

One Disruption Away

We Need to Acknowledge the Razor's Edge that Many of Us are Walking

By Robin Moore

I got a call from a colleague recently asking how I was dealing with the corona virus pandemic, and I said I was feeling grateful. This is in stark contrast to where I was only six years ago when I was one disruption away from my entire fragile system falling apart. I am offering my story to show what these struggles look like in a rural area, how many of us move in and out of these situations without anyone around us knowing, and how close so many of us are to falling apart. I am writing this to remind myself, and everyone else, how close any of us can get to falling apart.

To be clear, I am grateful to still feel safe right now. Currently, I have a job at the Land Stewardship Project, with benefits and paid time off and a board and management that see the bigger picture. I am grateful to live in a rural area where costs are low and primary activities outside of working for LSP—biking, collecting firewood, and going for long walks—haven't been interrupted. I am lucky to be healthy and to have a healthy family, and am grateful to be financially secure right now. I am also white, have been to college, speak the language, and understand how to function in the systems around me—most of the time.

This is set against the recent memory of being so poor that I was relying on nettles as a major source of nutrients and skipping as many meals as possible to save money, mostly to make sure that I could pay for gas to get to paying work. Guess what, I was farming! I'm not trying to compare my situation to the current farm crisis. My farming didn't resemble what a lot of small and mid-sized operations are doing—I was growing organic flowers for a cut flower market, worked as a hired hand for a local conventional farmer, was the primary help at a couple of local vineyards (pruning all winter and managing the canopy and grounds in the summer), and had a variety of other side jobs, from blacksmithing to substitute teaching.

I sometimes had healthcare, but that was

never stable. With multiple meager income streams and being single with no children, MinnesotaCare was very easy to lose, what with shifting requirements and bungled red tape. The poverty was real, and even being fiercely self-sufficient, thrifty beyond logic, and modest in all consumption, I wasn't making it.

A few points of honesty and clarification: I was able to live so close to the edge for so long because I benefited from several things: I didn't have kids, I lived on another family's farm in a trailer and did not pay rent, I could barter for meat, the utilities were in that family's name and I reimbursed them when I could (usually after a tax return), I heated with wood and had access to wood, I didn't have much student loan debt, and I have my own family who would take me in if I needed it.

On the other side: I was so poor because my agricultural and crafted products were continually undervalued, because my labor was really undervalued, and because the "support" systems out there are structured to discourage

use and made to shake people off rather than help them get to a point of self-sufficiency. Also, I was single and did not own anything but my car, so loans were out of the question for any of my ventures.

Once, while on my way to visit family for the holidays (my mom sent me gas money), I stayed overnight at a friend's house in Minneapolis to break up the drive. My car was ticketed while parked for, I'm not joking, a dirty license plate. I live on a gravel road. The ticket was for \$80, which I did not have. On top of being terrified of the entire situation, I could not afford to drive back to the Twin Cities to contest the ticket. So I ignored it.

Fast forward six months and I am pulled

over for a burnt-out taillight, and find out that my license had been revoked. The police officer, who knew me and my car, told me that if he caught me driving I would go to jail. This was a big problem, there are no buses in rural America, and my workplaces were spread over a 60-mile radius—how was I going to get to work?

I drove a lot of back roads, caught rides with the neighbors, and rode my bike as much as I could. My sister came out to help drive me for a spell. I borrowed money from my parents to pay the ticket and fines and court fees, I lost weight and sleep with the stress and anxiety about getting caught, going to jail, making enough money to pay for gas and food. Farming and blacksmithing were taking a toll on my body that I could no longer afford. I started looking for a way out, and after 18 years of farming I took this job at LSP. It almost broke me to admit that I had failed.

My point is that for so many of us, one major disruption, like a ticket for a dirty license plate, is all it takes to knock the whole structure of our lives apart, and this pandemic is an epic disruption. Remove one source of income and the car, the gas, the heat, the electricity, the water, the house... all of them are at risk. When I was that close to collapse, I didn't talk about it, I didn't even really have the time or energy to even think about asking for help. I couldn't step back and see the bigger picture of my situation, I was just focused on keeping it all held together.

How many of us, how many of our neighbors, are in a similar situation? We need to ask these questions, offer support, and acknowledge the edge that many of us, both rural and urban, are walking. I want to use this feeling of gratitude to keep my eyes open, to help build networks of support, and to keep our lives intact as uncertainty deals its blows. There's no shame in eating nettles, or in admitting we need help. Let's be there for each other both in the community we know and in the society we build. □

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COVID-19 & the Farm Crisis

The Land Stewardship Project has added a COVID-19 section to its Farm Crisis web page: www.landstewardshipproject.org/farmcrisis. Information on emergency loans and assistance for livestock producers and processors is linked there. That page also has numerous helpful resources for farmers grappling with stress related to economic, emotional, or weather issues. For more on newly available farm crisis resources, including assistance for farmers facing possible foreclosure, see page 11.