

Like food, like philosophy

Producers of both work creatively at system foundations, and feed us

Bill Vitek believes people come to The Land Institute's annual Prairie Festival because, under a world-changing juggernaut, they are desperate. They want signs that not all is lost. "They're hungry for hope," he said. They find some of their inspiration in The Land Institute's work to develop an agriculture that works more like a natural system. Vitek says they can also find hope in philosophy, where there is ongoing development of a system that also cues from nature. He'll lay this out at this year's festival September 26-28. He sketched it in an interview.

Vitek, who teaches philosophy at Clarkson University in far northern New York, dairy country, said philosophers and farmers are alike. Farmers are confident they can provide more than themselves with food. Philosophers are confident they can feed others ideas. Philosophers and farmers also both work at system foundations. So their effects are radical – things like creation of civilization, and elevation of individual over community.

Vitek thinks Prairie Festival-goers would agree the current system for how we interact with the natural world, as something to be subdued or ignored, is proving a failure. He thinks correction requires more than statutory adjustments. "We must go back to the roots to have a real foundational change," he said. In farming this may take

replacement of the predominating annual monocultures with perennials grown in mixtures, like most natural ecosystems. In philosophy it entails recognizing that the creativity that feeds us is shot through these systems, and that it is not sustaining if we try too hard to reduce and tame it.

"Walking" was an essay that Henry David Thoreau first gave as a lecture in 1851, predating The Land Institute's start by a century and a quarter. Here is where

Thoreau says, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." Vitek sees this as the beginning of a foundational shift, where philosophy starts toward a system that is ecospheric, recognizing the entire world as a system, one that is productively integrated. Heraclitus in ancient Greece and Baruch Spinoza in 17th century Holland saw more this way. But their ideas did not prevail against

the scientific and philosophical ones of Spinoza's near contemporaries Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, which brought about a reductionist, mechanistic worldview, and relinquishment of the greater good to the self-sufficient "I." Here, not with industrialism and fossil fuel, is where the modern world and its problems began, Vitek said. It is against this that Thoreau threw down the gauntlet, and since his challenge, science and philosophy have built on his view.

Thoreau didn't say "wilderness." He was not so concerned with place as with



Bill Vitek

process. This process is the creativity in the natural setting that we called wild. It is also in each of us, and in our cultures. Vitek said that in his Prairie Festival talk he will tie Thoreau's wildness to Alfred North Whitehead's "philosophy of organism," where every element of nature, down to the smallest amount of energy, in quantum mechanics, is alive and open to a kind of choice. Nature's creativity lies in these moments of freedom in all things, and over eons it creates diversity. From one element there develop 100, from one species millions; new properties like consciousness emerge; agrarians come to research perennial grains; and Bill Vitek comes to trade in ideas and plays jazz piano.

Wildness – what Whitehead calls “the creative advance” – produces new forms and tries them out, in nature and in our human systems. “In nature, think of the myriad species of plants and animals, and the ever-creative flu virus,” Vitek said. “In human systems think capitalism versus feudalism, or the call for an ecological economics coming out of our academic institutions.”

In each of these systems there is a balance between stability and change. Vitek said humans have become adept at managing systems for their own benefit. By the 19th century, Thoreau already saw the replacement of a wild creativity with bureaucratic sameness, technological efficiency, artificial inputs, and a pursuit of happiness



Starting indoors thousands of Silphium plants from the sunflower family, each with a pedigree, and then transplanting them to the field requires studied coordination. So will growing them along with other perennial species in a farm that mimics prairie, for a

new agriculture. The larger culture that agriculture works within is coordinated by philosophy, Bill Vitek says, and if we radically change that thinking, we can change our way with the world for the better.
Scott Bontz photo.

that produced “quiet desperation.” Aldo Leopold saw this replacement, too, and described it in his essay called “Odyssey.” He follows an atom picked up from limestone by an oak root and cycling through organisms for countless generations in the time of bison and prairie Indians. After arrival of the plow and rending of a system built over millennia, he watches another atom trip in one century from bedrock to sea bottom, lost for further creativity.

Vitek doesn't want to simply say that wild is good, stability is bad. He sees that culture needs some tameness. But he said the failure of our current worldview largely is its “lockdown-ness.” It is too reductive, constrictive, and controlling, which finally stifles creativity, limits options, and increases misery. An option is to humbly go with a wild flow that we can learn from but never fully understand, and which finally cannot be tamed. “We need to allow ourselves to be surprised,” said Vitek, who, with Land Institute President Wes Jackson, edited a book called “The Virtues of Ignorance.” For a culture to succeed it must let natural or ecospheric wildness work, Vitek said. “Whether in ecosystems or social systems, we need to keep that wildness network open.” This idea is beginning to seep into the social and natural sciences, he said. He thought perennial agriculture furthest along. Medicine is recognizing that many of the bacteria that outnumber the cells in our bodies 10-to-1 aren't there to make us sick, but to make each of us a biome. Even thinkers in industry are modeling processes and products after natural organizations. Vitek said it might be years before politics follows, however, and ecospheric philosophy has far to go before it permeates the material culture.

Transformation of worldviews took centuries after Bacon and Descartes planted

their ideas. “World views die hard,” Vitek said. Whitehead thought that they might wreak their worst damage while they linger awaiting replacement. But there is precedent for worldviews more ecospheric, among people without agriculture. And the current atomizing of relations is propelled by fossil fuels, which even some proponents of global capitalism are recognizing as dangerous to the human economy. A June 24 report produced by a bipartisan group of former Cabinet officers, lawmakers, corporate leaders, and scientists says climate change could cost the country billions of dollars over the next two decades.

So the time might be ripe for firming up a responsive “coordinating philosophy,” as Whitehead called it. Every culture has a coordinating philosophy, whether its members see it or not, Vitek said. One example is monotheism. Another is global capitalism. Vitek said that without such a deep address, changing light bulbs or the law or policies will have limited effects. “Until we get a coordinating philosophy that undergirds our emerging ecospheric worldview, we're not going to get much progress. Food and philosophy go together, if we're talking about transformation.”

He said the good news is that with the work of Thoreau, Charles Darwin, Whitehead, Leopold, and other scientists and thinkers, including James Lovelock, who called the entire planet one organism, we already have some of the basic ingredients for a transformative ecospheric philosophy. “The work is largely invisible in our everyday lives, and this will have to change,” Vitek said. “But when a new creative form catches on, transformation across sectors can quickly follow.” He sees the new work vying for the lead in both agriculture and coordinating philosophy in coming decades. He calls it the “perennial imagination.”