

A FILM BY SAMUEL-ALI MIRPOORIAN

GREENER PASTURES

JOURNEYS IN FILM™
educating for global understanding



INTERSECTION PRESENTS "GREENER PASTURES" A XYZ PRODUCTION
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GREENER PASTURES

Community Discussion Guide

For community screenings, panels, and workshops, and for college courses and seminars



Educating for Global Understanding

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Facilitation Guidelines

Filmmakers use immersive storytelling to produce intense thoughts and emotions in the viewer. **Journeys in Film** uses this powerful medium as a springboard for meaningful dialogue around humanity's most pressing issues. In this guide, you will find suggestions for leading productive conversations that broaden perspectives, increase global competency, encourage empathy, and build new paradigms for education.

- When watching a film or having a powerful discussion, normalize taking breaks and exercising bodily autonomy. Acknowledge that conversations around complex topics can be vulnerable, complicated, and challenging. Encourage members to voice and do what is right for them without needing to explain or apologize.
- People do their best when they know what to expect. Start and end your meetings on time.
- Share or co-create your intentions for the meeting.
- Create your space. If possible, share snacks or find other ways to create an inviting, comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a trustworthy space. Maintain confidentiality and only speak to your own experience.
- Minimize distractions while you are together. Silence cell phones and devices so you can give your full attention to the conversation.
- Practice whole-body listening. Listen to words, tone, body language, and the feeling in the atmosphere.
- Acknowledge voices that may be absent. Is there a lived experience that isn't represented in your group? Who are the bridge people who might be able to connect you with other people in your community who might bring new perspectives to the table?
- Adopt an attitude of positive intent. If someone says something that bothers you, assume positive intent and ask for more information.
- Ignite your curiosity around other people's views and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. You don't need to agree with others in your group or make it known that you are "right" to have a worthwhile conversation.
- Words matter. Be open to learning and practicing new ways to communicate with others.
- Be clear, direct, and kind in your communication. Nobody benefits when you bottle your opinions.
- Everyone has blind spots and biases; cultivate a space of grace as you enter into new territory together.
- If a conversation gets heated, practice acknowledging the tension, pausing as a group, and taking a collective breath together before diving back in or taking a longer break to reset.
- Privilege your relationships with others over the content or agenda of the meeting. Show each other kindness.
- Create a closing ritual that celebrates the time you've spent together and either gives closure or gives members something to think about before your next meeting.

Director's Statement

My unconventional Midwestern Persian upbringing was not meant to lead me to a career in filmmaking. Born and raised in small-town Indiana, my destiny as a first-generation Iranian-American was to become a doctor or a dentist. But when an injury forced me to stop playing competitive basketball in high school, I found myself with an abundance of free time. Trying to fill the void, I picked up a camera and made my first video when I was 16 years old for a botany class. I dressed my friend as a tree and had him plead with my classmates to recycle. I suppose this was also when my affinity for the environment began.

Once I finished high school, I felt myself at a fork in the road and was unsure how to turn my growing passion for film into a career. So I listened to my Persian family (again) and went to college, where I received my bachelor's and master's degrees from the Indiana University School of Informatics and Computing, still not convinced I would ever be able to make a profession of my passions. Fortunately, during my studies, I was able to make two documentary short films, "Little Warriors" and "Sonnie." "Little Warriors" won the Indiana Spotlight Film Award from the Heartland Film Festival. "Sonnie" is waiting to hear back from festivals in the hopes of landing a world premiere. While in school, I also found work as an editor and producer of Andrew Cohn's documentary short, "Destination Park," which had its world premiere at Tribeca and an online premiere in *The Atlantic*.



Samuel-Ali Mirpoorian, Director

Greener Pastures started in the spring of 2018 when I heard this [NPR news story](#) on the CDC's report on the decline of the agricultural industry. Milk and corn/soybean prices were at their lowest and most comparable to the 1980s. But the figure that caught my attention was the number of suicides occurring. The suicide rate for the agriculture industry was/is the highest among any profession in the United States, and I was shocked by this. Considering that farmers are our food providers, it seems they should maintain the same level of importance as doctors, lawyers, and educators.

Being a Midwesterner who grew up surrounded by farmland, I was driven to tell this story. Over the next few months, I started to reach out to anyone that could help me, and by the fall of 2018, production had commenced. I have been moved by the families that have been so generous in allowing me into their lives to tell this story. I've also been surprised to learn that despite their political differences, they're all fearful of climate change in one way or another. All they want is a solution, a hope, a light at the end of the tunnel. I believe that in telling their stories, this film can be a part of some of that light.

I may not have become a doctor or a dentist, but I've never been prouder about being a filmmaker. I plan to share this film with my Persian family and let them know I am still making a positive impact in this life. I want to let them know you don't have to follow a traditional path to change the world.

— Samuel-Ali Mirpoorian

About the Film

American farmers have seen it all – from the [Great Depression](#), a worldwide economic crash that began in 1939 with the U.S. stock market crash and ended in 1945, to the [farming crisis of the 1980s](#), an economic crisis that was almost as severe as the Great Depression for farmers. Throughout these hardships, farming families have held onto the rugged individuality and strong work ethic that define them. But now, a dangerous combination of economic uncertainty, the aftershocks of a pandemic, isolation, and unpredictable and severe weather patterns have placed an essential industry at a dark crossroads. These threats affect our nation’s food supply, our global standing as trade leaders, and the lives and livelihoods of American farmers.

Greener Pastures provides an intimate window into the lives of four multigenerational farming families as they navigate the stressors that have contributed to farming having one of the highest rates of suicide of any U.S. occupation. Throughout the film, we see how farmers carry on in the face of these challenges and, ultimately, find hope in their successes. It is an underdog story of perseverance and determination that tackles nothing less than the future of farming in America.

Meet the farmers:



Jeff Ditzenberger is a corn and soybean farmer in Wisconsin. Twenty-seven years ago, Jeff tried to end his own life. Today, he runs a mental health nonprofit, [TUGS](#), traveling across the Midwest to talk with farmers about mental health and suicide prevention.

The film follows Jeff’s work with his nonprofit, his involvement



Juliette Albrecht is a dairy farmer in Minnesota. Juliette was a proud dairy-show competitor, but when we meet her, those days seem long past as she works on her alcohol dependency. The film follows Juliette’s hard work toward sobriety. However, when the

rent on her land increases and COVID-19 fractures the food chain, all her progress is threatened.



Jay Simeral is a sixth-generation farmer, Jay owns the same land in Ohio that was granted to his family back in the late 1700s and still has the original deed with Thomas Jefferson’s signature on it. His wife, **Melissa Simeral**, runs her own business, a

cakery to supplement the family’s income. Jay and Melissa’s story documents their family’s financial struggles and successes, including the sale of Jay’s cows, bankruptcy, the closure of Melissa’s cakery, the decision to allow fracking on their land, and the reopening of the cakery in 2021.



Chris Petersen is a livestock farmer and a regenerative agriculture advocate in Iowa. He is also no stranger to the stresses of farming or the danger that comes from ignoring them. When Chris was five years old, his mother died by suicide. One week earlier, their family

farm was forced into foreclosure. As a result, Chris works tirelessly, lobbying for farmers’ rights and health. The film follows Chris’s 2019 support of Bernie Sanders’s campaign in the Iowa primary.



Becky Higgins, Chris’s daughter, is forging her own path for her family. She runs a small sustainable farm and works in a nearby soup kitchen/meal center servicing individuals battling food insecurity. Becky is determined to carry on her father’s political and

environmental activism legacy by running for district soil and water commissioner. In the fall of 2020, Becky won as the only woman candidate, beating all incumbents by a large margin, on a platform of environmental health for her community.



Navigating the Space Between What We Cannot Control and What We Can



Farmers experience high occupational stress unique to their industry, including constant concern over new legislation, anxiety about changing farming methods, long working hours, the unpredictability of weather, and financial problems resulting from market fluctuations. Additionally, family farmers have spent their lives becoming highly trained and skilled in their business and might find it challenging to transition to other work. Unlike most Americans, farmers may feel an added sense of duty to their job because of their family's history with their land across generations. Often they view farming not simply as an occupation but as a way of life. Many farmers will remain dedicated to preserving their family's legacy, even if their mental health suffers.

American farmers are not alone. Farming is also associated with a higher suicide risk than the general population in India, Sri Lanka, Canada, England, and Australia. [Given this global problem](#), there is a critical need to normalize the experiences that modern farmers face and make suicide intervention, prevention, and postvention programs accessible to destigmatize reaching out for support.

Farmers deservedly take great pride in the service they provide the nation and the world. Unfortunately, farmers also tend to blame themselves when things go wrong, even over events outside their control, such as trade policies dictating how and what to farm, extreme debt brought on by impossible market pressures, and extreme changes in weather.

1. When experiencing extreme stress, people have coping mechanisms to give themselves temporary comfort. Oftentimes, this is the beginning of overconsumption of food, alcohol, video games, television, or other addictions to escape or avoid negative thoughts and feelings. In *Greener Pastures*, Juliette bravely recognizes and confronts her dependency on alcohol. Are you able to recognize when you fall into a negative coping behavior? When you become aware, what could you do instead to interrupt that behavior?
2. The opening moments of *Greener Pastures* show Jeff rocking out to uplifting music and connecting to a beloved pet. Later, we see him creating theater experiences with and for people in his community. What positive coping strategies do you employ when you're feeling stressed (e.g. listening to music, exercising, calling a friend, taking quiet time for yourself)?
3. Do you have any negative or painful associations with addiction or mental health? What language could you use (with yourself or others) to adopt a "no shame, no blame" attitude in regards to mental health challenges? How else could you normalize seeking support when you or someone else needs it?
4. What services or groups are available in your community that could offer friendship, support, and connection? If none come to mind, can you imagine the kind of group you would be excited to create?

Back to Our Roots



Early in our nation’s history, most families grew at least some, if not all, of their food. Small farms worked harmoniously with the environment, using regenerative systems that did not take more from the soil than could be replenished. Surplus harvest was canned, jarred, or salted for future seasons that might not be as bountiful, or it was shared, traded, or sold between community members.

With the advent of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, less labor was needed to produce food, and many people left farming to move into growing cities. As the years progressed, technological advances provided the farm families who stayed with new tools, machinery, chemical inputs, and genetically modified seeds that promised to increase production and profit. [Click here for the USDA’s Condensed History of American Agriculture.](#)

When adopting these new “miracles of modern science,” farmers often left behind more diversified farming practices and became more specialized. Many families went into debt to buy or repair the equipment necessary to keep their businesses competitive. Over time, farmers became more dependent on expensive chemical pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and fertilizers, and their specialized farms became more vulnerable to changes in the weather or economy.

1. What traditions from the past do you value and want to pass on to the next generation?
2. Does your family or community have concerns about the economy or the potential impacts of natural disasters?
3. If you’re a land or property owner, what do you wish people understood about your tax burdens or upkeep costs?
4. If you’re a renter, what do you wish people understood about the unique challenges of running a business or living on a property you don’t own?
5. If your discussion group is made up of both property owners and renters, are there any obvious points of friction that come up when discussing the future of farming?
6. If your group is mostly owners or mostly renters, how could you invite the other stakeholders into a conversation that would benefit all involved?

Deep Connections: Soil and Food

Farmers need to save money on inputs while improving the resiliency of their working land, increasing nutrient cycling and water filtration, and reducing erosion. By working with the environment, farmers can be at the heart of building the soil structure that will be the literal foundation of building healthy foods and families. Farmers and ranchers have been stewards of the land for generations, and new research and remembered practices are emerging to help them continue this vital work.

We don't need to reinvent the wheel. Indigenous farming cultures have engaged regenerative practices for millennia, many of which are called "cutting-edge" today. [Companion planting](#) naturally reduces pests and attracts pollinators, combining [intercropping](#) with [agroforestry](#) maximizes yields in small spaces, and understanding the interconnectedness of environmental health, individual health, and societal health honors the wisdom of the past that can propel us into a sustainable future. [The UN Food and Agricultural Organization 2021 report states](#), "the world cannot feed itself sustainably without listening to Indigenous Peoples."

There was no way our ancestors could know that in the dirt beneath their feet, invisible to the naked eye, [microorganisms](#) were busy fixing nitrogen, recycling nutrients, controlling pests, and promoting plant growth. Imagine having that conversation with your great-great-grandparents!

[New research](#) led by geomorphologist David Montgomery of the University of Washington links the health of the soil to the nutrient density of the food we consume. (A geomorphologist is a person who studies how the earth's surface is formed and changed by rivers, mountains, oceans, air, and ice.)

1. When was the last time your family ate a meal that consisted entirely of fresh fruits and vegetables, and locally produced meat, dairy, eggs, and whole grains? What would need to shift in our culture to allow families to eat home-cooked, locally produced foods? What are the barriers?
2. What differences have you noticed in your livestock when you change the quality of their feed? If you don't raise livestock, do you notice differences in your own energy and mood when you eat high-quality, nutrient-dense food rather than processed food or food that is high in sugar?
3. What have the conversations been in your community regarding no till or reduced tillage, cover crops, and other conservation practices? How widely have these practices been adopted in your community?
4. The [Soil Health Stories blog](#) on Farmers.gov shares inspiration and ideas from farmers all across the country working to preserve the integrity of the soil, whether their business is corn, beef, or beyond. Do they spark ideas you could bring to your farm or community?
5. Have you or someone you know had experience working with the [USDA's Natural Resource Conservation Service](#) (NRCS)? How have conservation practices been part of creating a healthy business?
6. Can you foresee any barriers to applying for [programs that offer assistance](#) with climate-smart agriculture and forestry? Click here for your [state's ranking dates](#).
7. Respected institutions like the [World Economic Forum](#) and [Natural Resources Defense Council](#) have shared evidence on how regenerative farming can improve crop yields and nutrition density, sequester carbon, and make crops more resilient to extreme climate events. What is the main obstacle to regenerative farming practices being more widely adopted in the United States?

Connecting the Dots: Health



[Farming practices that deplete the soil produce foods that are not as nutrient dense.](#) Additionally, the food industry has created ultra-processed foods with preservatives that allow for a long shelf life. These ultra-processed food products deliver excess calories, saturated and trans fats, added sugars and sodium, leading to diet-related chronic diseases, such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, osteoporosis, and some cancers. In the past, poor diet was once associated with lack of food. [Today, it is more likely that someone eating the Standard American Diet is undernourished and overfed.](#)

Imagining farmers, the people who produce our food, not having access to healthy foods seems counter-intuitive. However, rural living comes with unique challenges. Plummeting prices for farm goods, limited availability of off-farm jobs or low-wage jobs, and lack of transportation [make affording food more difficult.](#) Like everyone else, people in rural communities want the best for their families: a healthy environment, healthy food, and access to medical resources.

A healthy diet and physical health are connected. However, people may be unclear on what a “healthy diet” is. Additionally, many people don’t know that the Standard American Diet, smoking, and a sedentary lifestyle can lead to or aggravate stress and mental illness. More and more data are piling up to show that [optimizing nutrition works to prevent and treat mental illness.](#)

The [National Rural Health Association](#) (NRHA) is a national non-profit that provides leadership on rural health issues through advocacy, communications, education, and research.

The [Faces of Rural Campaign](#) works to share the diversity and strength of rural communities. This campaign combats the stereotypes of rural Americans that have been politicized to create division amongst people with common interests.

1. We know that [mental wellbeing is intimately connected to physical health outcomes](#), yet rural communities have some of the largest shortages of mental healthcare in the country. What mental health facilities and/or providers are accessible in your community? What would need to be added for your community to be fully supported?
2. How would you describe your family’s relationship with food? Do you grow most of your food? Where do you make most of your food purchases?
3. If you [live in a food desert](#), could you and your neighbors create a community garden space or start other initiatives to improve your community’s access to healthy food?
4. How might you create connections between rural and more densely populated communities to collectively lobby for the common interests of healthy soil and food and medical access (that includes mental health services) for all Americans?
5. Mental health and physical health are often viewed as two separate things. What happens when we connect them and begin to prioritize whole health for individuals and families?



Moving Beyond a Rock and a Hard Place: Community Action and Engagement



According to data as of December 1, 2022 from the [USDA Economic Research Service](#), about 89 percent of U.S. farms are small, and most of these rely on off-farm sources for the majority of their household income. The rising prices of chemical inputs, severe weather, and unpredictable global markets have led to the [nation losing 100,000 farms between 2011 and 2018](#) (12,000 between 2017 and 2018 alone) due to bankruptcy or failure of succession.

Furthermore, the USDA Economic Research Service forecasts that in 2023 (the time of this writing) [net farm income will continue to decrease](#) partly due to lower direct government payments to farmers and higher production expenses. Many farmers understand the economic, environmental, and health advantages of transitioning to regenerative farming practices but need more [resources and support](#) to be able to make changes. Our farmers face the impossible choice of doing what they know is right for the land and keeping hold of the family farm to feed their families.

Even after the supply chain disruptions of the pandemic, many Americans don't really understand how the food on their grocery shelves is connected to our nation's farmers and rural communities. Fortunately, the pandemic did teach us that whether we're in a rural town or a densely populated city, in the fields or sitting in an office, we all need access to affordable and healthy food, shelter, and medical care. Wanting the best for our children's futures, and the ability to work with dignity, aligns our interests across any political divide.

Even when doing the best we can, there are forces outside of our control that can bring us to our knees. It is in these hard times that we need to work together to find solutions that will benefit everyone.

1. Did supply chain problems during the pandemic affect your community?
2. When you envision a thriving, healthy future for family farms, what does it look like?
3. What would need to happen immediately to support family farms? What would need to happen over time?
4. What drives your purchasing choices? Affordability? Quality? Availability?
5. Many Americans have jobs in industries connected to large agricultural corporations, either on factory farms or in the supply chain. How could regular people in collaboration with our representatives in government support these people earning a livelihood that doesn't contribute to environmental and individual health degradation?
6. When you look at the following suggestions for action, what other ideas spark the excitement of your group to 1) educate the public, 2) create healthy and vibrant rural communities, and 3) heal and protect the environment?

What Can You Do? Suggestions for Engagement



Some ideas for engagement and action are shared below. With your group, discuss positive strategies and resources available in your local community.

Self-care is essential for sustainable advocacy. Whether leading or supporting a grassroots effort or flying the friendly skies, [put on your own oxygen mask before helping others.](#)

Post signage in public spaces to raise awareness for the [988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#). This is a national network of local crisis centers that provide free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, seven days a week in the United States. Just dial 988. Learn more at [988lifeline.org/](#)

Support the [National Rural Health Association](#) (NRHA) by [becoming a member](#). For more than 45 years, NRHA has been your on-the-spot advocate, building communities and coalitions in rural areas across the country and connecting members with a wealth of resources, including the greatest resource of all: people who dedicate their lives to rural health. Your unique rural story deserves a platform, and your voice is crucial to the future of rural health. [www.ruralhealth.us/about-nrha](#) Visit [Feeding America](#) to [find your local food bank](#) and promote and destigmatize its use in your community. If there isn't a food bank in your area, talk with your friends, colleagues, or faith community to start one.

Explore the resources for the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#). NAMI is the largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. [Find support](#), [learn more](#), or [become an advocate for mental health](#).

“Regenerative Agriculture” describes farming and grazing practices that, among other benefits, reverse climate change by rebuilding soil organic matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity, resulting in carbon drawdown and improving the water cycle. Learn more at [Regeneration International](#) and [USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service](#). See what assistance might be available in your state [here](#).

Support [Farm Aid](#) and share [The Farmer Resource Network](#) with your community.

If possible, shop at your local farmers or growers market to support small farmers in your community. Click [here](#) to find your local farmers market. Some markets accept EBT. If a farmers/growers market is not available in your community, look for produce/meat/dairy/goods marked LOCAL at your grocery store. We also encourage you to talk to your local grocery stores, hospitals, and schools to find out if they source any of their produce or meat from local farmers and to encourage them to do so when possible. If you know a local grower and can connect them to a vendor, this is a great way to get involved.

Additional Resources

Climate/Regenerative Agriculture

[Climate Change and Food Security Risks, UN](#)

[Five Benefits of Sustainable Agriculture and Five Ways to Scale It](#)

[NASA Agriculture Climate Change Projections](#)

[New Food Order Podcast: How Might We Better Support Farmers in Their Transition to Regenerative Agriculture?](#)

[USDA: Climate Solutions](#)

Farming/Rural Communities

[American Diverse Family Farms 2021 Edition](#)

[Farm Aid](#)

[Farm Crisis of the 1980s and Boom and Bust Cycles in Agriculture](#)

[National Black Farmers Association](#)

[National Young Farmers Coalition](#)

[Rural Data Explorer](#)

[Share America: Women Boost Sustainable Farming](#)

[U.S. Department of Agriculture: A Look at America's Family Farms](#)

[USDA: Farm Service Agency](#)

[Women & Ag Network](#)

Mental and Physical Health Awareness, Information and Resources

[American Psychological Association \(APA\): Farmer Stress](#)

[Down on the Farm: Supporting Farmers in Stressful Times](#)

[Farmers' Suicide: Across Cultures](#)

[Manage Stress to Increase Farm Safety](#)

[Mental Health First Aid for Rural Communities](#)

[National Association for Rural Mental Health](#)

[National Library of Medicine: Overview of Health and Diet in America](#)

[National Rural Health Association Policy Brief](#)

[Stress Management for Women Farmers and Ranchers](#)

[TUGS: Talking, Understanding, Growing, Supporting](#)

Film Credits

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