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Different Pathways to a Common Cause: Finding the Roots of our Right Relationship with Food
A review by Lis McLoughlin of:
Soil and Spirit (Scott Chaskey, Milkweed Editions, 2023)
and
Earth to Tables Legacies (Barndt, Baker, and Gelis, Rowman & Littlefield, 2023)

There are some journeys that are easier to take in the company of good friends. The journey to a better relationship with food is one of them.

Two books, offering two very different types of exploration, and ending in the same place. In both, the journey takes precedence, but the goal—to increase right relationship to food and soil—is the same.

Scott Chaskey's new book *Soil and Spirit: Cultivation and Kinship in the Web of Life* is for the kind of reader who enjoys a walk in the woods with a good friend. We'd be lucky to have such a friend as the author—someone both widely read, and experienced in working with his hands on the land. Chaskey is a poet who in this work of prose leads the reader smoothly and with great integrity along his decades-long continuing journey in and with Nature. He is a founder of the CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) movement whose love and deep knowledge of plants and soils informs the way he moves through the world. In these pages Chaskey walks with you through fields and texts, introducing you to his friends and colleagues: innovative individuals from all over the world and all walks of life, who revere and work with the land. I thoroughly enjoyed going off-trail to explore Chaskey's personal stories of trees, fields, seeds, and people He Has Known; always brought back by the cogent threads of his astonishing breadth and depth of knowledge of all things plants.

In contrast, *Earth to Tables Legacies* is a long, rowdy, rambling, group hike. Through vibrant color photos, linked multimedia presentations, and a multitude of other resources for teachers and curious readers, the authors (called "storytellers"), and the editors take great pains to explain who they are, where they come from, and why they do what they do. Here, too, the journey takes precedence, this time as a whirlwind tour of multiple cultures all told in different voices, and sometimes different languages. On this trip we're invited to learn how highly dedicated and skilled individuals are unearthing (or maybe re-earthing) their heritage to help bring back authentic relationships between people and food and its source, the Earth.

I find myself thinking of cycles writing this. Not just cycles of seasons, but also of years. Both books explicate how this work is done— of reconnecting to the Earth, to the gifts she gives us in the form of nourishment, and why it is essential. They do so for different audiences.

Earth to Tables is full of life, spirit, experimentation—as the editors suggest, one giant conversation made up of many, intent on pushing our paradigm away from the neo-liberal interpretation of land as a resource and food as a commodity. It has the fire and urgency of a youthful burst of energy; a celebration of the spark of innovation while caught up in its midst. It will be excellent for college students and others whose attention spans are closer to hummingbirds than to owls. Yet it is not shallow—rather, it's a rich panoply, stories of the depth of the roots of the Indigenous cultures at the base of this movement, and how they are tangled at this moment in gloriously complex dance. The book tells of our present, rooted in past but moving forward in innovative ways with attention to complexities and tensions, but also, with joy. I believe every reader will find something in this book (for me, it was the reminder that "It's Always about Land") that is salient and compels them to read—or better, to do—more.

Yet I confess, at this time in my life, *Soil and Spirit* calls to me. It too is full of life, spirit, experimentation, and wonderful conversations; it just accomplishes this more quietly and with one voice as your guide. The overall effect is more intimate. Think of a marathon seen from above, the whole long line of it including the leading edge where Chaskey continues to cut trails, using his great and ever-increasing store of knowledge to help us find our way. Chaskey has earned his place out front, he's in it for the long haul. *Soil and Spirit* helps us as individuals to learn to think of plants and soil as living beings we can talk and listen to, to understand that our food is part—must remain part— of the natural web. Chaskey's work continues, and I find his lines, which speak with a resonant, contemplative maturity, deeply inspiring.

I want every student to read and catch the inspirational spark in *Earth to Table Legacies*, and then I want them to sink into the deep wisdom of *Soil and Spirit* to find out how to innovatively and joyfully keep up the good work, long term.

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Lis McLoughlin is a PhD in the interdisciplinary field of Science, Technology, and Society. She founded the Writing the Land Project (<https://www.writingtheland.org>) which pairs poets with conserved land and publishes anthologies sold for land conservation. Her themed anthology *Foodways and Social Justice* (NatureCulture, 2022) explores the intersection of the arts and just, sustainable agricultural conservation as accomplished on and in the ground. Find out more at <https://www.nature-culture.net/writing-the-land-foodways-and-social-justice>