

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



Farming for social justice with Leah Penniman

Jen Fisher (Jen): Food is a basic human need, but we can't all equally access it. Many who live in urban areas, often BIPOC communities, do not have access to the fresh produce that is so important to a healthy diet. How can we, as a society, tackle this inequity? An inclusive approach to sustainable farming, one that puts education, activism, and love at the forefront of agriculture may be the way forward. This is the WorkWell Podcast Series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, Chief Well-being Officer for Deloitte, and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

I'm here with Leah Penniman, a farmer, mother, a soil nerd, author, and food justice advocate. Leah is the cofounder of Soul Fire Farm, a BIPOC-centered community farm committed to ending racism and injustice in the food system.

So Leah, I want to start with a little bit about you. Can you tell our listeners a little bit about you and how you discovered that agriculture was your passion? Did you grow up in a farming community?

Leah Penniman (Leah): Oh, I absolutely did not grow up in a farming community. I think agriculture found me, rather than the other way around. I mean to some extent it was inevitable because my siblings and I had this really close intimate relationship with the natural world, stemming out of adversity. I mean we were the only brown kids in our school and we were relentlessly teased and excluded. So, we spent all our time in the forest. When I turned 16 and it was time to get a summer job and start saving for college, the job that hired me was on a farm. I will say that from the moment of hoeing a row of carrots to the smell of cilantro clinging to my hands at the end of Harvest Day, I just was so in love with that elegant simplicity of seed to harvest. That was 96 and I've been farming every season since then.

Jen: So, on this show, we focus on well-being and there are a lot of pieces that go into that, but one thing we know is that a nutritious diet is so important. So, can you talk to me a little bit about food deserts and injustice in the food system in the agriculture community?

Leah: Oh, such a big and important topic, right? Justice in the food system. I will say a lot of people give me side-eye when I talk about racism and injustice in the food system because we don't usually think of food as being connected to social justice. To be honest the foundations of this nation's food system are really rooted in stolen land and exploited labor. We have not shaken off that legacy. I mean the land that we grow on in this country right now is almost 98% white owned, which is more concentrated in the hands of one group than ever before. The people who grow our food are predominantly Latinx, Hispanic, and other people of color who aren't protected under the same labor laws as everybody else.

This real exploitation of land and labor has also made its way to the consumer side where, as you mentioned, the federal government terms certain neighborhoods that don't have supermarkets and have high poverty as food deserts. We've preferred the term "food apartheid" because it really is a human-created system, rather than some natural and inevitable force like a desert. There's a history of divestment and redlining and housing discrimination that leads to the fact that your zip code is a leading determiner of your life expectancy, your access to fresh food, even things like policing and education. So, the food system needs a complete overhaul in order to work for all people and to also work for the Earth.

Jen: Absolutely. So, I know that's actually a big part of your mission. At Soul Fire Farms, you do more than just grow food. So, can you tell us more about how you started the farm and what you hope to accomplish?

Leah: So, the creation of Soul Fire Farm started out a bit more humble than trying to fix the whole food system. It was really personal. My partner, Jonah, and I, we had two young children, Neshima and Emet. Emet was just born, Neshima was two, and we were living in one of these neighborhoods under food apartheid, called the South End in Albany, New York. Despite our many years of farming experience and college degrees and high motivation to feed our children fresh fruits and vegetables, it just was not an option. I mean there were no grocery stores, no farmers market. There wasn't even a bus line near our house to get to the supermarket. So, if you didn't have a car or a lot of money, this is before Blue Apron, you just couldn't get the food. We ended up walking over 2 miles to the nearest drop-off of fresh food through a CSA or Community-Supported Agriculture program one way and then piling all the vegetables on top of the kids in the stroller and going back down the hill. So, when our neighbors found out that we knew how to farm, they started half-jokingly chiding us to start the farm for the people and we didn't take it as a joke. We've been sort of thinking anyway that at some point we want to start a farm, but this seems like this crucial and pivotal moment where we could create something that would alleviate a bit of the strain on our neighbors and community members in the South End, who were also very much struggling to get fresh food for their children and their families. We purchased the land in 2006 and opened the farm in 2010 because it took that long to heal the soil and build a home and make the business viable. The very first program that we had, when we opened it 2010, was doorstep delivery of fresh food to our neighbors, and of course, things have expanded and diversified since then.

Jen: So, it's almost like you didn't have a choice?

Leah: Right. We were doing as it was needed, right?

Jen: Can you tell me more about how you accomplished that and what you do there to incorporate that into the work on the farm?

Leah: Oh, thanks for asking. Yeah, so we work in three main spheres. The first is the farm itself. So, we're on 80 acres of traditionally Mohican territory and we're growing fruits, vegetables, herbs, raising animals on pasture for eggs and meat, all using our Afro-indigenous ancestral practices that sequester carbon, increase biodiversity. Then we box up that food and we serve approximately 50 families on a weekly basis through this subscription program. In addition to that, the second sphere of our work is that we're a training farm. So, we have a mission to equip, fortify and inspire this next generation of black and brown farmers. In a non-pandemic year, that's mostly in person so, there's a couple thousand visitors here on the farm, mostly say for weeklong residential courses, but we also have season-long apprenticeships and day-long workshops, youth programs, and so forth in Spanish and in English. We've had to pivot some of that online, but we're doing our

best to have small groups outdoor only as well. The third sphere of our work is about systems change. It's really about mobilizing the public to see how important it is to treat farm workers fairly, to share the land, to make sure that everyone has access to culturally appropriate healthy food. That looks like educating about policy, educating about reparations, about the types of institutions we need to build in support to have localized food systems. It's very exciting because we have so many just incredible regional and national partners that we collaborate with on this systems change and have gotten the ear of all the Democratic presidential candidates who've have integrated some of our work into their platforms and very, very exciting momentum that I could not have imagined even a few years ago.

Jen: Well, thank you for that work that you do. It's important for all of us. So, you mentioned that you also do a lot of work with young people. How did you become passionate about this and how do you use the platform that you have and what are some of the impacts that you've seen?

Leah: Well, something that's been so powerful about our work in a local community is that we started out by working with families through a survey and through focus groups to really identify what are the barriers to accessing and enjoying healthy food — there were fundamentally two barriers. It was money and transportation. Motivation to eat healthy food, cooking skills, none of those were barriers. Once we eliminated the cost barrier by making the food sliding scale so people could pay whatever they could afford and eliminating the transportation barrier through doorstep delivery, families were then able to enjoy this fresh, healthy, local, organic produce. That's been so powerful because I think there's this pervasive methodology that the underlying problem, so to speak, with the health of the nation or the health of the black community is ignorance, lack of education, or lack of motivation when in fact it really has much more to do with access. If we can take care of cost, transportation, geography, other barriers, making sure folks have the equipment in their kitchens to cook and the time and the support, then it happens. So we've seen that with our Families In Solidarity share and also with the youth who come out for the farmer training programs. 100% of these thousands and thousands of youth who have come to these programs joyfully and enthusiastically gobble down their vegetarian burritos and gumbo soup mainly because they made it. There is no convincing them that this isn't what they want. First time someone eats a real actual tomato, it kind of speaks for itself.

Jen: I hear you and that's certainly something we all deserve to have.

Leah: Exactly. Imagine. We all deserve it, we all do.

Jen: So I want to go back to your own childhood because I know that spirituality is very important to you. Can you tell me more about that and what it looked like in your family? How that influenced you and how you incorporate that into your life and work now?

Leah: Oh, that's wonderful. I love that you brought it back to childhood because you are making me remember when my younger sister and I were quite young, maybe five years old and six years old, respectively. We invented our own religion, so we thought, and it was called "Mother Nature." We would go outside and make offerings of songs and flowers and gifts to the Earth, and now, as an adult, having spent a significant amount of time in West Africa and in Haiti, which are our ancestral homelands, I have come to believe that we weren't inventing, that we were really remembering. African traditional religion does see the Earth as deity and all these forces of nature like the thunder, the clouds, the plants, the trees, they're all sacred, they're all considered to be infused with godliness. Those practices that we had of making offerings and singing songs to nature are very much part of our ancestral traditions. So, since then, I have been very blessed to be able to engage in some

deep study around what are these traditional religions—the Yoruba religion, Vodun which comes from the Dahomey region—and integrate more of those practices into what we do at Soul Fire Farm. A couple of examples and there're many, it's really part of our daily life, is asking for permission. So there is a belief that the Earth is not so much of amalgamation of natural resources to be used. The Earth is a being, and so before we dig a pond or cut a forest, we ask permission and there are certain divination tools that we use to find out what that answer is or what the conditions are. That is something before we make any major changes on the land, and we don't always get a yes. Sometimes, we have to wait or figure out what those conditions are. Another example would be our seasonal festivals. So, we have one coming up called Manje Yam, which literally translates in Haitian Creole as "eating yams". It's a festival where we honor the spirit of the yam — we grow sweet potatoes because the yams don't grow in upstate New York, but it's really cool because the yam spirit actually cannot stand having any conflict or bitterness or anger around it. There's a whole period, very much like the Jewish Days of Awe, before Manje Yam where you seek forgiveness and heal wounds with other people, so you're preparing to eat the yams in peace. There is a lot of fun elements to the ritual, like rolling up banana leaves mystically back to the land of our ancestors and sort of silly fun aspects as well. So those are two examples, but these practices are very much integrated into daily life of really treating the Earth as the Orisha or divinity that she is.

Jen: We talk about well-being on the show in many forms, but I don't think we've ever really talked about it from the perspective of nature. Can you talk about this connection with the natural world and how it can positively impact someone?

Leah: Well, I will tell you a quick story and then I'll throw some science at it. There is this wonderful young person who is now grown, his name is Dejour Carter, and when he was 13 or 14, he came to the farm for one of our youth programs, and this child was so skeptical. He was like "I'm not getting into a van, I'm not touching any bug, like I'm not doing any of this." But then when we all left on a tour, he was terrified a bear would come, find him in the van, and eat him, so he did get out of the van, came with us, and quickly realized that his brand-new Jordans would be completely ruined walking around this farm and took them off and walked barefoot. So we went through this tour and none of the children were really listening which was fine. They're squealing because little toads were jumping across their feet and they saw a snake and they saw this and that, and we get to the end to debrief, Dejour says, "This might sound crazy, but as soon as my foot touched the ground, it felt like my grandma. Like her memory had come up through my foot to my heart, and I was remembering all these things from when I was little. When she was alive, and she would garden with me and would put a worm in my hand and tell me to be gentle. Miss, I didn't think I had anything to do with this place, but I realized that I had everything to do with this place." And then the kids are all talking about their grandmas. I shared this because I think that connecting with nature and farming is partly about learning skills of growing our own food, but also very much is about healing our sense of disconnection from one another and from what's possible. For young people to be on the lands, for their bodies to be free to move, for them to be able to eat good food, for them to see adults, like black and brown adults who look like them, running their own business, this just starts to expand like that feeling of what's possible and what can be meaningful in their lives. There's a whole lot of fascinating research about the nature deficits and sort of the impact of not having nature in terms of cognition, physical health — everything from diabetes to kidney failure can be impacted by not having access to nature. Then perhaps most intriguing, the somewhat recent research about soil bacteria and its implications for our mental health, the sort of headline is "is soil the best antidepressant?". When we, especially as young people, are getting little bits of soil into our mouth because we're interacting with the environment, we're actually building up a healthy gut flora that makes us more resilient to traumas and

upsets of life. Anecdotally, again going back to Dejour, but even the thousands of folks who come through for other programs, we're here teaching them soil chemistry and marketing strategies. By in large the feedback we get on our evaluations is about healing, connection, truth, justice, possibility so it is clear that the Earth is doing her master composting. She's figured out how to not just compost like leaf debris into rich dark soil, but she is composting all of our yuck and giving it back to us as hope and connection. So I think the main job we have here is just to introduce people to the Earth and she kind of takes over and gets the healing going on.

Jen: That's awesome! So, we're in a very difficult moment for the whole world between the COVID-19 pandemic not to mention everything else we faced in 2020 over the last year. I do think, in some ways, there's reason for hope. I think there's always reason to hope. When it comes to the future for you and your work at Soul Fire, what are your hopes and fears for the future?

Leah: Hopes and fears... My daughter Neshima, who is no longer a little baby, she is now 17, she said the food system is everything it takes to get sunshine onto your plate, which I love this image, the arc of a food system. My hope would be that all along that arc, whether we're talking about land ownership, the rights of farmworkers, the sovereignty of seeds, the food access, like all of that is really infused with justice, equity, and sustainability. That Soul Fire Farm does our humble part as a training farm to inspire and resource that. My fear, to be really honestly, I think my fear is that we will burn ourselves out before we get there because there is so much work to do and there is so much demand for the work. With deeply, deeply caring people on our team and in our networks, folks are just always going the extra mile and there's only so long that you can pull off the 60-hour workweeks before you get disillusioned and burnt out. So my hope is that society catches on and helps us out and gives us a hand with this really crucial effort to heal the food system.

Jen: For people that are listening who want to get involved, what are some actionable steps that people can take and maybe help you not burn out?

Leah: There are so many, really amazing ways that folks can engage in food justice. I will say first that for a full list with over 100 options, you can go to soulfirerfarm.org's Take Action page, but I'll mention a few. So, one of them is an innovative project by Soul Fire Farm in the Northeast Farmers of Color and Land Trust called the Reparations Map. It's an interactive Google Map that lists all of these black-indigenous and people of color led farms and food projects across the nation. You can scroll through, find projects near you, and it will list what they need, which is sometimes as simple as someone to help them with their website or a used car that they can borrow. So check out what those farmers need because I really think that at the same time as we have a global analysis acting locally and supporting the farmers around us is really really crucial. Another thing that folks can do is to educate their lawmakers around the 2020 Fairness for Farm Workers Act. A lot of lawmakers are not aware of the fact that we still don't have equal protection under the law for people who work in the food and farming system. That means no rights to unionize, no right to a day off in seven, no overtime pay, inadequate child labor protections for children as young as 12, and so forth. Passing the Fairness for Farm Workers Act is one way to address some of those harms they go back to the mid-1930s. I think the last thing that I can mention is there are some really neat initiatives nationally like the Real Food Challenge, which encourage institutions, including cities, universities, and hospitals, to sign on to a commitment to use their institutional purchasing power toward a sustainable and ethically grown food. Usually it's a 20% budget commitment and there're all the templates out there from Real Food Challenge that you can use. So if you're part of a school or city or an institution, getting them to meet that commitment goes a lot further than thinking about the "One Dollar, One Vote" personal activism, but instead moving huge budgets to make

permanent promises. So those are three out of hundreds, but yeah, go to soulfirefarm.org's Take Action and check out the ideas and see what resonates with you because there are so many right answers to that question.

Jen: I've one final question, which is kind of a two-part question. You've a lot going on, so how do you manage everything we just talked about and making time for self-care? What does that look like for you?

Leah: Well, I think I have a long way to go and a lot to learn from others about well-being. I will say that I have pretty religiously kept to an early morning routine of taking a run on the trails, which kills a lot of birds with one stone because I get my heart exercised. I get a chance to be alone, which introverts need and just let my thoughts wander, and I get my nature time all in a 45-minute chunk. So at least six out of seven days a week, that's me, and so even if the rest of the day just is helter-skelter, at least I'm grounded by my early and my dawn routine. I get to see a lot of cool animals. It is not uncommon to see a bear, deer, porcupines, owls, and other beautiful creatures on my morning runs, so that's magical as well.

Jen: Yeah, I love that and I think there's a lot we can all learn from that. I know I said last question, but first I want to say thank you so much for coming on the show, sharing your story, and I would love to leave the listeners with any last piece of advice that you have to increase our connection with the Earth.

Leah: Thank you so much for having me. This has been awesome. I guess I would just say that remember that the Earth loves you back as much as you love her. Even if it's just a few sprouts that you're growing on your counter or a tree you're taking care of in a corner lot, I really encourage everyone to rekindle that personal relationship with the Earth and you'll find many rewards from it.

Jen: I couldn't agree more, and I can't think of a better line to end on, so thank you for your vulnerability and spending some time with us today and sharing your story and your insights. I know that I got a lot out of it and the listeners here as well. I deeply appreciate it.

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