

Sustainable Farming: Reconnecting with Consumers¹

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American agriculture is in the midst of a “great transition.” 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.

The 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. Until recently, the specialization, standardization, and consolidation of farming had been driven by the decisions of individual, family farmers. Farmers freely chose 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 production invariably increased, because each farmer now was compelled to produce more. The new technologies allowed farmers to reduce costs per unit, but only if they produced more units. 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 and profits were gone. In cases where the government supported commodity prices, land prices rose instead, 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.

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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 continuing 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 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 increasingly is carried out under direction of giant agribusiness corporations.

The industrialization and corporatization of American agriculture has been supported by government policies – including government farm programs and publicly supported research and education programs. The overriding objective of such policies has been to increase the efficiency of agriculture for the ultimate benefit of consumers, in the form of lower food prices. 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 “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.” These same kinds of claims have been made for every U.S. Farm Bill since the 1930s. Yet, the farm economy has continually floundered and American agriculture has limped from one crisis to the next. And now, independent family farmers are becoming a rarity. This new Farm Bill will not do any of the things promised. It simply continues the policies of the past, which subsidize wealthy landowners and the agribusiness corporations, at the expense of family farmers. The new Farm Bill won't promote farmer independence or preserve the farm way of life. It most certainly will not provide for either “farm security” or “food security,” nor will it improve the lives of people in rural America. 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 increased market share and 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.

We don't need a lot of data, facts, or figures to understand what is happening to 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, in corporate control of agriculture. The outcome is a logical consequence of the objectives and strategies we have 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 our “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 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 a 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, rural residents, 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 assembly line workers. Industrial agriculture, inherently, is management “extensive.” It allows fewer farmers to farm more land by using more capital -- machinery and equipment -- and more purchased inputs. As farms have grown larger and more specialized, agriculturally dependent rural communities have withered and died. Larger farms meant fewer farms and fewer farm families to support local schools, churches, public institutions, and retail businesses. In addition, larger farms tend to bypass local communities in purchasing production inputs and in marketing their products. It takes people, not just production, to sustain local communities. The fundamental purpose of agricultural industrialization was to make it possible for fewer people to produce more. An industrial agriculture degrades 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 and still stay competitive in a global economy.

An industrial agriculture exploits people, because it separates people from each other. Today, farmers can't be too concerned about their 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 neighbors land to survive. Neither can farmers be too concerned about the welfare of consumers, because they need a share of the consumers' income to survive. No matter what tactics the processors and retailers use to separate consumers from their money, or how small the farmers' share, if the consumer doesn't buy, the farmer can't sell. Farmers, processors, retailers, consumers, are locked in economic competition, in pursuit of their individual self-interests. A competitive, industrial society is a society of disconnected people. No one set out intentionally to destroy the ecological integrity, social responsibility, or economic viability of 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. These farmers are concerned about the sustainability of agriculture. The success of this new type of farming also has important implications for food safety, food quality, food security, 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.

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/publications/naf.htm>

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 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.

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 farmers who are 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.” The government and public universities at least are becoming aware of the sustainability movement, especially through the growth of markets for organic foods. However, the few million dollars of public money allocated to support sustainable agriculture is but a pittance when compared with the billions of tax dollars subsidizing corporate, industrial agriculture. 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. Understandably, production methods have received much of the attention, thus far, in developing more sustainable farming systems. Farmers traditionally have identified themselves as “producers,” not processors or marketers. At one time, farmers produced food, not raw materials for further processing, and farmers sold their products direct to food consumers. However, one of the first stages of industrialization was the separation of food production into the specialized functions of farming, processing, preservation, and distribution. So, farmers specialize in production of the raw materials and left the rest up to others.

Sustainability, however, will require a reconnecting of these specialized functions – a reintegration of farming with processing, preservation, and distribution; and thus, a reconnection of farmers and consumers. To farm sustainably, farmers will need to relearn both the value and means of developing and maintaining positive productive relationships with their customers. They will have to develop a better understanding of how they can help enhance the quality of life of their customers, if they are to sustain a desirable quality of life for themselves on the farm. Niche marketing may well hold the key to relationship marketing, and thus, to achieving economic viability for farming systems that are environmentally sound and socially responsible. The natural resource base that supports most agricultural production is diverse – in soils, topography, climate, etc. Niche markets for small quantities of many different types of products allow sustainable farmers to match their enterprises and production practices to the uniqueness and diversity of their natural resources. Niche markets can make ecologically sound farming systems economically viable.

Niche marketing provides opportunities for more farmers to make a better living in a given geographic area, by allowing farmers to participate in the total process of food production. Eighty percent of the economic value of food is currently created beyond the farm gate, and thus, beyond the farmer's ability to participate or benefit. By marketing in the niches, individual farmers have opportunities to market direct to consumers, and thus, to participate and benefit from the total process of food production. Thus, niche markets make possible a more socially

responsible agriculture – one that not only meets the needs of people, as consumers, but also provides more quality opportunities for people, as producers, to work and live on the land. Niche marketing offers a more socially responsible, sustainable alternative.

Niche marketing provides economic opportunities by allowing farmers to match their unique resources with the unique wants and needs of consumers. A brief review of some basic economic concepts validated the soundness of this proposition. All economic value or utility arises from four fundamental sources: form, place, time, and person or possession. In order to know the value of anything, we must first know four things: Its physical form – what is it? Its geographic location – where is it? The time of availability – when can I get it? And finally, the individual people involved in the transaction – who has it and who wants it? Only when we know the answer to *all four* questions, can we know the economic value of anything. During the industrial era, our attention has been focused on the first three dimensions of value – form, place, and time. The fundamental advantage of industrialization is that it greatly reduced the costs of changing the form, time, and place of things, through mass production and mass marketing. But, to achieve the economic efficiencies of mass production and marketing, industrial food producers had assumed that all consumers want the same basic thing. “The consumer” wants food that is “quick, convenient, and cheap,” they said, as if there were only “one consumer.”

But, different consumers have different tastes and preferences. The same *thing* at the same *place* and *time* may have greater value to one *person* than to another. It matters *who* wants whatever is offered for sale. The tastes and preferences of individual consumers, and small groups of consumers, matter – not just the desires of the masses. But industrial systems couldn't create benefits for people as *individuals*, only for people as *masses*. So it seemed best to the industrialist if people didn't know too much about what they couldn't have – they tried to sell everyone on food that is quick, convenient, and cheap.

However, a growing number of consumers are now asking for something more – they want a sustainable food system. Of course, these consumers want some of the same things that other consumers want. They want their food to be safe, wholesome, attractive, flavorful, and reasonably priced, but they are asking for something more. They want to know where their food came from, who produced it, how it was produced, and what were the consequences of its production on the natural environment and on all of the people touched by the process. The sustainable producer must meet some of the same basic expectations as industrial producers with respect to the basic safety and quality of food products. But the sustainable producer must meet the additional expectations of consumers who are concerned with the ecological and social implications of the production process.

Many consumers who are concerned about sustainability will sacrifice cosmetic appearance, preparation time, convenience, and price, at least to some extent, in order to ensure the ecological and social integrity of their food. But, they will not sacrifice on food safety or wholesomeness, and most will expect even higher qualities of freshness, nutrition, and flavor. By marketing in the niches and marketing direct, sustainable farmers can meet those expectations. They can surpass supermarket quality with respect to freshness, nutrition, and flavor, and can meet consumers' expectations for ecological and social integrity. By marketing

in the niche of sustainability, they take themselves out of direct competition in the quick, convenient, cheap food market.

The critics argue that niche markets are but a small part of the total food market, and that niche markets will always be marginal in relation to the mainstream of food production. However, all consumer markets are made up of niche markets, because we all have different tastes and preferences. The question is not one of size of the total market, but rather of how narrowly the total market can be segmented and still be served effectively at a reasonable cost. The more relevant question may be, how big is the sustainable foods niche market?

Psychologist Sherry Anderson and market researcher, Paul Ray, in their book, The Cultural Creative, indicate that possibly 50 million such people currently live in the United States alone. These “culturally creative” people believe that relationships are very important, share a strong sense of community, are committed to social equity and justice, believe that nature is sacred, and are concerned for the natural environment and ecological sustainability. They also tend to be more altruistic, idealistic, optimistic, and spiritual than is the average American. They are less materialistic; less concerned about job prospects, and have fewer financial concerns. These are all characteristics of people who are concerned about issues of sustainability.

These “Cultural Creatives” have joined together in various social movements, including those advocating social justice, civil rights, human rights, world peace, environmental protection, sustainable development, holistic health, organic foods, and spiritual psychology. These common sense issues are merging into a common movement committed to building a more sustainable human society. While this group represents only about 20 percent of the total population, their numbers are growing, and they are far more than sufficient in numbers to provide markets for a rapidly expanding number of sustainable farmers.

To sustain a farm economically, however, the farmer must find their niche within the sustainability consumer market by developing relationships with their own specific group of individual customers. The social and ethical principles of sustainability ultimately must be expressed through relationships among people and between people and the earth. For food eaters who do not grow their own food, their relationship must be with their farmer, and through their farmer, with the earth. Such relationships cannot be developed through production and marketing standards for environmental integrity and social justice. They must be developed face-to-face, one-to-one, between people who share a common commitment to each other and to the earth.

“Relationship marketing” takes both farmers and eaters away from the corporate, industrial, competitive market place. The quickness, convenience, and cost of food become secondary to the integrity of the food and the integrity of the farmer-customer relationship. The integrity of the food is ensured by the integrity of the relationship. A violation of this integrity, however, diminishes the quality of the relationship and threatens the integrity of the market. However, “relationship markets” are characterized by mutual concern between farmer and customer for the success and well-being of the other. As long as farmers and eaters genuinely care about each other, they will be able to work through minor misunderstandings and miscommunications. “Relationship markets” also are characterized by a bond of mutual consideration between farmer

and eaters, reflected in a degree of patience, empathy, sympathy, and forgiveness that is simply not found in supermarkets and fast food franchises. In the best of “relationship markets,” farmers and their customers support and reinforce their mutual confidence in a better future, with a sense of open-mindedness, optimism, and hopefulness. “Relationship markets” truly reconnect consumers with their farmers, and through their farmer, with the land.

The most prominent examples of relationship food markets today are found in farmers' markets, community supported agriculture organizations, roadside stands, and other forms of direct contact between farmers and their customers. Another form of relationship market is becoming increasingly common between farmers and chefs in restaurants. In this case, the chef becomes involved in the farmer-eater relationship. In the best of situations, the chef and farmer then work together in meeting the “needs and expectations” of the customer, and the relationship involves all three. In some cases, farmers' agents serve the facilitating role in bringing farmers and eaters together. The key in all cases involving a third party is that the third party does not attempt to replace the farmer in the relationship. Ultimately, to ensure sustainability, the customer, the agent, and the farmer must share a connectedness to the land. The key to “relationship marketing” is the connectedness of people with each other, and through each other, with the land. American agriculture is in the midst of a great transition. Agriculture as we have known it is being transformed into something fundamentally different, and the future of farming and food production in America is at risk. When the corporations have degraded the productivity of the land and have polluted the natural environment, and when they find desperate workers elsewhere who will work even harder for less, they will move on. They will leave America with desolated rural areas that resemble previously colonized third world countries, and will leave Americans without the ability to feed ourselves in a time of crisis. We will become as dependent on the rest of the world for food as we are today for oil. Something is fundamentally wrong in American agriculture. We don't need a lot of facts and statistics to understand it; it's just plain common sense.

It's time for a return to common sense in American agriculture. We are not powerless to oppose the multinational food corporations. We are free to reject the conventional wisdom that corporatization is inevitable, that bigger is better, that the economy is more important than the environment, and that everyone should just mind their own business and look out for themselves. We can learn, instead, to rely on our common sense – the sense of right and wrong, of good and bad that comes from our sense of place within the higher order of things, within which all things are connected. Our common sense is our insight into the true nature of things. This common sense of humanity is reflected in the Golden Rule, the Ten Commandments, and in similar fundamental principles of life, which transcend all of 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 the sustainability of agriculture to be destroyed for the sake of corporate profits. Our common sense tells us that agriculture must be ecologically sound and socially responsible if it is to be economically viable, and thus, sustainable over time. Our common sense tells us that a nation that can't feed itself is no more secure than a nation that can't defend itself. And, 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.

Sustainability requires nothing more than practicing the Golden Rule, both within and across generations. It asks only that we do for others, including those of future generations, as we would have them do for us.

We know what needs to be done to create a sustainable agriculture. Thousands of farmers are already on the frontier in finding new and more sustainable ways to farm. Millions of potential consumers are searching for ways to help build a more sustainable society. As increasing numbers of these farmers and eaters find ways to reconnect with each other, the vision of agricultural sustainability will become clearer. Niche markets will become the mainstream and relationship marketing will become a way of life as much as a way of doing business. As people begin to reconnect with each other and to reconnect with the earth, all across society, America again will begin to realize the value of relationships. Through a renewed love of the land and of each other, we will realize a higher quality of life.

American agriculture is in the midst of a “great transition.” Within this transition is the opportunity to help build a better world and a better way of life. We need only the common sense to see it, and courage to claim it.