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## FARMING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

(full article)

**BSE and the foot-and-mouth crisis have taken British farming to a new low. Alex Fisher asks if there is an alternative to our current farming methods which are riddled with horrific practices and lack of respect for the land or animal. Denise and Ian Bell think so and they are proving it through their extraordinary work on Shedbush Farm, Dorset.**



Passionate animal lovers, environmentalists and spiritually aware people, Denise and Ian Bell are not your average meat farmers.

At a time when many people were so appalled by factory farming that they were choosing to give up meat altogether, Denise and Ian decided to take a different approach. During the height of the BSE crisis, when farming was at an all time low, their colleagues were amazed when they announced they intended to leave their well-paid town jobs to go into farming full time. Fuelled by their belief that it was possible to raise animals in a respectful and holistic manner and concerned that meat farming was being left to huge commercial operations where animal welfare was disregarded in the pursuit of profit, they wanted to show farmers and the public alike that there was another way.

### **An evolving organism**

With this vision in mind, they took over Shedbush Farm, a 16th century National Trust smallholding, five years ago. The couple utilised the principles of biodynamic farming developed by pioneers such as Rudolf Steiner in the 1920s. Biodynamic agriculture was founded on a holistic and spiritual understanding of nature and the human being's role within it. As the couple explain: 'At its heart is the idea of a farm as a self-contained evolving organism whose life relies on home-produced compost, manures and animal feed in which external inputs are kept to a minimum. Even the farmer's own consciousness has an influence on the organism. Subsequently, the farm develops its own resilient identity, builds long-term fertility and radiates health and vitality into its surroundings. Special compost and spray preparations created out of natural substances are used to enhance and regulate plant growth. Biodiversity is a key element and animals as well as plant life are crucial in developing balanced and productive soil conditions, while the practice of companion planting (combining symbiotically supportive plants, such as poppies in a cornfield) and the rotation of crops enable the unique qualities in each plant species to benefit the whole farm ecosystem.'

### **Following the moon**

Influences from hedgerows, streams and woodland form a part of this picture and play a major part in warding off pests and diseases. The sowing and planting calendar corresponds with the positions of the sun, moon and planets. The constellations of the zodiac through which they move are considered when choosing the correct moment to sow, cultivate and harvest crops.

Using plants such as dandelion, nettle, chamomile, yarrow and oak bark, preparations are created according to the seasons and lunar cycles by drying or mulching the plants in manure and then burying them in cow horns for as long as a year. 'This ensures that the elements these plants bear, such as calcium or phosphorous, have the influence of the universe within them' says Denise. 'These are then added to water and sprayed onto the fields.' Denise gestures towards the fields that surround the farmhouse. 'The field on the right is ours; the one on the left is not.' The difference is startling - a glistening emerald green next to a patchy brown and pale olive sprawl.



### **Going slow**

In addition to the meticulous methods of biodynamic farming, the couple introduced the principles of Optimum Health: feeding the animals an entirely organic, GMO-free diet that would be fit for human consumption. They treat the livestock with homeopathy, thus avoiding using any chemicals either on the land or on the animals, and work with the idea of 'slow food production', giving their exclusively rare and traditional breeds time to grow and mature at their own natural pace.

### **The natural way**

To this end all the animals they rear, breed and finish in their enclosed smallholding are allowed to wean naturally. In conventional farming piglets are taken from their mothers at three to five weeks, fattened and sold. By the Bells' methods, the process takes up to a year. 'This has great benefits both psychologically and physically', says Ian. 'The young are imbued with a highly efficient immune system, which they gain from their mothers. In turn, the mothers are allowed to 'dry up' in their natural way, thereby avoiding mastitis.' The couple believe in preventing disease rather than simply treating illness. 'Break down the word disease into dis-ease. If you can keep the animals "at ease", they will not become dis-eased. Psychologically, it's very important that they can obtain emotional highs, that they are happy and enjoy a full life. If you take the young away from their mother prematurely, neither is "at-ease", neither is happy, so it's much better to leave them be.'

### **Glowing endorsements**

The results of their unique farming methods have been extraordinary. Despite being relatively new to farming, the Demeter organic certification they were subsequently awarded was for 'Food more carefully produced than the highest organic standard'. The vitality has returned to their previously poor quality and overstretched land, bringing with it an abundance of flora and fauna. Wild orchids, bulrushes, birds, butterflies and dragonflies have appeared, making Shedbush Farm a lush green oasis amongst the more barren fields that surround it.



### **Homeopathic peppers**

The Bells' approach to dealing with any difficulties on their land is certainly unusual. Three years ago they acquired additional land that had been used for intensive dairy farming. 'The ground had become very sour and subsequently 90% of it was covered in thistles. With a group of volunteers we pulled these out by hand, reducing the coverage to 50%. We then burnt the thistles and sent some of the ash, with some thistles, off to a homeopathic pharmacy. They made us a potentised thistle-ash mixture, like a tincture. In biodynamic terms, this is called a "pepper". You can do this with anything. If you have a problem with rats you could do a similar thing. We put the "pepper" in the spray tank and sprayed the ground, in the hope that we could make the thistles in the ground sterile. Having put the thistles through a destructive process by burning them, we wanted to make them think they'd done their job and die back. The idea is to give a message that the life-cycle of the plant had been interrupted, which is always the best way to kill any parasite. We didn't know what the results would be and, because of weather conditions, were unable to apply it at the ideal time according to the constellations. However, it had a very interesting effect. Some of the thistles in flower wilted, some died completely and many of the seed heads went brown and began to disintegrate. A few survived. It wasn't 100% effective, but the few new ones that have since appeared are much weaker. If we did this a few years on the trot, we would eliminate the problem entirely. Tell that to MAFF and they'd probably fall off their chairs.'

### **Following your intuition**

The couple have only one part-time worker, Sadie, who assists them with the running of the farm. As well as being a financial necessity, this hands-on experience allows them to expand on the principles of biodynamic farming that can be learnt in books by letting their surroundings teach them what their animals need. Ian describes the heightened sense of intuition that he frequently experiences when working on the farm. 'Very often, things are literally shown to me. That might sound wacky, but when I'm with the livestock, at a particular place for no particular reason, something will become obvious to me and I often question why that is,' he muses. 'It might just be that I notice a small aspect of how an animal is behaving. Through this observation I've learnt a lot about how important it is to run generations of animals together. You begin to notice how the psychological balance within the herd structure brings on their personalities, so the animals develop their intelligence when the different generations intermingle. I also became aware that they benefit from being allowed to wander around the farm, so although they are enclosed within the whole smallholding, we often open up all the gates between the fields. The cattle might be with the sheep, the horse might be with the cattle; this leads to a marvellous balance. It also allows them to find medicinal herbs for themselves. They have the freedom to pick through the plants that grow in the hedgerows and around the waterways. A lot of farmers leave cattle in a fenced field with rye grass and nothing else and wonder why they get diseases! It's hard to define, but it's a spiritual thing that one gets being around this stuff and knowing it's the right thing to do. I'm a fervent believer in God myself, but I'm not religious. I have my own views. I'm closer to God when I'm out with my animals in the pasture than I could ever be in a church. Magnificent places that churches actually are, I certainly don't want to talk to God through other human beings.'



### **Living and dying**

If their animals do become unwell, they are never treated with chemicals. Ian is currently training as a homeopath and comments that 'a lot of people tend to think that organic meat is totally chemical free, but often sick animals are still treated with standard drugs. In conventional farming chemicals are poured along the spine of the animal for very simple ailments such as tapeworm. If you had a child with tapeworm I hardly think you'd consider putting something down his spine.' When one has such a close relationship with their animals as Denise and Ian demonstrate, it has to be asked how they feel about taking them to slaughter. 'It can be a very emotional experience, but if nobody bought our meat, would I find a charity to pay my rent? What would happen when they died of natural causes, or would I let my lambs be eaten by foxes, which is a horrific way to die as the fox basically eats the animal alive? If our animals weren't bred for food, frankly they wouldn't exist. I can understand the argument that it is better not to be born at all than to live the life some farm animals do, but to deny life to animals such as ours would be wrong. Yes, I personally do believe it's natural for humans to eat meat. We have incisor teeth and a gut that dowses our food in hydrochloric acid. Taking things back to primeval level, humans would hunt animals for their meat and fur. Where we have gone horribly wrong is that we have taken the respect for the animals out of the picture. If we're going to farm animals rather than hunt them with bows and arrows, then let's do it with terrific respect. It would be great to not have to kill our animals, but who would pay for the feed for the next generation? It's a cycle, behind the generation that moves on is a new generation coming forward. The previous generation pays for the next to have its feed, its straw, its life.'

### **Quality of life**

'What I can do is ensure that not only do they have a fulfilling, happy, healthy life, but that their final journey is as pain-free and stress-free as possible. To this end we only work with a small family abattoir a few miles away. The journey in a trailer is less than 20 minutes, we send no more than six animals at a time and they are not mixed with any new animals from other farms that they are not familiar with. It's very important they stay overnight before slaughter. It's only a short journey, but for an animal that has never been on a trailer, it can still be a bit stressful, so they bed down on straw and get a chance to rest and relax. We have a very close relationship with the people who actually do the killing. The animals go in one at a time and it's very quick.' Obviously, we are aware that some Kindred Spirit readers are committed vegetarians and vegans and we are not trying to persuade them otherwise. However, Denise and Ian expressed concern that the growing trend for vegetarianism is taking the more conscious people out of the animal husbandry field, leaving the industry to those who care little for animal welfare. 'Factory farming, which has developed over the last 50 years, appals us. Animals are treated wrongly, fed wrongly and given chemicals throughout their lives. Ultimately even the way they are killed is wrong and then we pretend that we're going to give ourselves nourishment from such a product! The vitality, the respect given to the animals is what we pass on to our customers. The goodness, or the badness, as the case may be, is passed on. Which is why, I believe, we're seeing so much cancer today. What we're doing to the animals has a huge impact on the health, both physically and spiritually, of human beings. People talk about the need for cheaper food, but at what cost? The cost is animal welfare and healthy humans. In reality we all pay for cheaper meat through taxes, subsidies and the costs of disasters such as BSE and foot-and-mouth. It's not sustainable and no argument can make it work.'



### **Supermarket organics**

The couple do not blame farmers for the demise of agricultural standards; it's the supermarkets they hold responsible. 'Most farmers don't want subsidies. They want to be able to produce quality goods that are going to return the costs involved. But the supermarkets are constantly driving their prices down. That's where capitalism goes wrong: it only looks at 'efficiency'. One of the leading supermarkets has a single abattoir in the country and that's in Cornwall. So, no matter where those animals are bred, they travel. What's more, the lorries often stop at six or seven places to pick up more livestock. Unfamiliar livestock travelling long distances - it's the worst possible husbandry. Shareholders demand growth year in year out. But the shareholders aren't eating their own products. We know that because they buy ours. In Africa tribespeople worship the animals they eat and in our culture it should be the same.'

Ian is equally scathing about the supermarkets' recent move into the organic food market. He believes they actually shouldn't have been allowed to market organic meat. 'They are intrinsically inorganic. Everywhere they've arrived they've destroyed communities. They're only interested in taking the money. If supermarkets are so concerned about organic food, why are they creating a farm unit in Poland that's going to house one million animals? Supermarket meat is on the shelves 36 hours after it's killed. Yet beef isn't really beef until it's been hung for three weeks, no matter what the origins, organic or otherwise. Anyone who knows anything about beef or lamb knows it should be hung. Take a look at your supermarket meat and see what they're selling you. People buy organic supermarket meat thinking they're paying extra for a higher quality product, then they are disappointed that they can't tell the difference. This is actually turning people away from organic food. I think there would have been a great organic movement in this country if it weren't for the supermarkets.'

### **Simply the best**

So, is there a real difference in the quality and taste of Denise and Ian's meat products? Britain's top chefs seem to think so. Nigella Lawson called their organic pork 'better than any pork you've tasted or could hope to taste'. Raymond Blanc declared it a thousand times better than any he'd tasted and Michel Roux has been serving it at his upmarket London restaurant for more than two years. Even Prince Charles has taken an interest in their produce, serving their Heritage Prime pork at his country residence.

'What is needed,' Denise states, 'is a whole re-education. People need to understand that it's better to spend more money on better quality meat, and cut costs by eating it less often. Farmers need to have access to more information on how they can convert to better farming practices. This is why we plan to put together a logbook, a journal, of how we did it so that others can follow in our footsteps. We want to give hope to an awful lot of young people who want to farm in this country and show that there is an alternative. You can take the slower way. It may take some time to get into a profit situation, but you will have a very rich life in doing so - good quality food as you work, a harmonious and rewarding relationship with your environment and with the animals you share your life with.'

On top of the hard work the couple already put into their farm, this may seem like an impossible workload. But for the Bells it's worth the effort. 'At the moment humans are desecrating the very earth that sustains them. We're not saying that we want to stand in the way of progress. We can continue to build spaceships, people can utilise technology, but when we tinker with the source of life, when we don't care about the micro-organisms in the soil, then we're really destroying the steps at the bottom of the ladder on the planet. When it all goes wrong under the ground then we're pulling the carpet from under our feet. If agriculture was kept right, then the rest of the world can do what it wants and it will be saved by the fact that the planet is being properly managed.'

### **MORE INFORMATION**

Those who are interested in learning more about Denise and Ian's methods and supporting this way of farming can call the number below to go on their regular larder list to purchase produce seasonally as available. Their products - beef, lamb, poultry and pork - can be bought through the post and delivered by courier. They encourage meat-eaters to cut out the middlemen and award those extra costs to the animal by buying in bulk and storing in a large box freezer to use as needed. The energy used to power the freezer is balanced out by cutting down on shopping trips. All meat is sold cut up and ready to cook. They also have a range of eco-knitwear, sheepskins and leather goods, produced on the farm.

The couple hope to complete their book by next year and plan to make an educational video to share their ideas.

Contact Heritage Prime - earnestly British meats of rare quality at Shedbush Farm on 01297 489304. Email: [HeritagePrime@aol.com](mailto:HeritagePrime@aol.com)