



conversations

# VANCOUVER'S CITY FARMERS —

MICHAEL LEVENSTON AND BOB WOODSWORTH,  
TWO GRANDFATHERS OF THE  
URBAN AGRICULTURAL REVOLUTION

“I thought we could get the word out! And we still have that, let’s get the word out!”

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*Before taping the interview with Bob Woodsworth and Michael Levenston, we all met at “Vancouver’s oldest vegetarian and natural food restaurant,” The Naam. Woodsworth is co-owner and has been running the place with Peter Keith since long before we met. It was my first visit to The Naam and the place’s warm and lively atmosphere made an immediate impression. The food was good, too. But the claim that the The Naam is “Vancouver’s last remaining link to the ultra-hippie West 4th Avenue neighborhood of the early 70s” is an exaggeration. There’s another living link to that vibrant past and Bob is part of that as well. It’s Vancouver’s City Farmer, Canada’s Office of Urban Agriculture. Bob was a co-founder of City Farmer in 1978 along with longtime executive director, Michael Levenston. And the reason I was in Vancouver in the first place was to interview the two of them about City Farmer.*

*While neither Bob nor Michael went on record as to whether they themselves had been ultra hippies, I don’t think either would be embarrassed at the idea. Bob’s grandfather, J. S. Woodsworth, was the founder of Canada’s Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, which later became the National Democratic Party. He was a socialist, for heaven’s sake! That’s almost the same thing as being an ultra-hippie, isn’t it? J. S. was also one of the main architects of what later became Canada’s program of universal health coverage. So I’m guessing it runs in the family.*

*None of this surprised me. And clearly, Michael Levenston belongs to this same tribe of individuals whose actions are oriented toward the social good. He’s dedicated his life to City Farmer.*

*Put most simply, City Farmer is about advocating and teaching people how to grow food in their own front yards, back yards and side yards—to say nothing of vacant lots and any other parcels of city property that might be put to such good use. Over the years, City Farmer has become a world-wide resource for every kind of information that pertains to growing food right outside your own front and back doors. It covers just about every conceivable thing you’d need to*

*know about growing your own food inside city limits, and their Web site is constantly being updated with information from all over the globe.*

*After our dinner at The Naam, we repaired to Bob’s home in the Kitsalano neighborhood of Vancouver. It was already close to 10pm and getting a little late for farmers, even city farmers, who, as we all know, rise at the crack of dawn. But we were all in good spirits, so I set up a microphone, turned on my old Sony Walkman, and began asking questions.*

**Richard Whittaker:** Well, I’d like to hear about the beginnings of City Farmer here in Vancouver.

**Michael Levenston:** Bob is the beginnings. Somehow Bob made this connection between growing food in a back yard and it being a conserver of energy instead of trucking things from a long way away. This is a very current topic today.

**Bob Woodsworth:** I did my Master’s in environmental economics in 1970. Dan Phelps, a physicist, and I did this huge study of energy movement through the city and nobody was doing an energy analysis of everything. Is it worthwhile getting into your car and recycling your glass bottles at a depot that’s ten miles away? Is that energy efficient? So energy was really foremost in my mind. I just thought food was an obvious example. If you could grow it, and recompost it, it would undercut a massive amount of energy transport. So it was an obvious one to study.

**RW:** Let me ask how you two met each other.

**BW:** Trudeau, who was the prime minister then, was trying to inspire youth to do projects, especially environmental projects, and offered grants. I was teaching political economy at a college, and it was summer. I needed to make some money and heard about this, so I went and interviewed and got hired. And that day, we met. We showed up in this office together. I think that even before I walked in, I had this very clear notion that I wanted to do something with energy and food.

**RW:** How did you come to this interest?

**BW:** I’d more or less read all the literature that was available for my Master’s on environmental externalities, as they were called then, which are the social



MICHAEL LEVENSTON

BOB WOODSWORTH

costs generated in society that are not being taken into account by the economists. Take air pollution, and here's a very simple example: window cleaning. Having to clean your windows because of the soot created by industrial processes is a cost that was not taken into account by the economic models of the early seventies.

Among other things, there was a book I was really interested in written by a guy from India, I don't remember his name, but they were composting on a massive scale with these huge windrows. That was the first connection with food that I remembered, actually composting.

So I'd read everything I could get my hands on at the University of Toronto about costs to society, which were not taken into account by economic models. Then I came out here and I did this big energy study with Dan Phelps.

ML: You're getting a history of City Farmer that I don't even know about, but I'm always happy to hear from Bob. This is important because you have to have someone who says, "We should think about this. We

should investigate that." And Bob had reasons for this before he even entered the job, which was fabulous.

BW: And another thing, I got a teaching degree and went to Simon Frazier for a year, a school in Kamloops, which is a small town 300 miles north of here. It had a vegetable garden. That's where I saw this. Somebody was very far ahead and I thought, *This is absolutely the way we should be going as a society!* Because teaching about growing food to an elementary or even to a high school class is *basic*. You could do so many wonderful unit projects. You'd have your food unit, your physics unit, your biology unit, etc. in grade five or six or eight, or whatever. You'd have a garden plot in a school for the study of growing food as opposed to having a plot just for kicking a football around.

Then Michael and I met and right away, almost within one day, we agreed this was a great idea. Let's study energy and food. I think that's how it went, eh?

ML: I think so. Bob brought in Olkowski's book, *City People's Book of Raising Food*, and took us to his relatives' homes. Walking down back lanes, he showed me

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vegetable gardens! People’s food gardens, which people have had since the beginning of the city, in every city. And suddenly, I was starting to become aware. This is a neat thing to do! We don’t have to have lawns. *We own the property.*

We started a newspaper only a month or two later. It came out August 1<sup>st</sup>. That’s because, when I was in university in the early seventies, I worked on the university paper.

We thought, “Okay, we know how to do this.” So we put out *City Farmer*, an eight-page tabloid. It had articles about all these subjects we were interested in. And we got into controversy right away. Anyway, we started to publish this.

**BW:** And distribute it door to door. [laughs]

**ML:** For twenty-five cents. We just put our university experience, our research and our writing together and tried to get this information and what we were thinking out to people. And it just went from there. We founded a separate group called *City Farmer*, a non-profit, which we still are.

We’ve worked for thirty years on millions of subjects! But this was the center, what Bob brought to it and then our research from that on energy and food and assorted other environmental issues related to food gardening in the city.

**RW:** Michael, tell me a little about yourself. What was it that made you ready to get involved in all this when you met Bob?

**ML:** I never called myself an environmentalist until much later. But I think I’m one of those people who was born with an interest in the environment. So at

University, at Trent, I worked on projects like the city bikeway project. We worked on a natural historical project to find an old portage. I liked the environment. I wanted to do something useful. So by the time I met Bob there were enough things I’d been interested in from publishing to workshops to this research to that, that I could see this was something I could be interested in *for years*. The number of subjects that relate to this, from history to victory gardens to raising livestock to school gardens, community gardens—I could go everywhere and all my interests fit in.

**BW:** Just to put my two cents in, my perception of what Michael brought is that he was a writer and an historian. The *City Farmer* newspaper was a vehicle by which Michael could satisfy this deep part as a writer. I’m more of a gardener. But Mike is a writer and someone who has a deep interest in communicating with other people. So this magazine, for Michael, was just a vehicle and *pshzoom* [gestures]. Wow! I thought, “*We could do this!*”

**ML:** That is true. I thought we could get the word out! And we still have that. Let’s get the word out! I think that if I find something interesting other people will be interested, too. That’s what my job is, making this subject exciting to everybody.

If we have an influence in the world on this subject, it’s that we’ve really picqued people’s interest over and over again by things that we’ve pointed out or have done ourselves. Editorially, we know what’s interesting. That gets people going. So yes, it was a good combination. And we did have good writers, Terry Glavin and Kerry Banks. If we didn’t have good writers we had people who wanted to be writers, like me, who liked to research. Or an academic, like Bob. He could put out anything.

**BW:** But see, after about a year, I had a new kid and I kind of faced myself and I thought, I’ve got to find a way to find a living here!

**ML:** He’s a smart guy. [laughs] Little by little, the original founders decided it wasn’t a money-making deal and they couldn’t survive. They stayed in supporting the project, but I was left as the one person who could get paid on the little grants we were getting.

**BW:** So Michael started to carry the ball. And I went off to, well, I got a teaching job at college. Then I

became a carpenter and then I bought a restaurant! But Michael, after about a year, took the whole thing and ran with it.

**RW:** There must have been some early recognition for you two guys to have hit it off so immediately.

**ML:** Let me say that I always respected Bob's judgment on everything. I still say that City Farmer has a lot of Bob's judgment in it, even if he doesn't come in every day. I take his words of wisdom on so many issues that we've come up with or faced. He'll just say, "This is what you should do." And I think this is part of his own study and research. His spiritual study allowed him to get that much farther along. He might have calmed some of my hotter-headed stuff down—and for the other people, too.

City Farmer has a certain quietness as an activist group. I stay away from politics and, again, that's pretty interesting because Bob comes from quite a history of politics. His grandfather was one of the most famous Canadian politicians of all. He's known in all the history books. So for Bob to be there, even though he may not have known it, he guided us. You know, this work that I'm in, that we're in—City Farmer—is *highly* political. He's kept us out of trouble and I've tried to continue that in the very wild waters around all the environmental and activist groups.

**BW:** I mean, Michael is being *very* complimentary to me. Really, *Michael has carried this*. But the one thing we always felt from the beginning was that City Farmer and everything to do with growing food is positive! *There is no negativity here!* It's a positive thing! And there are other groups who are not like that even though they are in the same territory. And Michael has guided it, absolutely!

**ML:** We did come out of the early environmentalist setting from years before when everything in the environmental movement was, "Let's look at all the pesticides that have the long names and how dangerous they are. Let's look at the nuclear plants and their problems." That stuff was not what we wanted to give the public more of. We wanted to give the public more of "this is what you *can* do." Without being too Pollyannaish, we are a positive group. But with the goal of reaching more people and getting more people active who might be turned off by a group that was hitting them over the head with the doom and gloom.

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**RW:** Two things seem obvious here. There's a long view, and a kind of intelligence in seeing how to avoid pitfalls and keep this longterm goal in mind. It reminds me of Gandhi, for some reason. And clearly, you two recognized something in each other.

**BW:** I think we had a camaraderie right from the beginning. No question about it. Right from square one.

**ML:** I always liked Bob. I don't climb mountains, but I do t'ai chi! [laughs] And we have some very bright people, Sue Gregory and Risa Smith, on the board. Risa is a founder. Sue is a longtime board member who has always supported us in an intelligent, hard-working way since the very beginning. Bob and I were there, but other people have been there all the way through. Right up to today.

And taking it up to today, every minute is exciting! To the point of craziness! It is absolutely astonishing what is going on now! If you can have thirty years of that kind of daily excitement—and it's getting better!

**RW:** That is amazing!

**ML:** I know. I know. Let me count. I'm fifty-seven. Started at twenty-six, twenty-seven. And we're just barreling along! And I accept that if now I have to work seven days a week because there's stuff to do, I'll do it. It's the time to do it! And interestingly enough, this thing of Bob's that we started working on thirty years ago is now an "it" thing. It's IT! Whatever urban agriculture in the wider green culture is, it's being jumped on all over by so many people.



WOODSWORTH TALKING WITH JOAN MCNAB IN FRONT OF CITY FARMERS HEADQUARTERS, VANCOUVER, CANADA

One of the people, a world authority on urban agriculture, Jac Smit in Washington, who I talk to weekly, just called me yesterday and said, "Mike, you can't believe it. I'm going to be dealing with the World Bank. I'm dealing with the USDA. I just got a call from the *New York Times*."

For all of us who have been there, it's happening Big Time right now! It's just a hot, exciting subject from every angle. The interview we did earlier today was with *Audubon*, a bird magazine! I mean, we don't know who's going to call us.

**RW:** Another thing I wondered is, back when you started in '78 what was going on in other places? I'm guessing you were ahead of Alice Waters, for instance.

**ML:** I assume we were earlier, but I didn't know

about her. We're pretty well before most of the groups you've heard about doing these things. The people I was close to, and they're still there, were in the American Community Gardens Association. Community gardeners were the leading groups, at least in this area. Whether SLUG was there, the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners, or BUG, Boston Urban Gardeners. And there were a lot of green guerrillas in New York.

**BW:** Integral Urban House in San Francisco, too.

**RW:** You were in touch with these groups early on?

**ML:** Yes. It was north/south. Canada, us up here, to the American hot spots. Yes. We were quite related to them early on.

**BW:** I can tell you there was not much about urban agriculture around. By 1971 most of what was there was in relation to pollution—air pollution, water pollution, Rachel Carson sorts of things. And I will say, even now, I don't think a very good vision of energy economics is available, whether something is good to do in terms of energy or not. Back then there was *virtually nothing* about energy economics and whether it was useful.

I know I went intuitively on the fact that it has to be absolutely energetically efficient to plant a few seeds in your garden and bring the vegetables into your kitchen and put the waste out into your compost. You didn't have to do the energy economic study on that!

The minute you thought about it, well, you're going to have your big lawn. You put the pesticides on and spend the money to get a big gas lawnmower to mow your grass. Or, you could dig it up by hand, plant food and have the food! There's no question that it's going to be efficient. You don't have to do the study. We sort bypassed those kinds of studies. They weren't needed, and they weren't there.

**ML:** I'm thinking about Bob's comment about lawns. In my little blog I always put in new books. The new one that's hot is called *Edible Estates* by Fritz Haeg. He basically digs up front lawns and puts in vegetable gardens. Thirty years ago this is what we were doing! But it's a big, hot book. I think it was put out by an art museum! So people are coming to it from all different angles now.

I said to Jac Smit a few years ago—we were at a meeting at the United Nations and he said maybe he should retire. I said, "No Jac, you can't because you've got to guide all these new people coming into it or at least broaden how they see what they're doing." And that's how I see my role.

Now there are millions of people doing it, but now through the Web site I'm saying, okay, there are Australian city gardeners, there are first world city gardeners, there's this aspect, that aspect. I'm trying to help broaden some of the maybe narrower views of what urban agriculture is. This is a role we can play because we were talking about edible estates thirty years ago.

**BW:** Pushing that idea, advocating that. I don't know what year you started the Web site—but Michael carried *City Farmer* for about fourteen years via just the

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garden and the little office downtown and I don't know how you made the outreach to the larger world.

**ML:** Through publishing. We researched *anything* related to this subject we could. And we communicated with people by letters, phone calls, word of mouth. But the real change came with the Internet in terms of us connecting with people, reaching out to people and making this a global phenomenon. We got in early. We were on the Net in 1994. Basically I just took up material we had in the office and started to put it online.

**RW:** So were you the early Internet presence on the idea of urban gardening, urban agriculture? Then it spread all over the place, right?

**ML:** Yes.

**ML:** At that time people would send me material and I'd put it up. Not everybody had the HTML and the technology to do it. So we would publish research from other people as well as the research we found ourselves. So people who were interested in this or who stumbled upon us would learn about urban agriculture. And as time went on, they got savvy and they could make their own Web sites. Now, of course, there are linkages to all the different web sites. But people, when they do something, they still send it to me. I get it up, or link to it, very quickly. So we're still a hub.



CITY FARMER GARDENER ISABELLE OPPENHEIM WITH HEAD GARDENER, SHARON SLACK

The Internet changed how fast people started becoming aware of what urban agriculture is or could be.

RW: This is all *pro bono*, right? I mean, you didn't charge, right?

ML: No. And that was a big thing. There were a lot of different ways of doing the Internet. Should you have a subscription? Should you charge people for coming in? People were telling me that I should. But I stuck to the same old poverty role I'm in, which is let's share that information for free. Let's get it out! Let's get it out now! And it works. People want to see as much as they can and they are so grateful. Same way I am when I get information. I'm an Internet junkie.

William Gibson, this famous sci-fi writer, actually lived across the street from Bob. I know Bill Gibson because I see him around the neighborhood, shake his hand and say "Hi" to him. He coined the term *cyberspace* and I think of this word all the time when I think of the Internet. It's out there. It's growing and so much has happened because of it.

BW: Well, and because of what Mike's done on the

Web, I think that very rapidly it became *the prime hub for urban agriculture in the world*. The large development organizations in the world took notice—the UN, for example. City Farmer had hundreds of pages of original urban agriculture research on-line before anyone else did. Anybody who is researching urban agriculture has this astonishing instrument.

RW: This is amazing.

BW: It is amazing.

ML: Well, it's the group. We're really the "small is beautiful" approach, which Bob used to talk about. I think he always had Schumacher in mind. You know of him, right?

RW: I confess I have yet to read his book, but I know it's one of those seminal books.

BW: Well, he was a pupil of Gurdjieff and he wrote another book called *A Guide for the Perplexed*.

ML: But *small is beautiful*. We've stayed tiny. We have

one full-time position. That's me. And a few part-time people who run the garden. Sometimes people ask can we open up a branch of City Farmer here? I say, just open up your own and do your own thing.

RW: But you would help them, right?

ML: Oh! We help them in any way they want. I believe that you get strong if you start your own thing and you control it. I guess it's like you with your magazine. You like to have the magazine the way you want it. You know how big it could get, but when it's good, it's just this size. You can manage it. It has your direction. I guess, selfishly [laughs], I'm the same. I want it to be a certain way. It works for what we want it to be.

RW: Obviously your whole model is to be of service. We're all in this together, this little spaceship, earth. So you're helping people.

ML: We hope we are. I have so much fun every day from the moment I get up answering emails from around the world, putting up Web pages, to the moment I get to our Demonstration Garden at 9am when the gardeners arrive. I'm back and forth with the staff. We answer phone calls—and the phone calls come in. People of all ages visit all day. And we give tours and workshops. I get to see our first shitake mushroom come out, a bird nest in a birdhouse built for us, a seed sprouting in early spring.

BW: It's just like community gardens all over the city. And this has happened, of course, in other cities. It's not as if it's just happened here. But nobody has the infrastructure of the Web site underneath them like City Farmer. Correct me if I'm wrong, Mike.

ML: Well, our site has stuff about our organization, but also I embrace everything, *every* book and *every* article *about* the subject.

RW: You have stuff from all over the world, right? All kinds of things related to urban agriculture.

ML: As much as I can.

BW: If a PhD thesis comes in from Mongolia on urban agriculture in Ulan Bator, Michael will put it up. We have all kinds of material.

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ML: We have Ulan Bator filmmakers wanting to come now to Vancouver to film us because they want to take the information we have about city farming back to their country, Mongolia, to influence their people to do what we we're doing. We have a huge international visiting audience. We just did a tour of senior officials from China. I've got two more coming, from all over the world. And we do get recognized. Every other day we're talking to somebody somewhere. It's quite exciting.

RW: It's really astounding and very encouraging, too. Now I want to ask you both about the aesthetic aspects of all this, the parts that touch people's feelings. Gardens, growing plants, they're green, a bird lands, you hear the song, you have flowers. What would you say about this aspect? Have you thought about this at all?

ML: We're always out enjoying the beauty of the demonstration garden as it evolves through the year. I think the joy the different gardeners get, I get. I enjoy the staff, their passion for what they do. Sharon is head gardener. She's sixty-five. She's been head gardener for eight years now and just her pleasure in going out and creating something in the garden. She's a birder. I walk around with the gardeners first thing every morning so I can at least know something about what's going on in the garden. Or Maria's excitement. Maria is excited about the insects. She's an entomologist. She's creating new mason bee houses to have these bees for pollinators. She's growing silk worms now. She planted a mulberry tree so we'd have the



leaves to feed the silkworms. So that will be part of her educational package for the kids. But there's aesthetics and beauty. She's a fabulous photographer! Sharon is an artist. She paints in the garden. So I'm not sure if that's an aesthetic response to the garden.

RW: All of that is.

ML: And I'm the taster. Anything they grow out there, twelve months of the year, I get to taste it when it's just right, just to know we're on the right track. And I always say I'm the greeter. You know the greeter at Walmart? I help greet the visitors who come to the garden.

RW: How do you like that part of it?

ML: It's the best. I have a role to play out there. I'm from Toronto where it was all lawn, lawn, lawn. No food. That was the revelation that keeps me going: take the lawn off. You're still in the city and you're eating fresh food where there was only lawn before. The more diverse a crop we get, the more excited I am because I'm hidden here in Kitsilano [a neighborhood in Vancouver], and I'm eating Saskatoon berries, or

some rare oriental vegetable, or a gooseberry that's finally ripened, or a grape off the vine that the raccoon didn't get.

There are new things every year and it's all where the lawn was. It's urban, and it's food! It's sustenance. It's exciting. And you know, this edible landscaping, it's an obvious thing. It's been here since the beginning of time. But people discover things again and again that they lost. The urbanite in the high-rise with his video games, he suddenly rediscovers something that people knew about, but that has been forgotten. And that's something we're doing. We're always reintroducing how to put a seed into the soil, how to do composting. We joke around a lot about the crazy calls. And somehow we don't get bored.

RW: What is that I wonder? There are certain things one never gets tired of. What do you think that's about?

BW: Well, I have a couple of thoughts that are percolating up. I see this in the larger context of consciousness shift, shift of consciousness for urban planning, if you will. But just one little vignette, before making my point.



I had a neighbor who was Chinese right next door to me, a computer programmer probably in his mid-thirties. His wife's mother who was in her seventies lived with them. She has all these little *gai-lan* plants, Chinese broccoli, beside their lawn, growing for food. But he came over one day to complain about the worms in the compost. I had a compost between our two lots. He said, "They're worms!" Then, I'm looking at the grandmother who's all wizened and I'm looking at him. And I'm realizing that in one generation, he has lost all contact with these biological roots and growing food and understanding what a worm is, what a compost is. He has no interest and no knowledge and there is a complete cutoff. Here's his mother growing *gai-lan* over there and he comes over thirty feet to my compost. It's a complete disconnect of consciousness.

And I asked myself, how would you go back to a way of living, say the energy generation was block by block, so you weren't subject to large central hydrosystems where power is coming from 500 miles away, in the case of hydroelectric. How do you shift a society

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to something that is more humanized? And I sort of see this urban agriculture as part of a possible solution or movement out of this mess we're in. It's very slow, and we're a long ways away from that. But you could mentally conceive, architecturally, of a different way of living.

So the aesthetic would come with that. Quieter living. You're related to the soil and growing. How do you shift consciousness in a society where we're so far down, in a way? Where this computer man is so far down from something organic and real. He's got all this head knowledge in one department and he's got no knowledge in another department. The gap is vast. It's not so much aesthetics as a possible consciousness shift. And one doesn't know if it will go like that, either. It might well go the other way where everything is packaged and pills. It could well go that way. I'd say it's all in the balance.

ML: People like what we're doing. It's about nature. We do wormshops about worm composting and we get people from all walks of life coming in Saturday for that class, and they love being in the garden. I mean, it's the reason *The Naam* is so popular. It harkens back to a different time and place, and people

come. We're always astonished, and Bob can probably talk about that. There is something my 22-year-old daughter pointed out years ago and it shocked me. She said, "Bob and Mike run the last two hippie businesses in Kitsilano." [Bob laughs] In her kid mind, somehow we still represented hippies. There was something that she could identify about his restaurant and our garden and the work we did, or the approach we took to our work. I thought that was pretty cool. There's something there that's quite interesting.

**BW:** The other side to that is that, you know the fastest growing area of the natural food business is prepackaged foods, just like in the other sectors. It's organic, but it's all prepackaged. You just microwave it. So to me, the question of the tension in the society is that there is this tremendous response to what Michael is doing with urban agriculture and, at the same time, cities are growing and slowly architects are starting to think about growing food on rooftops or something. I just read something where they will build a huge warehouse dedicated to growing food inside, a food factory in an urban area, fifty stories high, all hydroponically grown. Is that a good thing? I'm not going to attempt to say. Clearly, in terms of transportation, it would be much more efficient. But I'm not sure I want to live in that sort of world. It's odd, isn't it?

**RW:** It's the industrial thing.

**BW:** It's industrial food production.

**RW:** You know what's missing there? When I'm growing some of my own food, there's a great appeal not only because it makes great sense in terms of energy use, but it feeds something beyond just putting food in our mouths. When I grow my own food, I get things on other levels that I was calling the aesthetic side of it. I mean, I have a front yard like a jungle, which is great. I go out there and water and prune and coax things along and I get a great deal of genuine pleasure from just doing that, being out there in the garden.

**ML:** Now I want *you* to fill that in, because you've perceived that.

**BW:** I agree, because there is something very elemental about that.

**ML:** People are always asking me, well, why are you

doing it? I always say there are at least two hundred reasons, but those are some big ones. I might say these are some of the psychological or spiritual or relieving stress reasons. Health, nutrition—it's all part of it. I compare it to hands in the soil, to that feeling. I think I saw, who's that singer that comes into your restaurant?

**BW:** k. d. lang?

**ML:** Yes. I think she sings barefoot when I see her on these slick shows. And I think, I bet she's doing that so she can feel something real. I always think of that as being, in a way, what the gardeners really want who come out of their high rises or townhouses. They want to feel a bit of that, too—naked feet, hands, something they can connect with that's elemental. I think it's the same for me hanging out in the garden. And I do garden work. I shovel compost and I edge and prune.

I always feel similar to Bob. Bob doesn't particularly like to get dressed up. I don't like to get dressed up. He can go to work like he dresses. [laughs] I can go to work like I dress. We can be in a comfortable chair in our job and not under fluorescent lights. I can do that in a greenhouse. We can do our work in a very natural environment. If he wants to go out and saw and make some steps, he's allowed to as the Godfather of The Naam. And if I want to take a break from the paperwork and the Web, I can go and shovel that pile of new compost all day and get sweaty. We can both go and *work* in a kind of natural way.

**RW:** That reminds me of something that A. K. Coomaraswamy wrote. He said that in traditional societies there was never a TGIF [Thank God It's Friday]. Because, in all traditional societies, everybody finds a vocation. Obviously, you both have found vocations, work that's a calling. Well, how many people in this culture can say that?

**ML:** It's very hard to find that.

**RW:** I'm not suggesting that urban gardens are going to provide all of that, but I'd think people will feel a little bit closer to something if they just have, even a few potted plants.

**ML:** Your magazine must be a vocation. I could see that as soon as I looked at it. You're one of us! [laughs]

**RW:** I feel very, very fortunate about that.

**ML:** We are very lucky. Speaking of the older generation, those over eighty-five say, they didn't have the opportunity to choose a job for love. They just took the job because there was no other choice. My father, who was a businessman, at the table he'd say, "I wish I'd been a professor." Or, "Oh, gosh, I should have been a doctor." But what he did, he did for forty years. He did it well. And he succeeded in it. And somehow we got lucky and have been able to have the luxury of having more of a pleasure, or, as you say, a vocation. It's difficult in this society.

**RW:** A friend just told me that when her child was very young, she'd come back to visit her parent's farm. Her father had just ploughed a field and the earth was freshly turned over. It was summer and hot, but the freshly turned earth was still cool. She took her little boy's shoes off and stood him out there in the soil. "*This is the earth here!*" she said.

And, of course, if you have a little garden, not only can you grow your food, but it's such a connection. People must be hungry for these things as well.

**ML:** It's related to nature. They want the real. They want the earth. I was always into art and aesthetics. I'd go from Toronto to New York and I had a little epiphany one spring in New York when I was down there and going to the shows and searching for truth in the arts. I came across a laburnum tree, and I realized "This is the most beautiful thing I've seen here in New York, this real tree." I always felt afterwards that I was seeing so much more beauty in nature.

**RW:** This has been inspiring, talking with you both.

**BW:** We'll go to the garden tomorrow and you'll get a whole different view! There's the garden, composting workshops and rainwater workshops, composting toilets and worm workshops. And handicapped people can come in wheelchairs. They can work at this level [gestures]. It's all integrated. It touches so many social areas. I'd say the theoretical areas we talked about earlier are almost secondary to these very practical, hands-on, feeling things that a huge number of people want to experience. And school children!

**ML:** And we're having fun because we've been asked by the city to make some videos: how to make compost in Mandarin, Cantonese and Punjabi, which are three ethnic groups in Vancouver. We just completed

these videos and put them on the Web. I'm excited because we know we can now choose to make videos in any language!

We wrote the script based on our experience in the garden. And we can now make these films for our Swedish friends, our Zulu friends. It's kind of a real kick because you know when you put it up on the Web it's going to be seen everywhere. The potential is absolutely huge.

**BW:** And what's ironic is that in China they might need to know at this point how to make compost. It's like that little story I told about my neighbor. Almost disturbing that way—the globalization, the corporatizing of agriculture. This is *absolutely in the opposite direction of what City Farmer is about*. So in one way, it's very political. There are these two directions it seems the world could go in. One is more humanized and the other one is some global, corporate, mechanistic world. It's an open question to me how it will go. ♦

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