THE MORAL NATURE OF WINEMAKING

A lecture given at back room wines
July 11, 2013

This lecture will unfold in 7 parts:

0. METAPHYSICS
1. THE DESERT
2. RIGOR
3. ERROR
4. PRESERVATION
5. THE ABYSS
6. TRAGEDY
7. [PARTICULARITY]

0. METAPHYSICS

[BEGIN POURING WINE 1: TEGERNSEEHOF KELELRBERG RIESLING]

What I mean by metaphysics, what I mean by a metaphysical wine.

1. [the desert]

Having begun with metaphysics, a theoretical discipline, a vaporous entity itself we now move to something intensely physical, a place, a place that you can imagine, and not just with your mind's eyes, but with your skin, with every bit of your body. We move to The Desert.

[BEGIN POURING WINE 2: proserina]

I moved to Napa on September 1, 1999. I had visited Napa once or twice before, but I had never lived here. What struck me more than anything else, even more than anything about what you might call the culture or the people of the place, was that I now lived in a desert. The land outside of my house had no green grass growing on it, but only clumps of gray and brown grass, grass that I have since learned to recognize and love as drought-obligant native bunch grasses; clumps that seemed dead and burned to me at the time. Poking up between them were nasty, spiky, green towers with unlovely yellow flowers, coruscations and blisters all over the leaves, and slightly hairy stems, all prickly and even abrasive to the touch. Star-thistle, bristly ox-tongue. You could not uproot them. You could not turn the soil anyway; I tried to plant some rosemarys that I had brought with me. I

couldn't get the rosemarys in, or the thistles out of, the rock-hard soil. The weeds and the inhospitable soil were bound to each other.

I lived there that year two full months before the first rain; and then a month after that I experienced 40 days and 40 nights of biblical deluge. I learned that this was a land of extremes, and for the first time in my life, I had a sense of what it might have been like to live in the time of Noah.

I had left St. John's where I had taught only a year before, and one of the last classes that I had taught had been on the book of Genesis. I had hardly understood it at all, but I know that I understood it much better after living in Napa for 5 months, and experiencing the amazing and sudden transformation from drought and desert to water world. For the first time, I had some kind of corporeal understanding of what it must have been like to live in the aftermath of the expulsion from Eden. That was what Napa meant to me.

Let me quote at some length from Genesis to set the scene.

At the beginning of Genesis, we find what you might call two creations stories. They are in some ways completely incompatible; yet they are also clearly complimentary. It is hard not to think of them together, and consequently essential to distinguish them clearly, and not conflate the two. I will appeal to both stories but try to be careful keeping them separate for you.

In the first account, the story of the six days, God creates fish and flying things on the fifth day; and cattle, earthbound things, and humans on the sixth day. On the sixth day, after God creates human beings, he speaks to them and says the following three things:

1. Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth [1.28]
2. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens, and all the living things that crawl upon the earth[1.28]
3. Here, I give you all plants that bear seeds . . . And all trees in which there is fruit that bears seeds, they shall be for you for eating [1.29]

And then adds the following,

> "For all the living things of the earth, for all the fowl of the heavens, for all that crawls upon the earth, [I give you] all green plants for eating." [1.30]

At the beginning, there is a world full of everything that we live with now: Napa in the Spring, full of green plants and trees that will feed us. It is the opposite of a desert: food is everywhere. From this last pronouncement about the green plants, it seems to me that no animals are carnivorous. Everything is here in this land of plenty, but with a different demarcation of who may eat what. Everything that lives on or above the surface of the earth eats fruits, seeds, plants. There is certainly no evidence of cooking; no mention of cheese-making or milk-drinking. The whole world seems to be universally vegan and raw food eating-- one might say, crudivore. And there is no difference between what humans eat and what animals eat; there might even be no difference in the way that they eat. In other words, there might be no such thing as cuisine, vegan or not. This means the collapse of some other distinctions: there is no dining, with careful cutting, or sequential coursing: only *feeding*.

[BEGIN POURING WINE 3: turley juvenile]

This is the first of two creation stories. The second story is the story of Adam and Eve and their progeny. In this story, it seems like men and animals still do not eat flesh; and the same

remains true even after Adam and Eve leave Eden. There is nonetheless a very interesting modification of the human diet after the expulsion. God says:

> "The soil is cursed because of you. With painstaking toil you will eat of it, all the days of your life; it will bring forth Thorns and Thistles for you, when you seek to eat the herbs of the field; [but only] by the sweat of your brow will you eat." [3.17-3.19]

It struck me then, in September 1999, in my new house in Napa, surrounded by what I thought was dead grass and noxious thorns and thistles, that God could bring about this curse simply by imposing a drought, by making the land outside of Eden a desert. It did not even have to become the Mojave or the Sahara; the curse could be accomplished simply by moving Adam and Eve to Pope Valley in August.

2. RIGOR

This is not a joke. Think how quickly you would die stranded in Pope Valley, in the middle of August. All that there would be for you to eat would be grapes. And this in turn made me think of something else. The grapes are (for the most part) completely dependent on irrigation-- but no matter where the water comes from, they preserve it perfectly. In other words-- the precious water is not lost, not wasted on the plants, but persists, preserved in the grapes, little turgid globes, ready to keep us alive in the desert. The vine is an engine for pulling water from deep in the soil; the berry is a treasury for preserving that water. And this in turn made me think of something else-- always having in the front of my mind, the rigor imposed by living in the desert, surrounded by thorns and thistles. The grapes are a blessing in the desert, an escape from the curse. We have a great responsibility to make the most of them. But they come only once a year-- stranded in the vast Julianna vineyards in Pope Valley, I can only eat so many grapes before the birds get them, before they spoil in the autumn rains, before the berries fall right off the vine and return their precious water to the soil. Harvesting the grapes and making wine from them is a way to capture that water, and the nutrients also caught in the grapes. In a land of scarcity, a world of painstaking toil, in the desert, we have the responsibility to preserve every bit of the food and water presented to us by the vine in its fruit. Fermentation is not only a way to preserve the blessing, but once preserved, fermentation also allows us to share the blessing, distribute it. Delicate fruit now turned to wine, Julianna can now help feed a city, for months past harvest. This is the beginning of the moral nature of winemaking. In the city, or in Napa in the spring, that responsibility, of a celestial order, is not clear. But once you place yourself in the desert, once you bring yourself to feel a world carpeted not in grass but in star thistle and ox tongue, you sense that responsibility not just in your mind but in every bit of your fiber.

3. ERROR

You will have noticed that I have delayed defining my most important term. I am going to begin that slow process by telling you what I DO NOT mean by "moral."

I used to work for the Maldonado family. They were among the first people to hire me to make wine, and it was a great honor, not only because I was so unproven, but because they had already accomplished so much. It was a remarkable act of trust on their part and I worked very hard for them to reward that trust. In the Spring of 2007, I prepared to bottle

the 2005 chardonnay that I had made for them, at White Rock vineyards, with the help of Sarah Adkins Van den Dreissche, who had shown a great affinity for working with the wine. In 2007, she was engaged in other projects, and I brought two rather inexperienced friends with me to White Rock to rack the barrels of the 2005 chardonnay in preparation for bottling. I like working with people at the beginning of their learning for many reasons, perhaps chiefly because I am so aware of the amazing joy I have felt when I, at the beginning of my learning, with no experience or accomplishment, have been given tasks, responsibilities, opportunities for learning. My friends and I racked the barrels, and at the end of the day, we felt that we had accomplished a good day's work. Before we left, I pulled a sample from the tank to see what the blend tasted like. And the wine tasted great; much better than even the best of the individual barrels. But it was VERY cloudy. VERY. Like a wine still fermenting. But it was not. It had finished both primary and secondary fermentations, and had been utterly limpid in barrel, before racking. Did we stir the lees up in moving the barrels outside? Did we perform a sloppy racking and pull lees out of the barrels with the wine? I did not know-- I had not supervised myself and my companions well enough to answer the question. But it was only of forensic interest anyway-- the problem was there, no matter how it had arisen.

Bottling was only days away. I did not think that I could accomplish a successful pad filtration in time to prepare it. And I was afraid of sticking the Maldonados with the bill for a cross-flow filtration. So I decided brazenly to bring a very turbid wine to bottling, and simply to hope for the best. To hope that the wine would settle in the next couple of days, to hope that it would settle in bottle before we released it, to hope that the market would find something "cool," or "authentic" in a wine that so flaunted its unfiltered nature-- and, at bottom, to hope that no one would notice the evidence of my risky decision before it had disappeared.

Bottling day. Every one was very excited. Ryan McGee had wedged their truck on to the crush pad at White Rock; all of the glass was there, the labels, everything. We were flying through the bottling. Lupe and Maria Maldonado were there, very proud, beaming. Hugo drove up, on the way from vineyard to vineyard, in the midst of busy Spring operations. We pulled a bottle from the bottling line for him to sample, and opened it in the White Rock lab. He looked at the wine, nothing like a bottled wine, and with deference and respect, asked me if it was supposed to look like this. I said, no problem, people will love it. Hugo was hesitant, but trusted me. On we went, 90 bottles per minute. A while later, John Kongsgaard drove up, just by chance. He was there to confer with Christopher on a wine they were working on together for Lee Hudson. John was not only my teacher, but he had introduced me to the Maldonados, great friends of his, and had recommended me to them as someone who could help give birth to and guide their Chardonnay project. John had always given me enough rope to hang myself, but also liked to check in every so often and assess the results of my education. So I opened a bottle for him. Hugo was already gone, on the way to his next vineyard. John poured the wine, fixed his eyes on the glass, and said, "This is a mistake." Then he turned his eyes deliberately on me and said, "Your mistake." Then, without another word, but equally deliberately, he returned his gaze and his attention to his work with Christopher.

I stopped the bottling, about 700 cases into a 1800 case run.

We later disgorged every bottle, cross-flowed the wine, and got Ryan McGee back for another bottling. The mistake cost me and the Maldonados about $30,000. The resulting wine was excellent. Thank god.

[BEGIN POURING WINE 4: coutier]

This was a moral error. I had betrayed a trust out of a combination of shame, cowardice, laziness, lack of confidence. All moral failures. Our work as winemakers is shot through with decisions like these; decisions with great consequences for our employers, our investors, our partners in every aspect of our business-- from the people we work next to and employ, to the farmers who raise our grapes, even to the people who sell us bottles and corks. For if we produce a wine that we cannot sell, the consequences are many, and no aspect of our world is sheltered from the damage.

Yet this is not what I mean by the moral nature of winemaking.

4. PRESERVATION

It is interesting to me, and something that I cannot quite put my finger on, that when John and I have discussed mistakes that I have made in my winemaking, he has almost always succeeded in giving the discussion a moral flavor. This is something that I have discussed with his son Alex, and with other friends and colleagues, more than I have with John. What I mean by this is that whenever we discuss something that I could have better done otherwise, the mis-step does not seem merely practical: it is as if one always has to confront the cowardice in a decision, or at least, the lack of grace or lack of something like artistry or vision. And that that lack is somehow a moral failure. I am talking about flavor here, not crystal clear, categorical words. And the most interesting of these experiences is the one where the flaw is not cowardice, but lack of artistry. In a certain sense, what this whole lecture is devoted to is understanding this feeling that I get when I talk with John:

How or why does he succeed in making me feel that a lack of artistry is a moral failure? Cowardice, betraying a trust-- those are obvious. They are at the heart of what is moral. But limited artistry? Whatever the hell that is?

Let me give you the beginning of an answer. We honor not only success but the taking of risk. In other words, we all admire wines that succeed in various ways, but my sense is-- least especially within what you might call my circle of friends and associates-- that we save the highest degree of respect for our colleagues who have not taken the easiest or most predictably successful routes. I will go even further: we reserve a certain amount of scorn for certain tools or methods: enzymes, oak additives, reverse osmosis, the addition of distillates or concentrates. I am not saying that we should, or that our judgment is consistent, or that we can even detect their use. So our scorn is not about their effect: our scorn is a moral judgment about how one works. And I think that what drives it is not simply a respect for hard work or something like that, but *placing a value on the taking of risk itself*. I thinks that without praising or justifying this inclination of ours, I can make it more precise, and perhaps even give the origin of it.

[BEGIN POURING WINE 5: dauvissat les clos 1997]

Let us return to Pope Valley. Wine, as you well know, originates with fruit. Consider the fruit without the intervention of the hand of man: it ripens on the vine, and the more that it ripens, the longer that it hangs on the vine, the more it becomes prey to the destructive forces of nature. Big things, like birds and bugs, will eat it; little things, like yeast, molds, bacteria, will too. In the end, the fruit, and everything within in it, is lost to us.

Let us now consider a drastic innovation, but one that depends only on a small amount of very simple human activity. We harvest the fruit, cut the clusters off the vine, and dump them in a vessel with walls; the vessels need not even have tops. This activity is sufficient to preserve the fruit-- or, to be more precise, to preserve everything precious in it. The result is

simple and predictable: dumping the fruit into an enclosing vessel compacts it, and minimizes, but does not eliminate, the air space between clusters. At this point, the natural yeast of the vineyard and the ambient yeasts of the vessel and its surroundings can take over. The weight of the fruit will spontaneously crush the berries at the bottom and a fermentation will start immediately. This in turn will release both heat and carbon dioxide as the yeast eat the sugars in the berries, float around the sweet juice, and, as they feed, begin to multiply. The carbon dioxide will suffuse the space between grapes and clusters and exclude any non-fermentative organisms. Almost no native bacteria can survive without the oxygen; neither can any mold, nor most other yeasts. In this way, the fermenting yeasts take over the whole system, eventually break down all of the fruit (especially if we stomp on it just a little), and convert all of the sugar and water (and interesting other molecules) to wine. We strain the wine, throw the stems and skins away, and through this small act of harvesting, compacting, straining, we have preserved all of the water caught in the fruit, and nearly all of the nutritive value.

This is the very praiseworthy activity of preservation that I alluded to earlier. The moral thing to do is surely to preserve as much of precious resources as you can, and to take as few chances as possible in the act of preservation. Risk-taking in this sphere seems precisely like a venal dare-devilry, not something the least bit praiseworthy.

5. THE ABYSS

The difference between preservation and spoilage, loss, is fermentation. In fermentation, a very small living thing eats some form of sugar, or a close relative of sugar (call them "carbohydrates"), and gets nutrition from it, without requiring the presence of oxygen to feed itself in this way. The microbes that I am interested in are all single-celled; some are yeasts, some are bacteria. Some produce alcohol; some do not. I am going to enumerate several kinds of raw foods that we preserve through various sorts of fermentations.

1. Milk: we preserve milk by turning it into cheese. cheese is the result of many kinds of microbial actions on milk; some of which take place in the presence of oxygen; some not. There is no cheese without this microbial activity. The fundamental action is the consumption of a sugar particular to milk, lactose, by a bacterium that transforms it into lactic acid. This has many effects on the the whole complex that is milk: it raises its acidity, making it less attractive to other microbes; it changes its affinity for water, leading to concentration; it changes the structure of proteins, leading them to clump and form curds. And it takes an attractive food source off the table.
2. We can preserve fresh fruits and vegetables by pickling them: pickles too depend on the action of microbes. You can have pickles without the use of salt or vinegar, but not without microbes. Vinegar too is simply the result of microbial activity; it arises more quickly in the presence of oxygen, but can be produced by fermentation. In this case, bacteria consume the various sugars found in fruits and vegetables, and, as in cheese, convert them into acids. Dehydration and protein transformation have almost no role here, but the production of acid is crucial.
3. Meat is supremely liable to spoilage; we preserve it by curing. The curing of meat seems distant from fermentation, but it differs from the other modes only in concentration and speed, not in any fundamental way. Here too bacteria eat sugars, produce acids, drive out water, and modify proteins. In a certain sense, the use of salt is not what preserves the meat directly: rather it is used to create an environment favorable to certain bacteria and molds, and not others. The cure itself can thus be understood simply as the culturing of certain organisms.

In each one of these, a microbe attacks what counts for us as a kind of fresh food, and, by consuming what it is interested in within this food, it transforms the fresh food into a preserved food. In each case, the transformation is parallel to but different from a form of spoilage. In this way, cheese is the result of a certain microbial activity; a slightly different activity results in spoiled milk. Salami too depends on a certain activity; but spoilage differs by only the slightest degree-- a different initial temperature, a different concentration of salt, a different level of moisture-- and suddenly the dominant population is one set of microbes and not another. In each of these cases, the difference between excellent salumi and disgusting meat that you have to throw away is the difference between this set of microbes winning the race and not this one. And this is not a difference measured in percentages but in parts per thousand or even parts per million.

[BEGIN POURING WINE 6: 1MN]

Preservation in the face of spoilage is central to the understanding of fermentation. But this survey makes clear something a little surprising, not *emphasized* in the usual education of the winemaker: the preservation does not occur through the marshaling of some forces different and opposed to the forces of spoilage. Just the opposite: preservation is achieved through the husbandry and management of exactly the same microbial forces that would cause spoilage. Preservation is simply the flip-side of spoilage. What is remarkable about being engaged in these activities-- winemaking, cheese-making, curing meats-- is that you spend your whole professional life hovering over an abyss of disaster. In this respect, risk-taking is not some superfluous or venal option within winemaking-- it is in the nature, at the root, of winemaking. To be engaged in making wine is from the beginning to be courting and resisting disaster at once.

6. TRAGEDY

This helps me explain by what I mean by the moral nature of winemaking: I do not mean simply that we encounter moral decisions, or decisions with moral implications, in the course of winemaking. This is not unimportant but obvious. I am after something further: what is the moral implication of deciding to make wine in the first place-- of pledging oneself to an activity that courts disaster by its very nature?

In order to get at this, for the first time tonight, I want to discuss a particular wine; in fact, to contrast two wines.

Consider the chablis
Consider the kellerberg.

Wine depends not only on marshaling the forces of spoilage, but every wine contains the seed of its own doom within it. Some beautiful wines, like the Kellerberg, could make us forget this-- could make us forget how intrinsic spoilage is to the nature of wine. But others, like the Dauvissat, remind us how every wine hovers with fragility over an abyss. In a certain sense, the Dauvissat, or the Proserpina, even the Juvenile, lets you taste the abyss. Even the cleanest and most sturdy wines point to their own doom. There is something about wine that always says: this does not last. You may love me, but I will not persist.

[BEGIN POURING WINE 7: ODDERO BAROLO]

Now we consider these wines not as objects of admiration, sources of pleasure, means of consumption: but as the fruits and ends of our own labor. What does it mean to pledge yourself to making something that undoes itself, that in its very progress toward its acme, progresses also toward its decline?

Plato complains in the Republic that tragedy is bad for the moral education of the citizen. How can you have good citizens, when the whole city troops out to the theater together to witness the downfall of a good man? How do you inculcate virtue when it looks like the good man can fall as easily as a bad man, and perhaps not even by chance, but as a *result* of his own virtue? Nietzsche rejects this understanding of tragedy and instead celebrates the ancient Greeks for their embrace of tragedy. For their strength and joy in celebrating the world even if it holds no reward for virtue-- even if virtue can be its own undoing. This is for him a profoundly moral position-- and not the every day morality of responsibility, even of courage-- but a grander, more profound morality. It is no accident that he points to an artistic creation to exemplify and explain this morality. In the end, he celebrates this moral position not only as a way of living, of making daily decisions, but as a way of creating art, of making a statement. The tragedian says: I embrace doom; I see nobility not opposed to the abyss, but poised on its edge.

In this way too, winemaking is a profoundly moral activity, but of a very particular nature. Responsible or not, daring or not, it cannot separate itself from its roots in spoilage and its inevitable future-- not in persistence-- but in falling apart. In its essence, it is an oddly courageous activity that does not turn away from spoilage, decline and death-- but devotes itself to creating objects of impermanence, and fragility, that, at their peak, point to their own death.

And most wonderful at all, we engage in this activity year after year not with a sense of futility or dread, but with joy, anticipation, and celebration.

THANK YOU