

Keynote

Aloha —

My name is Michelle Galimba and along with my family and employees, I operate Kuahiwi Ranch in Ka'u on Hawaii island. We are a cattle ranch that provides beef for local restaurants and markets throughout Hawai'i. We have been in business since 1993 and have been providing beef to local markets since 2007.

I am probably the only rancher in the world with a doctorate in comparative literature, - admittedly a strange combination - a bit of a paradox, which is an idea that I will return to later. However it is less of a contradiction than you might think. Literature is about the deep stories that we tell ourselves, about the paradigms by which we structure our understanding of the world we live in. These deep stories are the framework by which we tell ourselves why we do what we do.

Agriculture is one of those deep stories that we live within, It is a story that we make and a set of practices and a way of life.

It is also at the economic foundation of our civilization. As the Welsh farmer and fierce blogger Patrick Noble says:

“Today, in spite of the marvels of aviation; of the internet and so on, we remain an agriculture.”

Agriculture harnesses nature to provide for our most fundamental need, the need to eat, and in doing so provides the foundation for all of our other accomplishments.

Those of us in agriculture, in our different ways, construct stories in the language of animacy, the language of life. These stories that we construct and live everyday, year after year, these stories are what we call farms and ranches, orchards and fishponds. The literal meaning of poetry in Greek is “to make.” Those of us in agriculture are poets as much as we are businesspeople and scientists - we are makers in the language of life.

Making agricultural stories is a tradition that I was born into and that I have also chosen. I will tell you one of the origin stories of our ranch.

My family started Kuahiwi Ranch in the summer of 1993 with one cow. She was a rather wild black cow. We hauled her in our little trailer up the side of the mountain where we had just finished fencing up a 25 acre pasture, a former sugar cane field, the first of many that we would fence to make up the core of our ranch. It was an overcast afternoon. The guinea grass in the pasture was dark green and very tall, at least eight feet tall. My brother Guy backed up the trailer to the pasture gate that we had painted blue. We opened up the trailer door and the black cow ran straight into that tall grass. We didn't see her again for months. Not a very promising start!

That story, like most origin stories, is a little over-dramatic. I grew up around cattle on the dairies and ranches where my father worked. We always had our own backyard animals as well. So she wasn't our first cow by a long shot, just the first cow that belonged to our ranch as a business.

Our ranch slowly grew until we now have a herd of about 3000 head of cattle, and produce half a million pounds of beef per year for the local market in Hawaii. The reason that I wanted to tell you that story was to point out how ambiguous that beginning was. One wild cow, one pasture salvaged from the wreckage of the great sugarcane economy. I wanted to point out how innovation doesn't have to be about using the latest gadgets; it can be as simple a thing as letting a cow out of a trailer one day. And then carrying on, bringing in new ideas, learning new skills, constructing and making for twenty-five more years.

What fascinates me about ranching - and agriculture in general - is that it is a multi-species collaboration. That is the first adaptation that I would like to highlight: **collaboration**. As Ursula K. Le Guin, one of my favorite writers says:

To use the world well, to be able to stop wasting it and our time in it, we need to relearn our being in it. Skill in living, awareness of belonging to the world, delight in being part of the world, always tends to involve knowing our kinship as animals with animals.

To be skillful as a pastoralist, which is say, as a rancher, you must collaborate with your domesticated animals - in my case, your cattle, horses and dogs; you must collaborate with the grasses and trees on the ranch and your soil flora and fauna; **x** you must collaborate with the forest-watershed, you must even collaborate with the undomesticated, feral or invasive animals and plants - your weeds and wild pigs, your butterflies and two-lined spittlebugs. You need to know them, know their ways, and how to respond to them.

Agriculture is a very intimate zone between nature and culture, between human and nonhuman. Intimate to the point of being quite often uncomfortable and even dangerous, and not just on a physical level. You are dealing with life and death, with eating and being eaten, on a daily basis.

Agriculture is a hinge vocation and we in agriculture act as hinges and mediators - mediators between the human world and the natural world. And nature can be as small as the microbes in your cattle's amazing four-part rumen or as large as a ranch landscape or watershed - or the planetary climate.

To be skillful as a rancher you have to think with the landscape, with the many, many animate and inanimate beings on the landscape. Think with them and work with them. As the Native American ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer says:

"The animacy of the world is something that we already know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction - not just for Native peoples but for everyone."

Ranching, for me, is one way to revive and live this language of animacy, with all its sharp edges of life and death, and in all its mesmerizing beauty.

The district of Ka'u where I ranch is a very special place. It's a wild place. It's bigger than this entire island of Oahu but there's not a single stoplight or Starbucks in it. Instead of stores, highways, military bases, and hotels, we have what we used to call "archeology" but we now call "cultural resources," which is to say the powerful physical and spiritual presence of the past. The coastal pastures on our ranch are dotted with house-sites, caves, he'i'au, makahiki grounds, animal enclosures, petroglyphs, and other artifacts of all kinds intact on the landscape.

In Ka'u, the presence of the native Hawaiian past is a deep undercurrent that you don't have to be native by blood to experience. The presence of the past and the land itself, in all its wildness, evokes an elusive but distinct feeling of participating in something larger than ourselves. We have memories and stories and whispers on the wind. We are connected to what the Muskogee poet Joy Harjo called "the breathing beneath our breathing." This is something that we value deeply in Ka'u, this connection to the living presence of the land and ocean.

it is in the context that I would like to talk about another collaboration, this time between multiple (human) stakeholders

Our ranch is very much the collaborative endeavor of many different organizations and programs, public and private, that helped us to keep going and keep building the ranch over the years. The collaborative project that I would like

to highlight has to do with the intersection of conservation, culture, and agriculture, and about strengthening the special qualities of our landscape and our community. Our ranch recently had the opportunity to purchase a piece of land that we have been grazing for many years. As I mentioned before, it is common for ranch land in Ka'u to be rich in cultural resources and such is the case for this piece of land. We had the further opportunity to place this parcel under an agricultural conservation easement.

An agricultural conservation easement means that you dedicate your land to agriculture in perpetuity. Our ranch still owns the land but we have sold the development rights to a non-profit that agrees to steward the easement and verify - on an annual basis - that the easement is still being honored.

Conservation and Agricultural Easements are relatively unknown in Hawaii, but with the help of multiple community partners acting as a team, Conservation Easements can be a powerful way to support agriculture and protect important working farm lands. We have been fortunate to work with the Trust for Public Land who championed and facilitated the details of the deal, with funding support from the Freeman Foundation which has a special interest in helping farmers and ranchers here in Hawaii, and lastly with stewardship support from Ala Kahakai Trail Association who will be the primary holder of the conservation easement.

An agricultural conservation easement made sense for us by lessening the financial burden of the land purchase and by ensuring that the land will remain in agriculture which is something that we value as a family and that our Ka'u community values as well. The conservation easement also provides for non-profit stewardship of the archeological and cultural sites, so that we can do right by the cultural legacy that is present on our ranch. This agricultural conservation easement works on many levels: it lets us continue ranching and gives us secure land tenure so that we can implement the best possible practices for our land and soils; it relocalizes land ownership and helps us to provide food and employment for our local community; it protects the cultural resources of the place; and it protects the land itself, to be itself with minimal disturbance, in perpetuity.

In perpetuity means forever, so in drafting our conservation easement I've had to attempt to think about agriculture and land-use in terms of forever, and try to make practical decisions for that infinite timeline. Of course I don't have the brain power to forecast forever. Even trying to think forward a century is tough.

What will agriculture be like 100 years from now? 500 years from now?

One way of trying to think about it is the question my daughter taught me to ask: what does the land want? What kind of agriculture is right, not just for human interests, but for nature too, for the long run?

Another way is to ask: what do we want it to look like? What kind of agriculture do we want to shape in the next 100 years?

We are heading towards increasingly wicked problems associated with environmental limits. There is no question about that, it's the simplest kind of logic. Exponential growth meets finite planet.

Which brings me back to that idea of **paradox** that I talked about earlier: this co-existence of two seemingly incongruous things at once. Because working with paradox or as the philosopher Donna Haraway puts it "staying with the trouble" is going to be an important adaptive skill as we face these wicked problems on a global scale.

What will agriculture be like in 100 years? I don't know but I do know what I would like it to be, and that is: an ecological agriculture as part of an ecological civilization.

The anthropologist James C. Scott has written about the complex inter-relation between political systems and agricultural systems in Asia. Intensive grain cultivation such as rice, wheat, and corn support the classic centralized state with its taxes, bureaucracy, military, and concentration of power in cities. On the other hand, hill tribes and other decentralized groups often adopt an agriculture based on root crops and other plant species that are inconspicuous, perennial, and not easily taxed. The point is that the kind of agriculture that we create, in turn creates us and the kind of social and political systems that we live within.

Here in Hawaii, our political history is closely tied with agricultural systems. We are still in the midst of grappling with the legacy of the sugar-cane plantations.- an export-driven, highly extractive agriculture requiring immigrant labor from around the world. Many of us here trace at least part of our ancestry back to plantation immigrant laborers. At the moment, plantation agriculture has been replaced by the increasingly problematic tourism industry. We've gone from one sugar high to another. Which is why learning from indigenous agriculture is important because that was the last time Hawaii had an agriculture and economy that was sustainable for the long run - that was not a short term sugar high. The way forward towards an ecological agriculture and an ecological civilization can be informed by our past. That is one paradox.

The concept of an ecological civilization is, in itself, a bit of a paradox. Our economic systems assume infinite natural resources and our right to exploit them in order to achieve growth. Of course this planet does not have infinite resources, and part of the dissonance that we are experiencing comes from our inability to deal with that reality within our current economic and social paradigm. At the same time, civilization - this mode of organizing ourselves and working together on complex systems for the common good - this is a valuable skill that we humans have been working on for thousands of years. There have been many civilizations, some of them more ecologically sound than others. The one we happen to live within, is, as we are discovering, one of the more unsound ones. Highly successful, yes, but ecologically unsound.

And one of the keys to our success and our unsoundness is this story of economic growth that we tell ourselves over and over again. We must turn a critical eye on the pursuit of growth through ever increasing levels of resource extraction and consumption. It's not that growing is bad in itself. There are ways to "grow" that do not require increasing extraction and the short-sighted extermination of biodiversity, of life.

We in agriculture probably know more about sustainability and resource limits than any other sector - the Chinese developed and practiced a agriculture that supported a high civilization for 4000 years, and here in Hawaii, indigenous agriculture fed a large population within the strict resource limitations of these remote islands for well over a thousand years. In contrast, industrial civilization is running into terminal problems after less than two hundred years.

The paradox is that we must practice a resilient, re-localized, low-emission agriculture that is, at the same time, an agriculture that draws on and contributes to a global network of knowledge, technical skills, and best practices.

We must embrace technological innovations and data-driven tools, but also recover and value what is best in traditional and indigenous agriculture.

We must become re-encharmed by and passionately protective of the environment and its complex ecologies, but also be tough-minded, scientific, and pragmatic in evaluating the best courses of action at a global scale.

We must look at agriculture holistically, not just as the production of material goods at any cost, but as an activity that shapes us socially, culturally, and environmentally.

An ecological agriculture as part of an ecological civilization must work with these paradoxes, among many others.

Paradox can be a way of finding generative spaces to think and work towards more ecologically sound ways of living on this planet. Paradox can be a space of innovation and creativity.

We will need courage, a lot of courage, to face the often frightening contradictions of our times, the courage to turn fear and defensiveness into an embrace of paradox, to turn our anxiety into creativity, the courage to stay with the trouble.

Finally I would like to leave you with an idea that is both very exotic and very familiar. It is something that we probably have all experienced - but the word for it comes from the Yolngu people of North Australia as translated by the anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose. This word *bir'yun* can be translated as brilliance or shimmer.

Bir'yun is the shimmer, the brilliance, and the artists say, it is a kind of motion. Brilliance actually grabs you. Brilliance allows you, or brings you, into the experience of being part of a vibrant and vibrating world. When a painting reaches brilliance, for example, people say that it captures the eye much in the way that the eye is captured by sun glinting on water.

Or, in my case, by the waving of the tall grasses in the Kuehulepo wind of Ka'u.

If we do our job right as agriculturalists we get to be there when the brilliance or shimmer happens, we get to be a part of the poetry of the living world. The poetry of healthy soils, healthy animals, healthy communities, and a healthier environment.

Thank you very much for your time, and for being involved in agriculture.

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