No Answers - Only Questions

A review of a Biodynamic Beekeeping Workshop: Reducing Stress; Increasing Vitality, presented by Michael Weiler at The Hatch Community, Thornbury, May 2009

The typical public view of beekeepers is, I suspect, that we are a harmless bunch of kindly but eccentric, nature-loving folk, strangers to controversy and not given to overly-assertive statements of opinion, who like to mess around with odd-looking boxes of stinging insects at the bottoms of our gardens.

The reality is that - like many other subjects of gentle obsession - beekeeping is rife with politics, radically opposed opinions and dogma by the skep-full. Arguments have raged for years about this type of hive and that method of queen-rearing and recently the air has been full of theories about why bees appear to be 'dying out'.

How refreshing then, along with 50 other bee enthusiasts of all ages, to spend a weekend with a beekeeper who is at the same time knowledgeable, practical and self-effacing, as well as being an inspiring and captivating teacher. Where he is sure of his ground, he can back up his statements from experience, and he is always willing to listen to other opinions and observations, even when they differ from his own.

Michael began by talking about how we 'meet' a colony of bees as a singular organism, as compared to how we experience other creatures for the first time. There is no body, no head, no legs and no eye-to-eye meeting as with other domestic animals, and we first have to get used to interpreting its unfamiliar 'language'. Such a first-time meeting can be daunting for a newcomer, and often there is an element of fear to overcome. The sight of a large swarm hanging in a tree can cause alarm among people who don't understand that in this state the bees' only concern is to find a new home, and having nothing to defend, they are most unlikely to harm anyone.

Most life is connected to the soil, but the life of bees seems to come - as Michael put it - 'from the heavens towards the Earth'. The cluster hangs from a tree, and when it enters a cavity it hangs from the roof, and the bees hang from their comb and hardly contact the walls or the floor, as if they don't like to touch the material world more than is absolutely necessary. This quality shows us that they are significantly different in their nature to animals that walk on the ground. Having no physical body and no skin, the creature that is the bee colony must find a suitable skin and build within it a 'skeleton' of beeswax, which is is produced from the 'high fever' generated when bees cluster together. New wax comb is light and almost transparent, gradually yellowing, darkening and hardening with age. The comb serves as a nursery as well as a place to store food, both nectar and 'bee bread' - a fermented mixture of pollen and nectar that is fed to larvae. Having a diversity of pollen is essential for their health, and bees will always seek out multiple sources of pollen, as can be seen from the spectrum of colours present on a typical comb.

Michael is convinced that one of the purposes of bees is to produce honey, both for their own use and for ours in the 'development of our own egos'. The honey we eat is the product of 'sensitive and intricate work' and helps us to 'act rather than react'.

Michael discussed the swarming impulse and the timeline of events leading up to and beyond the flight of the prime swarm. He referred to Steiner's description of the developing queen larva 'giving off a light' causing the swarm to 'move away from this disturbing source' for fear that it 'no longer possesses bee poison', a state that means it can't defend itself anymore or save itself'. Indeed, the swarm emerges in a highly excited state, whirling and spinning as if in a panic, and Steiner likens it to 'the soul of a human being, forced to leave its body'.

The subject of swarming always generates animated discussion among beekeepers, mainly

concerned with the various ways of preventing it. As Michael says, swarming is a 'renewing and refreshing process': a 'necessary and elementary part of the bees lives', and we need to find ways of working with the swarming impulse, rather than becoming too focused on largely futile attempts to thwart it. So we need to look at how we can 'manage' swarming in a way that allows the bees to express their natural desires. Our job as beekeepers is to provide a 'skin' for the 'naked swarm' - in the form of a suitable hive.

I last met Michael in 2005, while I was working in commercial beekeeping and in my own time experimenting with top bar hives. Since then, I have given up frames, foundation and mechanical extraction in favour of the simplicity and bee-friendly design of top bar hives, which Michael asked me to talk about as part of this event. Michael's experience is mainly with Dadant hives, which he has run successfully for many years without queen excluders - his colleague in Germany runs a commercial operation based on 500 of such hives. While our choice of hive may differ, we agree that the queen should have the run of the hive and that bees should be allowed to build natural comb as they prefer and not be forced to use wax foundation, which slows and constrains cell-building and has been shown to contain residues of pesticides and varroa treatments. The numbers of workers and drones are allowed to find their natural balance, according to how the bees decide to arrange things: drone culling, along with the use of worker-only foundation, is just one of the stressors applied by beekeepers in an attempt to have them perform according to a human plan.

As an example of stress, artificial insemination of queens was being experimented with around the time that Rudolf Steiner gave his warning that if such methods became the norm, bees would be in real trouble in 80 to 100 years. His six bee lectures were delivered in 1923.

Indeed, I suspect that most of the problems facing bees today are caused by the stress of having to live their lives in a world shaped by humans: a toxic agricultural system; atmospheric pollution; insecticides; habitat destruction; electromagnetic pollution - and on top of all that they have to cope with unnatural hives and beekeepers with their ideas of how bees should be 'managed'. Before the advent of 'modern beekeeping', less than 200 years ago, it was not possible to manage bees in the ways that are now routine, and many beekeepers interfere with bees far more than is good for them. This is, I suspect, largely due to the way beekeeping is usually taught: as a largely mechanical process that happens to involve a species of insect, rather than a mutually beneficial meeting between humans and a highly-evolved creature that has been around far longer than we have.

As Michael says, 'you can tell a lot about a culture by studying the quality of its meetings', and the quality of this meeting between bee enthusiasts promises much for the future, if it enhances the way in which we meet our bees and share their world. A wide range of people took part, including some who had not yet experienced bees at close quarters and others with many years of beekeeping behind them. Many questions were asked by participants, and Michael himself said several times that he had 'no answers: only questions'.

For a teacher to admit that he does not have all the answers takes courage, while for an audience to hear that and accept it requires faith. Our faith was rewarded with a weekend to remember, that will, I think, have a profound effect on the way participants will conduct their future meetings with bees.

As Michael says, 'not all people can become beekeepers, but the more people who have a deep feeling for the bees, the happier the bees will be'.

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