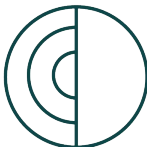


Episode 1 Transcript - Rooted Wisdom



CASTANEA
FELLOWSHIP

COMMUNITY. POWER. JUSTICE.

0:00:35.8 Aileen: Hi there, I'm Aileen, welcome to my kitchen. I just finished preparing pan-charred asparagus with garlic and lemon. So asparagus isn't something I grew up eating, it's something I always associated with "high-end restaurants" and exclusive dining, but when I first learned the history of asparagus in California and the Sacramento river delta, which is nearby where I live, it opened my eyes to the deep connections of crops like these with migrant Filipinos and people of colour, this told me that behind a crop like asparagus is a whole story of the soil and people who fought for justice in the past, and present. The freshness of this dish makes me think about our living histories in food, which brings me to a topic that we're gonna learn about today, the relationships and values shaped from the farm to our plates, so I brought together two leaders with deep wisdom on this topic. Leonard Diggs is a peaceful farmer working to share his experiences with current and future generations of gardeners and farmers. Emily Moose is a sustainable farming promoter who works to empower sustainable solutions in food and farming. Settle in and enjoy the conversation.

0:01:50.4 Aileen: Hello, Leonard and Emily. Welcome and thank you so much for taking time to gather here today. When I think about relationships and values that are connecting farm to plate, a conversation between the two of you could just provide so many first-hand stories and truth about what that is and what that feels like. And before we jump in, I want to center our minds with this question. What is growing in your yard or your garden that you are feeling particularly connected to, and Leonard can I invite you to kick us off.

0:02:21.1 Leonard Diggs: So many plants, it's hard to choose, but the seasonal preference for me is the citrus, we have about three lemon trees and two of them are older and they're blooming, and I love seeing the blooms plus a few of the citrus that have already set and a few that are ready to set. Special time of year to see that.

0:02:40.3 Aileen: And Emily, tell what's growing.

0:02:42.1 Emily Moose: This isn't in my yard, but there's a creek down behind our house, and on the way down to the creek, there's this patch of trout lilies, and I don't know if you've ever seen a trout lily, but it is a beautiful flower and the leaf looks like this kind of trippy looking purple and green leaf that looks like a trout's back, and when you look at 'Emily, you're almost not quite sure... I feel like you might be... I don't know, about to faint or something, or just seeing something that is in another dimension, and it is just one of the most beautiful leaves I've ever seen, and there's these bright tiny little yellow lily flowers out of each, two sets of leaves. So that's a flower I look forward to every spring, that's when I know spring's on the way.

0:03:24.3 Aileen: Thanks for painting that for both of us, Emily, I'm gonna have to look for the trout lily.

0:03:28.4 Emily: I'll send you a picture.

0:03:28.5 Aileen: Thanks for taking us to a psychedelic place. So between the two of you, you're farmer Leonard, and you're a sustainable farm promoter, Emily. And both of you have these close relationships with soil and with people, and I wanna invite you to tell us about those early moments that you personally started that have shaped your deeper relationship with seeds and with soil. And what took you along this work early on?

0:03:50.3 Emily: I always had a garden growing up, my family, we always had tomatoes, corn, whatever was easy to grow in a North Carolina garden, and so I always grew up connected and knowing where food comes from. Some of the earliest memories I have of agriculture and farming are visiting folks in my family who farmed; my mom's cousin raised cows in Virginia, my dad's cousin raised hogs also in Virginia, and so I've always respected the relationship between people and animals and the land and have not taken that for granted. I wanted to be a veterinarian when I... One of my first career I was gonna be a veterinarian or an artist or a writer, and somehow that still flows into what I do now. And so I've spent many years in production in vegetables and small-scale livestock and then I started working for A Greener World over a decade ago. And my role now is to connect farmers and consumers around principles of sustainable production that are verified and that are transparent, so that people can be sure about the products that they're buying and they know, hey, this really is having a positive impact on the world, and farmers are able to get credit for those practices. They are able to get the appreciation they deserve for using amazing practices.

0:05:11.7 Aileen: Thank you, Emily, for bringing us to those early moments 'cause that's such a formative place, and I know that Leonard, you've also taken a path that spanned various parts of the food system, and we'd love to hear you share your take on some early moments that have shaped you.

0:05:27.4 Leonard: Yeah, my first garden experience was in college, and I'll share that in a minute, but I'm just thinking about my experiences that are related. We lived across the street from a cannery, and in the summertime, the air was filled with the smell of tomatoes, and I could ride my bike out to the country and look at those tomatoes actually growing in acres and acres of the fields not too far from my house, so I didn't get a direct experience with those. It was more of sensory experience with my eyes and with my nose. Then when I got to college, I lived in a house where we had about a two-acre garden just outside of the house, and we grew the vegetables that we ate in the house, we also went and gleaned a lot of fruit. We went and gleaned apricots from winters, which was not too far. Sometimes we'd ride our bikes out there and go get them, so my experience of actually growing the food that we ate was really special. I'd never had that before, and then cooking it, we all had cook days and we'd team up two of us at a time to cook the meal for that night. So the combination of harvesting direct from the garden, bringing it into the house and cooking it up just resonated with my spirit. And that's what got me on the path that I'm on.

0:06:51.5 Aileen: I love how both of you have been invoking these really sensory memories, taste, smell, those connections, and is there a memory that you have, whether it's a favourite time on the farm, or some relationship of a meal shared that you would want to share that kind of illustrates these connections from seed to plate.

0:07:12.0 Leonard: I think the meals that I've had where we actually went out together with the bowl that was going to be the salad mix bowl, and the house that I lived in, we had great potters, and so we would have these huge beautiful bowls that we'd take out to the garden and we'd fill with things like the borage flowers and the nasturtium flowers, and then lettuce is put right in directly into the bowl, and by the time we had grazed all the way through the garden, we'd filled the bowl up and brought it into the kitchen, and that salad was the most special salad.

0:07:51.0 Aileen: I love that. Emily.

0:07:51.7 Emily: Yeah, no, I'm going to the total opposite end of the food pyramid or table. [chuckle] When you first asked that question, the first meal I thought about was it was a gathering that we had with a cooperative of farmers that we certify in the eastern part of the state, and this is a group, a very diverse group of pasture-based certified animal welfare-approved hog farmers, it's an amazing group of people. Many of them have been farming this way since before industrial production in their families, and so it's a really interesting mix of folks who have a long tradition of sustainable pasture-based hog production, and we had a... It was a barbecue, just a regular old barbecue, which we do a lot in North Carolina, and I just remember just the flavour of that pork, this was just some of the best barbecue I've ever had, if not the best barbecue. And this is a barbecue state, so much so that we have an ongoing feud about which type of barbecue sauce is the best, is it East versus West, so that was a very memorable meal.

0:08:56.5 Aileen: We're living in a time where there are so many choices in a lot of ways, and definitions around what to eat, how to eat, and I'm just curious, do you both personally eat meat, why or why not? And if I can add another part to that question is, what do you wish more people understand or knew about the connections of meat to farming in the land, from your own vantage points? Leonard, taking us from your borage gathering, grazing of a salad, I would love to hear your take on that first.

0:09:28.4 Leonard: It's funny because at that stage in my life, I was a vegetarian, and we tease sometimes and say, chickens are vegetables, right? Especially there were those times during the year when there was time to eat turkey and it was like, Well, you could eat a little turkey probably, but I was a vegetarian for about 20 years. And it wasn't until I was on a farm where we had our own cattle and our own sheep that I started eating meat again because one of the main reasons that I didn't eat meat wasn't because of taking of the life, it was the raising of the life and the taking care of the animals and feeling that there was a way to maintain that relationship in a healthy way. And take responsibility for the taking of the life, and once I had total responsibility for that, I didn't have a reason not to, and so started eating our own lamb and our own beef. And that was a completely different experience, and I really appreciated it. The skew though for me is that when I opened that door, it was like, okay, I can eat meat, but then going out to a restaurant and eating meat is a totally different experience and it didn't quite feel the same.

0:10:51.0 Aileen: Can you share a little bit more about that, Leonard?

0:10:52.1 Leonard: Well, because I wasn't always sure where the meat came from and the ethics behind it, and the quality of the meat, and in many places that I ate, I knew that the meat quality probably wasn't good. I could go to some high-end fancy restaurants that I knew really were careful about where they sourced their meat and how they sourced their meat, but you go out to have a burrito with grilled chicken, you don't know what's in there. So that's the kind of ambivalence and hypocrisy I kind of felt as I wove back and forth between those two worlds, and yet I also realize that so many of us are not fortunate enough to be able to grow our own food, and that I had that privilege and the privilege of being able to be discerning and somewhat a little maybe snobby and arrogant about it.

0:11:39.8 Aileen: I wanna pull out something that you shared when you talked about being vegetarian and how chickens could be meat, one conversation that's often floated up growing up as

a Philippine-American is, Oh. Okay, so you're vegetarian, but you can totally eat chicken and fish, right? 'Cause that's our vegetables. So I feel like there might be a whole line of ways that people are relating in different ways, including from different cultures, so it's complex and it's this ongoing conversation, but when you were sharing Leonard just now about how there's this difference in having a personal relationship to meat and then also going to a restaurant and the uncertainties that can come about the source or the story or the life behind it, and I feel like Emily you have so much to share in this area based on your work and your approach, but I wanna turn that question to you too. Your own relationship to meat, and what are things that you wish more people understood about the story?

0:12:27.8 Emily: So I do eat meat, I have been vegetarian at times in my life, but I've... Just like Leonard, I think it was largely because I didn't know that there was another way to raise animals, and the way that I saw most available was something that I wasn't comfortable with and so as I grew older and as I grew more aware and got more in touch with other methods, I was able to feel comfortable and to respect that full circle. And I think it's important to say people should eat whatever diet best suits them. I don't pass judgment on anyone's dietary choices, but when the stated reason for not eating meat is either sustainability or animal welfare, I think that there's a discussion to be had there because animals are an incredibly important part of sustainable agriculture, essential.

0:13:19.8 Emily: And so to say, well, I don't like how animals are raised, so I'm gonna give up meat, to me that's like saying, well, I don't like this one story in a book I read, and so I'm gonna ban books. It's just one approach. And depending on how we as a society encourage different approaches that can change the impacts on the ground, and so that's the reason that we do what we do is to bring back that transparency that Leonard was talking about when you go into a restaurant and you want to know, okay, how was this pig raised, how was this cow raised, what kind of life did the chicken have? Then you can make an informed choice about what you are supporting with your food dollar and what you're putting into your body.

0:14:05.7 Aileen: It sounds like there's a lot of work to be done around the storytelling, the story sharing, and also just the education piece on so many levels. So I wanna ask you, in all your years of working on farms, collaborating with producers and working in education, what do you see is the connections with social justice and how do you message that?

0:14:26.3 Emily: Yeah, food and social justice are intimately intertwined and they always have been in a large part because if you control who is producing food and how it's done, you control pretty much every aspect of life. Food has an incredible impact on how we treat each other as people, and I think we saw, especially during this pandemic, how we as a society completely take for granted the people behind our food, and we expect, as Americans anyway, expect cheap food and expect to not have to think about it. And when we do have to think about it, it's usually in the context of, how can I get mine? It's not necessarily in how can we make this system work better for everyone. So, I do think that there was an increased interest in looking at the whole system and an increased appreciation for what it takes to get food to the plate, and I'm hopeful that that remains even as things settle back into some sort of routine. We're not going back to the way things were before. There is no going back, but there is opportunity to rebuild in more sustainable ways. And oh my God, the natural foods industry, it's rife with virtue signalling, it's almost like a hobby in natural foods. It's important to be aware of when demand or solutions or whatever is actually just looking like it's doing good versus when it's actually doing good.

0:16:00.9 Aileen: Leonard. What does this spark for you?

0:16:03.7 Leonard: So many things. What was just said about what looks good and versus what is good is a deep conversation in terms of so many of the choices that we make, because we're herd animals, we tend to flock towards whatever the most important trendy thing is and follow our group mentality about that. I think that tendency to group up to create cliques, to create our own clubs is not a very healthy approach to many things that we do because it's so exclusive. But what I was thinking about values and social justice is that it starts with what's justice? What's just? It's not just some social justice issue, it's what's just, what's fair? And we have so much indifference to things and we have so much greed that we are able to create systems that stem from that. They stem from the indifference and the greed, and they stem from intolerance, so when you combine indifference, intolerance and greed, you end up spinning off.

0:17:11.7 Leonard: I was remembering the chickens that I've seen, the meat birds that we've grown on farms that I've been on, and if you take meat birds that are part of the industry, that are the predominant breeds that are being grown, and you see how they grow out with these large breasts, and their breasts are so large to meet what's considered to be the demand that they can't even stand up. They fall over and when you try to raise them with ecological principles and having them be outside more, having them move around onto new grass, it's really hard to do that with chickens that can't walk because their breasts are making them fall over. And why did we start doing that? So that we could sell more breasts in the marketplace? So, there are all kinds of divergent realities that are created when you let greed take place and indifference take place. So social justice starts with having a set of values as a touchstone that allow you to make better choices.

0:18:17.0 Mark Winston Griffith: Peace y'all. I'm Mark Winston Griffith, an alumnus of the Castanea Fellowship program. As the executive director of the Brooklyn movement center, I was looking for a community of peers who also saw a world where food truly became a source of health, equity and well-being for all. Castanea brought those very leaders together and invested in us to make it happen. Since then, I've collaborated with a cadre of Castanea fellows on a national initiative to hold philanthropy accountable, and have tapped into game-changing support for my food systems work here in Central Brooklyn. So I'm looking forward to what's ahead in my professional as well as my personal journey along with the following impact I know my friends from the program will continue to make. Learn how Castanea can support your journey. Visit castaneafellowship.org, that's C-A-S-T-A-N-E-A-F-E-L-L-O-W-S-H-I-P dot org.

0:19:12.4 Aileen: It's just about relationship, really remembering relationship and breaking down these exclusionary practices and the divisions or the connections that sometimes are hard to see for some folks. And I'm wondering what's your take on how we can get to a healthier place? We've come through an incredibly difficult time when maybe some of these connections are more visible in the mainstream level, we'd love your take on how are we gonna get to a healthier place if there's no going back. What do you see as moving forward?

0:19:43.8 Emily: That's a big question, and it is the challenge, our health and diet-related disease, these are huge factors in how our lives play out. And I think one aspect of it that really resonates with me is really looking at the full cost of the food that we eat, and looking at all the externalities and looking beyond the sticker price because we as a society and our future generations are

subsidizing that cheap price. And so it also needs to come into context with a larger conversation about who can afford what food and how we were talking earlier about, I think Leonard, you mentioned about being a premium or sort of a shi-shi type thing, natural foods, sustainable foods, organic foods, and it has been that way because of these externalized costs that are being borne by everyone. So, I do think we have to look at health in a holistic context, not just in a food pyramid, but in a complete circle about making sure that good food that doesn't wreck your body and wreck the planet is a right and not a privilege.

0:20:52.6 Aileen: I love that Emily, seeing a circle instead of a pyramid, 'cause pyramids are about hierarchies too. But Leonard, how about for you? What's coming up for you?

0:21:05.2 Leonard: So I think one of the things that we do need to return to, and it's going back way back before COVID, we're losing our relationships. I was just talking with some folks who were in Montana by chance yesterday, and they were wanting to have conversations with us in regards to what we could do to increase opportunities for farmers, and it got into all kinds of different corners, and what they said is that on a lot of farms in their area, when a farmer goes out of business an absentee landowner moves into place instead, and they don't have any connection with the community, they don't have any connections with their neighbours. And one of them has said, what if we would have gone over to that farm before they went out of business and sat down at the kitchen table and had a coffee with them and talked about how's it going and how are you doing? What are you struggling with? What can we help with? And sometimes those little interventions and the reason to be neighborly and part of a community make a difference. Maybe that farmer wouldn't have gone out of business and they would still be there to be part of the community.

0:22:13.1 Leonard: So I think going back to a time when we aren't indifferent about the suffering, we aren't indifferent about who's bearing the total cost of the system that we have, or part of the cost, what we see going on with field workers and the way that they have to live on the farms. The way they have to be exposed to the environment and the products that are being sprayed out on the farm, if we're indifferent to all of that in terms of how we get our food, there's a problem, and so I see it as the true value proposition. What is that true value, not the total cost, what are the ecosystem products, what are the ecosystem services and what's equal justice? Those are the things that I'm concerned about.

0:22:58.3 Aileen: I love that 'cause there's two sides of that coin, and because food has such an intimate impact, the way that we grow food and the way that we eat has such an impact on the planet, you can either do great damage or great good.

0:23:11.4 Aileen: For both of you. I know that you have families and you also work in places that span across different generations. I wanted to ask what is one way that you found yourself wanting to pass on the lineage of your work with a younger generation? These are incredibly complex stories. I'd love to learn from you, what have you found as a way to impart this knowledge on the next generation?

0:23:37.1 Leonard: It's interesting that there is a generational shift in regards to how to make that transfer. I find that the generation that I run into a lot these days, 20 to 30-year-olds would like to see a much more flattened hierarchy, and they wanna be able to have opportunities to be at the table and have a say and have leadership, and I think that's wonderful. The issue that comes up is how do

we share what we've already been doing, what's the history of what we've been doing, and how do we include that into the conversation, history and experience. And I am more focused now on how I can interact in ways that I can share my experience, my professional experience, but also our agricultural experience over eons.

0:24:31.8 Leonard: I like to express it oftentimes in, we've got a lot of mechanical advantage that people created taking a stick or taking a rock or taking a stick and leveraging a big boulder, and that physical approach to being able to use leverage is something that we've learned over thousands and thousands of years how to use mechanical advantage. And it doesn't need to be thrown away in order to reduce the amount of damage that we're doing to the soil, because we've used a lot of mechanical advantage to maybe damage the soil but let's not throw out mechanical advantage. It's sort of like what was said earlier about let's not throw out books. And I think we shouldn't throw out mechanical advantage when there's an opportunity to deploy it in maybe more sustainable ways. So, I'm very focused on how to share those things and not preach them, how to point out what's really essential so that it doesn't get lost because those things took a lot of people, a lot of lives, a lot of years to learn, and we shouldn't as humanity lose that.

0:25:40.2 Emily: I think in terms of connecting future generations, at least in the realms that I work, I think for the younger kids, just getting kids on a farm. I used to do a lot of farm tours with some of the firms that we certify, and just the look on a kid's face when they can actually touch a cow or see where an egg comes from, or there is a hunger for connection to food and animals and farming. And it doesn't go away at older ages too, we see a lot of interest in the generation you were talking about, the 20 to 30-year-old generation and people are so hungry for information about food. And it's just such a natural human thing to wanna be connected to the food that you eat, and the way that our society and economy is structured right now, it's very difficult to have that connection. And the disconnection not only benefits food processors and marketers and people slapping labels on packages that look really great and don't really do anything for people or the planet. So learning more about food and feeding that hunger, I think is a really great approach because people can dive as deep as they want, and there's information and visceral connection available.

0:26:55.2 Leonard: Yeah, I agree with that 100%. One other aspect I would add to that is, I think that young people need to get exposed to those experiences when they're in junior high school at the very latest, because they haven't already developed a self-image of themselves, they can experience it and feel it. And if it feels like it's something that resonates with them that they wanna do more with, that they wanna be involved with, whether it's natural science or ag science or working in those environments, then they're willing to pursue it, but if you wait until they're older in high school, or college, where they've already developed a self-image of themselves and they don't see themselves as doing that type of work or being involved in those types of things, then you can only just hope for good advocates. People who are gonna support those efforts that other people are doing. But I think we're at an urgent time when we need some of them to be excited about actually participating, and if we're gonna get them to participate, we need to get them exposed much younger where they can envision themselves being a part of that.

0:28:00.4 Aileen: I'm hearing a clear call, clear call there to really bring in that connection early on, and one thing I wanna reflect back to both of you is we began this conversation from a visceral place with these early memories, and I feel like you've gone back there, so I wanna thank you for building those bridges. This hunger for connection that you're finding from people really meets the

need that we're at right now, this urgent need to mend relationships. And so I know we're coming to the close of our conversation, but I want to just express so much gratitude to both of you for taking the time to impart these words from your own places, and want to invite you to share closing thoughts for the audience. What's some advice that either of you would want to share on one thing that anyone can do, that can make a huge difference in our own local communities and homes?

0:28:51.5 Emily: I would say don't underestimate your own impact and empower yourself to be a part of the solution, because our current industrial food system, it sacrifices health, it sacrifices sustainability, animal welfare, our planet, and this is all for the profit of the few at the expense of everyone else. And this is not gonna fix itself and it's gonna take all of us. So here are a few things that you can do. One, I would say reward real change. So when you're shopping, if you're paying anything extra for food, if you are making decisions based on food labels that you expect to deliver change, make sure that change is actually happening. And you can know your labels, we've got some great resources on our website of a guide called Food Labels Exposed that goes through common foods and label claims and tells you exactly what they mean, so you can know what labels to trust. Or you can talk to your friends and family about why sustainable food is important, what the impacts of food are on our society, whether it's routine antibiotics, whether it's environmental impacts, the social impact.

0:29:53.0 Emily: You can demand better food choices, so you have a great deal of power as someone who may potentially buy food from someone about what type of food is offered. And so make sure that you're making your values known, where you're buying food. Thank those who are doing the right thing. So if you see a farm that is using amazing practices, we have so many awesome farms on our website that we certify whether their grass-fed, whether they're animal welfare approved, non-GMO, whatever. So if you see folks that are doing amazing things, thank them and let them know that you appreciate that, and the restaurants or stores or farmers markets they're offering their products, just let them know that you are grateful for that and you can support organisations that are making change. So the final thing I would say is that we really do all have the power to make a difference here, and we don't have time to waste.

0:30:44.3 Leonard: I'll second your statement and leave it all, I think we need to all reduce the amount of indifference that I talked about earlier that we have in our lives and intolerance. Those two go hand in hand, that we have to be so much more tolerant of each other. And not only the obvious tolerances of stark differences of culture, race, gender, but the subtle differences, just the quirkiness that we have each of us as individuals and how we sometimes get silly in our way of expecting to have cookie cutter type individuals. Celebrate diversity in every way, celebrate the differences that we all bring to the table and the quirkiness that we bring to the table. Eliminate as much greed as you can from your life, because it's this greed that is driving us and we've got to start there and learn what is enough and reset the scale so that there is an equitable distribution of the resources that we all need on this planet. And then I would counter balance that with saying, increase the amount of hope that you have, it can be very, pretty disheartening.

0:31:56.7 Leonard: I understand how disheartening it can be when you look around and you feel and you see what is going on in our world and what's been going on, but I think it's important to find that North Star, that thing that you can look towards that allows you to maintain your hope and your strength and lengthens your dreams, because as Frances Moore Lappe said many, many years ago when I was young and helped me buoy up my spirit, she says If you have a dream that you can

see being completed in your lifetime, it's too small. You need to really have a longer view of what it is, and that the building blocks that are being built by you and your friends and family and colleagues are gonna help the next gen. Maintain it forward. I think that would be the other thing I would say, we have that phrase, pay it forward, but I think we gotta maintain it forward. We gotta start taking care of what we have and knowing that if we maintain it, it's going to be there later for other folks to use.

0:32:58.7 Leonard: Pay the total cost of stewardship, and I've flipped that too, in saying total cost of stewardship instead of the total cost of ownership. Ownership is not always the solution here, but stewardship is always the solution, we have to find ways to steward. Whatever you produce in the environment is an ecosystem product, whatever you can do to take care of the environment is an ecosystem service and equal justice is merited out everywhere, and it's something that you have to find a touchstone that allows you to determine where justice lies in every situation. It's not always clear, but we have to work on that, and that's through values and through relationships with each other. We have to have relationships with each other that are developed over time, so that we trust each other and respect each other, and then we can work together on all the important organizational and movement issues of our time.

castaneafellowship.org
info@castaneafellowship.org

©2021 Castanea Fellowship

Castanea Fellowship is a 501(c)3 fiscally sponsored by the Earth Island Institute.

The Castanea Fellowship is not affiliated with the Castanea Foundation, though we are avid supporters of their inspirational work.