

Introduction



I never set out to create or inspire societal change. When it came to renewable energy, I just sort of lumbered along, stepping into one curiosity after another. If anything, I merely had too much time on my hands. My friend Michael Tiemann attributes that in part to my lack of a television set. To hear him tell it I was just a guy with five gallons of turkey fat who wanted to figure out how to make it burn.

He's partly right about that. I might argue that I was more interested in motive power than simple combustion—but close enough is good enough.

My deep frying of turkeys did lead to the creation of biodiesel from used cooking oil, and the creation of biodiesel did lead to the formation of Piedmont Biofuels, and Piedmont Biofuels did go on to become a national pioneer in grassroots community scale biodiesel. That's all true.

What is also true is that I went on to meet an astonishing array of powerful people. I don't count the White House advisors, or Senators, or the sea of politicians that have visited or tapped our project. What inspires me is those individuals who are on the ground, delivering good work in the name of environmental sustainability. They are the voices in this book.

Some of them are well known, with books, essays and articles to their credit. Some of them are family. Some are

making their publishing debut. All of their stories are fascinating, and I am delighted to have collected them here.

This book accidentally began with a piece I wrote for my daughter. She was editing a newsletter on renewable energy and I submitted an essay entitled “Agents of Change.”

“Change” is a big space. This book is limited to change agents on the environmental and sustainability front. I intentionally left out those people I know who are on the front lines of fighting sexism, racism, corporatism, poverty, hunger and many other good battles.

And I understand how flawed that is. My brother Glen once invited me to a conversation with David Suzuki, and he distilled everything down to hunger and poverty. Suzuki said, “If I was starving, and I saw an animal I could eat, I wouldn’t check some list to see if it was endangered. I’d kill it and eat it. That’s what I would do.”

I think he is right about that. But to assemble a book I needed some criteria—some sort of theme I could stick with—so I chose people with experience in the sustainability field, which left out many dear friends and wonderful writers.

I have happily omitted the point of view of anarchists, greenwashers, talkavists, posers, freeloaders and sustainability consultants who hang out around the sustainability movement. This book is by those people who are actually doing the work that needs to be done.

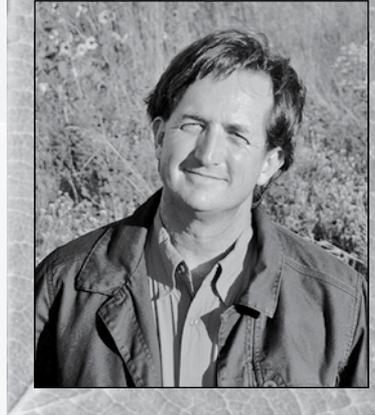
These are simply stories. Some about flops. Some about successes. Some about ideas that have long since died on the vine. Despite what I might write, or talk about, my own story seems inexorably tied to biodiesel. I intentionally lim-

ited the number of biodiesel activists in this book for that reason.

Sometimes I feel trapped in a biodiesel ghetto. And while it is easy for me to resent that, it is through biodiesel that I discovered my own activism. And our unending desire to fuel our community is what has introduced me to the remarkable collection of writers and activists that have made this book possible.

The message of this book is that you are not alone in your fight to effect positive change. I've been inspired by the work of these people, and I am hoping their stories will also inspire you.

Bryan Welch



I met Bryan Welch in the early summer of 2011 at his Mother Earth News Fair in Puyallup, Washington. I had never met him; all I knew was that he was the publisher of a stack of magazines, including *Mother Earth News*, the presenter of the Fair...

I was awestruck by the Fair. I wandered through exhibits of inventions, paused at various demonstrations and was astonished by the throngs of people who were hungry for any ideas that would increase their self-reliance or the resilience of their community. I was there to speak about my book *Industrial Evolution*, but I rapidly found myself more of a consumer than an expert.

Because Bryan was the sponsor of the fair, I felt like his guest, so I found my way to the main stage to hear him speak. I had low expectations. I thought, "He's a magazine magnate throwing a conference. Of course he has center stage."

He walked out in front of a packed audience and instead of taking the podium; he just sort of leaned against it. He

was casual, completely relaxed and at home. The audience immediately felt as if they were in good hands and my small-minded suspicion dissolved instantly.

Without any notes he explained how he raises livestock in Kansas. He spoke of his dependence on the prairie and of how he is actually more of a grass farmer than anything else. To my amazement he launched into a discussion of overpopulation and the carrying capacity of the planet.

After his talk I wanted to meet him, but fans swarmed him. I overheard one middle-aged woman say, "I've been reading Mother Earth News since I was ten years old..."

Here's the story of his journey, from a hardscrabble patch of desert to a magazine empire that feeds the minds of millions of readers...



MOTHER EARTH NEWS

by Bryan Welch

My mentor was a sunburned, 60-year-old, 300-pound Jehovah's Witness in dark glasses. Tim Posey didn't look like a tree-hugger. He didn't talk about loving nature or saving the environment. But he was, in many ways, the truest and best conservationist I've ever known.

I grew up in an enclave of surplus army barracks and mobile homes on the Mexican border a few miles from El Paso, Texas. Technically we lived in the village of Anapra, in southern New Mexico. But our community—and our culture—didn't really belong in any either state, or either country. In many ways, the border is its own nation. It's a country that attracts self-reliant misfits, independent thinkers and many people who are simply stranded on the margins of the North American economy.

Mr. Posey bought 10 acres in that economic—and literal—desert in the 1950s. He drilled a well and buried a network of shallow water lines, dividing the land into a grid of lots where renters could park their trailers (which have since come to be called mobile homes). He dug simple septic tanks with standpipes rising out of the sand. He planted poles and

strung power lines. If you rented a lot in the Posey Trailer Park you could pull your trailer in, hook up the sewer, electricity and water and within an hour or so be ready to settle in and watch *GunsSmoke* on TV.

The great thing about owning a trailer park, Mr. Posey would tell me, was that once you had the water, sewer and power set up, you could pretty much “set back and collect the rent.” But Mr. Posey didn’t rest on his laurels. Once the trailer park was operational, Tim Posey built himself an oasis.

The Posey homestead probably wouldn’t strike most Americans as a vision of paradise. We lived on dunes dotted with creosote and mesquite bushes, cactus and yucca. Mostly, the land was bare sand. We had seven or eight inches of total precipitation a year, which as my Dad liked to say didn’t seem like much unless you were there the day it rained seven inches—usually in a single deluge in late June or early July.

Tim Posey had a half-acre vegetable garden irrigated with well water; a collection of sheds and barns built from scavenged poles and plywood; pens for his goats, chickens, geese and ducks; two long rows of rabbit hutches; and a few paddocks and stalls he rented to horse owners.

I started hanging around when I was about 8 years old because I loved animals. By the time I was 9 Tim Posey had hired me to milk the goats, and to take them out to the desert to browse. He said he figured he couldn’t get rid of me so he might as well put me to work. I was paid in eggs and milk.

The desert is a goat’s natural habitat. Where we see a wasteland of scrubby plants they see a smorgasbord. I would open the gate and watch Tim’s little herd of half a dozen

dairy goats charge into the scrubland, greedily seeking out their favorites—bunch grass, mesquite beans and purslane. They seemed to enjoy variety. They moved from one species to the next: Seed pods for breakfast, grass for brunch, a big meal of flowering purslane and then maybe a leisurely hour or two munching on mesquite leaves. In the evening we went back to the barn and I witnessed the daily miracle. From the desert's sparse, coarse, resinous plants the goats made sweet, frothy milk loaded with butterfat.

Mr. Posey performed a similar miracle in his garden.

We mixed manure from the pens in a 55-gallon drum with well water, and then poured the slurry into the stream of irrigation water, which carried nourishment to every corner of the plot. Because Mr. Posey had a bad back, it was my job to stir the slurry. If you've ever stuck your head in a barrel full of liquefied chicken manure on a 95-degree afternoon you can confirm that the sensation is less a smell than it is a state of being, like snorkeling in a pond that is equal parts feces and ammonia. Still, it was our magic potion.

There in the heart of the Chihuahuan desert surrounded by sand dunes, Tim Posey cultivated squash and cucumbers, fat watermelons and tall stands of corn. He grew spices and beans, okra and peas.

The desert summer days were long and sunny. The sand was clean and well drained. We added water and fertilizer and, voila, the desert made food. It struck me then, and still seems to me now, a sort of miracle, or at least evidence of a sort of earthy magic, the transubstantiation of sand into watermelons.

The Jehovah's Witnesses encourage their members to create their own food and to protect the planet by using organic

methods. But I didn't know, then, that the Posey homestead was inspired by a religion. I only knew that it amazed me and that I felt closer to God there, among the plants and animals that provided our food, than I ever had in a church. I never considered joining the Witnesses, but I guess I became a sort of lower-case witness myself, a witness to the wonder and satisfaction of growing food on a personal scale. And my goat herding evolved, in a roundabout way, into my career.

Since my company acquired it in 2001, *Mother Earth News* has formed the main part of our business, the primary engine of our growth and profitability. It is, by almost any measure, the biggest, most profitable, highest-impact media business focused on preserving our environment, in the world. It's held that distinction almost continuously since its founding, by our predecessors John and Jane Shuttleworth, in 1970.

Today, about 6 million people regularly read *Mother Earth News*. And it's grown steadily, and profitably, the whole time we've had it.

That surprises some. In spite of its scale and longevity, *Mother's* mixture of self-reliance and conservation-mindedness still strikes a lot of people as quaint. But I've never found it quaint. Since the first time I picked up a copy in the mid-1970s, I've thought *Mother's* writing about small farms and energy-efficient technology forms a philosophical bedrock for humanity's relationship with its habitat.

Maybe that's because I learned my conservation from people like Tim Posey. Mr. Posey's personal values embraced all the definitions of "conservation." His home was a surplus building bought on the cheap from the US Army and moved to Anapra from Fort Bliss. Nearly every structure and every

machine, every board and every wire on the Posey homestead was reclaimed, refurbished or repurposed. I'm sure that penchant for recycling was born of economic necessity. But part of what I learned from Tim Posey—and others like him—was that ingenious frugality could be the source of every bit as much intellectual satisfaction as any other form of invention. And a large part of that satisfaction, then as now, comes from the awareness that every power pole scavenged from a decommissioned railroad telegraph line saved a 30-year-old living tree from being cut down.

The fundamental values associated with conservation are virtually universal. Nearly every human being appreciates a living tree, and would like to save it from destruction.

And everyone likes a scavenger hunt. Hunting for a good, cheap used pole is more fun than going out and buying a new pole. When you offer people the chance to make constructive, creative changes in their own lives, most people are receptive.

Everyone wants to preserve clean air and water. Everyone likes a dose of nature now and then, in one form or another. Everyone wants future generations to be at least as prosperous, healthy and gratified as our generation. So why, I ask myself, has concern for the environment remained one of the most divisive topics on the American political agenda all my life?

In a word, fear.

My partners in arms—environmentalists—are afraid of the looming catastrophes. They have accepted their responsibility for humanity's impact on the planet. They know the data, and the data have a compelling story to tell. Earth's habitat is changing rapidly, and we are the cause. We are

changing the atmospheric chemistry and the climate, depleting the groundwater, exhausting the topsoil and diminishing the planet's precious diversity of species.

Understandably, this knowledge fosters a sense of urgency. One doesn't have to contemplate our impact on the planet for very long before one starts to feel that we need to change our behavior in a major way—and soon. It's easy to feel a little freaked out.

On the other side of the geo-emotional divide are those who habitually deny that we are degrading the planetary environment. They've heard the murmuring about change, and instinctively recoil from the idea. If you plan to mention major societal change in any context, you can expect to get some recoil.

Both camps are fundamentally afraid of what tomorrow may bring. And both camps are motivated, to a destructive degree, by that fear.

Between these two camps sits a community of busy farmers, gardeners, goat-milkers, trail-builders, engineers, scientists, windmill climbers and solar installers. To a great degree they have led our society's journey toward sustainability, and they continue to do so.

They are leaders because their excitement is stronger than their fear.

Logically, when crisis threatens we need to subdue our fear in order to take constructive action. But taking action also somehow diminishes our fear. It feels natural. Once we get busy we're not as scared any more.

Perhaps we don't *control* the forces changing our climate when we grow a few vegetables, but we do *influence* those forces, and I think the activity profoundly changes our per-

spective. The situation immediately seems more manageable when we begin to manage.

That's been the most gratifying thing about my work, these past 30 years. My assignment, as I see it, is to get excited and stay excited about people who do good in the world—and the good they do. It's my job to tell their stories. In the process, I believe I've steadily become more optimistic. Probably as a side effect of the optimism, I even feel more energetic than I did 30 years ago, at least at work.

My work has been a sort of meditation on constructive action. And that meditation has made me feel more inclined to take constructive action myself.

I learned two important habits while I was a goat-milker and manure mixer on Tim Posey's homestead. First, Tim taught me how to connect with nature on a personal level. Animals are great models of constructive action. Their initiative is always authentic. They wake up every morning with a passion for living—until they die.

Tim Posey named nearly every animal on his place, even those he intended, eventually, to eat. He treated each of them with humane respect. He taught me how to handle the animals gently, and to let them show me how they wished to be treated. Chickens don't like sudden movements. Goats love to have their foreheads scratched, but a milk goat doesn't like cold hands or cold water on her udder, so we cleaned them off with warm water from the house. Tim showed me how you can swing a rabbit with its head down until it loses consciousness.

He always put them to sleep before he gave them one sharp blow with a hammer at the base of the skull. At his hands, I never saw one suffer.

Tim Posey taught me to respect the plants and animals we lived among and to understand their nutritional, medicinal and psychic values. He taught me to drink the goat's milk warm and to appreciate the companionship of the animals that provided it. Later I found other influences in the books of people like Wendell Berry, Robert Frost, Jane Goodall and Joel Salatin. Tim Posey led me there.

The second good habit I picked up on the Posey homestead was a natural inclination to get to work, and to do my work in a cheerful state of mind. There's an old cliché about busy hands being happy hands. It's a damned good cliché.

I'm sure passersby on Posey Road didn't generally share Tim's vision of paradise in the peeling paint and dry rot of his barns, but I learned to see the place through his eyes. Now I have my own place where the hinges are rusty and the garden overgrown, but I've preserved and developed a knack for seeing its charm and its grand potential. As I walk around the property, year after year, I can feel my tread getting a little slower, a little heavier, a little more in line with Tim's gait. And the habitual smile on my face is, maybe, a little more like Tim's smile.

I'm particularly grateful for the years I've spent with the tinkerers and visionaries who populate the pages of *Mother Earth News*. Tim Posey inducted me into his tribe of inventive, nature-loving crackpots. I feel very much at home in their company. Right now I'm editing a story about an Alabama farmer who powers his fleet of trucks with wood. He puts a charcoal burner on them and the motor burns the gases off the smoldering wood. No kidding. Another reader recently demonstrated how to heat a wall of your home with a homemade solar panel. In the same issue readers wrote

in to explain how to make gazebos and birdbaths from old satellite dishes; how to turn cabinet doors into chalkboards; how to turn your old washing machine into a compost tumbler; and how your old flannel sheets can be turned into nice cloth diapers.

We're also writing about the dangers of genetically modified crops; gas wells that pollute groundwater; and plastic residues in canned food.

But most of the time we're doing our work with smiles on our faces.