

The Good Food Revolution¹

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In Pope Francis' recent *Encyclical on Global Climate Change* he challenged claims that biblical reference to God giving humans “dominion over the earth” gives us the right to use the other living and non-living things of the earth as we choose. The Bible teaches human beings to “till and keep” the garden of the world, he said: “‘Tilling’ refers to cultivating, plowing or working, while ‘keeping’ means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving.”ⁱ

His most stinging criticism was his condemnation of our preoccupation with economic self-interests and our unwise reliance on technology to solve our problems. He acknowledged the achievements in medicine, science and engineering made possible by economic growth and technology. However, he added, “Our immense technological development has not been accompanied by a development in human responsibility, values and conscience.” He rejects the belief that technology and “current economics” will solve current environmental problems or “that the problems of global hunger and poverty will be resolved simply by market growth.” He also cited the undue influence on corporations and wealthy individuals on politics and calls for government action, international regulation, and most important, a spiritual and cultural awakening to “recover depth in life.”

Nowhere is the Pope's call for deep, fundamental, lasting change more essential than in the American Food system. A recent *Fortune Magazine* “Special Report: The war on big food” begins, “Major packaged-food companies lost \$4 billion in market share alone last year, as shoppers swerved to fresh and organic alternatives. Can the supermarket giants win you back?”ⁱⁱ The *Fortune* article describes how a wide range of consumer concerns is eroding the market power of the large corporate food companies. The report names artificial colors and flavors, pesticides, preservatives, high-fructose corn syrup, growth hormones, antibiotics, gluten, and genetically modified organisms. All of these concerns stem directly or indirectly from the industrial paradigm of food production and distribution, including industrial agriculture.

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The “war on big food” is the beginning of a consumer revolution against today's industrial food systems, including industrial agriculture. Many people equate industrialization to the migration of people from farms and rural communities to find manufacturing jobs in urban areas. However, urbanization is only a symptom of the specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control that characterized the industrial model of economic development – including industrial agriculture. Specialization increases efficiency by facilitating division of labor. Standardization allows routinization and mechanization of specialized processes. Routinization and mechanization simplify management and allows consolidation of control into large-scaled, eventually corporately-controlled, enterprises. This is the process by which so-called “economies of scale” have been achieved in farming as well as manufacturing.

The good food revolution against our industrial food system is a “battle for the hearts and minds of the American people” that ultimately will determine the future of farming and food production. Consumer concerns with our current food system are growing and will continue to grow until there is deep, fundamental change. With respect to GMOs, more than 30 states are considering legislation requiring labeling of food products that contain genetically engineered ingredients.ⁱⁱⁱ Maine and Connecticut already have labeling laws that are pending implementation. The world's most popular weed-killer, Roundup, has just been identified by the World Health Organization as a “probable carcinogen.”^{iv} The most commonly used herbicide on U.S. farms, Atrazine, has been identified as a probable endocrine disruptor linked to a host of potential adverse health impacts.^v

Nine states have banned the use of gestation crates in CAFOs, which confined breeding hogs in spaces so small they can't even turn around.^{vi} Only a veto by Governor Christie prevented New Jersey from becoming the tenth, and bans are under active consideration in several other states. McDonalds has been joined by a growing list of restaurant chains demanding “cage-free” eggs for their customers.^{vii} Legislation persistently proposed in the U.S. House of Representatives would ban the routine feeding of antibiotics to animals – a common practice in CAFOs. Under growing pressure for action, the FDA reluctantly adopted “voluntary guidelines,” for antibiotic use in CAFOs, which the big drug companies endorsed.^{viii} All of these actions are responses to growing concerns about the safety and integrity of our industrial food system.

In an attempt to stem the tide of growing public concern, advocates of industrial agriculture have mounted an ongoing multimillion-dollar propaganda campaign designed to – in their words – “increase confidence and trust in today's agriculture.”^{ix} *Food Dialogues*, just one initiative of the broader campaign, is sponsored by the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance—an industry organization whose funders and board members include Monsanto, DuPont, and John Deere, as well as the American Farm Bureau Federation and several major commodity organizations. The campaign features the “faces of farming and ranching”—articulate, attractive young farmers, obviously chosen to put the best possible face on the increasingly ugly business of industrial agriculture. The campaign has hired some of the nation's top public relations firms to try to clean up the tarnished public image of industrial agriculture – and they are very good at what they do.

I want to make it clear that I am not a critic of agriculture in general or of animal agriculture in particular – just industrial agriculture. I grew up on a small dairy farm in southwest Missouri. My brother made a good living there and still lives on that small farm. I was fortunate enough to be able to attend the University of Missouri, where I received my BS, MS, and Ph.D. degrees in Agricultural Economics. So, I understand that farmers need to make a profit. After receiving my BS degree, I worked at the Kansas City stockyards for short time and then spent three years with Wilson & Co., the fourth largest meat packing company in the U.S. at the time.

After receiving my Ph.D. in 1970, I began a 30-year academic career in the agricultural colleges of four major state universities – the first half as an extension livestock marketing specialist. I unknowingly helped start the so-called modern hog industry in North Carolina. I worked with the big cattle feed lots in western Oklahoma. I worked with the large peanut and soybean producers in Georgia. I advised farmers that farms had to become bottom-line businesses, if they expected to survive. I told farmers to think of a farm as a “factory without a roof” and fields and feedlots as “biological assembly lines.” I agreed with then Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz: farmers should either “get big” or “get out” of farming. So, I know where people who promote industrial agriculture are “coming from” because I used to “work there.”

Obviously, I have changed my mind. I first opened my eyes and mind during the “farm financial crisis” of the 1980s. Farm foreclosures and bankruptcies were common fare in the network evening news shows. In order for some farmers to “get big” others had to be “forced out,” because many were not willing to leave voluntarily. The demise of family farms meant the economic and social decay of rural communities. It takes people, not just production to support rural communities. Farming fence-row to fence-row to maximize profits was eroding the soil and polluting the water with chemical fertilizers and toxic pesticides. The industrial agriculture that I had helped create was not good for farmers, not good for communities, and not good for the land.

The lessons from my mistakes as an advocate of industrial agriculture eventually led me to become a committed proponent of sustainable agriculture – a process that began more than 25 years ago and continues through 15 years of “retirement.” A sustainable agriculture must be able to meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. It must be ecologically sound and socially responsible to be economically viable over the long run.

Everything of use to us, including everything of economic value, ultimately is derived from nature – from minerals, land, air, water, energy. While this is obvious in agriculture, it is true of all types of production. Beyond self-sufficiency, we must also depend on our relationships with other people – economic and otherwise – to meet our needs. The economy simply allows us to relate to others impersonally – by working for others, buying, and selling. Consequently, if we destroy the productivity of nature and civility of society we can't sustain our economy or any level of living remotely comparable to our current way of life. A sustainable agriculture must maintain its ecological, social, and economic integrity. Agriculture is the foundation of society.

Over time, it became clear to me that our industrial agriculture is not sustainable. Contrary to the corporate propaganda, it is not even meeting the needs of many if not most people of the present and it most certainly is not leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. I have consistently told farmers they should focus their energy and money on

“changing agriculture” – making agriculture sustainable – rather than supporting a giant propaganda campaign that insults the intelligence of their customers, their neighbors, and people in general.

The indictments of the industrial food system are clear and compelling. Best-selling books, such as *Fast Food Nation*^x and *Omnivore's Dilemma*,^{xi} *The End of Food*,^{xii} and *America's Food*^{xiii} are well documented and supported by reams of scientific research. Video documentaries such as *Future of Food*,^{xiv} *Broken Limbs*,^{xv} *Food Inc.*^{xvi} and *Fresh; The Movie*^{xvii} provided gripping images of the negative ecological and social impacts of an industrial food system on nature, society, and on the future of humanity. The critics consistently tell the same story of a food system that is lacking in ecological, social, and economic integrity. Will Allen of *Growing Power* in Milwaukee joined the growing movement in 2012 with a new program and new book calling for a “*Good Food Revolution*.”^{xviii}

While American farmers have been preoccupied with new industrial technologies to increase economic efficiency and productivity, they have inadvertently degraded the ecological, social, and economic integrity of farming. Industrial agricultural technologies are inherently reliant on non-renewable fossil energy, chemically-dependent monoculture cropping systems, and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. We see the ecological consequences in eroded and degraded soils, polluted streams and groundwater, depleted streams and aquifers, and the growing threat of global climate change. Industrial agriculture shows utter disregard for the other living and non-living things of the earth upon which the sustainability of food production ultimately depends.

We see the socioeconomic consequences in the demise of independent family farms and the social and economic decay of rural communities, as the farms grow larger in size and fewer in numbers. In addition, basic human rights of self-determination and self-defense are systematically denied to rural residents who are forced to live with the clear and compelling threats to public health associated with factory farms.^{xix} “Right to farm” laws were never meant to ensure the right to operate degrading and polluting “farm factories.” Industrial agriculture is driven by economic values, and there is no economic value in doing anything solely to protect the health of either society or nature – the foundations of economic sustainability.

That said, the driving force of the good food revolution is the absolute failure of industrial agriculture to fulfill its most fundamental purpose: to providing food security for the nation. A larger percentage of people in the U.S. are “food insecure” today than during the 1960s, with more than 20% of U.S. children today living in food insecure homes.^{xx} In addition, the only foods affordable to many lower-income families are high in calories and lacking in essential nutrients, leading to an epidemic of obesity and other diet-related health problems. Obesity-related illnesses, such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and various forms of cancer, are projected to claim about one-in-five dollars spent for health care in the U.S. by 2020 – erasing virtually all of the gains made in improving public health over the past several decades.^{xxi} The irresponsible overuse and misuse of agricultural chemicals, growth hormones, antibiotics, and a multitude of additives in industrial foods add to the growing list of diet-related illnesses. We simply can't afford the high and rising costs of more cheap food. Change is no longer an option, it is an absolute necessity.

Our industrial food system is not sustainable – ecologically, socially, economically, or ethically. The good food revolution in farming goes many names, including organic, biodynamic, holistic, bio-intensive, biological, ecological, and permaculture. The new farmers and their customers share a common commitment to creating a new food system that is capable not only of producing nutritious and healthful “good food” but also of sustainability or permanence through commitments to renewal and regeneration of the natural and human resources upon which good food production inevitably depends. Although they may be reluctant to claim the label, they are farming for sustainability.

The organic movement is perhaps the most visible symbol of progress in sustainable agriculture. The modern organic food movement began in the U.S. in the 1960s but didn't gain widespread support until the sustainable agriculture movement emerged in the 1980s. Organic food sales in the U.S. grew rapidly during the 1990s and early 2000s, averaging 20%-plus per year and doubling every three to four years. With the economic recession of 2008, growth rates declined and stabilized at around 10% per year, reaching \$31.5 billion in sales in 2012.^{xxii} While organic sales still account for less than 5% of total food sales in the U.S., organic fruits and vegetables now claim more than 12% of their market – an impressive accomplishment in a nation with a long history of industrial extraction and exploitation.

As organic production moved to larger farms and organic retailing into mainstream markets, organic consumers increasingly looked to farmers in their own communities to ensure the ecological and social integrity of their food. The local food movement began with roadside stands, farmers markets, and CSAs. A 2008 food industry study estimated that sales of local foods had grown from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2007 and were projected to reach \$11 billion by 2011.^{xxiii} The growing popularity of local foods is most visible in the growing numbers of farmers markets and Community Supported Agriculture organizations or CSAs. USDA statistics indicate the number of farmers markets in the U.S. increased from 1,755 to 8,144 between 1994 and 2013, increasing more than four-fold in less than 20 years.^{xxiv} Current estimates by the *Local Harvest*^{xxv} organization indicate there were 2,700 CSAs in the U.S. in 2009, compared with less than 100 in 1990.^{xxvi}

I believe the basic outline of the sustainable food system of the future can be seen in the growing number of local foods networks or collaboratives, such as *Grown Locally*,^{xxvii} *Idaho's Bounty*,^{xxviii} *Viroqua Food Coop*,^{xxix} *Good Nured Family Farms*^{xxx}, and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*^{xxxi} -- all of which I know personally. The *National Good Food Network* lists more than 300 multi-farm “food hubs,” although I have no personal knowledge of many of them and cannot personally vouch for their integrity.^{xxxii} By cooperating, farmers can offer a wide variety of local products with purchase and delivery options ranging from CSA shares to on-line orders of individual items.^{xxxiii} This makes local foods more accessible and more affordable to more people, even if it's not as cheap as industrial foods. The current food networks range in scope from local to state or regional in size and from a dozen or so to hundreds of farmer & consumer members.

Various natural food retailing surveys have shown that approximately one-third of American consumers today are looking for alternatives to industrial foods, specifically foods that have ecological, social, and economic integrity, and their numbers are growing.^{xxxiv} Over time, with supportive changes in public priorities and policies, regional, national, and global networks of sustainable, community-based food systems could well replace the current industrial, corporately controlled global food system.

The most frequently advantages mentioned by consumers of local foods are superior freshness and flavor.^{xxxv} Food safety and nutrition also are common reasons mentioned by those who buy local. Others buy local foods to support local farmers and keep their money in the local economy. Buying local also is seen as a means of reconnecting with friends and neighbors, and through local farmers, regaining some connectedness with the earth. The success of the local food movement will depend on restoring a sense of trust and confidence between and among consumers, farmers, and others involved at all levels in the food system. I believe the quest for a restored sense of personal connectedness – the felt need to reconnect with each other and with the earth – is the most important aspect of the local food movement and ultimately is the key to winning the “war on big food” and the “good food revolution.”

Restoring our sense of connected will require a spiritual and cultural awakening – to “recover depth in life,” as suggested by Pope Francis. A successful food revolution must be deeply rooted in principles, culture, and ethics. The fundamental principles upon which sustainable human relationships must be build include honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect. Sustainable farmers must build personal relationships with their customers, not just to create a market but also because they value friendships. They must have the courage to be trusting and caring in a society that consider such things to be idealistic and naïve. Farmers and their customers must find a renewed sense of community at farmers markets, community supported agricultural associations (CSAs), and community gardens, and other direct marketing venues.

Most important, sustainable personal relationships growing to ethical and moral values, as we learn to treat those we don't know well with the same commitment to trust and kindness that we show to those we know well – and eventually learn that all are deserving of our honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect. Sustainable farmers must “Till and Keep” the land: to till means to work; to keep means to care, protect, oversee, and preserve.” They must accept an ethical and moral commitment to preserve the natural productivity of their land and their communities. They must their land as good as or better than they found it – not only for the benefits of themselves and their customers and neighbors but also for the whole of humanity.

As consumers, we must reject the conventional wisdom that quick, convenient, cheap food is the key to food security – domestically or globally. Any approach to farming and food production that focuses on quick, convenient, cheap food will not provide good food – food that is safe, nutritious, or healthful. It will produce food that maximizes sales and profits. We must learn to pay the full ecological, social, and economic costs of our food, so farmers can care for the land, contribute to their economies, and still make a decent economic living for their families. We must be willing to share the costs as well as the benefits of a “good food.”

We must seek non-market means for providing food security for the poor, as markets have never fed the hungry and never will. Market economies produce foods for those who have the money to compete in the marketplace for food, and most people are hungry because they are poor. Ensuring access to good food for everyone is ultimately an ethical and moral responsibility that cannot be left to the indifference of the marketplace or the vagaries of charity. To alleviate hunger, domestically and globally, we must find the courage to create a society that is based on relationships of caring, kindness, or compassion. We must “recover the depth in life,” as Pope Francis admonished us to do.

We are in the midst of a good food revolution – a battle for the hearts and minds of the American people. Admittedly, the challenges seem daunting. However, as Pope Francis wrote, “All is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start.” In fact, all we really need to do is to return to our common sense of what gives our lives quality, purpose, and meaning – of what brings deep and lasting happiness. Certainly, we are physical beings; we have individual economic needs that must be met. We need food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and the other economic necessities of life. However, we are also social beings; we need positive relationships with other people, not because we might get something tangible in return, but because we need to love and be loved. Finally, we are ethical or moral beings; we need to feel a sense of rightness and goodness about what we do and how we live, which can come only from a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Certainly, we need to care about ourselves. But, it is not a sacrifice to care about others; caring and sharing make our lives better. It is not a sacrifice to respect the needs of future generations. Stewardship of the land and of society makes our lives better. In our pursuit of a healthful, just, and sustainable food system, we need only give the pursuit of true happiness priority over the pursuit of income or wealth. All we really need to do is return to being fully human – spiritually, socially, and individually. The essential dimensions of a good food system are the essential dimensions of human happiness. *The success of good food revolution is not only essential for our survival and sustainability, it is our hope for a fundamentally better future.*

End Notes

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