

OPPORTUNITY FOR LEARNING, AND UNDERSTANDING

Julie A. Avery

The opportunity to gather together to listen and learn from each other is one traditional element of American life that has been misplaced by an increasingly segmented, fast-paced and virtual world. *What Will Be in the Fields Tomorrow?* is an informal script intended for public group reading to bring people together around a common experience. This resource addresses issues that affect everyone—children, families, farmers, and community. We are all engaged in relationships with food, farming and the land around us. Presenting *Fields* as a public activity can be a starting point for community conversations and a series of public programs or events. It is important that more people learn about

“We as a society seem to have turned a corner where genuine concerns about the environment, about health and the future of the planet are in the public consciousness. Our goal is to help the dialogue evolve . . .”

Barbara L. Carlisle

and understand issues and relationships that are presented in this script.

The VOICES Project has developed this script and curriculum modules as resources for organizations to use in their own work: planning, training, building public awareness, and inspiring change in communities around farmers, farming and food at the community level.

Fields will engage and entertain people while exposing them to a wide range of issues—some of which they might not have even thought about.

TWO AUDIENCES, MANY ISSUES

Whether you work with farmers or with the general public *What Will Be in the Fields Tomorrow?* addresses issues and experiences that relate directly to our lives. These two audiences and a variety of issues important to both groups are encompassed within this script.

Within the agricultural community, wide-spread farming practices are grounded in strong motives and opin-

ions and often reinforced over three or four generations of experience. Imagine farmers of all types—large-scale production, small sustainable, diversified organic, etc.—talking and exploring their similarities and their differences. Discussions like what sustainability is to them or how land policies and tax structures impact their right to farm could lead to connections and

ISSUES SUMMARY

What Will Be in the Fields Tomorrow? is an informal readers’ theatre activity for public group reading that can bring people together around a common experience. Themes and story lines address contemporary issues of American farmers. Numerous starting points for continuing educational programs and civic discourse—both inside and outside of agriculture—include:

- Agriculture and young people in our society: where are future farmers coming from?
- Food and commodity: when are they the same and when are they different; how do they serve society?
- The aging farm population.
- Gender: farmers wives, women farmers, and the agricultural roles of women.
- What will become of all that culture? Who will hold it and pass it on?
- Land values, as distinct from the value of land.
- Marketing of food and of the lifestyle, and the choice to farm.
- Does a rural lifestyle still exist? What does quality of life have to do with life choices surrounding farmers, farming, and local food?

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partnerships that build understanding as well as policy. From the food co-op to Farm Bureau; through county Extension and land conservation agencies, service organizations and farmers could build and strengthen partnerships for understanding —agreeing to disagree at times and to work together on mutual issues at others.

The general public lacks basic awareness and understanding of food production processes, transportation, and related issues. Most children no longer learn about agriculture and where food comes from in school. Many individuals in our communities are generations removed from involvement with farming. Packaged lettuce and pet food problems have brought questions and concerns right into our kitchens. Many commonly held assumptions in the public mind about farming are based on an outdated historical context and uninformed trust in food systems. At the community and regional level, we are seeing land use practice shaping communities with policy trailing rather than leading. And, in many communities globalization has supplanted options for local products.

A TOOL FOR PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

What is the mission of your organization? What are your goals? Utilize *What Will Be in the Fields Tomorrow?* to draw attention to your organization and your mission. Bringing people together—consumers and farmers alike—around food and farming issues can be essential to a greater understanding and respect of agricultural positions and practices. *What Will Be in the Fields Tomorrow?* can be an intriguing public program to engage any type of audience. (The essays on presenting readers’

theatre help with this: “How it Works: The Power of Engagement,” “Performance Essentials: How to Make a Good Show,” and “Little Tools: Sharpening the Performance”).

We suggest that the power *Fields*, as a readers’ theatre activity for your community, will be as a kick-off or starting event for a series of educational programs or community conversations around food, farming and community issues. Draw an audience—draw attention with *Fields* and then follow it with a related series of programs or a book club/film festival series, or a community gardening project. Give your community more than just a teaser. Help them to go deeper in content and understanding. Give them ways to get involved, perhaps with community gardening that provides information and workshops as well as land and seeds. Educate by engagement. Serve your mission and your community by expanding your audience and their awareness of issues that affect us all.

CIVIC DIALOGUE A PROCESS FOR UNDERSTANDING

Across the country an increasing use of civic dialogue is building understanding and connections between people and with organizations. The only agenda of civic dialogue is respectful listening and honest sharing towards building trust and understanding.

This is a new approach for most of us who often are working to convince others about our position. The opportunity it provides can be dramatic. Several characteristics make civic dialogue different. Equal value is given to experience, emotion and intellectual knowledge. One is not better than

another because each contributes to individual understanding and beliefs—the foundation of action and behavior. If everything could be reduced to universal facts then misunderstandings and inappropriate action would not occur. Civic dialogue as a process involves the purposeful establishment of a safe trusted environment within which to explore others positions and feelings. Dialogue does not seek to change attitudes or come to consensus. Its purpose is to share ideas, information, experiences and assumptions with others for the purpose of individual and collective learning. Civic dialogue can become a basis for future decisions or consensus, but this is not the purpose.*

INFORMATION ON CIVIC DIALOGUE

Libraries and organizations across the country provide information on civic dialogue and engagement. Civic dialogue as a process has been used across

FORMS OF COMMUNICATION*

- *Conversation.* Sharing information and ideas to express one’s views without any intended impact on the listener
- *Discussion.* Sharing information and ideas in order to accomplish a specific task
- *Debate.* Sharing information and ideas in an effort to bring others into agreement or alignment with one’s position or belief.
- *Dialogue.* Sharing ideas, information, experiences and assumptions for the purposes of personal and collective learning.

many situations from opportunities for deeper community conversation in an area to situations where controversy has become divisive and created barriers.

In 2004 the National Park Service trained staff and incorporated civic engagement into their historic sites. Their Community Tool Box provides an on-line guidebook on dialogue tools and processes. www.nps.gov/phso/rtca-toolbox/fac_dialogue.htm (5/22/07)

Utilizing the arts as an avenue to public engagement, Animating Democracy demonstrates what can happen when an informed public becomes engaged in the issues affecting people's lives. Numerous essays and project examples are available at their site. www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/ (5/24/07)

The National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation seeks to foster a world

of conversation, participation and action. This website provides access to resources, training opportunities and project examples. www.thataway.org/ (5/28/07)

In partnership with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio, four Michigan State University entities—the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, MSU Extension, the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, and the Public Humanities Collaborative—will undertake a three-year project beginning July 1, 2007. The project is designed to help mediate differences in Michigan surrounding controversial issues in agriculture and natural resources. Public dialogue and deliberation will be the approach used with emphasis upon utilizing the best scientific information in conversation about contested issues within a framework of individual values and relevant

trade-offs. The National Issues Forum (NIF) model will be used extensively (see www.nifi.org/). Project objectives include increasing the number of Extension Educators and research scientists who utilize the framework of public dialogue and deliberation in their local, statewide, national, and global work.

READ MORE ABOUT DIALOGUE

- Bohm, David (Lee Nichol, Editor). *On Dialogue*. Routledge: New York, 1996.
- Isaacs, William. *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. Doubleday: New York, 1999.
- Yankelovich, Daniel. *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation*. Simon & Schuster: New York, 1999.

*Bormann, Tammy. Introduction to Dialogue Workshop, from *Using the Past to Shape the Future: Addressing Civic Issues*; 5th Annual Hull House Conference, Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, University of Illinois, Chicago. November 17–19, 2004.