

Reconnecting with Each Other and the Earth^I

John Ikerd^{II}

People in prehistoric civilizations understood the importance of relationships. They had intimate relationships with the earth as well as with the other people with whom they shared the earth. They were hunter gatherers. They lived in natural settings and went deeper into nature regularly to search for food to sustain their physical well-being. They depended on their families, tribes, or villages for protection from enemies and for help in securing and preparing food—for assistance whenever needed. They realized important social or quality of life benefits from relationships that returned nothing of physical or tangible value. We humans are inherently social beings. Indigenous peoples also considered the heavens and earth as the embodiment of their concept of God. We humans are inherently moral beings. That being said, their relationships with nature and with each other were clearly relationships of physical or material necessity.

The *agricultural revolution* of some 10,000 to 12,000 years ago brought about a fundamental transformation of human life on earth. One of the most important changes was in relationships among people and between people and the earth. Agriculture emerged at different times and in different ways in different parts of the world, but the transition from hunting and gathering to farming eventually transformed societies in virtually every part of the world. Some historians see the agricultural revolution as a blessing while others see it as a curse.¹ Agriculture made possible an explosion in human population from some five million people 10,000 years ago to more than seven billion people today. However, the costs to the earth have been great—including extensive depletion and pollution of soil, air, and water and alarming losses of biological diversity.

With the dawning of agriculture, the tendency was to see the other things of the earth as resources to be exploited rather than fellow living beings or a sacred trust to be revered and protected. The agricultural revolution brought the first *great separation*. By tilling the land and domesticating animals, humans were able to lessen their dependence on the bounty of scarcity of nature. Perhaps most important, in their separation from other things of nature there was a sense of independence from God's creation and thus a sense of separateness from God. Prior to the agricultural revolution, attempts to dominate or control nature would have been understood as a desecration of God's creation—the earth.

In spite of the first great separation, a sense of sacredness in nature persisted throughout much of human history. Ten thousand years after the agricultural revolution, the Apostle Paul wrote in the first chapter of Romans: “For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” To the early Christians, the essence of God was still clearly revealed in nature.

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^{II} John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA; Author of, *Sustainable Capitalism-a Matter of Common Sense*, *Essentials of Economic Sustainability*, *A Return to Common Sense*, *Small Farms are Real Farms*, *Crisis and Opportunity-Sustainability in American Agriculture*, and *A Revolution of the Middle-the Pursuit of Happiness*, all books available on [Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com): [Books](#) and [Kindle E-books](#).
Email: JEIkerd@gmail.com; Website: <http://web.missouri.edu/~ikerdj/> or <http://www.johnikerd.com> .

Even in early America, food was still a means of connecting with both God and the earth. Religious holidays were celebrated with festive meals shared among family and friends. Food was also central to secular family and community gatherings. “Breaking bread” was an expression of confidence, trust, and willingness to share. Food was understood and appreciated as physical, mental, and spiritual sustenance or nourishment—not simply fuel for the body. Early farmers were simply attempting to tip the balance of nature in favor of humans—much like every species in nature’s ecosystems. As Pope Francis stated it: “The biblical texts are to be read in their context, recognizing that they tell us to ‘till and keep’ the garden of the world (Gen 2:15). ‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving”² Early farmers apparently understood that farming had to be a balance of tilling and keeping—of provision and stewardship.

The etymology of the words “farm” and “farmer”^{3, 4} suggests that farming historically has been multidimensional. Farming has had an economic dimension as a means of making a living. However, farmers have also been provisioners of food, facilitators of festivals, and stewards of the earth. There is nothing inherently unnatural or wrong about agriculture as long as we do not allow farming to diminish our sense of connectedness with each other and with the earth. Unfortunately, in recent decades, the extraction of economic wealth from the earth has taken priority over the social and ethical responsibilities of farming.

The second *great separation* followed the *industrial revolution*. The separation of people into farmers and non-farmers actually began with the early enclosure movement during the 1600s. Prior to the enclosures, land was held in common for public use, not owned by individuals. Land was freely available to everyone to use to meet their basic needs of survival and sustenance. In a sense, every family was a farm family. They meet their needs for food by cultivating the commons. Wholesale enclosures during the period from 1760 and 1820 meant that people lost their right to use common land to produce food, in village after village all across Europe.

The industrial revolution and rise of capitalism occurred during this time. Adam Smith wrote his landmark book, *The Wealth of Nations*, in 1776. Land was privatized so the most efficient use of land could be determined by market competition rather than community consensus. Labor then also had to be “commodified,” or bought and sold, as a result of the enclosures. Those who lost access to land for food were forced to sell their labor to employers in order to survive. Those without opportunities or abilities to earn enough money to buy food were left hungry. As a result, the English Poor Laws, initiated in 1600, were expanded in 1834 to cover everyone, not just the aged and disabled. Various other attempts were made to protect the working class from the social upheaval triggered by removal of land from the commons. Nothing seemed to work.

Chronic hunger was but one symptom of the second *great separation*. The industrial revolution not only separated people from the land that had provided their food, but it also separated people from each other. The necessity for people to relate to each other personally to meet their basic needs was greatly diminished or removed by the reliance on market economies. Economies actually do not create anything of material or tangible value they simply facilitate the process of acquiring things of real value. Markets simply allow us to meet our needs through impersonal, economic relationships rather than through personal relationships with each other.

Everything that is of any use to us, including everything of economic value, ultimately comes from the earth—minerals, soil, water, air, energy. There is no place else to get anything. Beyond self-sufficiency, or meeting our needs individually, we must rely on other people we know personally—within families, friendships of local communities. Markets simply allow us to meet our needs through impersonal relationships. We can work for money and spend money to get what we need or want that is produced by people who we don't know and who don't know us.

In fact, economic value is inherently impersonal. If we can't buy, sell, or trade something it has no economic value. Our relationship with our spouse, our children, or our friends may be the most valuable and important aspects of our life. However, we can't buy, sell, or trade those relationships; so they have no economic value. There may be some economic value that accrue as a consequence of those relationships, but the purely personal or social connection with another person is of value only to those who share the relationship.

With the diminished necessity for personal relationships during the industrial revolution, the social cohesion within families, communities, and society began to diminish as well. The persistence of chronic poverty and malnutrition, even during times of tremendous economic growth and individual wealth, are direct consequences of our growing sense of disconnectedness that was nourished by the industrial era of economic development.

The third *great separation* was the *industrial agricultural revolution*. Until well into 1900s, farming remained a means of feeling some sense of connection with the earth. Nearly everyone in the U.S. lived on a farm, had lived on a farm, or knew someone who lived on a farm. Farming was still a “way of life” as well as a “way to make a living” persisted well into the 1900s. When I was growing up on a small farm in the 1940s and 1950s, rural communities were interwoven networks of people who knew each other mainly out of necessity. Groups of farmers, some up to forty men and boys, traveled from farm to farm to fill silos, thresh grain, or put up hay. The men worked hard, but a lot of socializing also took place at these gatherings.

The “farm wives” also renewed relationships at times of harvest. Several women and girls would gather at host farms on harvest days to help the host wife prepare the noon meal for the harvest crews. The farm women also had their individual groups who gathered periodically to make quilts to keep their families warm in winter and to help each other can fruit and make preserves or cut meat and make sausage on butchering days. The work was often tedious and tiresome but the varied conversations helped to pass the time.

The parents of kids who went to school together all knew each other. People would renew acquaintances in town, at the barber shop or farmers exchange. The networks of necessity also were interconnected through local churches. Everybody knew everybody in their own churches as well as most folks in the other churches nearby. Many people still thanked God for their food and also thanked the farmers who help bring forth their food from the earth. Until fairly recently, there was still a strong sense of connectedness among the eater, the farmer, and the earth.

But “times changed” in rural America. The industrialization of agriculture removed the necessity for community-based farming. Individually owned field choppers replaced the big silo

crews, individual combines replaced big threshing crews, and inexpensive hay balers replaced big haying crews. Farmers were free to harvest their own crops whenever they choose, rather than wait their turn to be helped by the big crews of neighbors. Modern kitchen conveniences also eliminated the need for farm wives to share housework. Social circles in farming communities began to narrow and narrowed further as farms grew larger and surviving farmers became fewer. New people moved into rural areas—seeking the low-paying jobs of factory farms or escaping high living costs in cities. Most people didn't bother to get to know their new neighbors because they “didn't need to.”

Commercial fertilizers and pesticides replaced crop rotations and integrated crop and livestock systems. Farmers no longer needed to rely on soil health to produce an abundant harvest. Farmers were able to benefit economically by employing the basic strategies of industry: specialization, mechanization, and consolidation into larger farming operations. Livestock moved first into specialized cattle, hog, or chicken farms and then into large confinement feeding operations or factory farms. Crop production no longer depended on the health of the soils. Animal production no longer depended on the health of the crops on the farms where the crops and livestock were raised. The sense of connectedness was lost among the health of people, livestock, crops, and soils.

Farmers lost their sense of connectedness to their land, to each other, and to their communities. Consumers no longer knew who produced their food, where it was produced, or how it was produced. What happens to food between the earth and the eater has become largely a mystery. Food for family gatherings and religious holidays are of economic importance to the food industry but have little social or spiritual significance beyond following cultural traditions. The dependence of humanity on the earth for food is no less than during the early times of hunting and gathering, but sense of connectedness between the eater and the earth has been lost.

We see the consequences of this final *great separation* in rural Iowa today. According to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, water samples from more than 1,000 water bodies collected biennially between 2008 and 2016 indicate more than half of Iowa's public waters remain polluted or “impaired”. More than 90% of the impairments are linked to the industrialization of agriculture.⁵ For example, the number of Iowa streams, lakes, and wetlands sufficiently “impaired” to require reporting to the EPA for additional corrective action increased nearly four-fold between 1998 and 2016—from 159 to 608.⁶ (The total number of “impaired waters” in 2016 was 750.) This was a time of rapid growth in industrial agriculture as large confinement animal feeding operations replaced traditional family farms.

A recent Wall Street Journal article calls “Rural America the New Inner City.”⁷ The article documents that levels of unemployment, chronic illness, teen pregnancy, crime, and drug abuse in many rural areas now exceed those of inner cities. Wendell Berry—farmer, philosopher, and gifted author—summarized the current plight of rural America in a recent letter to the book editor of the New York Times: “*The business of America has been largely and without apology the plundering of rural America, from which everything of value—minerals, timber, farm animals, farm crops, and “labor”—has been taken at the lowest possible price. As apparently none of the enlightened ones has seen in flying over or bypassing on the interstate highways, its too-large fields are toxic and eroding, its streams and rivers poisoned, its forests mangled, its*

towns dying or dead along with their locally owned small businesses, its children leaving after high school and not coming back. Too many of the children are not working at anything, too many are transfixed by the various screens, too many are on drugs, too many are dying.”⁸

What is happening in rural Iowa is a microcosm of what is happening all across America, in urban as well as rural areas, and all around the world. We are confronted with a multidimensional ecological, social, and economic crisis. Social thinker and author, David Korten, refers this time as *the great unravelling*.⁹ He cites compelling evidence of economic inequity and decline, natural resource depletion, global climate change, social divisions and wars, and mass extinction of species. We are confronted with an ecological, social, and spiritual crisis arising from our lost sense on interconnectedness with each other and with the earth—the great separations.

Returning to the wisdom of Pope Francis: “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.”¹⁰ He identifies an increasingly myopic preoccupation with economic self-interest as the root cause of this crisis. He writes, “Human life is grounded in three fundamental and closely intertwined relationships: with God, with our neighbour and with the earth itself.” “Everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others.”

Reconnecting with each other and the earth is no longer a matter of choice, it is a matter of absolute necessity. Hunger today is discretionary, not a necessity. Global agriculture produces enough food to provide everyone with a more than 2,000 calories a day, but more than three-quarters of a billion people are hungry.¹¹ There is more than enough economic wealth in the world to provide everyone in the world with a comfortable, living income. Yet more than 80% of the people in the world live on less than \$10 a day or \$3,650 year while the median family income in the U.S. is about \$60,000.

People are poor and hungry today because the rest of us don’t care enough to change the way we do things—meaning the way we live. We don’t care enough because we have lost our sense of personal connectedness with each other as well as with the earth. We no longer feel the necessity of relying on other people or the things of the earth for our individual wealth or well-being. We no longer understand that we are integrally connected with each other and the earth, regardless of our sense the urgency in dealing with growing environmental and social problems.

Those who do understand may feel they are powerless, that the challenges are too great, the problems too ingrained in our culture. But we are not powerless, we can make a difference, if we are willing to reconnect with each other and work together. In Iowa, we can confront the industrial agriculture, head on, and demand the God given right of all people to clean air, clean water, and safe food. We can sign the petition of the Iowa Alliance for Responsible Agriculture to place a moratorium in Iowa on new or expanded concentrated animal feeding operations—the epitome of industrial agriculture. We can join with local activists groups who are committed to caring for each other and the earth. We can become part of a great social and political movement that will restore integrity to government. We can become part of a *great unification*.

We simply need to find the moral courage to ask, quoting Pope Francis, “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity.”¹² To restore dignity to life, we must restore integrity to our relationships with each other and with the earth. We must understand this is not simply a matter of choice, it is an absolute necessity.

End Notes

¹ Jared Diamond, “The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race,” *Discover*, May 1987, <http://discovermagazine.com/1987/may/02-the-worst-mistake-in-the-history-of-the-human-race> .

² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si, Care of our Common Home*, para. 67. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html .

³ “Farmers,” <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/farmer>, (accessed September 15,2014).

⁴ “Farm,” from Wikionary, Open Content Dictionary; cites The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia; Wedgwood, Atkinson, A dictionary of English etymology; and Mantello, Rigg, *Medieval Latin: an introduction and bibliographical guide*, 11.3, <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/farm> , (accessed September 15, 2014).

⁵ Jennifer Terry, “Water Quality Challenges in Iowa’s Agricultural Watersheds,” Des Moines Waterworks, April, 2017. <https://www.iisc.org/filesimages/PDC/2017/Handouts/Jennifer%20Terry%20-%20Iowa%20Water%20Supply%20Update.pdf> .

⁶ Iowa Department of Natural Resources, “Impaired Waters,” <http://www.iowadnr.gov/Environmental-Protection/Water-Quality/Water-Monitoring/Impaired-Waters>

⁷ Janet Adamy and Paul Overberg, RURAL AMERICA IS THE NEW ‘INNER CITY’, *TheWall Street Journal*, May 26, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rural-america-is-the-new-inner-city-1495817008> .

⁸ Wendell Berry, “Southern Despair,” *New Your Times Review of Books*, Reply to Nathaniel Rich, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2017/05/11/southern-despair/> .

⁹ David Korten, *The Great Turning; From Empire to Earth Community*, (Sterling, VA; Kumarian Press, 2006), 251.

¹⁰ Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si, Care of our Common Home*, paras, 139, 66, & 70. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

¹¹ Mark Bittman, “How to Feed the World,” *New York Times*, Oct 14, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/15/opinion/how-to-feed-the-world.html>

¹² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si, Care of our Common Home*, para. 160. http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html