

HEALING AND CREATIVITY
A Whole Vision for Rural America
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Most American rural communities have roots in agriculture. When Europeans arrived in the New World, they found a land of great natural wealth. Some of that wealth was in minerals and timber, but most of it lay in vast plains and winding valleys of fertile farmland. However, it took people to transform this wealth into material wellbeing. People cleared the land and tilled the soil bringing forth a bounty of food and fiber from the fertile fields. People cared for cattle and sheep as they grazed the vast plains. As these people, these farmers and ranchers, achieved surpluses beyond their own needs, they needed other people in towns and rural communities. Farmers needed people who would take their surpluses in exchange for things that farms could not produce. They needed blacksmiths, dry goods stores, livery stables, banks, and salons. They also needed schools, churches, and medical care, if they were to move beyond economic survival to achieve a more desirable quality of life.

Some of the early American communities built up around timber and mining towns, but most towns were farming and ranching towns. The number of people in these towns reflected the nature of agriculture on the surrounding farms and ranches. The larger the number of people needed to care for the land, the larger the number of people needed in town to support those farmers and ranchers. It is likely true that distance between most rural towns relate to a day's roundtrip by horse and wagon. However, the number of people in those towns was determined in large part by the nature of agriculture. For example, lands well suited for vegetables and row crops were farmed more intensively - supporting more families per acre or section. Lands suited only for small grains or pasture were farmed less intensively - supporting fewer families per section or township. Of course, town folks also had mouths to be fed with locally grown foods - greens, milk, eggs, and bacon. But, the density of population in most rural places reflected the nature of the surrounding agriculture.

At the turn of the 20th century, America was still an agrarian country -- about 40 percent of its people were farmers and well over half lived in very rural areas. However, then came the second phase of the industrial revolution and the need to collect large numbers of people into cities to "man" the factories and offices of a growing manufacturing economy. The simultaneous industrialization of agriculture - mechanization, specialization, standardization -- made it possible for fewer farmers to feed more people better at a lower cost to consumers. This "freed" farmers and other rural people to find work in the cities and freed consumer income to buy those things the industrial economy was to produce.

The same technologies that pulled rural people toward the cities pushed them off the farms and out of rural communities. These technologies increased production per person by substituting capital and generic knowledge for labor and individual management. As successful new farming technologies were developed, they invariably reduced production costs -- per bushel or per pound of production -- but only if each farmer produced more. Thus, the incentive to realize greater profits by reducing costs was inherently an incentive to buy bigger equipment and more commercial inputs in order to farm more land and produce more output. As farmers individually responded to these incentives, production in total invariably expanded, market prices fell, and the promise of continuing profits vanished. The new technologies were then necessary - no longer for profits but now for survival. Those who adopted and expanded too little too late were unable to compete. They were "freed" from their farms to find jobs in the city.

The farms that survived grew larger and larger. In fact, with a limited population to feed and a limited amount of land to farm, it was possible for only fewer and fewer farmers to survive. In addition, large specialized farms often bypassed their local communities in purchasing inputs and marketing their products in order to remain competitive with other large farms. Their competitors were not just down the road or even across the country, but might be half way around the world.

Fewer farmers buying less locally meant less need for farm related businesses in small towns. Fewer farmers also meant fewer farm families to buy groceries, clothes, and haircuts in small towns. Fewer families also meant fewer people to fill the desks in rural schools, pews in rural churches, and the waiting rooms of rural doctors. Fewer people

with a purpose for being in rural areas meant that many rural communities were losing their purpose for being as well.

Today, America is no longer an agrarian nation. Less than 2 percent of Americans call themselves farmers and most farm households earn most of their household income off the farm. Somewhere around 25 percent of the people live in non-metropolitan areas - but many if not most commute to a city to work. There are few people left in farming communities to move to town and no longer any social justification for moving them. Industries are "downsizing" and "outsourcing" -- laying off workers by the thousands. As consumers, we spend on the average a little over a dime out of each dollar for food and the farmer only gets a penny of that dime. The rest goes to pay for commercial inputs and marketing services - packaging, advertising, transportation, etc. Society no longer has anything to gain from further industrialization of agriculture -- yet it continues. In addition, rural communities in farming areas continue to wither and die.

Feeling the stress of an industrializing society, many small towns turned to industrial recruitment - trying to become a city rather than a town - as a means of survival. Others have tried to capture natural advantages in climate or landscapes to become destinations for tourists from the cities. Those near the growing industrial centers "rented out their communities" as bedrooms for those who are willing to commute to the city. However, most rural communities in agricultural areas have not been successful in their efforts to regain prosperity - or even to survive. Most rural communities have become and remain places in search of a purpose.

As the industrialization of agriculture moves into its final phase - the centralization of decision making among giant agribusiness corporations - there might seem little hope for either family farms or rural communities. The futures of both family farms and rural communities most certainly are at risk. The wounds of the past one hundred years will not be easy to heal. Nevertheless, there is still hope for the future. The industrial era appears to be nearing an end elsewhere in the economy, even as it continues to consume agriculture. The emergence of a new post-industrial era for human society may create opportunities for a new kind of American farm and new American communities. However, the wounds of the past will not heal themselves. Rural people must address their problems at their root causes, and must find the wisdom and courage to develop and pursue a new holistic vision for the future of rural America.

Removing the Sacred from Food and Farming

The wounding of rural America has several root causes, but none is more fundamental nor more important than the dehumanizing and desacralizing of food and farming. As we have specialized, standardized, and centralized control of agriculture to make it more efficient, we have forced living systems, including people, to behave as lifeless machines. Not only have we removed the life from agriculture -- we have also removed its soul. We will never restore life to rural communities until we restore the life and health of agriculture. We can never restore its life and health until we first restore its soul. Before we can heal rural America, we must reclaim the sacred to food and farming.

Farming is fundamentally biological. All of life arises from the soil. The essence of agriculture begins with conversion of solar energy through the living process of photosynthesis carried out by plants that feed on the soil. The food that sustains our lives as people comes from other living things. If life itself is sacred, then food and farming must be sacred as well. In fact, people have considered food and farming to be sacred throughout nearly all of human history. Farmers prayed for rain, for protection from pestilence, and for bountiful harvests. People gave thanks to God for their "daily bread" -- as well as for harvests at annual times of Thanksgiving. For many, farming and food are still sacred. But for many more, farming has become nothing more than another business and food just something else to buy. Those who still treat food and farming as something sacred, modern are labeled as old-fashion, strange, radical, or naïve.

However, the time to reclaim the sacred in food and farming may well be at hand. The trends that have desacralized farming have run, and overrun, their course. There is a growing skepticism concerning the claim that more "stuff" - be it larger houses, fancier cars, more clothes, or more food - will make us happier or more satisfied with life. There is growing evidence that when we took out the sacred, we took out the substance. As agriculture has been robbed of

its natural productivity, our lives have been robbed of depth and meaning. But, people now are beginning to question the logic of our materialistic society. We have more “stuff” than any society has ever had but our wants seem as great as ever. How much is “enough?” Can anyone ever have “enough?”

The old question of how can I get more is being replaced with the question, how can my life be more fulfilling? The answer to this question, at least in part, is that we must reclaim the spiritual dimension of our lives. But, how can we reclaim the sacred? And, how will doing so change our farms and rural communities? We will address these questions later, but first we need to understand why we took spirituality out of food and farming in the first place and why we now need to put it back in.

Until some four hundred years ago, people considered nearly everything in life to be spiritual or sacred. The religious scholars were the primary source of knowledge in the intellectual segments of society. The uneducated masses accepted claims that kings, chiefs, and clan leaders -- the people who other people looked to for wisdom - had special divine or spiritual powers. Only during the seventeenth century did the spiritual nature of the world come under serious challenge. Among the most notable challengers was Descartes, a Frenchman, who proposed the spirit/matter dualism. “The Cartesian division allowed scientists to treat matter as dead and completely separate from themselves, and to see the material world as a multitude of different objects assembled into a huge machine” (1983. p.22). Sir Isaac Newton, an Englishman, also held this mechanistic view of the universe and shaped it into the foundation for classical physics.

Over time, scientists expanded the mechanical model to include the living as well as the “dead.” Scientists now treat plants, animals, and even people, as complex mechanisms with many interrelated, yet separable functioning parts. During the early part of this century, physicists developed fundamentally new theories they called quantum physics. The emergence of quantum physics challenges the old mechanistic worldview. Quantum physics views everything as interconnected - there is no separation of cause from effect. However, mechanical reductionism, which attempts to explain all biological processes as purely chemical and mechanical processes, still dominates the applied biological sciences from agriculture to medicine.

Scientists consider the spiritual realm, to the extent considered at all, to be in the fundamental nature of things - the unchanging relationships that they seek to discover. In science, there is no active spiritual aspect of life, only the passive possibility that spirituality was involved somehow in the initial creation of the universe that we are now exploring. The more we understood about the working of the universe, the less we needed to understand about the nature of God. The more we “knew” the less we needed to “believe.” As we expanded the realm of the “factual” we reduced the realm of the “spiritual” until it became trivial, at least in matters of science.

Over time, the concept of science had shifted from a “science of understanding” to a “science of manipulation” (Schumacher). Over time, the goal of science had shifted from increasing “wisdom” to the goal of increasing “power.” We did not want just to understand the universe; we wanted to dominate it. The purpose of science had become to enhance our ability to influence, direct, and control.

Farming was one of the last strongholds for the sacred in the world of science. “Mechanical” processes - using machines to manufacture things from “dead” matter - were relatively easy to understand and manipulate. But, “biological” processes - involving living organisms, including humans - proved much more difficult to understand and to manage. Farming and food are fundamentally biological in nature. So it took far longer to learn to manipulate and control agriculture. Farmers continued to pray for rain, and people continued to give thanks for food - although scientists would have advised us that both were either unnecessary or futile.

However, science eventually succeeded in taking the sacred out of farming - at least out of modern, industrialized farming. People tend to be difficult to understand and manipulate. But, machines took the laborers out of the fields, so farming became more manageable. Selective breeding brought genetic vagaries more or less under control. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are but the latest attempts by humans to manipulate and control other life forms. Commercial fertilizers gave farmers the power to cope with the uncertainties of organic-based nutrient cycling. Commercial pesticides provided simple scientific means of managing predator, parasites, and pests. Deep-

well irrigation reduced the grower's dependence on rainfall. Processing, storage, and transportation - all mechanical processes - removed many of the previous biological constraints associated with form, time, and place of production.

Farms have become factories without roofs. Supermarkets and restaurants are but the final stages in long and complex assembly lines for food. Why pray for rain when we can drill a deep well and irrigate? Why thank God for food created by ConAgra? Who needs God when we have modern science and industrial technology?

The Inevitability of Change

Admittedly, if past trends affecting food and farming were to continue into the future, there will be little hope for rural agricultural communities. But, trends never continue, at least not indefinitely. A few years back, a couple of scientists proposed a list of the top twenty "great ideas in science" in Science magazine, one of the two most respected scientific journals in the world (Pool). They invited scientists from around the world to comment on their proposed list. Among the top twenty were such ideas as the relationship between electricity and magnetism, and the first and second laws of thermodynamics. The top twenty also included the proposition that "everything on the earth operates in cycles." Some scientists responding to the Science survey disagreed with the proposed theory of universal cycles, but most left it on their list of the top twenty great ideas in science (Culotta).

In essence, the theory of universal cycles claims that trends never continue forever. Trends are nothing more than phases on longer-term cycles. In reality, it's just common sense - everything that goes up eventually comes down, everything that goes around eventually comes around.

The theory of cycles implies that farms will neither get larger nor smaller forever, but instead will cycle between larger and smaller over time. If we think back over past centuries and around the globe, we can find examples where control of land became concentrated in the hands of a few, such as in feudal times, only later to be dispersed among the many. The most significant such occurrence in the U.S. may have been the development and later demise of plantation agriculture in the South. The most significant such occurrence in the world at present is taking place in what once was Communist Russia. These cyclical turning points have been associated with major historical events. However, large-scale, industrial agriculture is coming under increasing environmental and social challenges all around the globe. So, the trend toward fewer and larger farms in the U.S. is but a phase of a cycle that may well be nearing an end.

The theory of cycles implies that people will not migrate from the country to cities forever, but instead, cycle between rural to urban and urban to rural migration over time. In fact, human history is marked by such cycles in spatial dispersion and concentration of people in general. Anthropological evidence indicates that people have concentrated in large cities in centuries past, but later, for a variety of reasons, have abandoned those cities and dispersed themselves across the countryside. Thus, there is reason to believe that migration from rural areas to U.S. cities during the twentieth-century was simply a phase of a cycle rather than an unending trend.

Most large center-cities are already losing population as people move to the suburbs in increasing numbers. A further migration back to rural areas might be a logical continuation of the dispersion phase of this cycle. The phenomena we call urban sprawl today eventually may lose its ties to the city and evolve into patterns of dispersed rural resettlement. The most relevant question for rural communities might be, when will people abandon the cities and suburbs to resettle rural areas and why? There is nothing in cycle theory that dictates that people return to the same rural areas they left.

The Great Transition

Today, as in the seventeenth century, we are in a time of "great transition." "We are at that very point in time when a 400-year-old age is dying and another is struggling to be born - a shifting of culture, science, society, and institutions enormously greater than the world has ever experienced. Ahead, the possibility of the regeneration of individuality, liberty, community, and ethics such as the world has never known, and a harmony with nature, with one another, and with the divine intelligence such as the world has never dreamed." These are not the words of a

priest of a philosopher but of Dee Hock, founder of the one of the largest financial institutions in the World, the VISA Corporation.

Hock is certainly not alone in this thinking. A whole host of futurists from the secular business community, including Alvin Toffler, Vaclav Havel, Tom Peters, Peter Drucker, John Naisbitt, Robert Reich, and others agree that we are in a time of fundamental change.

Capra, a physicist, writes about a “turning point,” in scientific understanding that will shake the very foundations of science. They talk and write of a shift in worldview from the mechanistic, industrial era where people derive power from control of capital and the technical means of production to a post-industrial era where the source of human progress becomes knowledge. People will enhance their quality of life by learning to live better with what they have rather than by acquiring more “stuff.” Knowledge is biological rather than mechanical in its fundamental nature - it changes, grows, and multiplies over time. Thus, the knowledge based era of human progress will require a new “science of understanding” to replace the old “science of manipulation.”

The transitions in agriculture and rural communities are but small parts of *the great transition* that is taking place all across society. The questioning that is driving changes in agriculture, however, exemplifies the broader questioning of society that is fueling *the great transition*.

Questions concerning sustainability of agriculture and rural communities arise directly from our loss of spirituality. Using almost anyone's definition, concerns for sustainability imply concerns for intergenerational equity - meeting the needs of our current generation while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of generations to follow. The three corner stones of sustainable agriculture - ecological soundness, economic viability, and social responsibility - rest upon a foundation of intergenerational equity. Intergenerational equity, in turn, has its foundation in human spirituality. Sustainability applies the Golden Rule across generations.

Paraphrasing William James, a well-known religious philosopher, we may define spirituality as a “felt need to live in harmony with some unseen order of things.” The sustainability issue ultimately is rooted in a perceived “need to be in harmony with the order of things” -- in spirituality. Finding harmony with a higher order requires an understanding of that order - wisdom not power and control. Sustainable farming means farming in harmony with nature - nurturing nature rather than dominating or manipulating nature. Sustainable farming means farming in harmony among people - within families, communities, and societies. Sustainable farming means farming in harmony with future generations - being good stewards of finite resources. A life of quality is a spiritual life.

However, sustainable agriculture is also about economic viability. A farm is not sustainable unless it makes sufficient profits to stay in business financially. Sustainable farming systems generate profits by fitting farming to the farm, the farmer, and the community - not forcing either to fit some predefined prescription for productivity. Thus, sustainable farming must be knowledge-based - knowledge of how to work with nature rather than against it. Sustainable farmers must match their unique abilities and talents with their land, their community, and their markets. It requires a higher level of understanding of consumer tastes and preferences and the uniqueness of relationship markets. It requires greater sensitivity to sources of potential support, as well as sources of concern, within the community. Sustainable farming requires a higher level of understanding of the land and of nature's productive processes. Sustainable farming requires more intensive resource management - more thinking and creativity per acre or land or dollar of investment.

Sustainable agriculture, with attention to equity, stewardship, and high levels of management skills is consistent with post-industrial trends in the broader economy. The increased knowledge needed to manage resources sustainably suggests a trend toward smaller family farms that allows farm families to remain personally connected to the land. Sustainable agriculture strategies provide more opportunities for local ownership, hands-on management, and long term commitment to the local community. A high level of farming skill increases returns to management and leads to greater profitability for small farms. Farming becomes profitable for farmers and for rural communities as more dollars remain in the community.

Agricultural sustainability requires a systems approach to decision making which treats farms, families, and communities as parts of shared ecological systems. Such systems embody enormous complexity in simultaneous and dynamic linkages among a multitude of interrelated factors. Cognitive scientists have shown that humans can deal consciously with only a very small number of separate variables simultaneously. Yet humans can perform enormously complex tasks; such as driving a car in heavy traffic, playing a tennis match, or carrying on a conversation that baffles the most sophisticated computers. People are capable of performing such tasks routinely by using their well-developed subconscious minds.

The subconscious human mind appears to be virtually unlimited in its capacity to cope with complexity. As organizational theorist Charles Keifer puts it, "When the switch is thrown subconsciously, you become a systems thinker thereafter. Reality is automatically seen systemically as well as linearly. Alternatives that are impossible to see linearly are surfaced by the subconscious as proposed solutions. Solutions that were outside of our 'feasible set' become part of our feasible set. 'Systemic' becomes a way of thinking and not just a problem solving methodology" (as quoted in Senge, p. 366). The subconscious mind is capable of assimilating hundreds of feedback relationships simultaneously as it integrates detail and dynamic complexities together (Senge, p. 367). The human mind may be the only mechanism capable of dealing effectively with the systems complexities embodied in the concept of sustainable agriculture.

Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer, has clearly articulated the connections among people, quality of life, and a sustainable agriculture. *"...if agriculture is to remain productive, it must preserve the land and the fertility and ecological health of the land; the land, that is, must be used well. A further requirement, therefore, is that if the land is to be used well, the people who use it must know it well, must be highly motivated to use it well, must know how to use it well, must have time to use it well, and must be able to afford to use it well"* (p. 147).

The words of Wendell Berry, the farmer and writer, are completely consistent with Peter Drucker, the industrial business consultant and writer, *"In the knowledge society into which we are moving, individuals are central. Knowledge is not impersonal, like money. Knowledge does not reside in a book, a databank, a software program; they contain only information. Knowledge is always embodied in a person, carried by a person; created, augmented, or improved by a person; applied by a person; taught by a person, and passed on by a person. The shift to the knowledge society therefore puts the person in the center (p. 210);*

Sustainable agriculture, the new vision for the future of agriculture, is a knowledge-based approach to meeting the food and fiber needs of society that puts people at the center.

Human Creativity and Sustainable Rural Communities

Sustainable rural communities, like sustainable farms, must maintain the productivity of their local resources while protecting their physical and social environment. Sustainable communities must also provide an acceptable level of economic returns and otherwise enhance the quality of life of those who live and work in the community. Strategies that rely solely, or even primarily, on local natural resources are unlikely to fulfill these latter requirements. However, rural people can overcome the obstacle of limited local resources through a clear vision of the new realities of post-industrial development and a firm commitment to the concept of community. They can leverage limited natural resources -- in much the same way as they might leverage equity capital in financing a business. As the local economy continues to grow, its natural resource "equity" will become a smaller proportion of its total economy, but no less important than is equity capital to a business in ensuring its survivability and sustainability.

Robert Reich, former Secretary of Labor, stresses that the economy is no longer local, or even national in scope, but is truly global. Neither communities nor nations can depend on capturing the benefits of local capital, local industries, or even locally developed technologies in a global economy. Money, jobs, and technology can and will move freely to anywhere on the globe where they can be used to the greatest advantage.

First, sustainable development must be linked to something that cannot easily be moved. Second, sustainable development strategies must give local workers and investors a logical reason for investing, working, and spending

in the communities where they live. Communities cannot be sustained without strong economic interdependencies among those within communities. But, people must have strong logical reasons for developing interdependent relationships.

Reich outlines two fundamental strategies for national economic development in a global economy. First, he advocates investment in infrastructure, including such things as roads, bridges, airports, and telecommunications access systems. Infrastructure has two important development dimensions. First, it facilitates productivity by making production processes easier and more efficient. Second, infrastructure is fixed geographically. If producers want to use U.S. roads, bridges, airports and communications accesses, they have to use them where they are, in the country that built them. Fixed natural resources - such as agricultural land - achieve this same critical developmental impact without building anything. The challenge is to find ways to leverage the local land base to support more people better without degrading it.

Reich's second, and even more important, development strategy is to invest in people. People who work with their minds will be the fundamental source of productivity in a knowledge-based era of the twenty-first century. Human creativity provides the foundation for sustainable economic development in the post-industrial era. Creativity makes the local natural base less limiting, but no less important, than in the industrial era of development. If a nation is to be productive in the post-industrial economy, its people must be productive. If agriculture is to be a cornerstone for rural community development, it must employ the talents of thinking, innovative, productive people - it must be a sustainable agriculture. These thinking, innovative, productive people who can then leverage a limited resource base into vibrant, caring, sharing rural community.

Many people have strong ties to rural areas; however, rural communities cannot depend on an allegiance of rural residents to their communities to keep productive people from moving to town. People can and do move freely among communities within the U.S. Thus, it will be critically important for sustainable communities to be able to attract new mind workers, if there are to be places where "home-grown" mind workers will want to stay. The primary attraction of rural communities for current and future mind workers will be the promise of a desirable quality of life.

Quality of life is a product of human relationships -- relationships among people and between people and their environment. Obviously, other things such as employment, income, personal safety, economic security, and access to health care are important aspects of quality of life. However, quality of life also includes peoples' subjective judgments regarding self-determination, freedom to participate, individual equity, freedom from discrimination, economic opportunity, ability to cope with change, social acceptance, and treatment according to accepted social principles of one's culture.

Rural communities that survive and prosper in the future will be culturally diverse. Successful rural communities will be made up of long-time rural residents, bright young people who choose to stay, returning rural residents, those born in urban areas of the U.S., and those born in other countries. They may also be Anglo American, Afro American, Asian, Mexican, and Canadian as well. Male and female, young and old, rich and poor, educated and less well educated, may be viewed as different, but they must be respected for their differences in the workplace and in the town halls of rural renaissance communities. This diversity will be an important source of creativity, innovation, and synergistic productivity, and will be an important aspect of quality of life in rural areas. In rural such communities, people will have an opportunity to know each other individually rather than simply accept the stereotypes of their cultural groups.

The most important single step toward success may be for those in the community to develop a shared vision of hope for their future -- for a better way of life and a brighter future of their community. The vision of each person in the community will be different from the vision of others in many respects and not all will be hopeful. However, the people of a community must search for and find some common positive elements among their different visions to provide the nucleus for a shared vision of hope. Otherwise, the group is not really a community but rather a collection of people who happen to live in the same general area. A community that has found its shared vision has made its first critical step toward self-revitalization and community sustainability. Hope then can begin to transform reality. To paraphrase Jesse Jackson, the articulate civil rights leader, "if they can conceive it, and believe it, they can achieve it." The future of rural America belongs to those who have a vision of hope and courage to seize it.

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