts me, but I fear that raising the minimum wage is tackling the problem from the wrong angle and will actually continue to feed into the fossil fuel dependency. I would rather see something like what the Ben and Jerry's ice cream company did when it first started (whether it is still doing this I have no idea). They started out with a company policy that no individual member of the company could make more than 7 times what any other member made. This puts a limit on the disparity of income between the CEO and the person who mops the floor. This is a very different way of distributing profits and sees the advance of anyone in a company as being an advance for everyone.

I have not seen any discussion on the way the structure of an hourly wage impacts our use of fossil fuels and thus our ability to manage climate change. Calling raising the minimum wage a problem may seem like an

attack on manual labor, but it is the opposite. It is an attempt to point to our unhealthy attitude towards manual labour. We put so much energy globally into finding ways to save labor. Most of this is driven by intellectual efforts designing technologies that are for the most part dependent on fossil fuels (yes, even alternative technologies are still very dependent on cheap fossil fuels, since manufacturing the resources that go into the construction of these alternative technologies still have to be extracted, processed and transported, which is still primarily a fossil fuel based system). Valuing someone's time based on an hourly wage, has consequences on the soul of the person, but also on the Earth. Sometimes, in an attempt to eliminate the slavery of people by making hourly wages higher, it seems we are enslaving the Earth, by forcing profit driven companies to eliminate as much human labour as possible through more and more mechanization.

Humour my fantasy for a moment; what if we didn't feel such a need to find so many ways to save labour? What if we could actually find a new meaning behind physical work that wouldn't drive us to try to avoid it so much? "Our work is our song." Movement can be a form of self-expression. Unfortunately, since so much of our economic life has become mechanized, often when we move as an economic activity, it is judged based on the efficiency of the machine. What I think is important about the exploration of labour in *Work Songs* quoted above is the priority placed on the role of work within community. When the efficiency of labour is motivated from the heart, encouraged by a sense of helping others, as opposed to motivated by the wallet, the muscular movement carries a different quality, both in its outward expression, and in its inward effect on the

soul. Minimum wage jobs are usually those that someone doesn't really want to do anyway. It seems more important to try to address the issue of finding meaning in our work, not raising wages.

The apprentices who have come to the farm with the greatest motivation to work seem to have a drive to save the planet, and a deep connection to using their strong will to do something positive. Many, who really get into the work, have a background in sports or martial arts. This ties back to farm work as being a whole body experience, and a dash of the competitive edge - the wish to do better and become more efficient. Again, what creates deep meaning in the work is not becoming efficient to make more money, but to become efficient to provide for a community that gives feedback. The "call and response" makes all the difference.

Here's another specific example: Scything. The scythe is an amazing tool that has been used for centuries and designed based on the interaction of the human body and a particular task, cutting grass. Before the invention of the sicklebar mower, first pulled by horses and then with a tractor, the scythe was the primary way to cut a crop of hay or grain. This took many hours of labour. One of the rhythms that has developed on our farm since the arrival of draft horses is bringing them into their stalls every morning so they are available to work as we need them. This means putting a bit of hay in their feed trough before they come in and again at midday. Never being one to spend a great deal of time mowing the lawn, the grass around the house would sometimes get pretty tall. In ten minutes with the scythe, I can cut a day's worth of grass for the horses. This gets the lawn cut without fossil fuels, and saves on hay.

What is the economic value of this? Is it fair for me to expect to receive minimum wage for this activity? I could imagine trying to be absolutely pure and do everything on the farm by hand. This would for sure limit the amount of food I could produce which would drive the cost of food higher for the people I was producing for, if I expected to be paid well. This is the argument you hear from large scale conventional farmers, as a justification for the harm to the environment that comes from using large scale technology and chemicals to save on labour... that they are trying to feed the world, and keep food prices down.

Putting a price tag on the hours of labour drives the economic machine to eliminate as much labour as possible, distancing ourselves from a potential social revelation that working within a community can offer. I feel that a different way of looking at valuing time and effort needs to be addressed if we are going to tackle the fossil fuel issue and climate change.

I could stop there, but I feel to really move forward I would like to go deeper. Biodynamic agriculture comes out of a spiritual science. At its foundation, spiritual science tries to understand the world not only as a physical manifestation, but also the non-physical realities that stand behind it. I apologize for the unavoidable leaps that I'll make here, but hope you can forgive them and use them as food for thought.

Speaking of food, why do we eat? One of the main reasons is to provide fuel for our will, fuel for us to move about in the world and do things. There are of course many other reasons to eat, but let's focus on this one. Evolutionary biology would like us to believe that we eat to survive and we survive to ... well, survive. But why do we engage our will and move about in the world? We

use muscles in our arms and legs that are an extension of our metabolic system. Physical science divides our nervous system into different activities: nerves for our senses serve a different function than our so called motor nerves. In spiritual science, nerves always serve a sensing function. So what are the nerves that connect to our muscles sensing? Are they only there to feel pain when something is not working right, and otherwise stay beneath our consciousness? Many cultures have meditation connected to movement, whether in a calm inner way as in yoga, or in a rhythmic sometimes energetic dance form. These movements are intended to open a person to a deeper consciousness, awakening the nerves in the muscular system, bringing them into consciousness. What these nerves reveal is not the physicality of the muscular movement, but a deeper purpose for moving about in the world.

Our physical movements, particularly when they are involved in our relationship with other people, (and economics is quite a deep and complex relationship with others) can reveal deep karmic relationships. This idea of a calling is not just about economics, but it is also about who we are as human beings and our relationship to others and the Earth itself.

Often our vision of progressing as humanity involves technologies that remove us more and more from a connection to place and allow us to manipulate the physical world in more and more fantastic ways that break the limits of our physical bodies. But what if that leads us away from delving deeper into what our physical bodies actually can reveal? What if there is more to digging in the soil, sweeping the floor, hammering the nail, or lifting and moving things than the economic possibilities? The efforts of our

bodies stretches out into the world around us. The simplest activity interacts with the complexities of the world and is very much a part of it and through these simple actions a window to a much larger reality can open up.

Climate Change, if nothing else, is forcing us to re-evaluate ourselves as human beings and how we relate to the Earth. We will have to change a great deal in order to live differently. One of the fears we will have to face is that life will be hard without the technologies that we have come to rely on so much. We have to compassionate capacity to help each other, but yes, we will have to do more physical work. But I don't think that has to be something to fear.

Our work is our song.

