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The Radical Power of “Do-Nothing” Farming

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Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming*, trans. Chris Pearce, Tsune Kurosawa, and Larry Korn (Emmaus: Rodale Press, 1978).

I remember quite distinctly the place I first picked up *One Straw Revolution*. It was during a trip to Guelph, Ontario for an organic food conference. We stopped to spend the night in an Ontario farmhouse that belonged to one of the organizers of the trip, and my friend, Anna, offered a fresh green copy of the book to me for the evening. At the time, I was eager to learn anything about food, but I did not know quite where to look. I had previously watched Michael Pollan’s “Edible Education 101” and was particularly enchanted by Carlo Petrini’s embrace of smallholder farmers. I had also just enrolled in two classes on global and sustainable agriculture. While these educational experiences were inspiring and informative, none offered Fukuoka’s perspective as a scientist and farmer.

One Straw Revolution is a powerful statement on contemporary food consumption and the industrial food system. Its author, Masanobu Fukuoka, critiques almost every aspect of food, bodies, and culture in a witty and effortless way. Because the text was originally written in Japanese, Larry Korn, an American who spent several years working on Fukuoka’s farm, led the translation effort into English and edited the volume for Rodale Press, which published it in 1978.^[1] Together, they disseminated Fukuoka’s treatise on the practice and philosophy of farming and food, which considers the rise of industrial agriculture as symptomatic of a lack of spiritual awareness. According to Korn’s website, the book has been translated in over twenty-five languages, which is a testament to Fukuoka’s influence in the worldwide sustainable agriculture movement.

Before writing this essay, I attended a gathering of Jewish environmental educators during which meat was only present in one meal. The chickens served during that meal were raised in Lindsborg, Kansas, where Frank Reese breeds standard bred poultry at his Good Shepherd Poultry Farm. Reese is increasingly connected to many Jewish communities in the United States, who are concerned with how chickens are bred and raised in industrial systems. His central objective is akin to Fukuoka’s concept of “do-nothing” farming.

“Do-nothing” farming is perhaps the most celebrated contribution of *One Straw Revolution*. In short, it resists the impulse to improve production by incorporating the latest technology learned at a workshop or offered by a company. Instead, Fukuoka

insists that we ought to consider the opposite: can doing nothing possibly lead to equal or better outcomes? Fukuoka writes, “There is no time in modern agriculture for a farmer to write a poem or compose a song” (111). For him, not plowing, spraying, or weeding means time for leisure and writing, one of the positive outcomes of “do-nothing” farming. I might extend these insights to suggest that moments of pause can bring awareness to the beauty and balance of the soil, plants, animals, and self.

Today, the stakes of “do-nothing” farming are even higher than in the 1970s. For example, Reese’s decision not to separate broiler and layer production builds upon breeding practices that have existed for thousands of years, despite contemporary genetic control of billions of chickens by Tyson and Aviagen.^[2] To “do-nothing” is a decision to actually do a lot! It means noticing how food is very different today than it was just a century ago. It means considering the implications of industrial techniques and hegemonic farming practices, like mass chicken production, and refusing to be complicit.

Fukuoka’s experimental farming methods draw from agricultural traditions that were developed over centuries. Reese reminds me a lot of Fukuoka in the way that he upholds the simple but ancient practices of raising chickens. Although Reese might not even know about or care for “do-nothing” farming, I consider him together with Fukuoka because I understand them both as radical activists and educators in our industrialized world. Both have travelled, particularly throughout the United States, to educate citizens and consumers about farming practices. Fukuoka was particularly influential in the permaculture and community-supported agriculture movements, while Reese speaks to people concerned about the poultry hegemony today.^[3] Both are caretakers of some of human culture’s longest-held farming practices. Reese demonstrates that Fukuoka is not just a historical figure but a key figure in a global lineage of farmers resisting industrial agriculture.

One Straw Revolution articulates an alternative food system and, more importantly, an act of resistance. Fukuoka is an authoritative voice because of his training in science and practice as a farmer. However, his book remains underrecognized, especially in academic curricula. Is there a bias against farmers as scholarly writers? Is permaculture not a subject of important academic inquiry? Is Fukuoka’s anti-industrial philosophy too bold for a wider audience? While overlooked by academic syllabi, Fukuoka’s book remains important outside of academia, passed along between travelers, farmers, and friends. I would speculate that many more people have read it outside of the classroom. For its transformative power and relevance, I propose

formalizing *One Straw Revolution* in food studies curricula to open up questions about food and life that have yet to be explored.

Biography

Zachary Goldberg currently studies geography at Penn State. His food curiosity took a spin while visiting an urban farm ten years ago, when he started contemplating food systems. Working in Barbados, Colorado, Israel, Montreal, Morocco, and New York, Zach has since had diverse experiences learning about food systems across three continents, mountains and islands, cities and rural landscapes. He looks toward a future of farming in the Jewish community and supporting smallholder farmers around the world.

Citations

1. Chris Pearce, Tsune Kurosawa, and Larry Korn are credited with the translation from Japanese to English. [↵](#)
2. Cobb-Vantress is a subsidiary of Tyson Foods. In 2017, Aviagen purchased Hubbard, the third major company involved in chicken breeding. [↵](#)
3. Shinji Hashimoto, “Training Young Interns in Ichijima Teikei,” #CSABeyondBorders (blog), The International Network for Community Supported Agriculture, last modified October 1, 2018, <http://urgenci.net/csabeyondborders-training-young-interns-in-a-japanese-teikei/>. [↵](#)