

Reclaiming the Soul of Food and Farming¹

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Webster defined the “soul” as the “immaterial essence, the animating principle, or actuating cause” of life. For something to have a soul, using this definition, it must first have life, but it must also be something more than purely physical in nature. It must have a nonmaterial, abstract dimension – something conceptual that defines the principles of its life and its purpose for living.

Eating and farming are living processes. And in times past, at least, both food and farming were considered metaphysical, as well as physical, in nature. All life was a miracle, a gift from God – not just the product of physical evolution from some past biological accident. Food not only was the physical essence of life, but it was a central focus of family, community, and worship – of our connectedness with each other and with the Holy. To farm meant to be an active participant in the miracle of life and to be a caretaker of the earth, the root of all life. Certainly, the soul of things like food and farming is something fundamentally different from the soul of a human being. But there was a time when food and farming were important sources of spiritual, as well as physical, sustenance for humanity.

Over time, however, the “soul” of food and farming has been lost. In our preoccupation with the physical and material, we have lost our sense of the spiritual. In our quest for ever more food, clothing, shelter, transportation, health care, education, entertainment, etc. to make life easier we have lost our sense of the value of friendship, stewardship, purpose, and meaning in making life better. In our unending quest to make farming more efficient, to produce more food at a lower cost, we have taken the “soul” out of farming. In our unending quest for food that is quick, convenient, and cheap, we have taken the “soul” out of food.

As we took the “soul” from food and farming, we also took its heart. In our never-ending quest for cheap food, we transformed American Agriculture from a system of small, diversified, independently operated, family farms into a system of large-scale, industrialized, corporately controlled agribusinesses. The production technologies that supported specialization, mechanization, and ultimately, large-scale, contract production, were all developed to make agriculture more efficient – to make food cheaper for consumers. Millions of farm families have been forced off the land and many of those remaining are sacrificing their independence. Thousands of small farming communities have withered and died -- all for the sake of cheap food. We're told this destruction of rural culture was an inescapable consequence of economic progress. The “agricultural establishment” has boasted loudly that ever fewer farmers have been able to feed a growing nation with an ever-decreasing share of consumer income spent for food. The increases in economic efficiency have been impressive, but what about the human costs? What is the value of the lives of farm

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families that have been destroyed by the loss of their farms, their way of life, and their heritage? What is the value of the lives of rural people – with roots in rural schools, churches, and businesses – who were forced to abandon their communities as farm families were forced off the land?

As we took the “soul” out of food and farming, we degraded the natural environment. Today, only the most diehard industrialists bother to deny that we have depleted the productivity of the land through erosion and contamination, and that we have polluted the natural environment with agricultural chemicals – in our never-ending pursuit of cheaper food. Certainly, we had soil erosion in the “dust bowl” days, but we were making great strides in soil conservation, before the dawning of industrial agriculture in the late 1940s. In spite of stepped up soil conservation efforts during the 1990s, American farms still are losing topsoil at rates far exceeding rates of soil regeneration. Feeble efforts to control soil loss through reduced tillage leave farmers increasingly reliant on herbicides that pollute our streams and groundwater and that disrupt or destroy the biological life in the soil.

We are told that farmers still have a strong sense of stewardship, that they are environmentalists at heart. Perhaps this is true, but many farmers have felt compelled to do whatever was necessary to survive the relentless competitive pressures in an agricultural industry driven by the economic bottom line. Many will admit that they are doing things to the land that they don't want to do, but feel they have no choice. The gains in economic efficiency have been impressive, but what about the ecological costs? What is the value of the health and productivity of the land? What is the value of maintaining the ability of the earth to support human life?

As we took the “soul” out of food and farming, it has come increasingly under corporate control. The multinational food corporations that increasingly control agriculture today are not people – they have no heart, no soul, nor citizenship in any particular country. Once decision making becomes separated from ownership and responsibility, as it is in publicly held corporations, economics becomes the sole motivation. Corporations have no sense of good or evil or of right or wrong, they can only do what they were designed to do – make profits and grow. Thus, with the globalization of agriculture through “free-trade” agreements, food in the future will be grown wherever in the world it can be produced at the lowest economic cost and sold wherever it yields the greatest economic return.

Increasingly, food will be produced somewhere other than in North America and Europe. High costs of land and labor – consequences of favorable employment opportunities and rural residential development -- will keep production costs in the more economically developed countries well above costs in the less developed food producing regions of the world. Increasingly, lower costs of land and labor in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, China, and South Africa will be exploited by agribusiness corporations to provide cheap food for affluent consumers in North America, Europe, and elsewhere.

A global agriculture might produce still more food at a still lower cost – although, increasing market power of corporations may ensure that lower production cost benefits

investors far more than it does consumers. However, even with more food there would be no assurance of fewer people being left hungry. Historically, when a developing country begins to produce food for export, outside corporate investors benefit at the expense of local, independent farmers. Local indigenous farmers can't compete with large-scale, industrial farming operations, and thus, are no longer able to sell their surplus production to generate cash income. Eventually, local farmers are forced to abandon farming as an occupation, but most will be unable to find jobs in the cities that pay enough to feed their families. The cities become flooded with displaced farm families. Indigenous people face increasing poverty and hunger. Greater agricultural production is not used to feed the poor, but instead, is exported to affluent consumers elsewhere. A corporate agriculture has no "soul." Its responsibility is to its stockholders, not to the hungry, so it sells to those who are willing and able to pay the highest price.

Ironically, a heartless, soulless agriculture means food insecurity for the rich as well as the poor of the world. For example, the U.S. could someday become as dependent on the rest of the world for food as we are today for oil. Economists argue that it won't matter where our food is produced. If producing food elsewhere in the world will be cheaper, we will all be better off without agriculture in the US. But how long will it be before an OFEC (Organization of Food Exporting Countries) is formed to restrict world food supplies causing our food prices to skyrocket – just as we have seen skyrocketing prices for gasoline in the past. Perhaps we in the U.S. can keep food imports flowing – through our military might, if economic coercion fails. But, how many terrorist attacks will we suffer as a consequence of our global food policies, how many *small wars* will we have to fight, and how many people will we be "forced to kill?" How secure is food of any nation, rich or poor, after it loses the ability to feed itself?

As we took the "soul" out of food and farming, we have sacrificed our sense of connectedness with each other and with the earth, not just to save money, but also to save time and effort. The consequences of our efforts to make food *quick and convenient* are no less dire than are the consequences of our efforts to make food *cheap*.

Today, nearly eighty cents of each dollar Americans spend for food goes to pay for marketing services – processing, packaging, transportation, storage, advertising, etc. All of these costs are associated with making our food convenient – getting it into the most convenient form and package, getting it to the most convenient location, at the most convenient time, and convincing us to buy it. Today, we pay more to those who "package and advertise" our food than we pay to the farmers who "produce" it. So, we pay far more for the convenience of our food than we pay for the food itself. Those who complain about the rising cost of *food* should instead complain about the rising cost of *convenience*. Ironically, it seems that poorer people are even more susceptible to the promotion of highly processed and elaborately packaged foods, thus spending even more for convenience than do the affluent.

Our growing addiction to convenience is not only adding to our cost of food, but also is placing control of our food supply in the hands of a few giant, multinational corporations. Today, the global food distribution system is dominated by a handful of

giant agribusiness firms, allied by various means to form four or five “global food clusters.”³ These firms influence, and in many cases control, nearly everything that happens to our food after it leaves the farm. They control both food cost and our access to food because they control the processes that make our food “convenient.” The consequences of *quick* food are similar in nature to the consequences of convenience food. Our growing addiction to “fast foods” is evident in the ever increasing share of our food dollar spent at restaurants and other eating establishments – a share approaching half of total food purchases. And, “fast foods” places, such as McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut, account for nearly half of all food consumed away from home. Erick Schlosser, in his recent best seller, “Fast Food Nation,” addresses the cost of our “love affair” with fast foods. He states, “fast food has triggered the homogenization of our society. Fast food has hastened the malling of our landscape, widening of the chasm between rich and poor, fueled an epidemic of obesity, and propelled the juggernaut of American cultural imperialism abroad.”

Our quest for *quick* food has lured us into choosing diets deficient in nearly everything except calories, supporting practices deceptive in every aspect from advertising to flavoring, and food systems that degrade nearly everyone and everything involved in the process. The fast food industry has lured low-income consumers, along with the affluent, into paying ridiculously high prices for low-quality meats, potatoes, vegetable oil, and sugar. However, the high dollar-and-cent costs are but the tip of the iceberg. The true costs of quick food must include the costs of poor health, lost dignity in work, degraded landscapes, and ethical and moral decay in business matters, including international trade and investment.

We are left today with a “soulless” food and farming system that values nothing other than the physical and tangible – the things that can be measured by weight and volume and sold for dollars and cents. Our system of food and farming reflects no sense of vital motivation, living principles, or spiritual essence. It has even lost any true sense that food and farming are *living* processes – that eating and farming are even capable of being soulful activities. We are left with systems that are motivated by profit and are carried out by mechanistic processes for purely materialistic purposes. We are left with systems of food and farming that have no soul.

The vital motivation for eating, and farming, is to sustain life. The root of all life, including human life, is in the soil. Air, water, and sunlight are essential to life, but no more essential than is the soil – the earth. All life on earth is interconnected, and in turn, is connected with the earth. The living things in the soil -- bacteria, fungi, nematodes, earthworms, etc. – live in a symbiotic relationship with the roots of plants. The living things above the soil – insects, plants, and animals, including humans – live in an interdependent relationship, with the health of one interdependent with the

³ For summaries of global food consolidation studies, see articles by Mary Hendrickson and William Heffernan, in Small Farm Today Magazine, April 1999 and July 2001, also available on the Internet at <http://nfu.org/images/heffernan.pdf> and <http://nfu.org/images/heffernan1999.pdf>

health of others, and the health of the soil. Healthy soils make healthy plants and animals, and healthy plants and animals make healthy people.

Most certainly, humans are not the only “consumers” on earth. In fact, all living things exist by consuming other living things, or at least by eating the remains of things that once were living. The waste of one living thing becomes the food for another, and some living things must die, becoming food, so that others may live. Microorganisms, insects, plants, animals, and humans are all part of an interdependent web of life. We humans are no less dependent on the health of microorganisms in the soil or wildlife in the forest than we are on the health of crops in the fields and the animals on the farm. And in turn, their well-being is dependent upon us – upon what we do to the water, the air, and the soil in the process of feeding ourselves.

When we lost the “soul” of food and farming, we lost this sense of this interdependence. Most people have no real sense of where their food comes from. They may be vaguely aware that farmers somewhere grow the food that they buy in their local supermarket or fast food restaurant. But, most people have no real sense of their connectedness with the earth, or of their dependence on the other living things on the earth. Few people seem to realize that we are as dependent upon the land and upon farmers today as we were when everyone grew their own food.

We are destroying the ability of the earth to support life, including human life, because we have lost our sense of the immaterial essence and vital motivation for food and farming. Since we took the “soul” out of food and farming, we have been doing things that are destroying the future of humanity.

To sustain human life on earth, we must honor the basic principles of living systems – the necessity to renew, regenerate, and reproduce, as we consume. We must honor the soul of food and farming. All systems, both living and “dead,” have three basic characteristics: pattern, structure, and process. The pattern is the conceptual framework for the system. For a dead system – a tool, a machine, or a factory – the pattern is the blueprint or design. For a living system – a plant, animal, or person – the pattern is embedded in its genetic code or DNA. The pattern is constant, unchanging, or fixed for both dead and living systems. A machine always is a machine and a person always is a person.

A principle difference between dead and living systems is found in the structure. The structure of a system is the physical embodiment of the pattern. For dead systems the structure is the thing you see or touch – the tool, machine, building, etc. For a living system, the structure also is the thing you see or touch – the plant, animal, human body, etc. For dead systems, the structure is fixed – it can never change on its own. It may wear out or it may be rebuilt or redesigned, but it has no autonomous ability to change. A machine keeps its same physical structure for all of its useful life. However, the structures of living systems are continual changing. Living things are born, they grow, they mature, they reproduce, and they die. This continual change is a fundamental characteristic of life – living things are “self-making,” dead things are not. Living and dead systems also differ in principle with respect to process. The processes by which dead systems perform their purpose or tasks are linear and sequential. The fundamental purpose of dead systems is to transform some input into a more useful or desirable output – step-by-step, from input to output. A person rides a bicycle to

transform kinetic energy embodied in leg muscles into mechanical energy that turns the wheels and propels the bike down the road. An engine transforms the kinetic energy in fossil fuels into mechanical energy to perform some useful task. Input results in output. But, dead systems use up inputs in the process of producing output – they don't regenerate, renew, or reproduce.

Living systems perform useful purposes or tasks as well, but living processes are renewing, regenerative, and reproductive as well as functional. Living processes are circular and simultaneous rather than linear and sequential. Living systems operate in cycles of birth, growth, and reproduction – before death. Function and regeneration occur simultaneously for living systems – they “remake” themselves in the process of fulfilling their purpose.

In summary, dead systems are designed to accomplish some purpose according to some blueprint or pattern, they function for the duration of their usefulness, and then they are either redesigned or discarded. On the other hand, the pattern and purpose of a living system is embedded in its genetic makeup, in its DNA. The processes of a living system include both functional usefulness and self-renewal. Living systems continually change and renew their structure in accordance with the unchanging genetic code embedded in their DNA.

When we lost the soul of food and farming, we lost any real sense of the necessity for living system to be self-sustaining – to be self-renewing, regenerative, and reproductive. We have developed “dead” systems of farming, turning non-renewable resources and finite inputs into consumable outputs, giving little consideration for their ability to recreate resources or recycle inputs, in order to sustain their productivity over time. When we consume food, we are “consuming” rather than “using” the resources of the earth. When we consume, without regenerating, we are participating in a process of exploitation that simply cannot be sustained over time.

We are destroying the ability of the earth to support life, including human life, because we have lost our sense of the animating principles of living systems for food and farming. Since we took the “soul” out of food and farming, we have been doing things that are destroying the future of humanity.

To sustain human life on earth, we must find ways to meet the needs of all in the present, while leaving equal or better opportunities for those the future. We cannot sustain our systems of food and farming if we continue to focus only on meeting the needs of those who are willing and able to pay for food. Food systems must be profitable for today's producers, but free markets will not meet the needs of those who are unable to pay, nor will free markets meet the needs of those of future. The poorest of the poor cannot compete in the market place for food. If the basic food needs of all are to be met, we, as a society, must make conscious, purposeful decisions to do so. Those of future generations cannot even participate in today's market place. Thus, they cannot buy resources to set aside for their future use. Nor can those of the future vote in today's public referendums through which we might set aside resources for their future use. If the needs of the future are to be met, we, as a society, must make conscious, purposeful decisions to do so.

We, as a society, will not make the conscious, purposeful decisions needed to ensure sustainability until we reclaim the spiritual essence of food and farming. We must recognize that eating and farming are something more than mechanical and biological processes – eating and farming are ethical and moral acts. Admittedly, food and farming have no “spiritual essence,” per se, but farmers and eaters do. Our concerns for the sustainability of life on earth are fundamentally ethical and moral concerns. Our eating and farming choices are means of reflecting our ethics and morality – of expressing our uniquely human spirituality.

Our concern for sustainability must arise from a belief in a “higher order of things” – a belief that we are but parts of something meaningful that is bigger than ourselves. The purpose of anything, including a human life, can be determined only from the perspective of the larger whole of which the thing is but a part. For example, a doctor may be able to describe the function of the human heart or brain – to pump blood or process electrical impulses – but the purpose of these organs cannot be determined without considering the body as a whole. The human body represents a higher order of things within which the heart and brain acquire purpose or reason for their functions. Likewise, the purpose and meaning of our life is not embodied in us individually, nor can it be derived from our relationships with others, but instead, arises from our place within a larger, intangible whole -- a higher order of things. The purpose and meaning of life must come from that which transcends life – that which is beyond or above us – from our spiritual essence. Without this higher sense of purpose and meaning, we will choose to care only for ourselves, or for those whom we love, and will not make choices to care for those whom we don't know or can never know.

Moral and ethical decisions are a reflection of our spiritual essence – our innate sense of good and bad, of right and wrong – that distinguishes between actions that are in harmony with the higher order and those that are not. Without a clear sense of spirituality, we will not make conscious, purposeful decisions to ensure that the basic food needs of all are met, regardless of their ability to pay. Without this sense of soulfulness, we will not make conscious, purposeful decisions to leave those of future generations with opportunities to have as much food and as good a food as we have today. We must reclaim the soulfulness of food and farming or we will not make the decisions necessary to sustain human life on earth.

Our soulfulness allows us to see our lives are made better by caring for other people – by helping those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Our soulfulness allows us to see that our own lives are made better by being responsible stewards of the resources of the earth – for the benefit of future generations. These things give purpose and meaning to our lives – they help us live in harmony with the higher order. We benefit from living more spirit-filled lives.

The sustainability of human life on earth is undeniably a question of human spirituality. The Golden Rule, a fundamental aspect of every enduring religion of the world and of most philosophies, is a clear reflection of human spirituality. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is a prescription for righteous living – for living in harmony with the higher order. It implies that we must have self-respect, as

well as respect for others. Otherwise, how we are treated, and thus, how we treat others just doesn't matter. But, the Golden Rule commands that we must make conscious, purposeful decisions to care for others, as we would have them care for us. The Golden Rule does not imply that we can choose to leave other people to fend for themselves simply because we are able to fend for ourselves. It says that we must care for those who are without means to care for themselves, as we would have them care for us, if we were without means to care for ourselves. Lives lived in isolation and in denial of responsibility have no purpose or meaning – they perform no function within the higher order. Thus, caring for others is not a sacrifice; instead, it helps give purpose and meaning to our lives.

The concept of sustainability extends the Golden Rule across generations. Sustainability requires that we not only care for others of this generation but that we “do for those of future generations as we would have them do for us” – if we were of their generation and they were here today. With an attitude of soulfulness, we recognize that being stewards of resources for the benefit of future generation is not a sacrifice; instead, it helps give purpose and meaning to our lives.

Benjamin Franklin concluded, in his later years, that commandments, such as the Golden Rule, “are not good for us because they are commanded, but instead, are commanded because they are good for us.” In other words, the Golden Rule is enduring and widely acclaimed today because it has proven to be a “better way to live.” Following the Golden Rule is not a sacrifice; instead, it defines a life of purpose and meaning. Living sustainably is not a sacrifice; instead, it defines a life of purpose and meaning. To sustain human life on earth, we must reclaim the soul of food and farming – the vital motivation, the living principles, and the spiritual essence. But, how do we reclaim the soul of food and farming? First, we must change the ways we think. We must recognize our complicity in the ecological and social destructiveness of our current food and farming systems and accept personal responsibility for our actions. We need not be repentant for every time we have shopped at a retail super center or have eaten at a fast food restaurant, and we need not boycott such establishments in the future. At times, there may be no logical alternatives. But, we simply must recognize that each time we spend a dollar at Wal Mart or Mac Donald's, we are helping to support a system of food and farming that is degrading the future of humanity.

As farmers, we must accept our complicity in supporting a system of production that lacks ecological and social integrity and accept personal responsibility for our actions. We need not repent for every crop of corn or soybeans we have planted, or every batch of hogs or chickens grown in confinement, and we need not pledge to grow only organic crops and grass-fed livestock in the future. At times, we may see no logical alternatives. But we simply must recognize that as long as we pursue conventional, industrial systems of farming, we are supporting a system of farming that is degrading the future of humanity.

We must realize that our individual thoughts and actions have social and ecological consequences. What we think and what we do matters – matters not just to us, but also to others of this generation and for all generations of the future. We must reclaim a

sense of food and farming as a source of our connectedness with each other and our connectedness with the earth. Our mothers were right when they told us “we should clean our plates, because the little children in China were starving.” Maybe, there was no “logical” connection between our being appreciative of our food and hunger in other parts of the world, but there was a spiritual connection.

As we grew up, we concluded that it didn't matter how much food we threw away. We could not reasonably be expected to give our surplus food to the hungry children in other countries – there was no logical way of doing it. But, as a consequence, we lost some of our appreciation for what we had, we lost some of our concern for what others did not have; and the disparity between the haves and have-nots of the world grew. It couldn't be our fault, we reasoned, we couldn't see any logical connection between our lives and theirs. But, there are spiritual connections among all children of the world – our mothers understood. And, there are spiritual connections among all people of the world. What we think and what we do matter. By changing what we think and what we do, we can change the world.

Perhaps we can't change the world by ourselves, no matter what we think or do. But, we can each do our part. We can begin to reclaim the soul of food through more spiritual eating. We can be ever conscious that our eating choices reflect and affect our connectedness with the other living and nonliving things, and that we are all parts of some higher order of things. We can eat more meals with others – with family members, with old friends and new friends – and thereby, strengthen our connectedness with other people. We can do more preparing of our own meals “from scratch,” and thereby, strengthen our connectedness with the other life that supports our life. We can grow more of our own food or buy more directly from the farmers who grow it, and thereby, strengthen our connectedness with the land.

We can reclaim the soul of food and farming by doing everything that we can to support food and farming systems that are self-making, regenerative, and thus, sustainable. As eaters or as farmers, we can all help develop and support more sustainable, local alternatives to the corporately controlled, global system of food and farming. We can join with thousands of farmers and consumers all across North America who are developing more sustainable, local food systems. These people come together regularly within local communities by means of farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture associations (CSAs), community gardens, and at other venues where farmers and eaters meet through their common interest in food. We can connect, though less personally, through locally owned restaurants and grocery stores that buy from local farmers and cater to ecologically and socially conscious consumers.

We don't have to give up oranges, bananas, coffee, or things that can't be produced locally in order to support local food systems. “Free trade” can be beneficial to all concerned – when “all are free to either trade or not trade.” We should do everything we can to ensure that the things we buy do not support the exploitation of people, by knowing the conditions under which “all” of our food is grown. We can and should continue trading with those in other regions and other nations whenever doing so will help ensure the ecological, social, and economic sustainability of their agriculture. Ultimately, agriculture must be sustainable for people *everywhere* or it can't be sustainable for people *anywhere*.

As farmers and as eaters, we must begin to think and act as “whole people” – with physical, relational, and spiritual dimensions. To reclaim the soul of food and farming we must accept our God-given responsibilities for each other and for the earth. Jesus said, “as you did to one of the least of these, you did to me.” When we show lack of respect for the *sheep*, we show lack of respect for the *Shepherd*. The Holy Bible states, “the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof.” When we show lack of respect for the *creation*, we show lack of respect for the *Creator*.

As we reclaim the soul of food and farming, we will begin to reclaim the spiritual essence of our own lives. We will begin to understand that all people have an inherent right to sufficient food to ensure their normal physical and mental growth and well-being. We will begin to understand that people of future generations have a right to food -- to an opportunity for as much and as good as we have today. We will begin to understand that the food we eat and the ways we farm have impacts on other peoples' opportunities for food, both today and in the future. We will begin to understand that the sustainability of human life on earth could very well depend upon the choices we make today.

We will develop a conscience with respect to food and farming. We will become more thoughtful eaters – realizing and appreciating the miracles of life embodied in the food that we eat. We will become more thankful eaters -- thankful to God not only for those who grow and prepare our food, but also for the plants and animals that give their life so we may live. We will become conscious that there are morally and ethically right and wrong things to eat and right and wrong ways to farm.

We will come to understand that our lives gain purpose and meaning as we meet our God-given responsibilities to make conscious, purposeful decisions to help take care of other people and to help take care of the land. We will come to understand that the quality of our life depends as least as much on the quality of our relationships and on our commitment to stewardship as on our individual "standard of living." As we reclaim the soul of food and farming, we will rediscover the vital motivation, the living principles, and the spiritual essence of our lives. In reclaiming the soul of food and farming, we will rediscover the essence of our own soul.