

Tom Spaulding, Angelic Organics
What's Worth Protecting?

Tom Spaulding: Great, thanks John. My name's Tom Spaulding. I'm at Angelic Organics, which is a biodynamic, certified organic farm in northern Illinois. We're right near the Wisconsin border. We're about 90 miles northwest of Chicago and about 50 miles southeast of Madison, Wisconsin.

And it's a 200-acre operation, mostly a CSA vegetable operation that's now has grown to about 2,500 families. And we also have wild space and we have pastured meats that we're doing as well in addition to the vegetables. But the vegetables are the primary farming activity that's happening on the land.

And I guess I would just say that we're deeply into the conversation now at our farm and with our community around the issues of land and ownership and use for a number of reasons, which I'll go into. But I would I'd preface that by saying I went through something around this question with my family that was very deeply painful about 20 or 30 years ago.

We have land in New Hampshire very close to the Temple-Wilton Farm, Trauger Groh's farm. And I had been in conversations with them about coaching us and our family on really doing something in New Hampshire. That was originally where I was told people I was from I was born in San Francisco, I lived all over the country. I never lived in New Hampshire, but that's where my grandparents lived. And that was the constant in my life for much of my upbringing.

And I really loved this land in New Hampshire so much. And with my brothers and other family members we started a dialogue back in the early '90s about using that land for a CSA or some other initiative.

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And it really ended badly. And so it was very, very painful to see that some of these questions could not be addressed in my family.

My brother looked at me one day and said: "This is not a church. You know, this— " and I was bringing up, these are spiritual questions that we're asking ourselves, and my brother just said, "This is not a church." And I told him, "This is not a condo association." And that's where we basically agreed to disagree. He thought our family was a condo association and I thought that our family was something much bigger than that it was a spiritual body. And we just had to walk away from that. But it was very painful.

But I'm happy to say that I'm now in a community of people that have really engaged this question. So I'm, I just want say that everything turns and comes around. The other thing that I found out after being involved with Angelic Organics for 20 years now, I found out this year that my family owned the property we're farming, before Farmer John's grandfather bought it in early 1900s.

Just a very odd thing. Someone came by the cemetery that we have on our farm and was looking at their own genealogy, and they showed me the list of who was buried there. And I recognized my brother's middle name on three of the people that are buried in the graveyard on our farm. And I asked my father, and he looked them up and said, "Yes, those are our relatives." And so, I never thought I would ever end up in Illinois and nor did I ever think I'd be farming in Illinois. And this year I come to find out, after 20 years of involvement with this farm, that it's the land my relatives farmed in the late 1800s.

So things come around. And so I'm eternally hopeful that good things are

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coming out of all of this stuff, this conversation.

So our initiative, we're seeking to protect the land in perpetuity for organic and biodynamic agriculture, farming education and land conservation, that's the purpose of our initiative. This is asking the question: What's worth protecting?

That's an aerial view of the farm from a few years ago.

You'll notice a big spiral in the middle of a field there. That was the day that we acquired those 40 acres from a neighbor who was who was retiring. And I was in contact with Live Power Farm back in those years. That was in the late 1990s and we had no money, and the neighbor was selling 40 acres and we just hustled and found members of the community to step up and help purchase that land together.

And that was a 15-year LLC that 27 families held that land until this year. And it sunsets in December. And so that was one of the reasons why we had to really get moving. So I'm just going to whip through a couple of pictures so you can get a sense of what it is we love. I mean, everything turns on affection.

And these are just shots from the fields, the hard work, the soils, the compost work we're doing, the community of people. This young woman is from a Waldorf school, and she's third grade and says she's going to be a farmer, and so she made this beautiful shirt. You know, we have a great diversity of people and organisms and activity. We have all kinds of school activity all year going on at the farm: educational classes, farmer training.

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We do urban agriculture in some of the cities nearby working with low-income families. This is Farmer John, his wife Heidi, they're here at the conference. His grandfather was the one that bought the farm in the early 1900s. And John transitioned it to a biodynamic farm in 1990.

And these are just to give you a feel for it. We have a floodplain. We have a creek that runs real clear through the property. That's me with my draft horses. Andrew's here at the conference, he's sitting on the back of that wiggle hoe. We have Scottish highland cattle. And that was a barn raising with the community.

This is my wife Nettie. She's an eco-theologian, give her a plug. This is one of our urban sites in the middle of the housing authority in Rockford, one of the hardest hit cities in Illinois during the recession. We're raising food in the middle of the housing authority.

We do farmer training, CRAFT farmer alliance, which we borrowed from Jean-Paul in the Hudson Valley. We grew that. And... fun on the farm. Anyway, that's the sense of what we're trying to protect. All the people who eat from this farm, we've got 60 acres in rotation, vegetables. We aggregate fruit, we've got 2,500 households. And we employ 30 individuals on the vegetable side. It was the first CSA in northern Illinois. John Peterson founded this in 1990.

And then we have the learning center, which started in 1998. It's a not-for-profit partner to the for-profit farm. We serve more than 5,000 farmers and community members a year in our programs of farmer training. Eater education for all the people that work with farmers and eat their food, urban ag and advocacy. We have about 30–35 employees as well working in Chicago, in Rockford and out at the farm.

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The other thing I wanted to say besides what is that we're trying to protect is also the future. And so there's opportunities to grow deeper and broader as a community. We want to resurrect some former enterprises that used to be on our farm.

There was a dairy at one time before it became biodynamic. John grew up on a dairy farm and we'd like to bring back the dairy and do grains. Those would lead into doing some new enterprises like a bakery as well as the creamery and such. And we want to expand some enterprises that are already there. We have an on-farm store we'd like to grow out. We have pastured meats we'd like to grow out. And we're trying to create a visiting students program, much like Hawthorne Valley in New York and have an overnight center that people can stay at for the week.

So all these enterprises are part of the thinking as we're going forward that are all happening based off of this land. And we have four parcels that we either own or lease that we're attempting to move into this long-term situation.

The 22 acres right here says J.W. Peterson, LLC, that's owned by Farmer John. After he lost his conventional farm in the '80s, he went from 700 acres down to 22, and he still owns this 22 in LLC with another investor. And then this 40 here was what we bought in 1997 for a 15-year LLC with 27 families. And then this 56 here, we rent from a neighbor year-to-year. And then this 70 we bought outright in 2012. And that was a five-year effort with social investors and donors who helped us to acquire that.

The goal is really, under this initiative, is to get all these things into long — longer than 15-year — arrangements. We want to get into forever arrangements, so how do we do that? So some of the

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questions that are guiding us right now, our five or six big ones, are: How can we ensure that the coming generations will be able to have access? How does the community have access to the farm and the learning center?

How do we manage the transition from Farmer John, who's 65 now and is going to be retiring, how are we going to manage that transition to a junior farmer and not put debilitating debt on the shoulders of the junior farmer? And how do we make sure that John's able to retire with dignity after such a life of giving to the community and to the farm? We estimate that if the junior farmer was in our area, it'd probably be \$600,000 to buy in just for the vegetable ground.

And you know, that just counts everybody we know out in terms of transitioning to another farmer. It's just not going to happen. And then we have two of those parcels that have 15-year leases on them that are sunsetting this year, that made it quite urgent for us to do this work in the last couple years. And then we were really looking at how do we structure the new relationships so that we balance freedom and community.

We want the enterprises to feel like they're still freely operating enterprises, but we want them to feel that they're also part of a community and how do you balance those two things? If you go to either end, you end up with tyranny in one form or another. And then what kind of umbrella structures could we bring that balance?

We know we needed to raise resources, so we're also asking, well, how are we going to raise those resources for these long-term tenure arrangements? And how do we model that past so other farmers in our region can learn from ours and do the same kind of thing?

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So those are the kind of questions guiding us. And the main strategies we've grabbed onto: We're doing farmer succession planning. We're engaging people in fundraising investment and governance of the effort that we're going into — multi-stakeholders — that's farmers, the community members and others.

We're using a community land trust model. We have not yet used easements, though we've been looking at them. And then setting up some long-term tenure arrangements with 99-year lease templates. And, a few inspirations for what we're putting together, Järna certainly, was mentioned today in the plenary. And we toured there some years ago. And that's had a lot to do with our thinking, seeing how they had some things set up there that inspired us.

Hawthorne Valley Farm in New York, the direction that we're going, they had considered at one point and did not choose the path that we're going down, but maybe they'll circle back to it. But they shared all their thinking around it from a couple decades ago. And so, we're heading down the path that they considered but didn't go down.

There's a community farm in Madison, Wisconsin called Troy and they have a land trust setup in a co-housing and then they have a farm that's all under a land trust. And so, we looked at them pretty closely. Chuck Matthei does anyone in the room know Chuck Matthei? He was a huge influence on me and in my life, and he started Equity Trust and they were very, very helpful in our thinking. Of course, Robert Karp from the BDA, and then Liberty Prairie Foundation in Illinois is a local land trust that we work with that's very creative in doing long-term leases from public and private entities for organic farmers.

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So, what we're putting together, we just did was we created a land trust of our own called Angelic Organics Association. We incorporated. And this is our umbrella that's going to be balancing the community and the freedom of the enterprises.

The land trust, so I'm the president of the land trust, and we've created a multi-stakeholder trustees— from the eaters and the farmers and the nonprofit educators. And then the land trust is providing the long-term leases, we haven't written the leases yet, but we're on our way there. We've created the land trust and then we did it, I'll talk about the other steps, but this is a little bit looking into the future.

We have the two existing enterprises on the left-hand side, the nonprofit and the for-profit farm. And they are going to have the 99-year ground leases that are inheritable from the land trust that's— represents the enterprises and the people who get food from or education from the enterprises. Hopefully, this will be the framework that allows us to add in the additional enterprises over time, no matter what they are.

Male Voice (off-mic): Who owned the— who was Angelic Organics Association now?

Tom Spaulding: This is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) community land trust. But it's represented— its trustees are representatives of all these entities and their users or consumers or eaters or whatever you want to call — the people that populate, the community that populates these enterprises — whether they're for-profit or nonprofit. It's the economic community, that's right. And so the basic idea is if Farmer John retires or moves to Jamaica, you know, or whatever, that this entity here will protect the interests of all the community that depends upon this farm and their

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interests as we transition to another farmer.

And so this is the basic framework that we're using to move forward. What we've accomplished so far in this is we did create our association, it was in 2013. The first parcel that was sunsetting in this year, in December, we just closed a couple weeks ago after a couple years of work on this 39 acres.

And some of the members of those 27 families donated their shares. They believe in this initiative so much they just donated their equity to the land trust. Some of them asked for the money that they put in 15 years ago to get the money out. And so, we raised the money for that. And then some people really just wanted the cash. And you know, we realized we had such a mixed bag of people.

Some people just wanted their money out and, I mean, market rate. So, the value of that land doubled, so we actually raised money from donors to buy out some of those people at market rate. And then some people we just had to find new social investors to buy out the market rate people. But we managed to come out of it with 19 shares in that land now, ten of which are owned by the land trust as of November 4th.

So, we have a majority ownership of that 39 acres, which is half of our vegetable ground. So that land now is on the road to being protected in perpetuity. The next conversation is really with John about his 22 acres and how do we negotiate a transfer of that land and buildings to the land trust.

And that happens concurrently with the farmer succession plan. Because that really will impact what resources John can take out of that. So that's

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a big piece of it. And then, these are other next steps in terms of moving other parcels into the land trust and then working up these templates for the 99-year ground leases in collaboration with some of our supporters.

We will work out facility use agreements-- and we're looking at templates now around those so that some of the structures can be owned by the land trust and some of the structures will be owned by the farmer or enterprise entrepreneurs. And so, we're working out those right now as well.

And then this is all about documenting what we're doing so we can share it out through our farmer training programs. We're working with a regional university and with some other entities to make sure that we're sharing those things out.

At the end of the day, we want to have affordable land access for our junior farmers. We want community access to the food. We want community access for the training and education. We want all income levels to be able to get and grow and eat good food. We want to protect the land in perpetuity. We want this to be a replicable model. And we think we're headed in that direction. So anyway, this is—this is what we're protecting.