

# HOW IT WORKS: THE POWER OF ENGAGEMENT

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What you will find here is a sort of hybrid plant, yet not an exotic, or even a fragile one. It is a readers' theatre script intended as an opportunity for people to gather and make a piece of theatre among themselves, using themselves as performers and also as audience.

Until you experience it, it's hard to see how you can use it. Once you've experienced it, the power of engagement it creates will surprise and move you.

## A SHARED EXPERIENCE ENGAGES

It's not necessary to be bold, or talented, or theatrical to use this script with a group of people. Anyone can read the words out loud, honestly. That is all that is demanded.

When the reading is finished, the community of readers and audience will be ready to discuss the issues, and will be animated to do so. It just works that way.

So, we invite you to try this out. A second essay provides some tips on how to maximize the experience, especially if you imagine an audience greater than the reading group itself.

## SUSTAINABILITY AND THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE

This type of script could be generated around any topic. The concern of The VOICES Project is sustainability and the future of agriculture.

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. We see it in activism coming from the building industry, the energy industry, the auto industry and the food industry. It seems clear, if measured by the growing number of political statements, corporate proposals, foundation work, film and television documentaries, that the big environmental questions have reached a level of public concern people can no longer ignore. Our goal is to help the dialogue evolve within the public awareness of the agricultural world. We know that healthy, nutritious food, is a key to healthier children, a healthier population, lower health care costs. All this has its base in the agricultural community.

## A THOUGHTFUL DIALOGUE ON CRITICAL ISSUES

This script, its performance and discussion follow-up, is a tool for sparking thoughtful, engaged dialogue about issues of farming and food. There are

elements here that speak to food production, food quality, sustainability of food producing land and people as well as a whole evocation of the lives of farmers—traditional farmers, alternative farmers, experimental farmers and a kid driving a big air-conditioned combine through acres of wheat.

Within these giant issues, the world of agriculture has its own multiple agendas. The goal of this project is to build broader public awareness not so much of specific issues, but of the range of positions—ideological, economic, political, scientific, environmental, and historical, for example. On a personal basis the piece may suggest, even within the pressures of modern living, rethinking decisions about the food choices one makes. Perhaps discussions will lead to an interest in larger public policy, including attention to corporate policy, and even to the massive questions of feeding the world and sustaining the capacity to do so.

## ORAL HISTORIES AND THE STORIES

*What Will Be in the Fields Tomorrow?* began its life in video interviews made by cinematographer Cynthia Vagnetti, talking with a whole range of alternative farmers. Most were in the mold of reducing chemicals in the soil, cutting down on waste runoff, restoring grasslands, keeping energy costs down, and

some were adding organic certification, restoring old fruit varieties, experimental pasturing, furrow to finish hog raising, free range chickens, bartering, and the like. Their voices have been captured and distilled and grouped into sections like “A Farmer’s Vacation.” The words are their own—full of strong feelings about their lives and work.

To these voices have been added three pairs of characters whose dialogues through the play call into question a whole range of issues. One of a pair of life long friends is deciding what to do with her farm now that she is widowed and feeling her age. Her companion, who has farmed in a more traditional way argues with her about the options—and they trade sweet corn for some fryers. A pair of fifth graders show off to each other how much they learned about international trade and farming, while earning money weeding beans, and a college student, more keen on getting a date than doing his weeding lab assignment, is weighing his decision to get a degree in Ag Economics while the girl he has his eye on has become a zealot for the elimination of all chemicals from the Ag world.

Two more monologues present stories drawn from actual events.

### **TAKING ON THE VOICES**

The whole idea of this kind of work—of readers’ theatre—is to invite people to take on these voices—just read them aloud either in a group for each other, or for an audience.

As a whole it makes a little play; but individually the monologues and dialogues and choral sections could be presented separately if the group wants

a shorter time together. The group might be a Vocational Ag class, an Ag Extension sponsored event, a 4-H club meeting, a church circle, a continuing education class, a Civitan or Kiwanis meeting; a Chamber of Commerce or planning commission open meeting, where, perhaps a town is considering establishing a farmers market.

It is best to set such a performance for something that already has a meeting established. Putting on plays is easy. Getting people to come to them is very hard. Furthermore, the audiences familiarity with the readers is a big part of what engages people, first to listen, and then to participate in the discussion that follows.

The performance psychology works simply enough. The person reading is someone you know. They are not actors, and they are reading, so there is no danger that these are outsiders coming to teach you something. The audience and the performers may be one in the same, or there may be a larger group listening.

Whatever group gathers, the leadership should dive in and be part of the reading. That signals to everyone that the whole thing has legitimacy. This works best when people step out of the shadows, when people feel included. It also works best when you know there is controversy represented in the reading group and the audience. The more difference of opinion present, the better the event will play out.

### **DIALOGUE AND EXPLORATION BUILD AND STRENGTHEN COMMUNITY**

It is our experience with this kind of theatre that ultimately it builds and strengthens communities. It is a “soft”

way of introducing controversy. It allows positions to be stated in the voices of real people with recognizable lives, who are people you know yet people you don’t know.

The ultimate key, of course is the follow-up conversation. Ask simple questions:

- What voices did you hear that you want to speak about?
- Where do you see the dilemmas?
- Does any of this discussion touch your life now?
- What stories surprised you?
- What positions seem closest to your own?

Consider making a list of things the group might want to take up if it were to go on. These might include:

- Learning more about where daily food comes from, how it gets to market.
- If there is a continuum from General Foods to the roadside fruit stand, what do you choose on that continuum and how do you make the choices?
- Where do cooks, restaurants and the food preparation industry fit in all this?
- What are the factors in feeding the world and sustaining the environment?
- And then, of course, if you were to collect your own food and garden and farm stories, what would you tell? Some groups may consider doing this.

*What Will Be in the Fields Tomorrow?* is not a magic solution to anything—but it has a magic to it.

We offer it with confidence and enthusiasm.