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Connecting while imagining

How farmers think and work
An explorative study
with biodynamic farmers

GreenSouth

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KAMAGURKA

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Foreword

Connecting While Imagining is a living pulsing study taking us into the inner and outer world of biodynamic farmers and their farming. The study comes out of a desire to understand the '*How*' of biodynamic farming: What are the practices and approaches of the biodynamic farmers, How do they work with the uniqueness of their farm? The insights in this study came through farm walks, intuitive dialogue, and shared reflection. It was a co-created process. The researchers walking alongside the farmers, asking them not so much '*What* do you know?', but rather '*How* do you know?'

The study opens to deeper insights and understanding of some of the often invisible essences of the practice of biodynamic agriculture. This makes the study an important contribution to initiatives like Greensouth, that I am part of, in which we are seeking to develop vocational training springing from the needs and realities of Southern Africa. We already know that to simply teach the technical skills of biodynamic farming is not enough. What are the invisible capacities that need to be transmitted to enable alive biodynamic farming to take root?

From this study it becomes clear that this is a deeply relational way of farming, that requires inner capacities of the farmer as well as the more technical knowledge and skills that every farmer of course needs. A key insight was the living reality of the farm individuality showing in the stories of these 9 farmers *how* they are in on-going dialogue and relationship with their farms.

These are lessons that can be applied by farmers themselves as well as people who seek to educate farmers.

The study offers three core capacities that can – and must – be nurtured in vocational training:

1. The capacity to *hold back*: Holding back requires a willingness to stay in not knowing when a challenge arises. Through being with the arising situation, perceiving what it is asking, and restraining from jumping too quickly to action or conclusion, the farmers in this study

found an often surprising path forward that was unique to their farm. It opens the question: In vocational training - how might we create similar spaces for students to learn – and trust - this kind of deeper listening?

2. Imagination: The stories gathered here show how the farmers' inner images shape their actions. Again the question rises: How can we develop the capacity of our students to awaken their image making faculty? How can we together explore the role of inner vision in outer action – and develop the practice of paying attention to emerging images as part of the dialogue with your farm?

3. Connection is a third 'method' brought to light here. The biodynamic farm, as a farm individuality is not an isolated individuality but a connected whole. Once again training must include this broader awareness. In the Southern African landscape this is often neglected beyond a dry view of the broader market.

I am already taking inspiration for our work at Kufunda Village as well as the GreenSouth vocational project. It reminds me that we are not only training farmers, we are supporting the development of human beings – to strengthen their relationship with themselves, their farm and the wider eco-system of which they are part. It won't be an easy path but it feels like the right one to be on.

With much gratitude for the clear engaging way in which the researchers illuminated for us how the farmers work with these three capacities as core to their biodynamic farming practice.

Maaianne Knuth

Partner GreenSouth

Kufunda Village, Harare, Zimbabwe

1. The core

There is currently a clear need for a change to more sustainable agriculture. Biodynamic agriculture¹ has been putting this into practice for a hundred years. It should go without saying that biodynamic agriculture can also contribute to a general change. So far, however, the main focus has been on the knowledge of biodynamic farmers. However, an equally important aspect that plays a major role in biodynamic agriculture is the question of how farmers deal with this knowledge, apply it in their individual situation and how they themselves create new knowledge. This explorative study is therefore not concerned with the question of *what* biodynamic farmers do, but rather *how* they think and work. "You have to experience it" and "You have to do it" are common statements. Obviously it is not easy to communicate the "how". We interviewed some biodynamic farmers, observed the results of their work and looked at what they were enthusiastic about. The results can be summarised as follows:

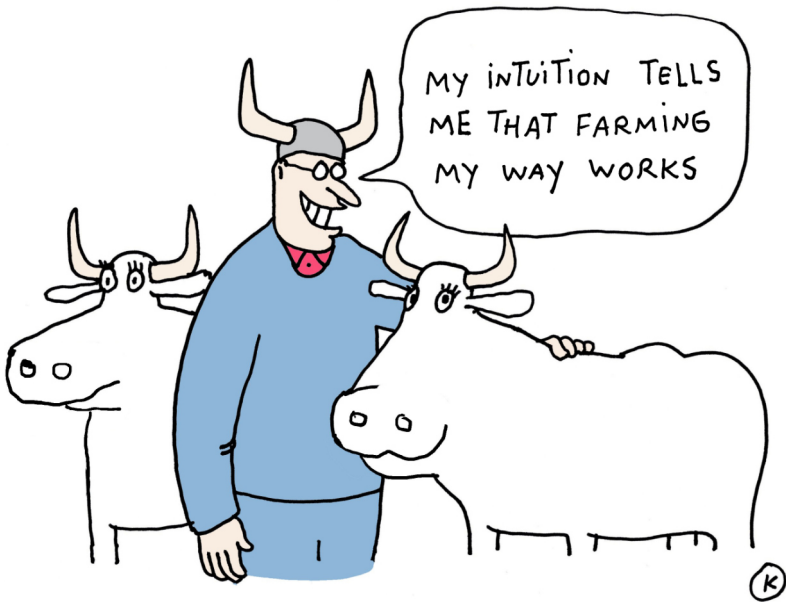
Farmers work on their development step by step. They use images - be it in the form of examples, images of the future or a holistic view. Farmers anticipate how the weather will develop, how the harvest will turn out or when a calf will be born. They can hold back when necessary or speed up processes. They are closely connected to the land, the livestock, the crops, the customers, the neighbours, the village and the suppliers. These skills are not limited to agriculture, but reflect general human skills that can be found in many professions. In biodynamic agriculture, these general farming skills come more to the fore. The idea of "farm individuality"¹ motivates farmers to take the uniqueness of their farm seriously. They cannot do otherwise, as they refrain from using fertilisers and pesticides, which would even out the differences between farms. They choose to let their actions be determined not by abstract figures that neutralise different realities, but by images. Farmers realise that what they do is of fundamental importance and that they are dealing with the essence of soil, animal, plant and farm. They are less influenced by experts, but rather inspire each other, each in their own individual search. Biodynamic agriculture is therefore not only an agricultural endeavour, but also a social experiment.

One consequence of this way of working is that each farmer relies much more on their sense of restraint, their imagination and connecting skills and their developmental thinking. This can be described as situational, intuitive action. However, this is rarely communicated, often only with a rationalisation afterwards. By sharing their quest with others, further development can be organised on a horizontal level.

From the description of the farmers' way of thinking and working, we can derive approaches for teaching the necessary skills. We recognise that biodynamic farmers can play an active role in this.

2. Develop step by step

FRED IS FARMING



2.1 Three introductory examples

Our discussions with the farmers were of an open nature. In other words, we were interested in everything they were enthusiastic about. We explained to the farmers that we wanted to get to know their way of thinking and working and that we hoped to discover this during a tour of the farm. However, we were also aware of our own expectations. We came with our own experiences and ideas about how farmers work professionally and what skills they use. At the same time, we were interested in how this would play out now, here and with these specific farmers, with their individual variations. The farmers told us the following:

Example 1.

The visitor path in the barn.

Ben van Tilburg, WaddenMax

"We have a farm shop on our farm, where people often come and ask to see the barn. I'm also proud of my cows and like to show them off. This urge became even bigger once we started converting our cubicle barn with slatted floor into a deep stable. I am also proud of this barn.

We couldn't tear down the slatted floor all the way to the outer wall. That would have been too risky. Then I suddenly saw the possibility of turning the remaining edge of the concrete floor into a visitor path. However, we had to support this floating edge on the inside. It could not be filled with concrete, otherwise the outer wall would become far too heavy and sink into the ground. We built a concrete wall directly under the floating part. The path is 60 cm wide and runs along the inside of the long outer wall.

We then discussed what material the railing should be made of: steel, wood, a rope? Steel would be too cold for this purpose, and a rope might make it feel too unsafe. We ended up with steel posts with a wooden railing in between. At the beginning of the outer wall, I built a door into the wall so that you can access the visitor path directly from the outside. Our customers can now see the cows for themselves whenever they want, and during a guided tour I can now proudly show them my "five-star hotel", where the cows can lie in the straw and have plenty of space."



The fact that the slatted floor could not be removed right up to the outer wall was initially perceived as a problem. Instead, Ben's vision and drive suddenly led him to see a new possibility: a visitor path. Situationally and intuitively, Ben realises an element that fits his purpose and makes his farm even more unique.

Example 2.

Decision-making in a group.

Jelmer Zandbergen, Veld en Beek



There is a regular directors' meeting at which policy and practical issues are discussed. There is no strong division of labour.

"We all recognised the need for a covered machine and manure storage area, but building a new shed was no easy matter. It seemed like an unsolvable problem at first. We contemplated more on this wish, without wanting or needing to find a solution immediately, and we discussed it several times. As a result, a solution began to emerge: One of the two trench silos was actually no longer needed for silage because it is now harvested in big bales and thus can be stored elsewhere. We seemed to have found the right spot, but how could we cover the trench silo in a simple and cost-effective way? We went in search of companies that could produce something appropriate.. To our surprise, we ended up on a company that also supplied our arched greenhouse. We put our heads together and oops, there was the solution: an arched greenhouse on a trench silo.



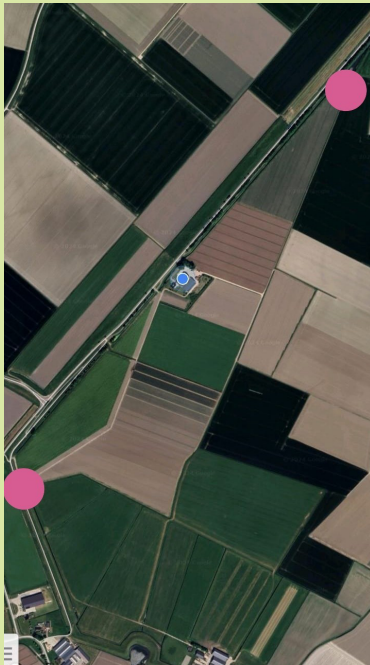
The decision-making process comes naturally, so to speak, like an intuitive action, derived from shared thinking and a shared vision.

Example 3.

Ponds and biological diversity.

Jan Willem Bakker, BakkerBio

"We bought an adjacent, conventionally farmed plot of land. Our plot now extends right up to the road. We filled in the intermediate ditch. The biodiversity was clearly lost there. I felt at the time that I had to do something, but I didn't yet know what, though I knew that something would happen in time. Eventually, we dug a second pond at the end of the filled-in trench. Now the two outer sides of the farm each have a pond. In my opinion, these ponds were necessary to create or maintain balance on the farm. In any case, the biodiversity on the plot itself has already been increased thanks to our soil cultivation methods."



*Blue dot: the farm
Red circles: the ponds*



The trench was here.



West pond, with a view of the farm



West pond



East pond

It often goes like this: situations arise, you want something, you need something, and then you do something - something you've never done before. You do not have a precise image in advance of what it will look like. You are in "dialogue" with your own farm, with the current situation. There are no universal standards that you have to fulfil. As a farmer, you take the situation of your own farm seriously - in fact, you take the idea of "farm individuality" seriously. When you encounter this farm individuality, your actions often take on an intuitive character. Usually one doesn't communicate it to others as intuitive. It simply happens the way it does. Sometimes a justification is developed afterwards and it then makes sense to have done it in precisely this way..

2.2 Skills used by farmers

In all three examples, one notices that the farmers hold back for a shorter or longer moment. They do not get carried away by events and they do not panic because they do not (yet) know. They keep guiding and directing by giving space to the internal and external processes. They take their time. They create inner space - and this does not contradict the fact that things can happen suddenly and then get done quite fast. It is an ability to hold back and do nothing (yet).

Farmers also have images about the future. These are tentative at first, not yet clearly defined, but they have a search direction. And from what is then done step by step, new possibilities are suddenly recognised and an increasingly clear picture of the future emerges. This picture encompasses the whole, in which details find their place and meaning. It is an ability to imagine.

It is all about connecting the consumer with the farm, the building contractor with his construction problem with an ideal image of the farm, involving a greenhouse supplier in a specific problem and linking a partial question with the bigger picture. One consequence of imagining is that connections are sought and made.

The three aspects mentioned - "enduring not knowing and not (yet) doing anything", "imagining" and "connecting" – will be explained in more detail in the following chapters.

3. Endure doing nothing

For us, an important discovery was that farmers often seem to do nothing - and that this "doing nothing" is nevertheless an activity that arises from a conscious commitment:

Example 4.

Replant or let go?

Guus van Imhoff, Urtica de Vijfprong

"The land purchase by BD Grondbeheer also included woodland so I also became a forest and landscape manager."

Part of the larch forest had collapsed due to the bark beetle. "I asked for advice on reforestation, but I wasn't immediately convinced that this advice was exactly right for our situation". As a result, only about half of the forest was replanted according to the recommendations. A birch path was also planted based on the recommendation, which was created in a sharp bend and does not lead anywhere. For the other half of the woodland, I decided to do nothing and wait and see what would happen.

Guus is confronted with an unexpected situation. He takes action in response, but remains cautious at the same time. He takes advice from others, but feels that this advice is not sufficiently tailored to the situation, which is why he does nothing in one part of the forest.

Taking action can mean deciding to do something - or, on the contrary, to do nothing. As one farmer put it: "Doing nothing is also doing something". It makes a difference whether you make this choice based on a connection or an image of "how it should be". Sometimes you just have to find your way.

Example 5.

To cultivate or not to cultivate plots?

Jelmer Zandbergen, Veld en Beek

"Our sandy soil is very susceptible to drought. We were wondering what to do about it. The idea of mixing the sandy soil with clay came up, but where do you get a good amount of clay and how do you incorporate it into the grassland of the plot?" It turned out that a large amount of clay had been excavated nearby,

so the clay was available. The advice on incorporation revealed that mechanical incorporation usually leads to disappointing results, as the sand and clay do not want to mix.

The clay was brought in and spread out over a number of grassland plots. "We will leave the working in and mixing to the rain and the worms. It looks heavy now, but later, when the grass grows again, it will be fine. Maybe then we'll just spread the few lumps of clay that are still there."

The farmers have this idea that their sandy soil should become a little loamier, but they don't yet have a solution. Suddenly it turns out that clay is available nearby and they seize the opportunity. They then practise doing nothing while the plots initially look messy, trusting that the natural processes of rain and soil life will mix the soil layers evenly - something that mechanical tillage would probably not achieve.

Example 6.

To harrow or not to harrow?

Guus van Imhoff, Urtica de Vijfsprong

"There are a lot of weeds in the crops on the sandy soils here. Ten years ago, when I started here, I used to harrow up to five times. Now I just leave the land alone. It works well. By harrowing, you create a new seedbed for the weeds and also bother the grain."

"I want to create conditions to avoid harrowing. This includes taking the previous green manure into account and treating it like a proper crop, including fertilising it."

When Guus started working on the farm shortly after his initial training, his aim was to have a "clean" grain field. He worked with a clear vision: the field should be "clean". Over the years, however, he developed a deeper connection with his field and learned to go along with the development of the crop and the weeds. He realised that harrowing also has disadvantages. By holding back, he creates space for a broader view. Guus now also takes the pre-crop into account and

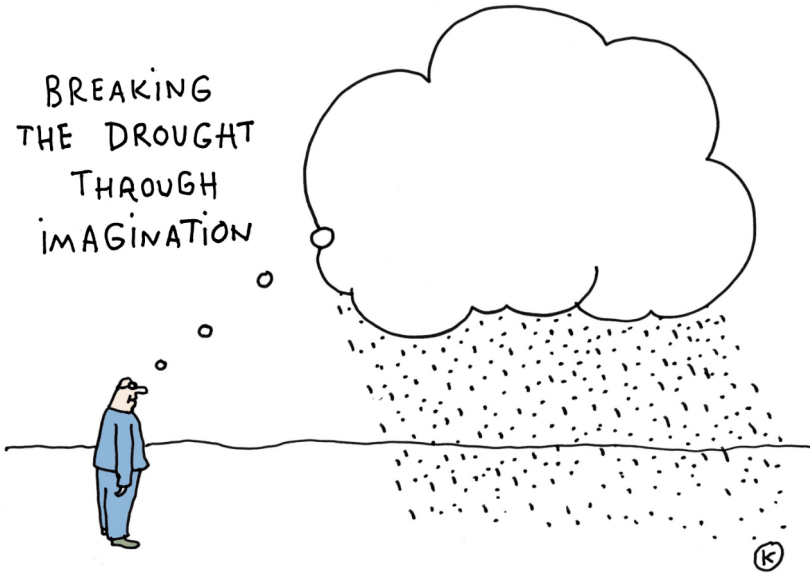
adapts his vision of it accordingly. He is confident that things will go well without harrowing - and that has proven to be the case.

In these three examples, the entrepreneurs become aware of a desire, but also that they do not know how to realise it. They take action as a response, but in all three cases this action also partly consists of doing nothing. Doing nothing does not mean that nothing happens. Rather, it means that the farmers have an idea and want to wait and see how the natural processes contribute to the desired situation and expand their ideas.

4. Imagining

FRED IS FARMING

BREAKING
THE DROUGHT
THROUGH
IMAGINATION



4.1 Some examples

We were surprised by the images that kept popping up in conversations with farmers. This raised questions for us: What makes something an image? How do images work and how can you work with them?

In example 3 on pond building, shown in chapter 2, you can see that the farmer looks at the bigger picture and is guided by it instead of orientating himself on an abstract measure of diversity recorded in figures.

Example 7.

Feed analysis opposed to images of feed and cows.

Jelmer Zandbergen, Veld en Beek

"Recently, someone from the feed factory came to analyse the silage and told me how and what I should be feeding based on these figures. That's not the way I work. I observe the cows, whether they have just calved, whether the weather is hot, cold, dry or wet, what types of silage I have available, spring silage, autumn silage, from a drier or wetter area, etc., and based on these images I decide what to feed.

I don't just pay attention to the cows' needs. If it were up to the cow, she would want to eat unlimited concentrates. I myself want something with the cows, I have my own need to work towards something. And that, of course, in cooperation with the cow.

A trainee recently asked about feed value analyses. It felt like I was pushed aside. Like these figures had more authority."

For Jelmer, a good ration depends on many aspects, not just the technical feed value, which can be expressed in figures such as feed units of milk, units of digestible protein and structure. Excessive focus on these figures reduces the connection with the whole and therefore working from this connection. Jelmer forms a comprehensive picture of the cow, feed and farm. He uses this image for his decisions and that's what he wants to share with the trainees.

Example 8.

Compost production.

Pyt Sipma, Timpelsteed

"This compost groove is covered with a compost cloth and is produced by using the CMC (Controlled Microbial Composting) method. The employee from Wageningen University and Research inquired about the length of the grass that is processed in the ridge. That's not a handy question for me, why does he want to know?"

With the CMC method, the material is regularly mixed by machine in the first two weeks and immediately covered again with a compost cloth. This mixing takes place as soon as the measured CO₂ content in the pile exceeds 16% and the temperature exceeds 60-65°C. No new material is added during the process, only water if the heap becomes too dry. The composition of the starting material therefore largely determines the intensity of the treatment. "CMC compost is ready in six weeks, but it is far too much work. A biodynamic approach is to give it time."



To the right: CMC compost

Pyt itself takes a completely different approach:

"This is the big compost heap. All sorts of things go on here without being mixed properly. If it gets too hot, I "extinguish" the compost heap. I don't do this with water, but by adding other things. When people see this, they sometimes ask: "Will this really work?" Yes, it will be fine, eventually it will become a very

nice compost once it has been given time. It won't be 6 weeks though, but a few months.

I pay a lot of attention to where the material for the compost comes from. The guy who delivers the material to me knows that very well. I really don't want tins, but a bit of plastic is no problem for me. When the weather is nice, we go out on the land and collect the plastic.



Large compost heap



A month later, after reshuffling.

Pyt has an image of how he wants to make his compost. He is not concerned about long or short grass or the C/N ratio. He follows the process and intervenes when he deems it necessary. He does not follow a set protocol for the correct mixture and temperature measurements, but observes what happens and gradually adds new compost material. The process is given the time it needs without Pyt intervening too much.

Example 9.

Marketing a linen bag.

Pyt Sipma, Timpelsteed

"We are working on growing flax and developing products that can be made from it. Look, a shopping bag made of linen. How much do you think a bag like that should cost?"

If a question like that is asked, it can't be a small amount, so I say: "€40."

"No, €60. Just imagine that: In five years' time, oil production will have come to a complete end and there will be no more plastic bags and no more shoppers. Then you will be standing in a shop with your arms full of things you've bought and want to take them with you, and then what?" Pyt, meanwhile, holds his arms as if they are full of shopping. "Then you're quite prepared to buy a €60 linen bag, and that bag will last at least four years."



And there you are with your shopping!



A beautiful linen bag.

The image that Pyt evokes with his story on the one hand, but above all with his demonstration in the shop, is immediately inspiring, convincing and connecting. One would love to buy such a bag. How different it would have been if Pyt had told the dry figures: "The flax for a bag like this costs €4, the design and production of the bag costs €16, and with the intermediate trade and sales margins, you end up with €60." That would give the following impression: "What an expensive bag! Nice initiative to try something like this, but little chance of success".

Example 10.

Lack of butter.

Ben van Tilburg, WaddenMax

"The amount of butter we can sell depends on the amount of buttermilk. Butter is very popular. If we put all the packets of butter in the shop at once, it sells out in no time. We don't want to regulate it by charging a high price. What we do now is we put a limited number of packets out every day: look, butter is scarce!"

These entrepreneurs opt for an image rather than a text with an explanation or a technical method to regulate butter sales.

4.2 Power of the image

We all know that images have a direct impact on our emotions. The examples from chapter 2 and the first examples in this chapter (examples 7 and 8) show how images can inspire farmers. The images used by the farmers in examples 9 and 10 in turn serve as inspiration for others. When figures are presented, people start to look in the feed table book (example 7) or in their own wallet (example 9). You then only look at the situation from an external perspective instead of really empathising and connecting. As a result, you are less involved with the specific case in front of you.

5. Connecting

5.1 Some examples

A third aspect that was addressed in different ways in the interviews was connecting:

Example 11.

Confidence.

Jelmer Zandbergen, Veld en Beek

"All members of the Consumers' Association have a key that they can use to go into our five 24/7 self-service shops. Members note what they pick up or enter it in the Veld en Beek app. So this is done entirely on the basis of trust. It works: If you trust, you will get trust in return."

The members of the consumer association feel closely connected to the farm and regard it as "their" farm with "their" livestock and vegetables. This connection is cultivated by both sides and enables a sales system based on trust. Members are expected to write down what they take home, while the farm is expected to reliably deliver high-quality food and communicate openly.

Example 12.

Production problem or common concern?

Jelmer Zandbergen, Veld en Beek

"Due to bluetongue, production had dropped and we could no longer supply the volume of dairy products ordered by customers. We assumed it would be a short-term problem, relying in part on the purchase of two lactating cows, but the situation was extremely acute. After considering various options, we decided to make all bottles slightly less full so that the burden would be borne by the entire consumer base. We informed the members of this and offered that if anyone did not want to participate, a signal was enough to cancel their order. We received many compliments for this immediate solution."

The technical problem of milk shortages is expanded by placing it in the wider context of Veld en Beek, including the associated consumer organisation. The

farm and the consumer organisation together form 'Veld en Beek', and from this connection arose the idea of sharing the "pain" equally. However, due to the urgency, there was no time for consultation with the consumer(association) and only one communication could be sent with the solution put into practice, supplemented by an emergency exit for consumers who did not agree.

Example 13.

Solidarity payment.

Vivian van der Torren, De Brouwketel

"The garden, 0.7 ha, is organised as a self-harvesting system on a subscription basis. There is room for 130 subscriptions, 100 of which were sold last year. I offer them for a solidarity payment, so there is no fixed price. With 130 subscriptions and an average price of €300 per subscription, I can generate a minimum income. The price is clear, but the number of subscriptions can still increase from 100 to 130. Until now, there has been one subscription per household, but I want to move to one subscription per "consumption share": That reflects the actual purchase of products much better."

Vivian works together with the subscription holders without imposing too many rules. The labour is shared between the farmer (cultivation) and the members (harvest). Payment is transparent and all subscription holders can see how the average guide price has been determined.

Example 14.

Regional and well-known.

Ben van Tilburg, WaddenMax

"In winter, we are self-sufficient in concentrated feed for months on end. Additional grain comes from Groningen, a nearby city - from my own neighbourhood and preferably from someone I know. No concentrates from a feed mill, because then you don't know what happened to it."

"We swap clover grass for fertiliser with the trial farm: a well-known farm close by and this is to our mutual benefit."

"Apart from our own straw, everything we need comes from our surrounding area, but not everything is organic. It's fun to go and get the straw myself. I do that in the evening, together with my wife."

Ben strives for a high degree of self-sufficiency ("a hobby, a challenge") and sources everything that does not come from his own farm from companies he has a personal relationship with. This connection brings peace of mind and trust: people don't let each other down and you supply or source good products from your own neighbourhood.

Example 15.

More than just good food.

Vivian van der Torren, De Brouwketel

"Our subscription holders don't just come to harvest good food, but also to breathe, to be here for a while. A number of customers just don't want to organise themselves in a larger context like Herenboeren or Land van Ons, but appreciate the Brouwketel's unique and open character."

Customers feel attracted to and connected with the farm precisely because of the absence of compulsory rules. There is a double bond between the farm and the customer: a formal bond through the subscription and an informal bond through the atmosphere of the farm.

5.2 Connectedness

Every farmer is connected and committed to his land, his crops and his livestock. One can feel connected to home-grown concentrates or concentrates from the neighbourhood, but not with concentrates from South America or South-East Asia. Connection to the consumer is also actively sought and organised. In biodynamic agriculture, this connection and commitment is realised in a way that suits the farm and the farmer.

6. Quotes from farmers about the essence of biodynamic work

6.1 Withhold, imagine, connect

In the interviews, it became clear time and again how difficult it is to put biodynamic farming into words. Comments included:

- "Above all: go and see for yourself".
- "Biodynamic is not static, but a continuous development of the uniqueness of your farm and its interaction with the environment (landscape, consumers, authorities, suppliers, buyers). You consider what the uniqueness of this place is and what you will do to further develop this uniqueness."
- "Biodynamic means listening to what wants to be. You let your subconscious do its work, but not passively."
- "Biodynamic does not mean leaving things out, like fertiliser, but rather adding things, such as a wider diversity on the farm."
- "Enter partnerships."
- "Take care of your relationships with people, the soil, nature and livestock."
- "Taking care of the earth in direct interaction with caring for people."
- "After two years of asking questions about the use of preparations, I realised that I wasn't going to get any answers and that I would have to figure it out myself to get ahead."
- "You want to do everything right, for the cow, the soil, the plants and the customers. With the side remark that taking care of yourself is often less self-evident."
- "It's all about personal development and a personal relationship with everything on and around the farm, so by definition, this is unique and individual."
- "For me, Sunday is usually a day off and I use this day for a moment of reflection during a tour of the farm. That would never be possible during the week. Six days of work and a day off is a nice rhythm for me."
- "I find a moment like that when I pick up the cows."
- "Biodynamic agriculture makes spirituality explicit. Spirituality means taking responsibility. Taking responsibility for the vulnerable."

The above statements show different variations of holding back, imagining and connecting. The uniqueness of biodynamic agriculture lies in the fact that these elements are seen as an integral part of an essential conversation. It is an encounter between beings. Even the farm itself is seen as having a 'farm individuality'.

6.2 Occasionally there is no conversation

However, in our conversations with farmers the opposite is also revealed. The Demeter standards dictate that things have to be done a certain way and this is sometimes experienced as pure protocol. Then restraining, imagining or connecting does not occur. The constant striving for a lively dialogue leads to these very elements. The use of biodynamic preparations in accordance with the standards or a minimum livestock density is perceived as disruptive. It is remarkable that this feeling is much less prevalent in the case of regulations concerning the omission of certain practices, such as the dehorning of cows or the avoidance of synthetic fertilisers.

7. Suggestions for training a (biodynamic) farmer

Two former Warmonderhof students, that we spoke to as part of this exploratory study, said that training to become a biodynamic farmer is "discovering yourself as an individual farmer". "It's really all about the individual," they said. "It's about nurturing things that can't be measured, and that's an individual thing." At the same time, they said: "At the end of the initial training, I still hadn't grasped the essence of biodynamics. It's a way of life." It is not easy to be more specific about what was taught in the initial training, that contributed to creating and experiencing this atmosphere. It is similar to what some farmers said in this study: "You don't learn biodynamic agriculture in a training programme, you learn it by doing." For us, the core of this study lies in the transmission. These quotes challenge us to find ways to organise transmission of the training in practical terms. What has been compiled in this study offers starting points. We are providing an impulse here that can be further developed in dialogue with teachers, (former) Warmonderhof students and others who want to work on this topic.

We have already worked with farmers on "training" during this study. Below we use some examples from these experiences.

7.1 Situational, intuitive acting

In this study, we conducted interviews with farmers in groups of three farmers and two researchers. We therefore did not interview the farmers individually, in order to deliberately create a learning space. When talking to colleagues it becomes necessary for farmers to articulate their way of thinking and working more clearly. From our experience of working in this way, we know that talking "outside" (which can also be in the shed) encourages participants to visualise their experiences rather than just expressing opinions, views or ideas.

To illustrate this way of working, below is an example of a different situation, involving a research group of farmers in Switzerland:

Example 16.

Broad-leaved dock ²

Walter Weidmann, Switzerland

"When I switched to biodynamic cultivation in 1995, broad-leaved dock was one of the biggest problems for me. My father had been fighting broad-leaved dock chemically for decades and yet it was still everywhere. There is no way I could get rid of it by hand. On our farm with slopes at an altitude of 550 metres, the maize can only be harvested late, so the soil doesn't dry out. The soil is then heavily compacted by heavy machinery during harvest, which leads to a lot of broad-leaved dock the following year."



Looking at it like this broad-leaved dock is a problem that needs to be fought. In a working group, in which Walter participated, the working hypothesis was put forward that weeds restore an imbalance in the specific natural balance of the farm. From this point of view, broad-leaved dock suddenly becomes interesting. Can I learn from how broad-leaved dock does this? Then perhaps I can restore this balance myself, in a way that suits me and my farm.

In the working group, the participants put themselves in the shoes of broad-leaved dock to find out what broad-leaved dock does. Different people presented their experiences as: "the discus thrower", "the bassoonist" and "the kneading baker". The experience was then articulated respectively as "creating while expanding", "expanding while creating" and "holding while expanding". This putting in the shoes method is called empathic perception.

"Apart from this search process into broad leaved dock, I had worked for years with farmers in the neighbourhood taking care of a marshy nature reserve near

the farm. To keep the area open, a mixture of reeds, marsh grasses, horsetail and mint had to be mown annually. Nobody actually wanted this mown material and it had to be disposed of and destroyed.

I then suddenly had the intuition to spread this mown material on the maize field after the harvest and mix it in. It was then ploughed. It looked terrible afterwards. The cuttings were so long and tough that the plant remains kept sticking out of the ground everywhere. That annoyed me. But at the same time it suited my idea. An artificial meadow was sown the following spring. Normally we have to harrow twice in spring before the soil is fine enough to sow. Now once was enough. The soil was loose and crumbly. The broad-leaved dock hadn't completely disappeared, but the field was unrecognisable, so different from before. The artificial meadow also produced a good yield so I no longer panic about broad-leaved dock."



Walter insists on disposing the cuttings, but at the same time expands the possibilities of how this can be done instead of simply driving it somewhere. Once he has started, he is forced to stick to this new option and enforce it - even if the neighbours laugh at him and his "wild" field, even if he himself thinks it is ridiculous. He had to persevere and keep open the possibility that things would turn out well after all. And it did. Walter is in many ways "holding while expanding". You could say that he started to work a bit like broad-leaved dock. This

practical example shows how a person looks for a way to deal sensibly with a situation that arises from a point of connectedness and responsibility. It helps to develop a different idea of weeds: It is not a problem to be fought, but an example to learn from. Such an idea presupposes and strengthens solidarity and responsibility. It has an opening and inviting effect. The broad-leaved dock becomes interesting. In this open space, the farmer's connection with his farm, his environment and the broad-leaved dock leads to a unique way of working. It also reinforces the uniqueness of his farm. It is a movement of inclusion - and not exclusion.

When I asked this farmer whether he had taken intuitive actions the following year as a result of his work with empathic perception in the working group, his answer was initially negative. When I enquired further as to what he had done differently in the past year than in previous years, the above story came to light.

In this example of situational, intuitive acting, the three aspects of imagining, connecting and holding back interact. For example, you imagine the quality of the broad-leaved dock and the situation of your own farm. You connect with an idea, an ideal, namely: to learn from the broad-leaved dock. And the holding back, the waiting: "Will it ever work out, with all those reeds sticking out of the ground?"

You cannot learn this method directly - that would contradict the concepts. However, during training you can work on becoming more skillful in the three aspects mentioned and taking an active interest in the intuitive actions of others. As a rule, this is not achieved through direct questions, but through indirect questions such as:

- What did you do differently last year than in previous years?
- What did you do that surprised you?³

7.2 Seize the right moment

The study shows that in areas where farmers do not have sufficient knowledge to formulate their own expectations, they get advice from experts so they can then formulate expectations. Sometimes these expectations have to be adjusted through gained experience. This ability to develop expectations and exercise restraint can be learned by formulating expectations and gaining practical experience of how things turn out in reality. You can only learn this skill by "moving along" with the plants and putting yourself in their shoes. This empathising is part of the basic attitude and professional technique of the bio-dynamic farmer.

There are farmers who mow when their neighbour mows or when the weather service predicts the right time. However, if you want to act at the right time in your own particular situation, you need to utilise and develop your own timing ability.

When tilling the soil in spring, the right time often depends on the moisture, workability and trafficability of the soil. It is important to get an image of the soil and the weather and to formulate an expectation of what the soil will be like tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Your expectation can then be adjusted on the basis of new experiences.

This ability can also be learned through explicitly formulating expectations regarding the development of a plant.

Example 17

Hoeing celeriac

Albert de Vries, Uilenhof

In young celeriac plants, the direction of growth changes from vertical, from the upright rosette of leaves, to horizontal, where the leaves spread out and lie on the ground. For weed control, it is important to hoe at the right time. Once the leaves have spread horizontally, you can no longer hoe between the plants. However, if you hoe more than three days before this turnaround in the growth movement, the weeds will have had the chance to shoot up again before the crop is closed. You can formulate your expectations every day of when this turnaround in the growth movement will occur. You can reinforce your expectations of this turnaround by drawing a plant every day. When formulating your expectations, you naturally also take into account the more or less favourable growth of the weather and the soil.

So you can formulate your expectations for everything and everyone more explicitly by asking yourself the question: "What can I expect if I were to do nothing now?"

7.3 Imagining

Talking to the farmers has shown that some of them have much easier access to images than others. The way the images are being used is also very different. Some use the image as an expression of the whole, while others use it more as an example or as an image of the future. At the end of each session, we practised imagining, we made images of how we experienced the farm.

Example 18.

The ten-headed dragon.

Pyt Stipma, Timpelsteed

With a group of farmers, we put ourselves in the shoes of this farm and its farmer, called Pyt. We tried to make images of both. We normally look for these images in the field of professions.

Ben replied: "Can I use an animal instead of a profession?"

"No."

A little later in the conversation: "I can only come up with one animal."

"Okay, let's hear it."

"I come up with a ten-headed dragon. Each head has something different: wild, but also calm, sharp, unruly, sly, messy, straightforward, sweet."

"Okay, in which profession is it good to have all these qualities?"

... Silence ...

"An actor?"

"But it's all real."

"Yes, an actor also has to portray it as real on stage."

"No, that's not quite it."

"What do you call someone who improvises?"

"A stand-up comedian."

"Excellent! And what does your stand-up comedian do?"

"Realising while jumping in. Yes, that's absolutely right. That is exactly what Pyt does. Yes, even now, right here!"

A ten-headed dragon initially appears as an image of a monster and evokes negative associations. On closer inspection, it turns out to represent a variety of characteristics, some of which appear contradictory. However, by using the image of a profession it turns into a unified, positive image, and what was perceived can be condensed into two suitable verbs.

And this method of positive imagining proved to be learnable. The method of first naming a profession and then verbs makes it much easier to interpret the images. Because when you visualise something, you always have to interpret this image afterwards. "What does it say? What is it talking about? What is the positive potential that I can connect with?" In this case the "ten-headedness" was about versatility, not about the dragon-like aspect. This positive use of will is visible and tangible in a profession. And you can build on this. Verbs are used to give words to what has been experienced and they also indicate action, while nouns or adjectives bring things to a standstill. The first verb is used in the present participle to connect it with the second verb and set it in motion at the same time. The 2 verbs together we call "the impulse to act".

Example 19.

Stacking boxes.

Jan Willem Bakker, BakkerBio

From the characterisation of the farm arises the following impulse to act: "directing while improvising". Jan Willem also interprets this as his personal impulse to act.

"I often give orders on the assumption that the other person will go their own skilful way, improvise and keep an eye on the bigger picture.

For example, I ask an employee to stack the boxes neatly in the shed. Then I suddenly see that the boxes are all neatly lined up in the corner, close together. But tomorrow a lorry will arrive and it needs to be loaded with certain crates. Then it's not practical at all that they're all stacked close together and the crates that are needed aren't at the front."



Tidy and some boxes accessible



Neat and tidy, boxes difficult to access



Boxes scattered around

The person who has neatly placed the boxes in the corner created his own image of what had to be done, so that's how it ended up looking. When Jan Willem paints the image of an even bigger picture, namely the lorry that has to be loaded with certain boxes tomorrow, the employee can focus on this image and work independently from there. That is what Jan Willem would like. By sharing your images of the future, the 'goal' becomes more concrete and transferable.

In this example, you can see that everyone's actions are guided by an image of a larger whole and that this larger whole is also an image. Images arise from the connection and the image acts as a unifying force. The challenge is to make the image large enough for the respective situation and task and to help each other in the process.

The two former Warmonderhof students found it very constructive in horticulture that they were repeatedly shown how they should act and were given examples. Later, however, at work, after completing their initial training, they found that if they were given a strict example, it didn't encourage them to explore their own way. It then degenerated into a protocol and no longer seemed free and inviting.

"Working with images can be interesting for anyone - with or without agricultural knowledge and experience."

7.4 Connecting

The two former Warmonderhof students: "We shared our enthusiasm with our fellow students and honed each others' skills. In discussions outside the classroom, we incorporated the teaching material and what farmers and teachers introduced us to. This was possible at Warmonderhof because lifework-learning is fully integrated into the training programme."

Example 20.

How do you get others to join you?

Ben van Tilburg, WaddenMax

Ben describes his frustration at not being able to get other people on board.

"Surely we should ..."

The conversations in this study showed that a connection is created when something can be visualised. With "we", there is no room for the formation of one's own image. The other person cannot see into the world and therefore does not see an inviting image. The other person may agree, but sees no space to enter into their own connection.

When you say, "I'm going to do this. If you want, you can join me," you create an inspiring image that the other person can look at and move along with.

Example 21.

How do you liaise with the landowner?

Guus van Imhoff, Urtica De Vijfsprong

Guus describes how sometimes direct orders come from a land management organisation to mow a certain plot, all on the same afternoon. "What can I do to create a connection to the managers of this organisation, because it won't come from them"? Again we are challenged with how to present an image that connects. You won't get a connection by slavishly carrying out the order, nor by rebelling against it. What you can do is to paint a picture of your situation, for example: "I want to fulfil your order. Today we have to bring in our hay and we need all the labour we can get. Tomorrow afternoon we have the opportunity to do this mowing job." This way you let the other person peek behind the scenes and they can get a clearer picture.

In a training programme, you can practise this form of communication in all kinds of teachings and discussions. The session becomes an enthusing workshop where fellow students can experience each other's initiative.

8. How do you communicate biodynamic agriculture?

This question forms the basis of our exploratory study and is, of course, a recurring theme for biodynamic farmers. After all, what do you say at a birthday party, in a café or in conversation with neighbours when you are asked: "What is biodynamic agriculture?" During our conversations this kept popping up: How can this study help us to answer this question? We, the authors, are of the opinion that an open dialogue - as we have conducted and described here - is the best starting point. In such a dialogue, there is room to talk about your own personal approach to biodynamic agriculture. You may say: "For me, biodynamic means always deciding in favour of life and not against life", or: "It is about entering into equal relationships and looking at nature as a partner", or perhaps: "It is about experiencing the essence or the essential". In such dialogue, you can explain what your inner process looks like and how you experienced it. After all, biodynamic agriculture is ultimately about individual development.

We believe that the best way to do justice to the biodynamic way of farming is to have the courage to talk about what we do not know and to recognise that there are not necessarily ready-made answers from a biodynamic perspective. Withholding answers is certainly not easy, especially when answers are demanded. But for biodynamics, this restraint is just as important as holding back in the work in order to create space for something new.

The conversation becomes particularly interesting if you can encourage the other person to see a bigger picture and if you ask about expectations. Then people get talking, create images and make connections. For example: "How much do you think this bag costs?" (example 9), or "How long do you think it will take to turn this pile of compost into something that can be spread?" (example 8), or "How long do you think it will take us to plant this cauliflower field?"

If you are organising a guided tour, you can then ask what image of a profession or professional situation is evoked by the experiences on the farm. You can then ask them to describe the "doing" in this image, using two verbs to characterise the farm (examples 16 and 18). In this way, you invite the other person to return something and not just consume. When you work together in

this way, the conversation becomes more equal. You can then ask: "What touched you?" If several people are involved, you could, for example, set aside half a minute to think about this question and give those who want to say something space to share. What has been said does not need to be discussed further; it is enough to make it clear how individually people engage with such an encounter with you and your farm - and that it can mean something completely different for some than for others or from what you expected.

9. Accountability

9.1 Cause

Today's agriculture faces enormous challenges and major changes are needed. The biodynamic movement, which was launched 100 years ago, believes that it can provide a model - even if only on a small scale - for the transformation of today's agriculture. There are many ideas and inspiring farms, but what essentially happens there often goes unnoticed. The material requirements for a Demeter certification are clearly defined. But if beside the 'what', the 'how' is made clearer, training can be simplified. This would enable farmers to recognise much quicker how biodynamic practice can be reconciled with their existing operations, enabling the biodynamic movement to play a bigger role in society over the next ten years.

After their conversion most biodynamic and organic farmers realise that they gradually begin to look at things differently. A changed way of thinking and working, combined with a new world view, develops internally.

But what exactly characterises this different way of seeing, thinking and acting? Is it transferable? Can it be learned? Or do you just have to start and the right feeling will come naturally over the years?

These questions prompted the Association for Biodynamic Agriculture in the Netherlands to initiate an exploratory study on this topic.

9.2 Literature

As far as we have been able to ascertain, no comparable research has been carried out in biodynamic agriculture. In general agriculture, however, there are studies on "indigenous knowledge" and its application. One example of this is the dissertation by Albert de Vries

⁴. The techniques described in his work for field research with farmers were also used in this study. In the medical field, for example, there is the work of J.W. Snoek ⁵, who describes how an experienced neurologist intuitively makes a diagnosis and then checks it. However, training to become a neurologist

focuses primarily on imparting knowledge; intuitive skills are not explicitly taught. At the end of the last century, the Louis Bolk Institute conducted the project "The Farmer as Experiential Scientist"⁶. The aim of this project was to investigate how agricultural researchers and advisors could involve farmers more as a starting point for their advice and research. It was recognised that farmers as entrepreneurs perceive their own reality differently. This focus on the farmer also influenced the advisors and researchers. How exactly the farmer's perspective changes in the process was only hinted at in this project, however. Later, Geert-Jan van der Burgt used the method of empathic perceiving, which was also used in "The Farmer as Experiential Scientist", as a method to talk to farmers about weed control⁷.

How differently farmers think and from which value systems they make decisions has been researched in many facets and presented by Prof. Jan Douwe van der Ploeg⁸. This research was less about how farmers think in images and more about the images from which they start.

Recently, two studies have been launched on this topic that are on a similar level. One comes from the Agriculture Department of the School of Spiritual Science at the Goetheanum in Dornach, Switzerland⁹, the other from the Louis Bolk Institute¹⁰. At the time of writing this report, no results were available from either.

9.3 Selection of participants

We started by looking for biodynamic farmers who wanted to join us to look at the biodynamic method and explore how it could be transferred to other farms. The invitation was sent out by the Biodynamic Association to all professional members. A number of participants responded, including two from Gelderland. We also actively approached a third person from our own network. This person was immediately willing to participate and explained that he had not received the invitation due to circumstances. In what later became known as the 'North' group, we asked the farmers who had applied to invite colleagues, which

resulted in two positive responses. In the end, there were five applications, but due to circumstances, three farmers participated in the "North" group.

We decided to organise three meetings per group (Gelderland, North), each time on a different participant's farm, where there were five of us: three farmers and two researchers.

As part of this exploratory study, there was an interview with two former Warmonderhof students to get an indication of the similarities and differences between the field and the initial training to become a biodynamic farmer.

From the outset, the talks were intended to take place on an equal footing: We, the researchers, knew just as little as they, the farmers knew about where we would end up. Of course, there were different roles. We also expressed this equality in financial terms: the budget included the same hourly rate for the farmers as for the researchers.

At the end of the three meetings, it was jointly decided that we would hold another final meeting (North and Gelderland separately). The focus was therefore different from the first three meetings. The farmers' partners were invited.

9.4 The methodology applied

We base our approach on grounded theory (for more background information and references, see note 3). It is common practice in the social sciences to gain insights from people's narratives. The researcher extracts frequently occurring concepts and examines which other concepts are linked to these core concepts. These concepts are derived from reality as it is experienced by people and portrayed in their stories. In his dissertation (Note 3), Albert de Vries describes how the grounded theory process can be simplified and accelerated by paying particular attention to the actions and verbs in the narratives. As a rule, the theory developed in this way is then tested by surveying larger groups. The questions in this survey are based on the core concepts identified. In this study, these core concepts would be intuitive action, withholding, imagining and connecting.

Example 22.

The image of the unity of plant, animal and soil.

Guus van Imhoff, Urtica de Vijfsprong

We arrived half an hour early for our first meeting with a group of farmers. We immediately struck up a conversation with the farmer we were visiting. We noticed him talking enthusiastically about something he had made: he had taken a large clover plant from the field and put it in a jar of soil. He told us how he had placed a dried bee on top. For him, this was an image of the unity of plant, animal and earth. A little later, when the group was complete, we talked about this first experience and asked the others about how they deal with images and the meaning that images have for them. This led to a conversation, see example 7, section 4.1.

Another element in our approach is action research, in which research and development are linked through practical action. The task of making the way biodynamic farmers think and work explicit, went hand in hand with the demand for a training curriculum. That is why we immediately tried out things at the meetings that could possibly fit into such a curriculum.

Our way of working is also participatory. Unlike traditional anthropological research, where you put yourself in a community without influencing it, our aim was to connect with the uniqueness of these farmers. For this reason we integrated ourselves into the group and actively participated in shaping the biodynamic way of thinking and working. In doing so, we focussed on how someone acts and thinks, while being aware that there are also other perspectives on the farm. A SKAL auditor, for example, has a different role. However, we deliberately refrained from judging or criticising the farm's actions so as not to distort the authentic stories.

9.5 The field meetings

We focussed on how the biodynamic way of working is expressed concretely on the farms, not as abstract ideas about biodynamic agriculture. To find out,

we quickly went outside after arriving at the farmers' homes and were guided by the question: "What inspires you, what touches you?" In response to this question, the farmers gave us a tour of the farm. During the tour, we initially kept a low profile. At later meetings, we contributed more actively to clarifying points or brought in aspects that we had heard previously or in other groups. The meetings ended with an in-house discussion. There, using the method of empathetic perceiving and the search for positive impulses for action, all five participants formulated a picture that summarised the activities and results on the farm. This image proved to be inviting for further action.

9.6 Report

The conversations and notes we took revealed that images play a central role in communicating biodynamic practice. Farmers indicated that they would not read a report with a lot of text. We therefore thought about a visual representation to better convey the content. In collaboration with the cartoonist Kamagurka, we created two drawings that illustrated the messages in a playful way.

9.7 Continuation

The results of this study can provide valuable impetus for the training and transfer of biodynamic thinking and action. Especially in training, the active involvement of farmers could help to promote the ability to retain, imagine and connect.

We have already gained experience in working with farmers in this exploratory study. A follow-up could also offer the opportunity for farmers to formulate the questions themselves.

9.8 Participating farmers and researchers

Jan Willem & Jacquélien Bakker	www.bakkerbio.nl
Ben & Mieke van Tilburg	www.waddenmax.nl
Pyt & Rika Sipma	www.timpelsteed.nl
Guus van Immhof	www.urticadevijfsprong.nl
Jelmer Zandbergen	www.veldenbeek.nl
Vivian van der Torren	www.tuin.landgoeddebrouwketel.nl

Former Warmonderhof students: Roos & Arte Tibben. They completed their training at the Warmonderhof eight years ago. They then worked on various farms.

Albert de Vries	www.onderzoekineigenwerk.nl
Geert-Jan van der Burgt	gjvanderburgt@gmail.com



From left to right:
Pyt Sipma,
Jan Willem Bakker,
Albert de Vries,
Ben van Tilburg



From left to right:
Guus van Immhof,
Vivian van der Torren,
Geert-Jan van der Burgt,
Jelmer Zandbergen

Notes

1. Rudolf Steiner (2022, 1924): Agricultural Course. Spiritual scientific foundations for the prosperity of agriculture. Rudolf Steiner Paperback.
2. Albert de Vries (ed., 2010): Biodynamic agriculture as a culture of intuition. Using the example of the regulation of blacken. Association for Biodynamic Agriculture, Switzerland.
3. Albert de Vries (2004): Ervaringsleren cultiveren. Eburon. In this dissertation the intuitive action was described as: "Successful Unexpected Action".
4. idem.
5. Jozef Willem Snoek (1989): Het denken van de neuroloog. RUG.
6. Ton Baars & Albert de Vries (1999): De boer als ervaringswetenschapper. Weten uit ervaring. Elsevier.
7. Geert-Jan van der Burgt (2011): Onkruid beheren. Inlevend waarnemen als inspiratie. Louis Bolk Instituut, publicatienummer 2011-033 LbP, 47 p
8. Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (1987): De verwetenschappelijking van de landbouwbeoefening. LUW. D. Roep, JD van der Ploeg, C. Leeuwis (1991): Zicht op duurzaamheid en continuïteit. Bedrijfsstijlen in de Achterhoek. LUW. t/m Jan Douwe van der Ploeg (2023): Gesloten vanwege stikstof. Noordhoek.
9. Jean-Michel Florin (2024): Intuitions based on perception. Anthroposophy worldwide, no. 1-2/24, blz. 11.
10. Ilse Geijzendorffler (2023): Projectvoorstel "Met BD elan de toekomst in". Louis Bolk Instituut.

Biodynamic agriculture has been around for 100 years now. It is still often cited as a pioneering example. But this pioneering movement is smaller than you might think. The board of the Biodynamic Farming Association therefore asked itself the question: How can we ensure that biodynamics becomes transferable and that there are more biodynamic farmers?

A biodynamic farmer acts out of a personal connection with the soil, the plant, the animal, his fellow human beings, with everything that surrounds him. This happens constantly, but often implicitly. This explorative study makes this visible. The personal, connecting and intuitive aspects can be given a place in a training programme. There are many inspiring examples!

Ir. Geert-Jan van der Burgt (1959) is an independent agricultural researcher. He contributes to a coherent understanding between nitrogen, humus, fertilisation and plant growth for healthy and sustainable soil fertility. And that is the basis for a sustainable society.



Dr. Albert de Vries (1955) works independently as a coach, trainer, research facilitator and researcher. With the Experiential Learning and Inclusive Coaching method he developed, he aims to strengthen the initiative, quality and unique contribution of each individual. The result is a more inclusive society.



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