

Karen Telleen-Lawton » Serendipity: Organic Bytes

Serendipity: Organic Bytes

Woody Tasch cultivates the crossover appeal of agriculture and the economy, fueling a fertile evolution

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 04.26.2009

Every once in a while I read a book that sets off so many synapses in my brain that I'm repeatedly forced to slow down and ponder instead of racing through the pages. This was how I experienced [Woody Tasch's](#) new book, *Inquiries into the Nature of Slow Money* — investing as if food, farms and fertility mattered.

Tasch spoke recently to a comfortably crowded [Victoria Hall Theater](#). The auditorium was filled with a marvelous mix of investors and fund managers; organic farmers and permaculture experts; and small businesses and nonprofit organizations. I passed up the book vendor on the way in, but by the time Tasch had beautifully stitched together the seemingly disparate concepts of finance and soil health, quoting just about all my favorite authors, I was hooked. He drew on [E.F. Schumacher's](#) *Small is Beautiful*, [Paul Hawken's](#) *The Ecology of Commerce* and [Herman Daly's](#) *Beyond Growth* while calling into question the efficacy of [Adam Smith's](#) eloquent legacy, “the invisible hand of the market.”

I happen to have slogged through both volumes of Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (first published in 1776). Why I did this may be something like why Tasch, a venture capitalist and foundation director, travels the world to talk to organic farmers, investors and philanthropists. He wants to find a way for economics to support the earth rather than vice versa.

When I read Smith's famous tome in the 1990s, I discovered that he understood this concept more than two centuries ago. Commenting on the waste he observed in the American colonies, Smith wrote, “A piece of ground which ... could not (now) maintain one cow would in former times ... have maintained four, each of which would have given four times the quantity of milk.” He continued by describing how American farmers worked one parcel of land until it



was unfertile, instead of cultivating the land with manure. This, in a master work that resulted in his being named “the father of economics.”

The building block of business is not the dollar bill but the soil. As Tasch puts it, “The problems we face with respect to soil fertility, biodiversity, food quality and local economies are not primarily problems of technology. They are problems of finance. In a financial system organized to optimize the efficient use of capital, we should not be surprised to end up with cheapened food, millions of acres of GMO (genetically modified) corn, billions of food miles, dying Main Streets, kids who think food comes from supermarkets, and obesity epidemics side by side with persistent hunger.”

There’s wealth in the soil. It’s time we learned more about the philosophy of stewardship than the mechanics of harvesting. I’ll explore Tasch’s concepts further in future columns.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton’s column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*