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Photos © Dave Mountjoy

The Healing Life of Cows

How can a humble herd of cows turn tragedy into healing?

Dave Mountjoy tells his story.

Here on our farm in the foothills of the French Pyrenean mountains, we feel we've discovered a different way in which our cows and all other forms of livestock might come to be valued.

The farm was bought in the spring of 2014, after nearly two years of almost frantic searching for the 'right' piece of land. A beautiful natural landscape, a country lane providing easy access yet with minimum traffic and a local town just 8km (5 miles) away whose weekly market was full of organic producers and artisan crafts and clothes convinced us this was finally the place we had been looking for.

In the first 18 months after buying the farm, our vision of what might be developed on the land seemed to chop and change every week. There were plans for a yurt camping business, a herb nursery and garden run on permaculture principles and a bushcraft school to be installed in the woodland. We were so full of enthusiasm for what we might create on the land that at times, the vital ingredient of clear, well-grounded practical thinking went straight out the window.

Listen to the Land

Our advice nowadays to anyone finding their own little piece of green paradise is first and foremost to invest the time in simply learning to listen to the land. Stop for a while, enjoy being on the land, see and feel what it suggests and how that might match with what plans and visions you arrived with.

In our case, all of our initial plans and visions, some of which we spent a lot of money on trying to get up and running, gradually fell by the wayside. When we eventually realised the importance of listening, not as a romantic ideal but as a vitally practical necessity, things began to fall into place. We also learned that however clear and well thought out your plans may appear to be, life itself sometimes intervenes to ensure that things go in a different direction altogether.

The cows, for example, have become the driving force of almost all that happens on the farm. We bought the first heifers in the winter of 2015. This was before we knew that the house (the previous owners' bioclimatic home) would be offered to us and our plan was to convert one of the barns

The cows' presence and stillness enabled me to come to a finer appreciation of what quietness might actually be.

that were included when we bought the land, into a home. We had been told that farmers are looked on in a favourable light in such circumstances. I was raised on my Mum's family farm and therefore, the idea of having a few cows around as a means to getting the building permission seemed quite straightforward. At the time, they were seen as a means to an end, a stepping-stone to the dream home.

The value of a cow is normally expressed in terms of kilograms of meat or litres of milk. The final valuation or estimation (particularly in intensive livestock units) is often preceded by a whole array of production cost calculations, such as: water and food costs; veterinary bills; abattoir and butchery costs; machinery maintenance and the cost of purchasing the animal if not bred on the farm and so on.

Wildlife Haven

We breed the Galloway and the locally native Casta cattle on 40 hectares (100 acres) of meadow and mixed woodland. The farm has been organic for over 25 years and we sit in the midst of three other organic farms, making the surrounding landscape a haven for wildlife and biodiversity.

Here in France, the official title for an agricultural activity is '*Exploitation Agricole*'. That makes me an '*Exploitant Agricole*'. The phrases need no real explaining or translation. The emphasis is on exploitation; on production in terms of meat or milk. This of course is the accepted norm. When locals ask whether the cows are raised for *viande* or *lait*, well, their questions simply reflect the way in which these animals are typically seen.

But what other possible way can we hope to place a value on these animals, if not for their meat or milk?

A Change of Perspective

It was in the middle of October 2015 that my beloved younger brother committed suicide. Corky as we called him, was supposed to be visiting us on the farm three days later, yet it just wasn't meant to be.

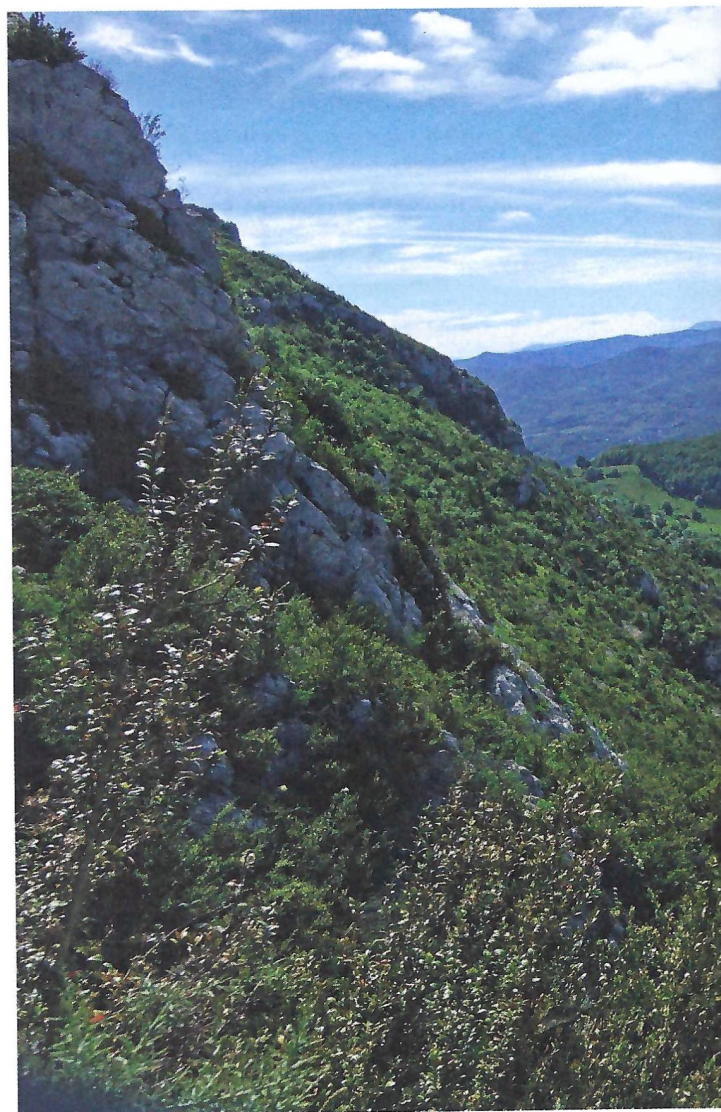
Five weeks later, on returning from the family home in Worcestershire, I went straight to the wooded hillside where the cows had been in our absence. As I called out to them, I heard them respond and eventually saw their heads coming out of the woodland edge, tears came to the eyes and for a moment, all the grief just melted away.

Over the coming weeks, as the twice-daily round of feeding the cows began, I found myself becoming ever more grateful just to be in the presence of the young females we had at the time. I was able to witness less identification with the pain surrounding my brother's death.

The cows were (and still are) fed by hand, as the farm is run without a tractor. Forking the hay into the round feeder meant that I was right in there amongst them, absorbing their moods, their ways and their solid presence. I regularly began to slip into a deep sense of quietness. During these

periods, thinking seemed to slow down and often come to a complete stop. The grieving stopped too, naturally and without any effort at all. Quite suddenly came acceptance of the whole event surrounding my brother and at the time, I could only look to the cows for an explanation.

It became clear during these moments with the cows that they already existed in this deep quietness – that for them that state is the normal way of things. Their presence and stillness enabled me to come to a finer appreciation of what quietness might actually be, for they showed me that it isn't something one can attain, but is in fact the very fabric of life itself. They helped me see that it is the one sole constant in what we think of as our lives. It simply is, free of all attempts of explanation or identification.



Nairn (the calf) with the author's son Gabi

The magnificent and peaceful views from the farm in the foothills of the French Pyrenean mountains





The author giving the first heifers salt by hand

Quiet Mind

As the relationships with the cows developed and the quietness deepened in being with them, their purity and no-mind state began to act as a mirror for me. On going to see them, it suddenly became obvious that they were bouncing straight back whatever it was, emotionally-speaking, that I had carried to them. This was particularly so with regard to the local French breed that we have on the farm, the Casta.

When one of them shook its head somewhat threateningly, or refused to let me approach, I began to see that through their incredible sensitivity, they were simply telling me that I was identifying with an anger or fear that served to pull me out of the quietness.

Supporting me in this way then, the cows have helped me to acknowledge what it might mean to be quiet. It is an ongoing process.

Some projects that seem designed by life to help us understand our true nature as human beings, are often inspired in their conception by deeply painful events. The retreats that we now hold on the farm are our way of saying thank you to the cows and ultimately, to life itself, for the support given following my brother's death. Out of this sense of gratitude came a simple wish to share what had happened with the cows with others and perhaps prevent another suicide.

How could we have possibly known that the cows would lead us to this, that they would lead us to feel as if a rich seam of gold had been discovered, an inexhaustible source of wealth that could enrich the lives of any who came into contact with them and landscape.

And what of this need to value? Is it possible that on some farms, in some projects, farm animals may come to be raised not for their meat or milk, but simply for the therapeutic effect they can inspire? That they can be valued not as a unit to be consumed, but as a source of inspiration and well being, is for us a hopeful vision of the future, a glimpse of how humanity can discover another aspect of sustainability and perhaps the real meaning of self-sufficiency.

From March to November, the farm is open to guests for five day retreats. Silent walks in a stunningly beautiful landscape, sitting quietly with the cows and supportive activities such as yoga, all combine to help us acknowledge that this quietness is nothing but our true natural state and condition.

www.beingwithcows.com

Dave Mountjoy grew up in the countryside of west Worcestershire, spending most of his free time on his mum's family farm. He now lives with his wife and two young sons on their organic farm in the foothills of the French Pyrenees.