“Summer and Sun” Internship Report

The air felt different as I walked through the rows of tomatoes and recalled their journey through the summer beginning with planting mature seedlings in May then weeding, mulching, side-dressing, cage building, rearranging of limbs, and harvesting of the juiciest and most vibrantly delicious tomatoes I’ve ever shared a summer with. I didn’t feel sad for the browned stems crumpling from the weight of rotten tomatoes, overgrown with weeds. A few of the cherry varieties and a speckled roman have been transplanted to the greenhouse to lengthen the summer’s harvest. Tomatoes have a prickly stem that roots when planted, this allows a greener stem to be cut off and replanted. It hasn’t rained enough for a few weeks now and so the ground is turning to dust, soon to be replenished with rain as trees quiet down with fall colors. It’s the beginning of a decline into the dead winter. That decline is slow enough to hold excitement for the trays of seedlings I planted later that afternoon in the greenhouse, three long rows of tilled beds, with a few rows already directly-planted into the ground.

I spent two or three days a week at this farm on the South Cumberland Regional Land Trust. This large property is mostly protected forest on the plateau, and the rest is inhabited by 10 households, with up to two votes per household, where they vote on anything relevant to the Land Trust. Each household is comfortably placed along a long winding road. Julia’s Fine Food’s first kitchen (in the community kitchen) and Jumpoff Mountain Java, available at the Cumberland Farmer’s Market, began on this property. The garden I worked in, Joseph’s Garden is located on rich soils in a gently rolling field surrounded by forest. The plants share the land with sheep, chickens, a few dogs and a cat.

If I wasn’t doing garden work or canning with Joseph Bordley, I was farming with the Wilsons in Monteagle, TN. I lived on InTown Organics, by the pond in an Airstream camper. My water came from the same spigot that the chickens drank from. Each
morning, the chickens are let out, given two scoops of feed, and a fresh bowl of water. The goats, young turkeys, rabbits, and pets get food and water daily too. After a few weeks, I found myself talking to them and picking favorites. Artemis the cat would often join me and Stella Wilson on the hammock under an apple tree most mornings after chores.

Tuesday was market day. Most of Monday and all of Tuesday was in preparation for the Cumberland Farmer’s Market with Jess Wilson the market’s manager. Depending on the time of season, most of the work went into harvesting produce. Jess’ spring mix of lettuce combined about eight different varieties. It was quickest to harvest with an electric knife, but scissors worked well too. After all the lettuces and herbs are picked, they are washed in a large bathtub, spun dry in an old washing machine, weighed, packaged in a biodegradable plastic produce bag, and labeled for distribution at the market. InTown Organics is Certified Naturally Grown (CNG), which is a worldwide grassroots food certification company based on local networks and peer-inspections.

This type of certification works well for small farmers like Jess. InTown Organics is a 3 acre farm, producing enough to supply most of the Wilsons’ food and some excess to sell. CNG compliments the national food certification system that’s fit for medium and large scale producers, because small farmers often sell directly to buyers through local markets not retail stores. The Cumberland Farmer’s Market (Sewanee.locallygrown.net) almost reached full capacity for their current system; it’s come a long way since its beginning. The internet-based market allows orders from 5 p.m. Saturday to 10 a.m. Monday. Farmers will post items that they will have ready for pick-up on Tuesday from 4:30 to 5:45 p.m. Customers go online to order and farmers come prior to pick-up to distribute the orders according to customer at the Sewanee Community Center. Each order comes with an invoice and the products include an array of bath and body
products, baked goods, cheeses, meats, eggs, and fresh produce. Every week, about 100-130 orders are mostly picked up from farmers as far as Chattanooga, TN.

Conversations of expanding has led the market’s volunteers to raise matching funds for the USDA grant and have found generous support within the community. The grant would go towards a food hub. The idea is centered around a refrigerated truck and a food coordinator that organizes the supply and demand of produce and products in the local community. Ultimately, there would be a storefront to accommodate growth. Local restaurants are already buying local food along with the University’s dining services, Aramark. As I worked with the Cumberland Farmer’s Market I began to build relationships with growers and buyers. These relationships grew over the summer, and I continue to maintain relationships with the Cumberland Farmer’s Market and the individuals who make it run. The best part of the internship is the people.

At the Cumberland Farmer’s Market, I would often sell extra produce after setting up and distributing orders according to customer. During pick-up time, I would set up outside the doorway or by the sidewalk and smile at people. By mid-summer, I knew a lot of these people, so those smiles turned into conversations and sometimes resulted in a sale. Depending on what I was selling, there were different success rate. In late summer everyone is growing yellow squash, so it’s almost impossible to sell extra. Squash blossoms sold as a specialty item; not only are they pretty, but you can stuff and sauté them. Farming isn’t about the money, though. I found that an immense amount of work went into seeding, growing, and harvesting plants. I didn’t see this translate into an immense amount of money. But because farming becomes ritualistic and personal over time, I began to regard it differently.

Growing my own food is religious. As a religion major, I seek to find clarity within questions without a right or wrong answer. These answers are beyond the intellect and I’m continuing to farm to better understand the ineffable; however, I can say that the
plants cared for me just as much as I cared for them. Also, I can say through experience that constant dirt underneath my nails all summer kept depression at bay. If the purpose of religion is not to solve the woes that distance happiness from day to day living, then I have no need for it in my life other than academics.

For my senior year, I've grown passionate and re-enchanted with the domain through the summer. I am continuing to grow food and occasionally milk goats as long as the sun shines hot enough. This fall I'm taking four religion classes in preparation for comps in January. I hope to connect farming, biology, nutrition, and religion for a senior project. This will be achieved through independent studies in the spring and working closely with outreach organizations and community members. Also, I hope to enhance Otey Parish’s Community Action Committee’s (CAC) gardening program through growing donated seeds, aiding with bed preparations, and seeding. This way, the clients that are unable to garden independently can focus on harvesting, one of the easier and more enjoyable tasks. I’m working with the CAC through a yearlong Canale internship.

The Community Engagement House is where I’ll live during my senior year, and like most residents, I work closely with the Outreach Office. Already, there are plans to work with a Chattanooga-based company and Cumberland Farmer’s Market seller, Link Forty One, to craft a brat dog to be sold at football concessions as a local alternative to hotdogs normally sold by Housing Sewanee, the program that benefits from the games. These brat-dogs will be nestled by Bread Peddler buns and sold at the first home football game. Within the house, I’m able to work on the culinary side of farming by cooking for myself and others as a basis for community and conversations.

As the world changes, my future plans do too. The honey bees may be in danger of dying off and this would mean I couldn’t have bee hives for harvesting honey. This also means I would focus some time working towards restoring honey bees. Assuming the bees will be around for at least another few years, I hope to attend graduate school
for religion and travel around the world through “WWOOFing” (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) or a Watson Fellowship to study fermentation. I will garden and work with communities to provide a basic need of life: nourishment.

Overall, the entire summer was a high point. I figured out what I was lacking: the connections between the linear, cyclical, and physical. My life, the seasons, and mother nature are all fragile variables that can work beautifully together or not. I found my center of peace in the dirt. The environment played a specific role in keeping my mind serene, much like a meditative state. Physical labor challenged my strength and perseverance. Most days, the most significant factors were the clouds, the sun, and the temperature. I found myself hoping for rain to grow seedlings that had time and sweat invested into them. I found myself embracing my sweat as it dripped down my nose. When one is eating a healthy, fresh diet, even one’s sweat tastes just as sweet as breakfast, lunch and dinner. If you’re unfamiliar with fresh food, then I can assure you it’s delicious.