

## A Postcard from the 2022 Berkshire Roundtable:

This year's 32<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the Berkshire Roundtable was a bittersweet gathering for those who attended; the excitement of convening again after a year's hiatus was tempered by unexpected and particularly untimely loss. And yet, it seems as though this particular occasion can best be described as a celebration of sorts. Not only were we able to celebrate the productive reunion of an exceptional group of orchardists, we also had the opportunity to celebrate the life of one of them. Any tears of sadness were accompanied by tears of honest joy as we remembered Michael Phillips as a man, orchardist, teacher, and friend. His chair in our circle was occupied by a beautiful fresh apple (it may even have been a 'Cosmic Crisp') and a copy of his book, *The Apple Grower*, yet this tangible representation seemed almost unnecessary as we felt his presence in spirit – indeed, his resolve to organize this year's meeting against such long odds makes it seem unlikely that mere death would keep Michael away.

We are so grateful to Michael's wife, Nancy, for taking the time to address our group that first morning. Our collective thoughts had been with Michael's family and we were so touched that in the midst of her grief, Nancy reached out to offer *us* words of support. A heartfelt message from Nancy was read aloud, letting us know how much Michael had been looking forward to meeting with his "apple buddies" at Stump Sprouts this year, and how much he had particularly cherished these friends. We then opened our roundtable with anecdotes that served to eulogize Michael. Several of us recounted how he had initiated us into the world of holistic orcharding. Others testified how he had "kicked the damn door in" on their understanding of whole-systems management. His devotion to the pursuit and dissemination of knowledge was a frequent theme, along with his much-appreciated sense of humor and uncommonly excellent communication skills. In short, we agreed that Michael Phillips was a "damn fine keeper" who we all wished had had more time on this earth. We try to find consolation in the fact that he was a model orchardist to the end, expiring in service to his beloved trees, and that perhaps he has finally found answers to some of his deepest questions. We moved unanimously that the somewhat outdated term 'mycorrhizae' be replaced by the infinitely more appropriate 'Michaelrrhizae.' So let it be written, so let it be done.

While the timing of Michael's death seemed so shocking and unfair initially (more than any of us, he should have been there!!!), it came to feel fortuitous that so many of his friends could come together in the immediate aftermath of his passing. And we know he would have savored the function of acting as an impetus for any conversation concerning holistic orcharding. So beyond serving as an impromptu memorial, our roundtable was the usual smorgasbord of practical orcharding concerns, big picture philosophizing, experiential sharing, good-natured bitching . . . and so much more! For many of us, Michael served as both the gatekeeper and the common link – if Michael invited us to attend the roundtable we must be good people, and in the past it was enough to go through a brief who's who introduction before getting down to business. This year, our smaller group consisted of a stimulating mix of 'OG' -- original gangsta -- founding members, relative newcomers to the group, and first-time attendees.

The sharing of stories, whether they be updates from the previous season or deeper reflective narratives from the authors among us, is always a big theme at the Roundtable, but being on inherently more intimate terms due to circumstance, we thought it appropriate that we spend time getting to

know each other better this year. Linda read an inspiring passage from her memoir, *The Artist and the Orchard*, to get us started, and we each went on to impart some of the more meaningful aspects of our orcharding interests, operations, and backgrounds. The resulting sense of kinship was palpable and served to lead us down many extraordinary avenues of conversation.

On the other hand, we're a very thoughtful and conscientious group, so it shouldn't be surprising that general talk of cider apples morphed into an exploration of the ethics surrounding the production of alcohol in a world where some are destined to suffer from the abuse of spirits. While meaningful conclusions are elusive in such a conversation, we agreed that the cidermakers among us continue a tradition birthed with the dawn of humanity and bring a considerable measure of joy into the world. We affirmed this notion, of course, with our customary cider tasting after hours that evening, and can attest to the beneficial role of hard cider in the augmentation of our comradery.

The circumstances of Michael's death, defending his orchard against the onslaught of deer, prompted discussion of other most-wanted pests we've been going toe to toe with in our orchards this past year. Porcupines are becoming a more frequent antagonist in the North, and some of us are experiencing such an uptick in adverse traditional rodent behavior that nights are spent "hunting wabbits" (Brett's uncanny Elmer Fudd impression continues to inspire).

An outsized topic of discussion this year was how to encourage an at-large culture of self-sufficiency, stewardship, and planetary survival . . . not necessarily in that order. We agreed that this, of course, starts with teaching our children well, and exposing them to the wonders of nature and holistic agriculture, in the hope that even those who don't feel an immediate connection may at least find a touchstone for the future. We are concerned at the state of the world and human culture, with regard to connection with the natural world we ultimately depend on for survival, but we have hope and confidence that our work within and beyond our orchards will serve as beacons for the future.

Tree physiology remains a fascinating and elusive topic as we strive to get to know our trees better. Michael's interest in plant sap analysis in order to better understand seasonal nutrient pulsings and needs led to a discussion of how we might pick up his breadcrumb trail in this regard. Beyond that, we pondered specific physiological questions relating to, among other things, how to encourage limbs in blind wood on older, larger trees, the effects of converting central leaders to open-vase training, high-vigor management, etc. During such discussion, Bill admonished us repeatedly to remember that "trees don't heal, they seal,"\* along with countless other pearls of wisdom.

Particularly in light of current world events, interest in producing orchard inputs on-farm is higher than ever, and we discussed possibilities for various ferments and homegrown creations, from anti-fungal (and sulfur-adding) horseradish brews to the yoking of indigenous microbe populations as the basis for beneficial bacterial sprays. We sincerely hope that these musings make the jump to active experimentation and look forward to hearing about practical adventures in closed-circle orcharding in the future.

Finally, for those not in attendance, who may be wondering whether or not we managed to stay on task, yes, The Worm Pictures were dutifully and hilariously examined. If you'd like to see them for yourself, **please mark your calendars for March 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2023 as the next intended meeting of The Berkshire Roundtable at Stump Sprouts.** Among other aspects, we hope to revive the tradition of the "Wednesday morning session" with an in-depth presentation from group practitioners of biodynamic

orcharding. As stated above, we particularly hope to hear updates from any in-orchard research that's being done this season: keep experimenting and keep sharing what you find! Alan, making up for never having sat next to Michael in the learning circle all those years, has generously offered to serve once again as interim facilitator for next year's meeting as we feel our way forward. If anyone else becomes interested in serving within this capacity, he urges you to make yourselves known!

So we hope you will join us next year to further our perpetual discussion of the role of the holistic orchardist in this changing world, the challenges we face, and the accomplishments by which we can teach others. In the meantime, "let's keep the conversation going," as Michael would say. While the online forum can always be accessed via The Holistic Orchard Network for just this purpose, we wish to explore other ways to engage each other for orchard discourse throughout the year to better connect with those of us firmly planted in the field and disinclined to indulge the "technocratic digital paradigm" in any way! Some of us chose to participate in smaller, regional breakouts of the Berkshire Roundtable in 2021, and building on this initiative to meet outside of the traditional B.R. time and space, in addition to our more comprehensive annual meeting, is certainly a possibility.

Michael was fond of saying that any attempt to wrangle our holistic orcharding crowd to any practical common purpose is like herding cats – he wasn't wrong! One of this group's greatest strengths is its independent-mindedness, but another is its talent for problem-solving. Michael's passing has laid bare plenty of practical issues and questions that will need to be addressed. He very capably and willingly engaged all of us as individuals in his efforts to bring us together, and was happy to serve as a sort of frontman for the group, as well as its treasurer and organizer. Looking to the future, we will have to explore how best to fill his void and assume the responsibilities he shouldered on the group's behalf. Anyone with thoughts or ideas to share is hereby encouraged to do so in the manner they see fit, whether by emailing this group listserv or otherwise. We could do t-shirts: "I survived the Berkshire Roundtable." Actually, one entertaining idea hatched this past week was that the group move toward purchasing Stump Sprouts (should it ever come up for sale, should Lloyd and Suzanne ever bless such a notion) and adapt it to be some sort of teaching orchard along the lines of a 'Berkshire Roundtable Institute.' Harebrained? Check. Unlikely? Check. Relentlessly conceivable? Well, yeah.

"Go back? He thought. "No good at all! Go sideways? Impossible. Go forward? Only thing to do! On we go!" — J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*

Respectfully Submitted,

**The Knights of the Berkshire Roundtable**

\*Per further reflection by Bill: "My trite comments that "animals heal while trees seal" has significance only when we begin to really understand what that means and how it can benefit our orchard endeavors.

Animals came first. From single celled archea, through the development of procaryotic, to multicellular eukaryotic cellular systems, all were motile (mostly), healing creatures. Energy was supplied solely through the mechanism of biochemical glycolysis from which 2 ATP's of energy per atom of high energy precursor could be derived (sulfur compounds at hydrothermal vents etc). A billion and more years later life entered a new phase viz. splitting water (the so called light reaction) and eventually the process became the norm on planet earth. This 'respiration' through the "citric acid cycle" added another 32 ATP's ,dwarfing the original 2 , thereby providing 34 ATP's per each atom of Carbon in a 6 carbon molecule of a new substance called sugar. Oxygen produced by respiration killed nearly all previous life and oxidized virtually all native metals on earth. It took literally hundreds of millions of years , eventually leading to our present atmosphere containing nearly 21% oxygen

Concomitant with this process, a new kind of organism led the way - the plants. Animals are motile, most plants not. Both animals (first life) and plants which came later are composed today of eukaryotic cells and all such cells are surrounded by a cellular membrane . This gives definition to an organism, a : "this is me" as separate from "all outside me is you". This membrane is flexible allowing animals to move (search for food etc.). It allows for a plethora of shapes and sizes, but ultimately restricts how large (how many cells), the organism can have. Size is important from single celled to billions of cells, e.g. in large fish and mammals . For motile animals maintaining size is critical, usually defining a species. When injury occurs, as it most certainly will , in all motile creatures, healing processes came into being. Healing in animals was critical, such that when an injury occured and the animal healed itself, it retained normal size for its genetic specificity. Healing in animals is critical to all living animal systems.

Plants for the most part are sessile and early on took a different route along the evolutionary pathway. Since they made all their own food (liquid photosynthate, i.e.-sugars) from sunlight, water and CO<sub>2</sub> ,they had no need to move around, especially on land. As sessile creatures, plants created a cell wall next to their cell membrane. This gave each cell rigidity and allowed plants to grow upward toward the sun. With motility no longer a problem they simply dispensed with difficult to maintain healing systems, becoming "growing systems". Trees now represent some of the largest earthly creatures. If a tree gets injured, and it surely will, it "barriers" the injury and grows past it . Size is no longer a problem as new cells grow over the injury, walling it off and adding now dying and eventually dead tissue to its total mass. Alex Shigo defined a tree as "A combination of living, dying and dead cells, all working together to comprise a functional whole"

All the above has incredible implications about how we care for our orchard and yard trees, not the least of which includes how water maintains the homeostasis of the entire system. That however is for another time. I just hope I've not bored you all to near death. Horticultorially, Bill MacKentley"