

## A New Jubilee of Agricultural Sustainability<sup>1</sup>

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Sustainable farming ultimately is a matter of ethics or morality. Sustainability requires that we leave opportunities for those of future generations for a quality of life equal to or better than the quality of our lives today. There are no economic incentives for sustainability. Those of future generations are unable to reward us economically for the resources we choose to leave for them rather than consume for our own gratification. There are no social incentives for sustainability. We will not be alive during those future generations, and may have no descendents in those generations, to benefit from the positive social relationships that may arise from our investments today in a civil and just society for the future. Ultimately, our concerns for sustainability arise from our sense of moral and ethical responsibility for stewardship of the earth for the benefit of all of life for all times.

True stewardship, acting out of concern for others rather than self, arises from the realization that we are a part of something that transcends “us” and transcends “now.” Stewardship reflects a belief that we are but a part of a higher order of things, within which our lives take on purpose and meaning. Our sense of ethics and morality reflect our belief in this higher order, which we cannot change but with which we must conform. Within this order, “right or wrong” and “good or bad” are defined by acts that are either in harmony or in conflict with this order. Our individual purpose in life is defined by our unique place and function within this higher order – through which our lives take on meaning. Our spirituality arises from our belief in this higher order of things, regardless of whether it arises from a belief in the laws of God or the law of nature. Lacking a sense of spirituality, true stewardship is irrational and sustainability is of no concern. Thus, sustainable farming ultimately is a matter of ethics and morality – of spirituality.

Guidance for sustainable farming can be found in spiritual principles of righteous living. In the Bible, for example, the people of Israel were instructed by God to proclaim a year of jubilee every fifty years. “Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each one of you is to return to his family property and each to his own clan” (Leviticus 25:10). During the year of jubilee, all people were instructed to rest the land, to release the slaves, to forgive all debts, and to redistribute the land. The year of jubilee was to be a year of rest, renewal, regeneration, and new beginnings – for the people and for the land<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> John Hart, A Jubilee for a New Millennium: Justice for Earth and for Peoples of the Land, 2000 National Catholic Rural Life Conference, Annual Meeting, 2000; published in Catholic Rural Life in the Spring, 2001.

A sustainable farm is a living system. Its sustaining ability depends on the self-renewing and regenerative capacity of its living systems – soils, plants, animals, and people. Living things naturally rest whenever they become tired and renew their physical structures, reproduce themselves, and evolve to accommodate changes in their environment. Natural ecosystems have natural sustaining ability – they were created that way by nature. Economic and social systems are creations of people – they are whatever we choose to make them. Unfortunately, the economic and social systems that dominate America and much of the rest of the world today are not created in the image of nature – they have no natural capacity for rest, renewal, regeneration, or evolution. Thus, the sustainable farmer must be guided by principles different from those that guide his or her more conventional neighbors.

The dominant economic system of today was designed to extract and exploit both natural and human resources; it has no inherent capacity for rest or for renewal and restoration of the resources it uses up in the production process. For example, publicly held corporate organizations, which dominate today's economy, have no natural life cycle of birth, maturity, and death; they are designed to live and to exploit continuously, forever. The dominant social system of today simply facilitates the pursuit of individual, material self-interests; it has no inherent capacity for rest, renewal, or regeneration of the social connections that inevitably are destroyed in pursuit of greater material well-being. It places no value on connectedness; it reflects the belief that society functions best when everyone takes care of themselves and expects others, including those of future generations, to do likewise.

Admittedly, many members of society support various actions, both personally and politically, to mitigate the negative ecological and social consequences of their individual pursuit of self-interests. However, the dominant economic and social systems of today lack the capacities of living natural system for rest, renewal, and regeneration. If we are to sustain a desirable quality of human life on earth, our economic and social systems must be recreated in the image of nature. We must create a living society and a living economy with built-in capacities for rest, renewal, and regeneration. The biblical concept of jubilee could provide a philosophical cornerstone for a new living economy and living society.

The biblical admonition for periodic rest of the land reflects an understanding of the necessity for ecological integrity in creating and maintaining sustainable systems. Natural systems have the inherent capacity for sustainability, but they must be allowed times of restoration, renewal, regeneration, interspersed with times of use and productivity. Sustainable farmers know they must rotate their fields among various crops, some of which allow the soil to rest, renew, and regenerate the soil, between periods of production for harvest or economic extraction. Periodic times of jubilee, of renewal for the whole farm, including the farm family, might further enhance agricultural sustainability.

The biblical admonition for periodic release of slaves reflects an understanding of the necessity for social responsibility in creating and maintaining sustainable systems. Slaves of biblical times are the farm workers of today. Sustainable social systems must provide opportunities for people, including farmers, to reach their full potential for leading productive, useful, rewarding lives – regardless of their present circumstances. Sustainable farmers must be given periodic

opportunities to relearn and rethink their work and their life. Sustainability requires periodic introspection and forgiveness of self and others for past errors in thoughts, words, and actions.

A socially responsible agriculture requires equity of opportunity – that all who choose to farm be given an opportunity to realize their full potential for contribution and self-fulfillment. Today's “agricultural slaves” are the seasonal farm workers and contract producers who find themselves at the mercy of corporate agribusiness. Thus, seasonal farm workers, contract farmers, and other wanna-be farmers must be given opportunities, support, and encouragement to “free themselves” from their current dependence and to become independent farmers, if they are willing and able to help recreate a sustainable agriculture. Periodic times of jubilee, of unique opportunity for beginning farmers, might further enhance agricultural sustainability.

The biblical admonition for periodic remission of debts reflects an understanding of the necessity for economic viability in creating and maintaining sustainable systems. A sustainable system must be capable of economic renewal and regeneration. Sustainable farmers know they must earn enough to be able to replace whatever rusts, rots, or wears out. Thus, they minimize their investment in machinery, equipment, and commercial inputs and maximize their reliance on management of renewable human and natural resources. However, given today's imperfect knowledge of sustainable farming, even the best of farmers may not be able to weather times of extreme economic adversity, brought on by extreme weather conditions or general economic conditions, which defy either anticipation or control.

Many conventional farmers who would like to make the transition to sustainable farming may be too far in debt to defy the demands of their creditors that they continue to farm conventionally – until they lose their farms. Many farmers who are currently in the transition process, from conventional to sustainable farming, may be particularly vulnerable to economic adversity. Periodic times of jubilee, of conditional forgiveness of farm debts, might speed the transition to sustainability.

Finally, the biblical admonition of redistribution of land reflects an understanding of the necessity for overall ecological, economic, and social renewal and regeneration in creating and maintaining sustainable systems. Natural ecosystems change and evolve over time to accommodate an ever-changing natural environment. Human society must change over time, as we learn to make better social choices for the future, or alternatively, as we learn to cope with the adverse consequences of unwise choices of the past. Economies also must change and evolve over time to accommodate our ever-changing relationships with the land and with each other. Thus, as responsibility for stewardship of ecological and social resources are passed from one generation to the next, sustainability requires that it passes from those who adhere to a way of the past to others with a way of thinking more appropriate for the future. Human society cannot be sustained without continuing evolution in thinking and continuing evolution in paradigms for choices affecting the quality of life of people and health of the land.

Sustainable farming requires regenerating the farmer and the farm family, as well as the farm. Farm families do not naturally regenerate themselves, as farm children are often prepared for and encouraged to seek their future in some occupation other than farming. Even when farms remain within families, ways of farming must change and evolve from one generation to the next. In

reality, the land does not “belong” to the farmer; the farmer is simply the steward or caretaker of the land. The farmer has a conditional right to use the land and benefit economically, but that right carries with it the moral and ethical responsibility to leave the land as good as it was found. These limited use rights may be passed from one generation to the next within families, but along with the rights passes the responsibilities. New generations within farm families may not be willing or able to accept the responsibilities that accompany the conditional use rights. Thus, means must be found for redistribution of farmland, from those who are unwilling or unable to accept the responsibility for moral and ethical use of the land to those who are willing and able to farm it sustainably. We may find periodic times of jubilee, of redistribution of land, to be necessary for achieving and maintaining a sustainable agriculture.

I am not suggesting that times of jubilee be declared by means of some public fiat or religious decree. I am suggesting that government farm policies should be redirected from supporting the current extractive and exploitation systems of agricultural production to supporting, instead, the transition to a more sustainable agriculture. I am also suggesting that the religious concept of jubilee – of periodic rest for land and people, new opportunities for beginning farmers, forgiveness of debts, and redistribution of land – are fundamental principles of serious consideration in reformulating agricultural policies.

Perhaps even more important, the concept of jubilee can help guide individual farmers toward greater sustainability and a more desirable quality of life. Individual farmers need not wait for changes in public policies. Farmers with a sense of spirituality, with a commitment to finding ways to farm and live sustainably in harmony with the higher order of things, can declare a time of jubilee on their farms any time they choose.

Farmers can declare a day or a year of rest, for their farms or for themselves, anytime they sense it is “right and good” to do so, and trust that they will benefit economically, socially, and spiritually from their ethical and moral actions. If farmers are in positions of dependence, they can free themselves by discontinuing their relationships with those who oppress them, instead, taking responsibility for their own decisions and actions. If farmers are in positions of power over others, they can provide opportunities for and encouragement to their workers to pursue independence, self-determination, and personal fulfillment.

Farmers can at least pursue the principle of forgiveness of debts, regardless of their economic situation. They can actively seek means by which those who owe them money may find their debts easier to repay. They also can actively seek ways to lessen the burden of their own debts, by talking earnestly with their lenders about reorganizing their farming operations in ways that will allow them to reduce their reliance on borrowed money. Many can choose better ways of farming that require far less capital than they need today, and thus, can forgive much of their debts by forgiving themselves for their past mistake of borrowing too much money.

Farmers can also pursue the principle of land redistribution by ensuring that their farms are passed to a new generation of farmer who will use the land responsibly. They can instill a sense of stewardship in their children who choose to farm. And, farmers can explain to children who do not choose to farm, that the land must be passed to those of the new generation who will leave it for the next generation at least as good as it is today. Those who choose not to farm must

accept the economic consequences of their unwillingness or inability to be responsible stewards of family-owned land. Farmers can make such decisions in the knowledge that the most important legacy they can leave for their children is their example of an ethical and moral life.

Sustainable farming depends on living systems. Living systems require periods of rest, renewal, and regeneration. The religious principles of jubilee are consistent with the requirements of living, sustainable systems of farming. The new jubilee of sustainable agriculture cannot be accomplished by government fiat or religious decree, but the concept of jubilee is a legitimate principle that may guide future public policy toward agricultural sustainability. But more important, individual farmers can enhance the sustainability of their farms and their personal, social, and spiritual quality of life by declaring their own times of jubilee, whenever they choose.