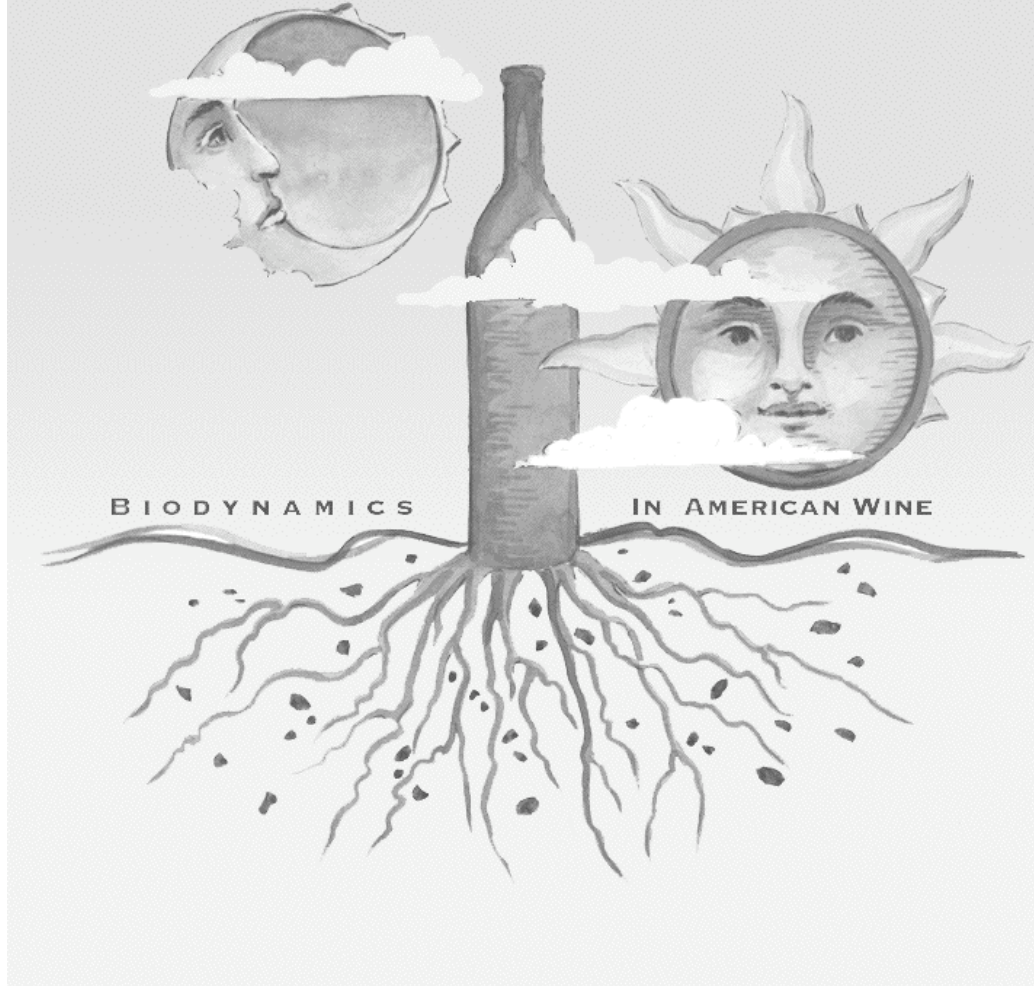


BD FORUM



BD FORUM 2006
APRIL 3, 2006 IN SAN FRANCISCO

Part 2: Basic Concepts

**BD FORUM 2006
BASIC CONCEPTS OF BIODYNAMICS
ALAN YORK WITH THOM ELKJER**

Alan York: Thank you, Thom.

[He studies his microphone]

I don't know why I got the red one. Maybe it's 'cause I'm a hothead. Can you hear me okay without the microphone? I don't like these things. Yes, no?

[Shouts of "No" from the back of the room.]

Can you hear me now without the microphone?

[More shouts of "No!" from the back of the room.]

Well, what are you doing sitting so far back?

[Laughter.]

Thom Elkjer: Use the microphone please.

Alan York: Man, my plan is deteriorating quickly.

Thom Elkjer: We don't have a plan. We didn't rehearse this. There is no script.

Alan York: Good. My last dictate from Thom was to keep it light. So I'm going to start off with your very favoritest subject: our commander-in-chief, Jorge. Jorge is out one day riding his bicycle. And he comes across a little girl and she has some kittens. And he stops and he says, "What kind of kittens are those?" And she says, "Oh, these are Republicats." And he says, "Very good." Gets on his bicycle and rides off.

A couple of weeks later Jorge is out, 'cause we know Jorge's very active, riding his bicycle again. And he comes across the same little girl with some more kittens. And he says, "What kind of kittens are those?" And she says, "Oh, these are Democats." And he says, "I thought you said they were Republicats." And she says, "Yes, but they have their eyes open now."

[Laughter.]

So this is why we're here, not to discuss Jorge, but see if we can open our eyes a little bit.

When I was first starting to think about this -- as you can imagine, it's virtually impossible to describe the biodynamic process in about 15 or 20 minutes, particularly when you waste your time telling jokes. So I was reading the *New York Times* a couple of Sundays ago, like

all good Democrats do, and I came across this article in the *New York Times* magazine and there was an excerpt from a new book from Michael Pollan.

Now many of you may know him from his two previous books, one called *The Botany of Desire* and the other called *Second Nature*. Very insightful writer about nature. And he has a new book called *The Omnivores' Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. And at the beginning of this article there's a little statement and it says, or it's a question, it says "Is hunting the last refuge of authenticity?" So the word authenticity captured my imagination because this is our cry in biodynamics.

You know, when we discuss biodynamic wines we typically do not say that they are better. We make a really big effort to stay away from claiming that they are better. What we try to do is to say and to show that they are *authentic* to the site by which they are grown, and reveal the passion of the people that are involved in that process. Hence trying to avoid getting into the conflict of better and worse.

I was really surprised in reading this how accurate [Pollan] was in being able to articulate the state of mind that is necessary to practice biodynamics successfully. So if you will pardon me I will read just a few statements that I think that are so just on-the-mark of what this is about.

"Walking with a loaded gun in a unfamiliar forest, bristling with the signs of your prey is thrilling. It embarrasses me to write this, but it's true. I am not by nature much of a noticer, yet here, now, my attention to everything around me, deafness to everything else, is complete. Nothing in my experience has prepared me for this quality of attention..."

"It was as if I'd dialed up the gain on all my senses, or quietened myself to such an extent that the world itself grew louder and brighter. I quickly learned to filter out the static of birdsong, of which there was plenty at that hour of the morning, and to listen for the frequency of specific sounds -- the crack of branches or the sniffing of animals. I found I could see farther into the woods than I ever had before, picking out the tiniest changes in my visual field and at almost inconceivable distances, just so long as those changes involved movement or darkness. The sharpness of focus and the depth of field was uncanny, though, being nearsighted, I knew it well from the experience of putting on glasses with a strong new prescription for the first time. 'Hunter's eye,' Angelo said later when I described the phenomena; he knew all about it..."

"Later it occurred to me that this mental state, which I quite liked, in many ways resembled that one induced by marijuana: [I knew he was loaded] the way your senses feel heightened, the mind seems to forget everything outside the scope of its present focus, including physical discomfort and the passing of time..."

"But whether I was actually having a cannabis moment or not, in the minutes before Angelo whistle pierced my silence I did feel as if I had somehow entered nature through a new door. For once I was not a spectator but a full participant in the life of the forest. Later, when I reread Ortega [Ortega is a large game hunter] a full -- a set

of descriptions of the experience, I decided maybe he wasn't so crazy after all, not even when he asserted that hunting offers us our last best chance to leave behind history and return to the state of nature, if only for a time--for what he called a 'vacation from the human condition...'"

"Much that surrounds hunting is completely artificial, Ortega freely admits, yet the experience itself, the encounter of predator and prey, is no fiction. Even though the hunt takes place during a brief 'vacation' from modern life, what occurs in the space of this electrifying analysis will ever and always be, in a word Ortega never shrinks from using, 'authentic.'"

Alan York: It's amazing how accurate that is. And at first I was very excited. And then I thought, "Well, that's the experience that we have as growers, that laser-like focus that puts you in an altered state so that you can make decisions that are congruent with the way nature works instead of a decision that is imposed upon nature." But then I realized that many of you are not growers and that this maybe would not have really much meaning for you, until I realized that I believe that you can *taste* that.

That's a pretty amazing thing, to be able to actually taste a description like that. Now, I'm not saying that all of the wines will convey it, but I would suggest that you keep that in mind when you're tasting the wines [today] to see if you can actually taste that raised level of consciousness that is expressed through the growers' relationship with what they're doing.

And this is very much what Michael Pollan was talking about in his second book which he called *Second Nature*: wine is not a wild product like hunting a pig, this is an act of culture in which we as human beings participate. And because we do participate in it, it can go in many different directions.

So today we have an opportunity to experience that. Now, the gesture in which we are all here today is to have an honest and open discussion about what biodynamics can and cannot do.

I think there's a lot of misunderstanding among people and what they think that [biodynamics] can do -- that it is some form of magic in which you can erase extremely detrimental conditions. But you all already know the answer to that. You know that that is not true, and that fine wine is always a question of superior sites with a deep understanding of the right varieties that are grown there, with the right training systems, the right pruning, cropped at the right levels.

So we are not exempt from that. No one is exempt from that. In the whole world superior wines come from superior sites. So what can biodynamics do and what really is the role and the reason why we should consider Demeter certification? Does Demeter have a role in this or is Demeter an obstacle in this?

It is my personal opinion that if you are going to say that you are a biodynamic producer of fine wine that you must become Demeter-certified. And I say that because it is the only way that the consumer has a validation of the practices that are involved in biodynamics. We live in America and we know because we see it and hear it every single day that you can say

pretty much anything you want to. But does that mean that it's true just because you can say it? Hardly. So what is it, in five minutes, that Demeter can do and why is it important?

Now, I'm going to make this much more simple than it is. There are really about four basic requirements that are required from Demeter. All of these are very practical, down-to-earth things that everybody has to deal with.

The first of them is to create as closely as possible, with the emphasis on as closely as possible, a closed system in reference to nutrients. The practical implication of that is the restriction of materials that can be brought in from the outside. It is our feeling that with everything that's brought in from the outside, the authenticity or the originality of that site is diluted. So it is a requirement of ours that we always look towards our internal resource base and organize that in a way that allows us to grow healthy plants with a minimum of outside inputs.

This is achieved through three basic, simple techniques of (1) composting, (2) plant management, sometimes known as cover cropping, and (3) the ancient art of tillage.

Now you can easily imagine in a year like this [2006, with significant rainfall early in the growing season in northern California] why vegetation management would be so critical, because you can imagine with the amount of rainfall that we've had how much leaching there would be. If you have bare ground at this time of the year there's going to be a tremendous amount of leaching and erosion. So that's the two ways that you lose nutrients. Nutrients are lost on a horizontal plane through erosion and on a vertical plane through leaching. So plant cover becomes a really important part of your management. If you take these things seriously and really manage to the highest degree they will make you a much better farmer.

Second, [in biodynamics we strive] to create a self-regulating organism. The idea behind biodynamics is that an estate, a piece of property, takes on the living qualities of an organism. And all organisms have the ability to self-regulate. They have a rhythmic system that regulates between extremes. We achieve this through biological diversity so that you create a landscape ecology that provides the basis for a predator/prey relationship and that provides the regulatory pest and disease management.

Now, you all know that it's impossible to achieve this without any intervention, but what I'm saying is that through biological controls you can have sufficient level of suppression of pests and disease that you will not have to step outside of the threshold of nature with artificial materials. That's the key thing. If your viticulture or your site is inferior in any way, biological controls will not give you the necessary level of protection that's needed. You can see that this is not something that's achieved overnight. This is a huge commitment in time that one makes.

One begins to realize that the development of an estate wine -- in the wine world, you know, we have a pretty good definition of what an estate is -- if you take such a piece of property, now [with biodynamics] we can add layers of life to it which lifts this estate into a living state that is conveyed through the wines.

Third, as you are all very well aware of, is the use of the biodynamic preparations. There are basically eight, two of which are field sprays, one is sprayed on the ground at the time when you begin to work the soil.

Thom Elkjer: Could you explain what a preparation is?

Alan York: I was hoping to avoid that.

Thom Elkjer: Just really briefly what a preparation is?

Alan York: If I must. Let me just go through the routine use of them first.

So two field sprays, one which is applied on the soil at the time of tillage, typically in the afternoon of the day, and this is to work with the conversion of organic matter into humus. Because, as you know, through the practices of agriculture organic matter is generally oxidized and it is therefore lost. It must be replaced. Organic matter plays a critical role, not only in the retention of nutrients, but also in giving the soil its living qualities and this wonderful thing that we call porosity. And porosity is that which when you step on the ground or when a tractor moves across the ground it has the qualities of a sponge. And what happens with a sponge when you squeeze it as hard as you can and you let go? It comes back to its original state. So this allows the earth to breathe. All living organisms must breathe.

The other is a spray that is applied on the foliage of the plant, which is used to aid in photosynthesis and qualities of light. I have a question for you. How important in a year like this do you think that is? It might be a useful tool this year. And it is to aid in the flowering and fruiting processes within a plant. Plants can develop along two basic lines. One line is that it grows and reproduces. And this is what we call "weeds." The other is that it grows, flowers, and fruits. And this is along the lines of culture. We have had as much to do with these plants as nature has.

So this enhancement of the flowering and the fruiting and the whole qualitative pole that comes with that is aided by this preparation. And then there are six that go in the compost itself directly. And they are there to aid in the nutrient stability and availability of nutrients to the plant in a way that the plant can take them up as the environment dictates its growth.

Now, these are made from all substances from nature. They are made from minerals, plants, and animal parts, and they are guided through a rhythmic process that occurs between the relationship of the sun and the earth. And so they come from our understanding of this dynamic that happens between the earth as a material center governed by the forces of gravity and the sun and solar system as an energetic source governed by the forces of levity. We witness this every year when the sun and the days become longer than nights, and the plants defy gravity and grow towards the sun.

Fourth and last, but not least by any means, is a holistic system of growing. Holistic is -- there are many definitions for it, but in this context it means that no part is more important than any other part and that you do not get to pick and choose which parts you like and which parts you don't like.

Thom Elkjer: Sort of like your family, you're stuck with them all.

Alan York: That's exactly what it's like. And in that situation you always wonder "How in the world did I end up in this situation?"

[Laughter.]

So it is very important in biodynamics that one has this idea of what holism is, that the biodynamic farm is a microcosm of the macrocosm and that all that is outside of it in nature is inside it in our organization.

Now, it also means that biodynamics, as you can tell from this very short description, is much more than just the spraying of the preparations in a monoculture of grapes. We must never allow biodynamics to be defined by the spraying of the preparations in a monoculture of any plants. This is the most diluted form that exists. And although you may get some short-term results, in the long-term you will find it grossly inadequate.

So what I hope today is that we will be able to, through our discussion, maybe open a new door in our access to nature. And that going through that door we can have an experience of the authenticity of our efforts in working with nature expressed through the wines. So thank you all very much for coming. How'd I do, Thom, time-wise?

Thom Elkjer: Great. But Alan's not leaving the stage. So give him a hand.

[Applause.]

And one of the things that you understand when you read the lectures of Steiner and he's talking to the farmers, is that all of the preparations are basically liquid with very small amounts of essential ingredients. And those essential elements are all growing in the fields and pastures and gardens already. They're in the farms. They're there already. The preparations come from the place itself.

Conversely, the problems that he alludes to the farmers having stem from the introduction of elements and minerals from outside the farms, in concentrations that nature would never allow. As Alan just explained, that approach can produce good short-term results, but bad long-term results.