

Revitalizing Rural Communities through Agriculture¹

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North American agriculture is in the midst of a “great transition” – a transition that is fundamentally transforming rural America. Although my rural life experiences have been in the United States, I have spent enough time over the past decade in Canada, talking with Canadians, to believe the rural transformations of the U.S. and Canada are not all that different. Agriculture as we have known it, with family farms and viable rural communities, is being rapidly transformed into an industrial agriculture, with factory farms and dying rural communities. Such times of change are times of great risks but also times of great opportunity. There are no guarantees of survival or success. But, an understanding of the forces of change can be quite helpful in coping with the risks of change and in realizing the opportunities. The forces driving change in American agriculture today are the continuing forces of industrialization.

This industrialization of agriculture is not a new phenomenon. The trend toward specialization, standardization, and consolidation – toward industrialization – began around the turn of the 20th century, with the mechanization of agriculture. However, the chemical technologies that emerged from World War II, particularly commercial fertilizers and pesticides, accelerated the industrialization process. Until recently, the most obvious consequence of this process had been larger farms, fewer farms, and fewer farm families. But, farmers and families, real people, were still making the decisions concerning what was produced, how it was produced, who it was produced for, and they considered how their decisions might affect the land and their neighbors. Today, however, these important decisions increasingly are made in the boardrooms of giant, multinational corporations. These corporations are not real people; they have no families, no friends, no communities, and increasingly no single nationality. Their decisions are driven by the never-ending need to generate profits and to grow. The needs of families, communities, the land, and society in general, must be considered secondary to the needs of the corporation.

Until recently, the specialization, standardization, and consolidation of farming had been driven by the decisions of individual, family farmers. Farmers freely choose to adopt the new mechanical and chemical technologies, many of which were developed through publicly supported research, because they seemed to promise increased profits. These technologies invariably promised greater production efficiency, which would reduce cost per unit of production, leaving the farmer with a wider profit margin. Increased efficiency generally meant that each farmer could produce more than before, in fact, needed to produce more to justify the new technological investment and to realize the full benefit of the new technology. However, the “early adopters” were the only farmers to realize increased profits. As more and more farmers adopted a new technology, a new kind of machine or agri-chemical, total

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production invariably increased, because each farmer was now compelled to produce more. With increased production, market prices invariably fell, leaving even the innovators no better off than before. The later adopters rarely had a chance to recoup their investment before prices fell. In cases where the government supported commodity prices, land prices rose, with the same net effect on profits. Eventually, technological adoption was motivated by survival rather than profits, and those farmers who adopted too late didn't survive.

Some farmers had to fail so others could expand – could farm more land or produce more livestock – in order to realize the full benefits of the new technologies. In fact, prices invariably stayed low enough long enough to force enough farmers out of business to accommodate the new industrial technologies. And, after each “technological adjustment” was complete, there was always another round of technology waiting for adoption. Chronic crisis and farm failures have been a necessary consequence of agricultural industrialization.

The current corporatization of agriculture is but the final stage of the industrialization process. As the new technologies have required larger and larger operations to justify the new investments, capital requirements have exceeded the credit capacity of all but the largest of individual farmers. Many farmers have formed family corporations to enhance their ability to raise investment capital. Increasingly, however, only the “publicly owned” corporations are able to meet the agricultural capital requirements of an increasingly industrial agriculture.

Economists now proclaim corporate contracts as the farmers' only means of gaining access to the technology, capital, and markets they will need to be competitive in the 21st century. Most of the land and basic production facilities are still owned by individual farmers and family corporations, but production is carried out under direction of agri-business corporations. Through contracts, the agribusiness corporations, many of them multinational, are making the decisions concerning what is produced, how it is produced, whom it is produced for, and how the production process affects the land and the neighbors.

With increasing corporate control of the food system, even those independent producers with lower cost than the contract producers are finding it difficult to compete. The corporations now control much of the new technology, particularly biotechnology, to which farmers can gain access only through contractual arrangements. Large corporate processors increasingly procure nearly all of their raw materials through contracts, thus denying market access, or at least denying competitive markets, to non-contract producers. The corporatization of agriculture is now driven much more by the quest for greater market power than for increased production efficiency.

Family corporations are not all that different from individuals; their decisions reflect the basic values of the family. Even with “closely held” corporations, with few stockholders, decisions can still reflect the basic social and ethical values of the owners. However, once the number of stockholders becomes large, as in large publicly held corporations, and management is essentially separated from ownership, the motives for decision making become profits and growth. Most of the stock in such corporations is owned by mutual funds and pension funds, and the stockholders are concerned foremost, if not completely, with growth in the value of their

investment. A corporately controlled agriculture is fundamentally different from the agriculture we have known in the past.

The industrialization and corporatization of North American agriculture has been supported by government policies – including government farm programs and publicly supported research and education programs. In both the U.S. and Canada, the overriding objective of public policies has been to increase the efficiency of agriculture for the ultimate benefit of consumers, in the form of lower food prices. The “agricultural establishments” of both countries continually brag about the small percentage of income that the consumers in our respective countries spend for food. The political rhetoric in support of family farming has continued; but government programs obviously have supported continued specialization, standardization, and consolidation, which have ensured the demise of the family farm.

At the signing of the new U.S. “Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002,” the President said, “The farm bill will strengthen the farm economy... will promote farmer independence, and preserve the farm way of life for generations.” In fact, it most certainly will not provide either “farm security” or national “food security” and it will do nothing to improve the lives of people in rural America. The new U.S. farm bill is just more of the same – huge subsidies for the wealthy landowners and agribusinesses that control the political process.

We don't need a lot of data, facts, or figures to understand what is happening to North American agriculture; it's just plain common sense. In making agriculture more efficient, we have chosen industrial technologies, which have resulted in fewer, larger farming operations, and now, corporate control of agriculture and agricultural policy. The outcome is a logical consequence of the objectives and strategies that have been pursued. We have sacrificed our security for the sake of efficiency. It's just common sense.

So, what's wrong with a corporate, industrial agriculture? Why should we be concerned? First, many people don't see anything wrong with a corporate, industrial agriculture, and they are not particularly concerned. As long as the corporations can give them food that is quick, convenient, and cheap, they are not going to ask too many questions. They aren't all that concerned about where their food comes from, who produces it, how it is produced, and what the consequences are for rural people and the land. Many trust the competitive forces of a “free market” economy to ensure that the needs of society are met.

However, a growing number of people are concerned about the corporate, industrialization of agriculture. They are concerned about what it is doing to the lives of farm families who are losing control of land that has been in their families for generations. They are concerned about people in rural communities who have supported and been supported by those family farms. They are concerned about the low-pay and long hours in the food processing factories that have moved into some of these chronically depressed rural areas. They are concerned about the landfills, toxic waste dumps, and giant livestock feeding operations that pollute the once pristine rural environment with dangerous chemicals, biological wastes, and hazardous stench. They are concerned about the ability of the soil to continue to produce after the topsoil is eroded and it is saturated with chemicals and about the quality of water subjected to similar industrial abuses. They are concerned about the safety of their food and safety of the people who

produce it. They are concerned about the negative impacts of an industrial agriculture on the people who farm the land, who live in rural areas, who eat the food. They are concerned about those of future generations who will still be as dependent upon the land for their sustenance, their very survival, as we are today. They are concerned about the sustainability of agriculture.

This growing concern for agricultural sustainability raises some “common sense” questions about our food system. It asks, how can we equitably meet the needs of people in the present, while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future – not just how can we make food quick, convenient, and cheap? It asks, how can we develop an agriculture that is ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible – not just how can we make agriculture more economically efficient? It asks, how can we ensure our long run food security – not just our current abundance? Sustainability asks how can we sustain a desirable quality of human life on this earth, individually, socially, and ethically – both for ourselves and for those of future generations?

Sustainable farming systems must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. All three are essential; more of one cannot offset a lack of either of the other two. The three dimensions of sustainability are not part of some formal or legal definition, but instead, are a matter of common sense. If the land loses its ability to produce, the farm is not sustainable. If the farmer goes broke, the farm is not sustainable. And if a system of farming fails to support society, it will not be supported by society, and thus, is not sustainable. The economic, ecological, and social dimensions of sustainability are like the three dimensions of a box. All are necessary. A box that is lacking in height, width, or length, quite simply is not a box. A farming system that is lacking in ecological integrity, economic viability, or social responsibility, quite simply is not sustainable.

There is growing evidence that current concerns for the sustainability of agriculture are well founded – that a corporate industrial food system, in fact, is not sustainable. The threats to the natural environment and to the quality of life of farmers, residents of rural communities, and members of society as a whole have continually risen as we have industrialized American agriculture. The same technologies that support our specialized, standardized, large-scale farming systems are now the primary sources of growing environmental degradation. Commercial fertilizers and pesticides – essential elements in a specialized, industrialized agriculture – have become a primary source of growing concerns for environmental degradation and food safety. And, industrialization has transformed agriculture, created for the fundamental purpose of converting solar energy to human-useful form, into a mechanized agriculture that uses more non-renewable fossil energy than it captures in solar energy from the sun.

Industrial systems of production also degrade the human resource base. Henry Ford is quoted as once saying the biggest problem in running a factory is that you have to hire whole people when all you need is two hands. Large corporate contract farming operations transform independent decision-makers, into building superintendents and farm workers – into people who only know how to follow instructions or directions but not how to make decisions. At a recent conference in Minnesota, one farmer remarked, “any fool could grow a good crop of soybeans using the

Roundup Ready system of Monsanto.” We have transformed our farms into factories, our fields and feed lots in biological assembly lines, and our farmers into factory, assembly line workers. Industrial systems of production have decimated many rural communities, both economically and socially. Larger, more specialized farms tend to bypass their local communities in purchasing feed, fertilizers, and production inputs, and in marketing their products. They feel they must minimize costs and maximize prices in order to stay competitive. Larger farms meant fewer farms and fewer farm families to buy shoes, clothes, groceries, haircuts, and auto repairs, etc. from local businesses. As farms have grown larger and more specialized, many rural communities have lost their economic vitality.

Fewer farm families also have meant fewer people to support local schools, churches, health clinics, and other public institutions. Fewer farmers and business people have meant fewer local leaders to support local government, organize volunteer fire departments, emergency medical teams, and other civic organizations, which enhance the rural quality of life. It takes people, not just production, to sustain local communities. A fundamental purpose of industrialization is to make it possible for fewer people to produce more, and agricultural industrialization has left fewer of the people in rural agricultural areas. The industrialization of American agriculture is killing rural America. Again, it's just a matter of common sense.

Perhaps even more important, industrialization has separated the people left in rural areas from each other, and thus, has destroyed the social structure of communities that remain. Today, farmers can't be too concerned about their farmer neighbors, because they know their neighbor will have to fail in order for them to succeed. They can't love their neighbor, because, sooner or later, they will have to have their neighbor's land to survive. Farmers can't be too concerned about the people who live in town, because increasingly, those people are asking hard questions about the industrial technologies farmers feel they must use to survive. Town people seem to be challenging their inherent “right to farm.” Neither can farmers be too concerned about the welfare of food consumers, because they need a share of the consumers' income to survive. Farmers, processors, retailers, consumers, are locked in economic competition, in pursuit of their individual self-interests.

An industrial agriculture also degrades the relationship of people to the land, because it separates people from the land. As Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, philosopher, and writer puts it: If the land is to be used well, we must have people on the land who know it well, know how to use it well, have time to use it well, and are able to afford to use it well. To farm sustainably, we must have people on the land who love the land. Industrialization has separated farmers from the land, if not physically, at least psychologically. Most farmers today don't even own the land they farm. Most who own land don't have enough time or can't afford to care “for it,” even if they do care “about it.” They can't afford to love the land because they have to put a higher priority on staying competitive in a global economy.

No one set about intentionally to destroy the social responsibility, or economic viability, or ecological integrity of North American agriculture. We simply lost sight of the fundamental purpose of agriculture, to meet the needs of people – as consumers, as producers, as members of rural communities, and of society. In our preoccupation with increasing economic efficiency, to bring down the cost of food, we neglected to monitor what was happening to the overall quality

of life of people. In our preoccupation with increasing production today, we neglected to monitor the agricultural legacy we were leaving for people of the future. We don't need a lot of data, facts, or figures to understand what has happened to American agriculture; it's just plain common sense.

Thankfully, the corporate industrial approach is not the only viable alternative for our future food and farming systems. A new breed of American farmer has emerged in response to growing concerns about the negative ecological and social impacts of our large-scale, industrial agriculture. Again, from my experiences with Canadian farmers over the past decade, in six Provinces spanning from Hazelton, British Columbia to Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, I know such farmers are scattered all across North America. These new American farmers are concerned about the sustainability of agriculture. However, the success of this new type of farming also has important implications for food safety, food security, viability of rural communities, and our overall quality of life.

While there are no “blueprints” for the *New American Farm*³, some basic characteristics are emerging. First, these farmers see themselves as stewards of the earth. They are committed to caring for the land and protecting the natural environment. They have a deep sense of personal connection to their land. They work with nature rather than try to control or conquer nature. They fit the farm to their land and climate rather than try to bend nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm. Their farming operations tend to be more diversified than are conventional farms – because nature is diverse. Diversity may mean a variety of crop and animal enterprises, crop rotations and cover crops, or managed livestock grazing systems, depending on the type of farm. By managing diversity, these new farmers are able to reduce their dependence on pesticides, fertilizers, and other commercial inputs that squeeze farm profits and threaten the environment. Their farms are more economically viable, as well as more ecologically sound, because they farm in harmony with nature.

Second, these new farmers build relationships. They tend to have more direct contact with their customers than do conventional farmers. Most either market their products direct to customers or market through agents who represent them with their customers. They realize that as consumers each of us value things differently because we have different needs and different tastes and preferences. They produce the things that their customers value most. They are not trying to take advantage of their customers to make quick profits; they are trying to create long-term relationships. They are personally connected with their customers. They market to people who care where their food comes from and how it is produced – locally grown, organic, natural, humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free, etc. – and, they receive premium prices by producing foods their customers value. Their farms are more profitable as well as more ecologically sound and socially responsible.

These new farmers challenge the stereotype of the farmer as a fiercely independent competitor. They freely share information and encouragement. They form partnerships and

³ For 50 real life examples, see “The New American Farmer – Profiles in Agricultural Innovation,” the SARE Program, USDA, Washington DC. (\$10 US – call: 802-656-0484 or e-mail: sanpubs@uvm.edu , also available free on line at <http://www.sare.org/newfarmer>)

cooperatives to buy equipment, to process and market their products, to do together the things that they can't do as well alone. They are not trying to drive each other out of business; they are trying to help each other succeed. They refuse to exploit each other for short run gain; they are trying to build long-term relationships. They feel a personal connectedness to each other. They buy locally and market locally. They bring people together in positive, productive relationships that contribute to their economic, ecological, and social well-being. They are helping to revitalize rural communities and are providing a new foundation for sustainable rural community development.

Finally, to these new farmers, farming is as much a way of life as a way to make a living. They are “quality of life” farmers. To them, the farm is a good place to live – a healthy environment, a good place to raise a family, and a good way to be a part of a caring community. Many of these farms create economic benefits worth tens of thousands of dollars, in addition to any reported net farm income. Their “quality of life” objectives are at least as important as the economic objectives in carrying out their farming operations. Their farming operations reflect the things they like to do, the things they believe in, and the things they have a passion for, as much as the things that might yield profits. They are connected spiritually through a sense of purpose and meaning for their lives. However, for many, their products are better and their costs are less because by following their passion they end up doing what they do best. Most new farmers are able to earn a decent income, but more important, they have a higher quality of life because they are living a life that they love.

There are literally thousands of these new farmers, all across the North American continent, creating new and better ways to farm. They may label themselves organic, biodynamic, ecological, natural, holistic, practical, innovative, or nothing at all; but they are all pursuing the same basic purpose. They are on the frontier of a new and different kind of agriculture, an agriculture capable of meeting the needs of the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future – a sustainable agriculture. These farmers face struggles and hardships and there are failures along the way. Life is rarely easy on any new frontier. But, a growing number are finding ways to succeed.

These new American farmers are getting very little help from government farm programs, from publicly funded research and education programs, or from anyone else in the “agricultural establishment.” These new farmers glean information from wherever they can find it; some of the best available published sources are often several decades old. They also learn from each other. But for the most part, they have learned to rely on their common sense. They have rejected the conventional wisdom of industrialization, and instead have embraced the common sense of sustainability.

They have rejected the conventional wisdom of specialization of function and instead, have adopted a more holistic approach to managing their physical and economic resources. They have rejected the conventional wisdom of standardization of process, and instead, have farming systems that match the diversity of their resources and markets. They have rejected the conventional wisdom that farmers must get bigger or get out, and instead, have found ways to make a better living with less land and less money invested. They have rejected the conventional wisdom of independence and competition, and instead, have focused on “interdependence,”

relationships of choice, and cooperation with their neighbors and their customers. These new American farmers have rejected the conventional wisdom of industrialization and are embracing a new and different common sense vision for a sustainable future.

Human civilization, like American agriculture, is in the midst of a “great transition.” The industrial era of economic development is drawing to a close and a new era of sustainable human progress is dawning. Industrialization is the physical manifestation of a “mechanistic” way of thinking about the world that goes back more than 400 years – to the beginning of the “age of enlightenment” and the “birth of science.” Rene Descartes, a Frenchman, suggested that the world worked like a “big complex machine” – specifically like a big clock – with many interrelated but separable parts. Sir Isaac Newton, an Englishman, built upon Descartes' ideas and developed many of the fundamental principles of modern mechanical physics. At first, the then new principles of physics were used only in dealing with “dead things” – inanimate materials, such as liquids, minerals, gases – as Descartes had suggested was their appropriate use. Over time, however, scientists began to use the same principles to study and to manipulate “living things” – even “thinking things,” such as human beings. Today, modern science treats all things as if they were mechanistic, including living things -- plants, animals, and humans. Muscles and bones are nothing more than a complex system of levers and pulleys, the circulatory system a complicated plumbing system with pumps and valves, and the mind, a sophisticated computer with electrical circuits and connections.

This mechanistic worldview led to the many marvels of today's world of science. It provided the conceptual foundation for the industrial era of human progress. Machines could duplicate, extend, and eventually replace the productive processes of nature. Factories could be built that would use machines, fossil energy, and human labor to transform various raw materials into useful finished products, much as nature uses plants and solar energy to transform minerals from the earth into food and fiber. People were no longer dependent on nature. They could “manufacture” the things they needed or wanted. They didn't have to wait for nature to provide them.

The industrial era brought many benefits. It removed much of the drudgery from day to day life, it challenged the then constant specter of starvation, and it suppressed diseases to extend human life. Few would willingly choose to return to a pre-industrial society. However, in the past few decades, we have begun to realize that treating “living” things as if they were “dead” has inherent negative consequences. In fact, nearly every social, ecological, and economic ill of today can be traced to our treating living organisms, including people, as if they were inanimate, mechanistic objects.

A farm is a living organism – soils, plants, animals, people, all are living, growing organs. The social, ecological, and economic problems of American agriculture today are all direct consequences of treating the soil, plants, animals, and people as if they were separable, replaceable, mechanistic parts of some sort of sophisticated “biological factory.” Current “biotechnologies” are but the latest products of an outdated worldview that treats life as nothing more than a sophisticated mechanical process.

A rural community is a living organism – an organization of living beings. The people who constitute a community are living, breathing, thinking, caring, and loving beings. The social, ecological, and economic problems confronting rural communities today are a consequence of treating people as if they were separable, replaceable, mechanistic parts of some “complex mechanism” called a community. Current efforts to develop rural areas by recruiting outside industries that exploit and degrade the rural environment and de-skill rural people is a reflection of this outdated mechanistic way of thinking.

Machines are manmade; they are designed to carry out specific functions in order to achieve a specific purpose. If the machine is properly designed and built, it will perform its intended function. The purpose and function are built into the machine. But all machines eventually become obsolete or wear out, regardless on how well they are maintained. Worn out or obsolete machines must be redesigned, rebuilt, or discarded, and may or may not be replaced. Machines can't redesign, rebuild, or replace themselves.

Living things are born, germinate, hatch, or otherwise come to life. Living things are born with a purpose. As they grow and mature, they become capable of performing the various functions necessary to fulfill their purpose in life. They may be well nurtured, but all living things eventually die. Before they die, however, living things have the capacity to reproduce themselves. Reproduction is an essential part of the continuing process of life. Living things are “self-making” – this characteristic, more than any other, distinguishes between living and dead systems. Living things are dynamic and ever changing. Their physical structure changes and evolves as necessary to allow them to fulfill their purpose in an ever-changing physical and social environment. However, the pattern of a living thing, its DNA, remains unchanged throughout its life. A human is always a human at all stages of life – whether it's a bouncing baby, a strong mature adult, or a feeble “senior citizen,” it's the “same” human. This, continual self-renewal of structure, in accordance with an unchanging pattern, is an essential part of the process of life.

The key to revitalizing and sustaining rural communities is the same as the key to agricultural sustainability, to quit treating living organisms, including people, as if they were inanimate “machines.” The development of new, sustainable rural communities will require an approach very different from the traditional approach of industrial, economic development. The stages of developing the new American community should be patterned after the “stages of life,” not after the phases of building a factory. The stages of life include conception, birth, early development, growth, maturity, productivity, and regeneration before death – in an endless cycle.

The first stage in a “living systems” approach to development is to define the purpose of the process. To be sustainable, the fundamental purpose for any rural community must be linked to the community, to the specific place or location, where development is to be sustained. This does not imply a return to agriculturally dependent communities, but for development to be sustainable, it must be “linked” to some something in the community that cannot be moved elsewhere. Capital, technology, and even people, with no commitment to the community, will move to wherever they can earn the highest economic return. Land, on the other hand, must be used where it lies. Some rural areas have highly desirable climates, others beautiful landscapes, others have abundant forest or minerals, but the most valuable geographically fixed resource in

most rural areas today is still “farmland.” Thus, agriculture is still a logical foundation for rural revitalization and for the sustainable development of many rural communities.

The failure of agricultural-linked rural development strategies of the past was not inherent in their linkages to agriculture, but rather in the specific type of agriculture to which they were linked. Sustainable rural community development must be linked with sustainable agriculture and with other strategies for the sustainable development of local natural resources. Regardless, the first stage in revitalization of a rural community is for the people of the community to come together, formally or informally, and redefine or rediscover their fundamental purpose for being in the community – for being in that place. For “natural” living systems, such as humans, purpose is defined at some “higher level” of organization – still, we humans must continually reassess “our perceptions” of the purpose for our life. In communities, people must find a common sense of shared purpose, some reason in common for their living and working together. A community of people with no commonality of purpose is not really a community, but rather, a collection of people who happen to be living in the same geographic area.

The “conception” of the development process occurs with the selection of a set of guiding principles. Principles define the basic nature of the development process, and thus, determine whether the process is consistent with the purpose. Principles provide the conceptual DNA. The DNA of living things determines what they are – plants, animals, insects, humans, etc. – but it also defines the uniqueness of each member of each living species. Likewise, principles define the basic nature of a development process, industrial, sustainable, etc., as well as define the uniqueness of particular development initiatives.

The number and nature of guiding principles should be sufficient to ensure that, if followed, the purpose of the community can be carried out. However, principles that are not necessary in carrying out the purpose should be omitted, to avoid unnecessary complexity and distraction. For example, the principles of sustainable development are ecological integrity, economic viability, and social responsibility. Any process which follows these principles will be sustainable, any process that does not, will not. The three principles are both necessary and sufficient.

After “conception” comes “birth and early development.” The “living systems” approach assumes that development processes require different types of support during the early phases of development than will be required at later stages. Industrial developers prefer to bring “full grown” industries into their communities so they can immediately realize whatever benefits are to be achieved. However, these “outside” industries have no “natural ties” to the community – they didn't “grow up” there. They have no commitment to contribute to the community in any way that does not fulfill their short-run corporate economic objectives.

Sustainable development must be “grassroots” development – it must be “conceived and born of” local people, who are committed to the future of the community. The conceptions or ideas of such people must be brought to life, encouraged, and nurtured – their initiatives must be supported, so eventually, their “infant” ventures will grow to “maturity.” And in the process,

those who are introduced to business and politics will grow to become community leaders with a commitment to helping others within the community to also grow and mature.

The stages of birth and early development should focus on the creation and dissemination of knowledge – on empowering people to solve their own problems and to realize their unique opportunities. The “food” for the early development of knowledge is “information.” And, the type of information provided must be appropriate for “living processes.” Public institutions must be redirected to creating and disseminating information and technologies appropriate for sustainable, grassroots development rather than traditional industrial development. Public policies should provide “protection” for individual, “grassroots” initiatives, at least during their “early stages” development. Once these early initiatives become “fully developed,” they will be strong enough help “feed and protect” themselves and to nurture the initiatives of others, ensuring the continual self-renewal of the community development process.

The latter developmental stages of growth, productivity, and maturity require little more than encouragement. Access to financing, appropriate marketing infrastructure, accommodative laws, and facilitating regulations are a few examples of the types of encouragement that local entrepreneurs need to grow, develop, and become mature, productive members of their communities and of society. The key to success in the “living systems” approach to development is to focus on people rather than production and profits. Once people have achieved a desirable quality of life – economically, socially, and spiritually – they will be committed to the well-being of others, both today and in the future.

Mature members of “living communities” will accept the social responsibilities of caring for others as a privilege, not as a sacrifice. Mature members of “living communities” will accept the responsibilities of stewardship of nature, as a privilege, not as a sacrifice. Mature members of “living communities” will accept their responsibilities to “regenerate” their community, not to abandon it. They will participate with others in the process of “conception and birth” of the new ideas needed to sustain new generations of people. They will contribute to the “early development and growth” of others who will grow and mature to fulfill their responsibilities in the future. They will help care for the “aged and dying” of the community, because they will know at some future time their work too will be done.

Most of the so-called “rural economic development” strategies of today instead are sucking the life out of rural North America. Industrial development is driven by the purposes of maximizing profits and growth, which give no recognition to natural limits or constraints. Industrial development is based on the mechanistic principles of industrialization – of ever-greater specialization of function, standardization of process, and consolidation of control. Industrial development makes no distinction between mechanisms and organisms – between the living and dead. Plants and animals are treated as machines on biological assembly lines; even their genetic materials are considered interchangeable and replaceable. Rural people, those who organize and work on farms or in business organizations, and make up rural communities, are treated as interchangeable and replaceable machines on some assembly. When they grow old or become obsolete, they are discarded and replaced with newer models. It doesn't take a lot of data or facts to know that such approaches to rural community development are fundamentally flawed. It's

just plain common sense. Rural revitalization and sustainable community development, first and foremost, must be built on a foundation of common sense.

Rural people are free to reject the conventional wisdom that the industrial exploitation of the people and natural resources of rural North America is inevitable. They can reject the conventional wisdom that family farms are things of the past, that sustainable agriculture is impractical and idealistic, and that rural development can no longer be based on agriculture or other natural resource-based enterprises. They can reject the conventional wisdom that rural people are incapable of developing their own economies and communities and instead must rely on outside investment and advice. They can reject the conventional wisdom of an outdated approach to development.

They can learn, instead, to rely on their common sense – the sense of right and wrong, of good and bad, that comes from our spiritual sense of place, within the higher order of things. Our common sense is our insight into the true nature of things. The common sense of humanity is reflected in the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments, and in similar fundamental principles of life, which transcend all major religions and philosophies of the world. We all have access to this sense we share in common; we only need take the time to listen to it, and then, to use it. Our common sense tells us that it's foolish to allow our rural communities to be destroyed for the sake of corporate profits. Our common sense tells us that our systems of development must be ecologically sound and socially responsible if they are to be economically viable, and thus, sustainable over time. Our common sense tells us that caring for the earth and caring for each other is not a sacrifice, but instead, gives our life meaning and purpose. Our common sense tells us it is fundamentally wrong to allow systems made up of living things – plants, animals, and people – to be built, managed, worn out, and discarded as if they were inanimate machines with replaceable parts. Our common sense tells us that revitalization of rural communities and sustainable community development must be based on approaches and processes appropriate for living things, because communities are living organizations.

We know what needs to be done to achieve sustainable development. Thousands of farmers are already on the frontier in developing more sustainable farming systems. Our common sense tells us this same basic approach to working with living farming systems can be employed in revitalizing and sustaining the development of rural communities. As these sustainable farmers are finding new purpose in an ever-changing world, rural people in general can find a new sense of purpose for being in the communities or rural places where they choose to live. Indigenous ideas and “grassroots” initiatives, conceived of the principles of living systems, can come to life, grow, develop, mature, and reproduce, to sustain the development of North America's rural communities.

American agriculture and rural America are in the midst of a “great transition.” Within this transition are opportunities to reclaim family farms, revitalize rural communities, and to sustain a more desirable quality of life for farmers, rural residents, and society as a whole. We need only the common sense to see the opportunity for change, and courage to seize it.