

## Genesis Farm: Living locally while honoring and learning about the new cosmology

Rich Heffern | Jan. 18, 2011 Eco Catholic

*Genesis Farm near Blairstown, New Jersey, is one of the oldest of the Earth-friendly enterprises in the nation sponsored or supported by a womens' religious community -- in this case the Sisters of St. Dominic of Caldwell, New Jersey. I talked with Sr. Miriam MacGillis, its founder and director, about the Farm and its work.*



### What is Genesis Farm?

Genesis Farm consists of 231 acres of farm land totally in protection, owned by the Dominican sisters, and established in 1980. The Dominican sisters, of course, have been involved in education for centuries. Our present expression is an agricultural one. We started a CSA (community-supported agriculture) subscription farming program which is in its 23rd season now.

We had one of the first CSAs back in the 1980s; now it has 300 shareholders, and it has created a wonderful sense of community among people who come here.

Genesis farm is also about the learning aspects centered on the new cosmology ? the story science tells us about our origins and whereabouts in the universe -- and on how we live that new understanding out in practical ways. That?s a large part of what we do, telling the universe story and exploring what Fr. Thomas Berry called ?the great work,? the task of reinventing the human at the species level in order to promote a mutually-enhancing Earth-human relationship.

We try hard to be a presence in the local community here, which is a suburban-rural area. We also work closely with other organizations in our bioregion. The bioregion here is known as the Ridge and Valley Bioregion, part of the Appalachian mountain chain that runs from Georgia all the way up through New Jersey and beyond.

### What's the nature of the educational component of the Farm?

We established the Ridge and Valley Charter School, a tuition-free public elementary school for children in the K-8 age group. The school is based on themes of Earth literacy, sustainability, experiential outdoor education and child-centered learning. Enrollment is open to any child in New Jersey. We also established the Foodshed

Alliance which works with farmers and eaters to promote local food. It develops farmers markets, farm to school programs, and things of that nature. We have a seed saving society in the region that has been going now for 20 years.

We've tried to promote the emergence of a sustainable Ridge and Valley alliance, trying to be a movement within this region so people can see there's another way besides the tried and true path.

The CSA practices biodynamic methods of agriculture. It's a philosophy of agriculture developed by Rudolph Steiner, who was both a mystic and a scientist. His approach to cultivation of food and animals is very spiritually based.

We are trying to work to bring all of these understandings based on the new cosmology and on the bioregional concept down into ordinary language for ordinary people so they can understand it, connect the dots and



practice it

in their homes and backyards. We have area of our land set

aside where we will create demonstration gardens designed to help people in an urban setting grow food in backyard, rooftop or condo community gardens. We want to do everything we can to help people grow their own food.

This comes in part out of our involvement with the Transition Movement. This movement is about deep changes in response to the realization that oil supplies have peaked, that we will not be able to depend on cheap fossil fuel, but will probably need to back to depend on local communities and local wisdom, to reconnect with the places where we live. The Movement started in England in about 2005. Our engagement has brought a compelling context and language to the work we have been doing on this land and in this region over the last 30 years. We have been deeply inspired by the vision and extraordinary work of this movement and its founder, Rob Hopkins. Facing honestly into the probable disruption that industrialized economies will experience through energy scarcity, unprecedented climate change and economic stability, they are preparing for the future with inner resilience, an ethics of caring and a depth of human ingenuity. Their efforts in the U.K. have spawned a world-wide movement.

Through the efforts of Seanna Ashburn, Michael Brownlee and Lynette Marie Hawthorn, Genesis Farm and a growing number of local initiatives have joined this movement as it links with thousands of other grassroots people working for ecological restoration, social justice and spiritual fulfillment. We became involved in 2008 when we started to read about the work they were doing. We started to integrate their thinking into our own program. It's Fr. Thomas Berry's "great work" put on an urgent basis. We call it "re-skilling," and it involves rediscovering old practices like canning and other kinds of food preservation, building bike paths in neighborhoods, and the whole array of skills and practices that will allow us to get along without fossil fuels.

Our Earth Literacy programs are becoming more and more locally-centered. We probably shouldn't be encouraging people to come from long distances, so we're looking into webinar techniques for long-distance

learning, giving this information away without people having to leave home and fly. The day of the nationwide conference is probably coming to an end.

### **Would you characterize yourself as an intentional community?**

We're not an intentional community. Our CSA is staffed by local farmers who come every day to the spaces we provide for growing. The CSA itself was deeded some land by an early member; there's a house and barn on that land that houses interns that study with the CSA. The garden supports three full time farmers and their families, and three or four interns.

Genesis Farm itself has two full-time staff. I live here and the coordinator of land and buildings lives here with his wife. Everyone else who work here is from the local region. .

### **You like to say that you're a learning center rather than an educational center.**

The new cosmology turns everything upside down. We are all learning together. Thomas Berry's first book *The Dream of the Earth*, was published in 1988 then there was an explosion of interest in Berry's ideas. Now there are so many more people down this path we start from a different place now.

Biologists, physicists and other scientists continue to adjust their perceptions of Earth as a living organism in its own right. Their writings make it ever more clear that humans must alter their most basic perceptions about themselves and Earth...that the survival of the human species must be considered within the broader context of how nature is surviving... how the air, water, and soil nutrients are faring in their ancient but newly challenged cycle

Honoring the land is important to us. When Thomas Berry published his paper on bioregionalism, it was an invitation to fall in love with where you are. It was an enormous contribution because the bioregional aspect of this work is inexhaustible Students who graduate with credit from our Earth Literacy program are given this last assignment: To go home and write a report about their bioregion and send it in. Everyone says they loved doing this research. When your heart and eyes are open, you cant get enough of it.

We do a lot of ritual, non-liturgical ceremonies that connect us with the land and honor it. Recently we all walked the land asking the land to accept us and feed us. We visited the ponds and wetlands. We gave gifts of bee pollen and cornmeal as we walked with a sense of humility. We prayed that we want to be real members of the community, asking the land to teach us

It's so important to do things like that. We honor the equinoxes and solstices, the turning points of our year. We need to do this everywhere. It supports a spirituality that will help us get energy and guidance for what is coming when the oil runs out. It will not be easy.

Genesis Farm is rooted in a belief that the universe, Earth, and all reality are permeated by the presence and power of that ultimate Holy Mystery that has been so deeply and richly expressed in the world's spiritual traditions. We try to ground our ecological and agricultural work in this deep belief. This Sacred Mystery, known by so many religious names, is the common thread in our efforts.

[www.genesisfarm.org](http://www.genesisfarm.org)



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