

## The Value of Essential Work

Ralph Martin

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The current pandemic has helped us to view work through a new lens. The contributions of personal support workers in nursing homes, health care workers and other essential service workers are no longer out of focus. We see them, applaud them and are keen for them to carry on.

Michael Enright on the Sunday Edition on CBC said he was asked whether garbage workers or Bay St. lawyers were doing the most important work. “I’m still thinking about it,” was his sardonic reply.

Farm work has also been either unseen or as work for someone else. Some types of farm work may even be even looked down on by farmers. Such repetitive and physical work is often assigned to labourers, usually temporary foreign workers (TFWs). Now that borders are thickening, the work of these TFWs is recognized for its essential contribution to producing food on Canadian farms.

Yes, this work may come with dust and sweat and unpleasant smells and sore backs. It’s intriguing to me that yoga instructors encourage paying customers to keep breathing and working through stretches, without wiping sweat away. “Just notice it.”

I’ve been wondering how Canadians will adapt if fewer TFWs squeeze through the border this spring. Much work of previously, productive people in urban areas is now non-essential and some of those folks are tired of movies and video games. What would have to change for them to choose to exercise their muscles on farms?

Low financial compensation could be a barrier to change. This does beg the question of essential service top-ups, in this peculiar period. It seems fair to me that truck drivers, cleaners, grocery store personnel as well as farm workers and others should be paid a bonus, at a time when they take more personal risks, in order for the rest of us to have our needs met. This can reasonably be deemed as a responsibility of government.

I'm guessing that the logistics of placing Canadians on farms can be managed. For example, see [www.ontario.ca/page/agriculture-and-food-jobs-ontario](http://www.ontario.ca/page/agriculture-and-food-jobs-ontario)

Nevertheless, my mind migrates to the key required change, a change of attitude. An attitude is a mental or emotional position, with regard to a fact or state. The facts of labour availability in food and farming are shifting. Can our mental and emotional positions concurrently change to adapt to the new reality?

Some may say, "this work is below me." Let me be blunt. Think again. This year, 2020, may be THE growth experience of your life. Consider the value of the essential service of growing food. Food connects us to Earth, three times per day.

Those who already work full-time on farms may have an attitude problem too. I recall a city relative coming to our farm when I, as an arrogant teen, was rather impressed with how I could build a load of hay that held together on a wagon, bouncing over bumpy ground, on a hilly field. On arrival, he couldn't do that. In fact, he could barely stand on said wagon. Yet he didn't let my demeanor dampen his determination to learn and adapt. Good for him.

I also understand why some farmers will be reluctant to hire workers without farm experience, who need training, and who may inadvertently cause damage. Experienced TFWs, having worked on the same farm for years, know how to do the jobs at hand.

Skills can be learned. Farmers and unskilled workers who mutually choose to hone their patience and perseverance, will all appreciate new possibilities. This pandemic will not be the last adaptation that Mother Earth asks of us.

Small farmers, with or without off-farm labour, have also grown local food for farmers' markets and restaurants. Most of these are now closed. Plan to safely procure food directly from local farmers e.g. [www.wellington.ca/en/business/tr-partners.aspx#](http://www.wellington.ca/en/business/tr-partners.aspx#) I have confidence they are willing to be transparent and to grow food and then arrange pick-up or delivery, in a safe way. The extra work, on your part will have its reward of fresh, healthy food and build resilience, in our neighbourhoods.

When we work, we contribute to society and to our own sense of self worth. Work on farms and in other essential services should be recognized for its high value.

*Ralph Martin, Ph.D., Professor (retired), University of Guelph. Information on new book, Food Security at [www.ralphmartin.ca](http://www.ralphmartin.ca)*