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Environmental/ethical/spiritual costs of Northern California wine industry

By Shepherd Bliss

I have been contemplating why the growing struggle by rural residents against the expanding, industrial wine industry in Sonoma and Napa counties, Northern California, has touched my heart and soul so deeply.

An email from Sister Julie DeRossi of the Starcross Monastic Community to the Board of Supervisors, which follows at the end of this article, provided insight. It stimulated a consideration of the environmental, ethical, spiritual, and agricultural costs of the invasive wine industry that consumes and spoils our diverse rural land at an increasingly rapid rate.



Nuns, monks, and other religious people have pursued farming as spiritual practice for centuries. Israel's communal farms, called kibbutzes, could be considered another example of such farming.

Good farming involves direct, meditative, mindful contact with the Earth and creation. It provides solitude and interaction with animals, plants, and the elements, which is important in most religious traditions. It offers insight into the other-than-human world.

Ordained a United Methodist minister, I served various congregations. For most of the last 35 years, I have worked mainly as a part-time college teacher, and as a berry farmer for the last two-dozen years. I have taught ethics and other subjects at the historically Catholic Dominican University for the last four years. I consider teaching, farming, and writing to be forms of secular ministry.

What the destructive wine industry has been doing in Northern California seems unethical to me. It is inconsistent with the principles of what ecologist Aldo Leopold describes as "land ethics." Leopold writes, "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land."

Sister Julie writes below about "spiritual health." I was drawn to semi-rural Sonoma County in the early 1990's because it nourished my soul. I felt part of a connected whole, what some describe as a "community of faith," rather than merely an isolated individual.

After a couple of years here, I bought rural land in 1992 and transformed it into a working berry farm. I named it after the wounded healer Kokopelli of the indigenous Pueblo people.

"KNEEL AND KISS THE GROUND"

As I pick berries at Kokopelli Farm, prayerfully bowing down to the ground, I recall words from the Sufi poet Rumi, "There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." Some farmers do kiss and even taste the soil, from which we emerged.

Berry-picking is a form of yoga, which in the spiritual tradition means “union,” including with the Divine. My belief system has evolved to include elements of various spiritual traditions.

I encourage berry pickers to “think like a berry.” This borrows from ecologist Leopold’s essay “Thinking Like a Mountain.” As a young man, he hunted wolves. One day he looked into the eyes of a dying wolf that he had killed. He later looked at a ravaged mountain, lacking that important predator. Leopold had a *metanoia*—a spiritual transformation. So he advocated that we “think like a mountain.”

Leopold stopped hunting and became a forest ranger committed to protecting forests, which the invasive wine industry clear-cuts to replace with industrial vineyards. Perhaps more grape-growers, wine-makers, and vintners will have spiritual awakenings and work to regenerate the land, rather than damage it.

Sonoma County has over 60,000 acres planted to wine grapes, which continues to expand, whereas only around 12,000 are planted with food crops, a number which is shrinking. One can “eat” only so much wine. A conventional vineyard destroys the land’s diversity, making it desert-like and inhospitable to most life forms, other than grapes.

Mono-crops threaten nature’s balance and tend to have boom-and-bust cycles. Wineries have real estate departments. Once their mono-crop busts, and it will, they are prepared to sell to people who would build McMansions.

Wine grapes do not need bees for pollination, as many food crops do. Most grape-growers use pesticides, which can spread for miles, killing millions of bees, as well as other beneficial life forms. Bee colony collapse is a major food crisis, which the growing wine industry worsens.

“Vineyards are green deserts for bees,” writes my bee-keeping neighbor Ellen Sherron. “They used to be able to forage on apples, pears, prunes and berries. These reliable food sources in early spring have been replaced with huge swaths of wind-pollinated plants that provide nothing for bees. Grapes require lots of fungicides, insecticides, and herbicides, which kill countless bees.”

“I consider how I interact with my garden to be a spiritual act,” Sherron added. “I have serious spiritual revelations by going into the yard.”

Gratitude is an essential element of spirituality, which can help create contentment. What unites Big Wine is the pursuit of financial wealth, even at the expense of one’s neighbors, the land, and the environment. Such rampant materialism aligns Big Wine with Big Oil, Big Tobacco, and Big Coal, for the damage that they all do to the Earth and its human and non-human inhabitants.

My soul aches as I witness the multiple abuses of the wine industry to the land, water, air, soil, and its animal and human neighbors. As the Wine Empire further colonizes our counties, I have felt a spiritual sickness. I no longer feel that “place of serenity,” which Sister Julie describes below, as much as I used to.

FARMING WITH OR AGAINST NATURE

Farming can either emulate natural processes or go against them. The list of wine industry abuses is long and dangerous. Many of its common practices are contrary to nature’s design, including the following: bulldozing hilltops; clear-cutting redwood forests, eliminating oak woodlands, and destroying apple orchards; abusing the soil; fencing out wildlife; using poisonous pesticides, including in school zones; congesting narrow, rural roads with tipsy wine tasters and noisy, industrial equipment; making loud noises all night that keep neighbors up; and much more.

Even in a time of drought, the wine industry hoards rather than shares limited water, which all creatures need to survive.

Such practices are not sustainable, contrary to the wine industry’s false claims, nor environmental, ethical, or spiritual. They are not consistent with genuine sustainable agriculture. The substantial profits go primarily to the corporate alcohol companies that own most of the wine production. *The money goes to Wall Street and foreign investors, many of whom never come here. The booklet “The Myth of the Family Winery: Global Corporations Behind California Wine,” by the Marin Institute proves this.*

Such practices do not make vineyards and wineries good neighbors. Property values tend to go down and wells sometimes dry up when vineyards and wineries move in next door.

“Most winemakers/vineyard managers label themselves as ‘stewards of the land’—a crown they conveniently wear to sell wine,” a grape-grower friend wrote. “In reality, they have a disregard for how their farming techniques affect us all.”

WINE AND WATER WATCH

For the last six months I have been working with a four-county community organizing group that meets monthly—Wine and Water Watch (WWW). Through the work of WWW and other groups—such as Preserve Rural Sonoma County and NapaVision 2050—we can engage in political efforts to restore the spiritual strength inherent in this beautiful land that we share with so many Divine creatures.

“I, too, feel a profound spiritual sickness so deep that I don’t know how to go on living here. When I drive to places I have to avert my eyes from the landscape,” writes my WWW colleague Pamela Singer. She is featured in her garden at the San Francisco CBS-TV news clip at the link below. Other friends have already left Sonoma County in search of more serene, less industrial places to dwell. I miss them.

The rapidly growing industrial wine industry has thrust Sonoma County into a spiritual crisis—as well as political, environmental, ethical, agricultural, and cultural crises. Dealing with it requires more than mere political action. Immediate and direct action is needed to retain what is being lost. Fortunately, more people are raising voices against the wine industry’s over-growth, indicating the emergence of a mass movement.

“We need a new kind of land reform, with a new consensual ethic that rewards regeneration of diversity, soil fertility, carbon sequestration, food production, beauty, and spiritual sustenance,” writes the Zen Buddhist priest and food farmer Barton Stone.

Too many people bow down to the false wine god Bacchus, rather than to the full fertility of the Earth itself.

Grace & peace, Shepherd Bliss, 3sb@comcast, www.WineWaterWatch.com (in development)

More information: <http://youtu.be/4VJrJUS-IKg>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXV1APcHWoE&feature=youtu.be>

Dear Members of the Board of Supervisors,

As you consider amending the Coastal Ag element of the General Plan please pause to reflect on what is happening to our beautiful county as industrial wine takes over. We are in danger of losing something which makes this area unique – the important natural quiet zones of forest and coast that contribute to the physical, emotional and spiritual health of all people whether residents or visitors.

You know the reality of water scarcity and other environmental impacts. May I offer an additional perspective and quote Pope Francis’ recent encyclical letter addressed “To the whole human family” *Laudato si: On Care for Our Common Home*. “If we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs...turning reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.”

When I first moved to Annapolis as a member of Starcross Monastic Community in 1976 we were seeking a place of serenity. It was a place we vowed to protect and preserve for ourselves, our children and urban friends in need of a place of quiet. Now looking out from our chapel we see hillsides covered with vineyards, almost all of which are owned by large corporations.

As the poet Wendell Berry has said, “What we need is here.” It is here. Now. I hope that in the interest of promoting commercial ventures, what we and our children truly need will not be sacrificed. The power is in your hands.

Sister Julie DeRossi, Starcross Monastic Community, Annapolis, Sonoma County