

The Local Food and Family Farm Revivalⁱ

John Ikerdⁱⁱ

I grew up on a small farm in southwest Missouri. Every summer in the little country church near my childhood home there would be an old-time “revival.” Every night, for at least a week, the church house would reverberate with the singing of old revival songs and some of the best “preaching” I still have ever heard. Each sermon ended with an “altar call.” People in the congregation were asked to publicly confess their sins and to “repent.” During one of these fiery revival sermons the preacher explained the meaning of the word repent, at least as it is used in the Bible. It means we should not only “confess” our past errors but learn from our mistakes and commit to “changing” our ways in the future. A revival is a time of change.

The people in rural communities in those days understood that even the best of people sometimes stray from the path we were meant to walk. Revivals gave us an opportunity to pause and reflect on our lives and then to renew, revitalize, recover, and restore our souls and the collective soul of our community. We are now at a point in history when we as a society need not only to confess our past mistakes but also to repent, by committing ourselves to fundamentally change our ways of life in the future. We need to restore the collective soul of our communities, our nation, and global society as a whole. We need a great local, national, and global revival.

The need for revival is most clear in the question of sustainability: “How do we meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future?” As the late Robert Rodale of the Rodale Institute used to say: sustainability is a question in search of an answer: in fact, “The Big Question.” Sustainability is not a passing fad, as many would like us to believe. The question of “sustainability” first came to widespread public attention in the late 1980s¹ and has survived widespread political and economic opposition to become the defining issues of the 21st century. When we ask the question of sustainability honestly and factually, we must conclude that we are not meeting even the basic needs of many if not most people today, even in the US, and we certainly are not leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future.

Nowhere is the lack of sustainability and the need for revival more critically important, and less widely understood, than our current systems of farming and food production. Farming operations have specialized, standardized, and consolidated control, in order to achieve the economic efficiencies of large-scale, industrial production. While industrial agriculture has resulted in tremendous gains in productivity and economic efficiency, it quite simply is not sustainable. A sustainable agriculture must be ecologically sound, socially just, and economically viable. Industrial agriculture fails on every count. It is not sustainable.

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

We see the ecological consequences of industrial agriculture in eroded and degraded soils, polluted streams and groundwater, depleted streams and aquifers, and the growing threat of global climate change. Ecological degradation is an inevitable consequence of the reliance of industrial agriculture on non-renewable fossil energy, chemically-dependent monoculture cropping systems, and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. Without these technologies, industrial agriculture is not economically competitive. An industrial agriculture inevitably degrades and depletes the productivity of the natural resources upon which its productivity ultimately depends. It is not ecologically sustainable.

We see the socioeconomic consequences of industrial agriculture in the demise of independent family farms and the social and economic decay of rural communities. It takes people, not production, to support rural communities. In addition, factory farms have been scientifically documented as significant threats to public health.² We see investors in corporate agribusinesses grow wealthier while farm families are forced into poverty. Many of those who carry out the day-to-day operations on factory farms are little more than “hired hands” on their own farms. Industrial agriculture is degrading and depleting the productivity of the human resources upon which its sustainability ultimately depends. It is not socially sustainable.

Everything of any use to us, including everything of economic value, ultimately is derived from nature – from soil, mineral, air, water, energy. There's no place else to get anything. Beyond self-sufficiency, our ability to derive our food or anything else of economic value from nature depends our willingness and ability to work together toward common goals. Industrial agriculture is systematically degrading and destroying the productivity of the natural and human resources upon which its economic sustainability ultimately depends. It is not even economically sustainable. In summary, industrial agriculture is not ecologically, socially, or economic sustainable. Change is no longer an option; it is an absolute necessity.

It's time for a food and farming revival in America. It's time to openly and publicly admit and confess past failures of our food and farming system, no matter how well intended they might have been. It's time to recover, renew, revitalize, and restore the soul of food and farming in America. It's time to reject the failed experiment of industrial agriculture and return to the historical principals of family farming. It's time for family farm revival.

Historically, family farmers were held in high esteem in America as in most of the rest of the world. Thomas Jefferson, for example, believed strongly that the “yeoman farmer” best exemplified the kind of “independence and virtue” that should be respected and supported by government. He did not believe financiers, bankers, or industrialists could be trusted to be caretakers of democracy and therefore should not be encouraged. Adam Smith, an icon of capitalism and author of the classic, *The Wealth of Nations*, observed that farmers ranked among the highest social classes in China and India, and suggested it would be the same everywhere if the “corporate spirit” did not prevent it. Smith never trusted businessmen to serve interests other than their own and held a particular distrust of corporations.

Prior to the mid-19th century, most farms in America were clearly “family farms,” meaning farming was predominantly a “way of life” – not just a means of making an economic living. Farms began to increase in size in the mid-1800s as new technologies allowed mechanization and expansion of production to feed a growing US population. Improved storage and

transportation also allowed grain surpluses to be more easily traded abroad. Farmer cooperatives played a significant role in this evolution, as family farmers joined together in various organizations to gain power to bargain with the large grain merchants, provide their own inputs and services, and retain their “independence and virtue.” Farms continued to expand in acreage and productivity through the early 1900s, in spite of setbacks during economic recessions.

Following World War II, millions of family farms were destined to become farm businesses rather than traditional “ways of life.” Agriculture soon became an industry. Wartime technologies developed to supply munitions, poison gas, and tanks were soon adapted to produce chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and farm equipment. During the 1950s and 1960s, capital and technology replaced labor and management and farms were consolidated into larger and fewer farm businesses. By 1970, farm numbers in the US had dropped by more than one-half from their peak. The global economic recession of the 1980s caused roughly one-fourth of the remaining farms to go out of business. Since then, farm numbers have continued to decline and average farm size and farming operations have increasingly come under the control of large, agribusiness corporations – through ownership as well as comprehensive contractual arrangements. Farms have been turned into biological factories and agriculture has been turned into an industry.

It's time for a *food system* revival in America. The industrialization of the American food system began with food processing, most notably with the meat packing industry in the late 1800s, as documented in Upton Sinclair's, *The Jungle*. The meat packing industry eventually was regulated by the Packer and Stockyards Act of 1921. However, government enforcement of all forms of antitrust legislation fell out of favor during 1980s. Since then, consolidation in meat packing, as well as other food manufacturing sectors, has gone largely unchecked. Virtually every food processing sector of the economy today is dominated by a few large corporations. As corporations gain positions of economic dominance in one sector, they often use their economic and political power to become dominant players in other sectors, globally as well as nationally.

The industrialization of food retailing began with regional supermarket chains replacing the “mom and pop” grocery stores in the late 1940s. By the 1970s, many of the smaller regional chains were consolidated into larger national chains. The process continued virtually unchecked during the 1980s, and in the early 1990s, Wal-Mart used its position of dominance as a discount retailer to broaden its span of control into foods, quickly becoming America's largest food retailer. The other national food retailers responded by buying or merging with other national chains to increase their span of control and market power.

A similar process occurred in the “away from home” food market. McDonald's “golden arches” started displacing local restaurants in the late 1950s. Others, such as Pizza Hut and Kentucky Fried Chicken (now KFC) quickly followed the McDonald's franchising model, buoyed economically by housewives moving into the workforce and out of the kitchen. Today, approximately one-half of all dollars spent for food is spent for meals away from home, more than one-half of which is spent for “fast foods.” Many of the different fast food franchises today are owned by far larger food corporations. A few large corporations now largely control the away from home food market, nationally and globally.

We have drifted far from the previous paths of real family farms, local butchers and bakers, mom-pop grocery stores, and family restaurants. We see the consequences in failing farms and a failed food system. Best-selling books, such as *Fast Food Nation*³ and *Omnivore's Dilemma*,⁴ as

well as less-known books, *The End of Food*⁵ and *America's Food*⁶ document virtually all aspects of our current dysfunctional industrial, corporately-controlled, global food system. Video documentaries such as *Future of Food*,⁷ *Broken Limbs*,⁸ *Food Inc.*⁹ and *Fresh; The Movie*¹⁰ provided gripping images of the negative ecological and social impacts of an industrial food system on nature, society, and on the future of humanity. They tell stories of a food system that is deceptive in everything from advertising to flavors and that disrespects and degrades everything it touches, from the soil and water to migrant farmers and fast-food workers. Today's industrial food system lacks ecological, social, and economic integrity. It is not sustainable.

It's time to repent for past sins in the kinds of farms we have inadvertently supported and to return to the historical values that raised family farms to a position of high esteem within past societies. True family farmers of the past and present have a strong “sense of place.” The interconnectedness of the family with the farm ultimately is what makes a farm a “family farm” and a family a “farm family.” On a true family farm, the farm and the family are inseparable. The same farm with a different family would be a different farm, and the same family with a different farm would be a different family. The family and the land are inseparable parts of the same whole.

True family farmers also have a strong “sense of family.” Family farms can be good places to raise children and to sustain family relationships – both within and among generations. Working, child rearing, recreation, and family life all happen at the same time and place – on the farm. Children who contribute to the chores on family farms grow up knowing they are valuable and valued as productive participants in the work and life of the family. Feeling valued gives them a better chance to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem or self-worth. Family farms survive and thrive by creating and sustaining the kind of positive, caring, personal relationships that are essential aspects of strong families and strong communities.

True family farmers have a strong “sense of community.” The farm is a reflection of the social and ethical values of the farm family in the community and the community often forms its opinions of the family in relation to their farm. Farm families often identify themselves, are identified by others, and identify others in terms of networks of familial, social, and economic relationships within communities. More than 50 years of social science research has validated that US communities characterized by small to mid-size family farms tend to be better places to live, both economically and socially, than are communities dominated by large farming enterprises.¹¹

Obviously, all family farms do not have all of the positive characteristics associated with sense of place, family, and community. But family farms have the potential to do so. It's the positive “potentials” of family farms, not their past or present reality, that make such farms important to the families who choose this way of life, to their communities, to agriculture, and the future of humanity.

With respect to agricultural sustainability, the most important characteristic of family farms relate to what is currently being called their “multifunctionality,” meaning their inherent motivation and ability to serve ecological and social functions, as well as their obvious economic function. A sustainable agriculture must maintain the productivity of its natural and human resources. It must be ecologically sound, socially responsible, and economically viable. Multifunctional farms are essential for sustainability. All farms are multifunctional in that they have inherent economic, ecological, and social consequences. Family farms are special in that they have inherent incentives and a natural capacity to be *intentionally* multifunctional, as they reflect the social and ethical values of the family.

Farms are not necessarily sustainable just because they are owned and operated by farm families. Family farms that are managed solely or predominately for their economic benefits are managed as *mono-functional* family farms, even though they have inevitable multiple effects on communities and ecosystems. Farms managed for the economic bottom line have inevitable *negative* social and ecological impacts on nature and society. Such farms are not sustainable. The family farms that earned and deserved the historical status of high esteem were *multifunctional* family farms. It's time for a return to the historical value of family farming. It's time for a family farm revival.

Fortunately, a “family farm revival” is already under way in the guise of the sustainable agriculture movement. Sustainable farmers may label themselves organic, biodynamic, ecological, natural, holistic, or choose no label at all; but they are all pursuing the same basic purpose. They are producing food that has ecological, social, and economic integrity. They are multifunctional. They are creating systems of farming capable of maintaining their productivity and usefulness to society indefinitely – a permanent, sustainable agriculture. At least eight “sustainable agriculture” conferences in the U.S. and Canada draw 1,000 to 3,000 people each year. Conferences drawing 500 to 700 people are becoming almost commonplace and virtually every state in the U.S. has a grass-roots organic or sustainable agriculture organization.

The sustainable agriculture revival obviously cannot be limited to farming; it must permeate the entire food system from farmer to consumers, from “dirt” to the dinner place. Fortunately, a “local food revival” also is already under way. It has its roots in the organic food movement, but it continues to evolve and grow as an ongoing protest to the industrial food system. The organic 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, and has stabilized at around 10% per year since the economic downturn of 2007.¹² 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 the face of relentless opposition from the industrial agriculture establishment.

However, the organic movement changed over the years. It began as a group of small, back-to-earth farmers and small cooperative natural foods retailers. As organic sales grew, economic pressures brought on a call for uniform national organic standards which opened up organic production and distribution to large, specialized farming operations and mainstream supermarkets. By 2007, the mainstream supermarkets and large natural food chains, such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's, accounted for more than 90% of the organic food market.¹³ Organic farming also had become similarly dominated by large, specialized, “industrial organic farms.” 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.¹⁴

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 2011.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Estimates by the *Local Harvest*¹⁷ organization indicate there were 2,700 CSAs in the U.S. in 2009, compared with less than 100 in 1990.¹⁸

In order to better meet the needs of a growing group of discriminating food customers, once independent farmers are forming alliances, collaboratives, cooperatives, and other types of new farming communities. Examples include food buying clubs, local food networks, food box schemes, regional food hubs, and a variety of farmer-owned cooperatives. *Grown Locally*,¹⁹ *Idaho's Bounty*,²⁰ *Viroqua Food Coop*,²¹ and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*,²² are examples. These multi-farm collaborations, or “food hubs” as the USDA calls them, could well be the model for new community-based national and global food systems.²³ To create a sustainable food system, farmers must find ways to scale-up to gain economic efficiency, without growing so large or impersonal, or so *industrial*, that they compromise their ecological, social, and economic integrity.²⁴ They must be willing and able to balance the virtues of cooperation and independence if they are to regain the historical respect awarded true family farmers.

We are already in the midst of a food and farming revival, and like old-time revivals, the level of enthusiasm is growing along with the numbers of people who are sharing the new *gospel* or good news of food and farming. 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.²⁵ 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.

Perhaps even more important, the new revival of family farms and local foods is being energized, if not yet led, by young farm families and their young friends and neighbors. These young families know that we have created an unsustainable society and they are ready to take on the challenge of creating a better world for the future for themselves, their children, and the future of humanity. They also have the knowhow to manage and coordinate the new food hubs using electronic information technologies to connect farmers with their customers. They have the ability to use social media not only to promote their products and organizations but also demand attention to their public policy priorities. These young folks are not bound to ways of the past, but are committed to the possibilities of a better future and are committed to making it a reality.

Admittedly, the challenges of fundamental change seem daunting. However, the way forward is really not that complicated, even if admittedly not easy. The “gospel of sustainability” simply extends the Golden Rule across as well as within generations. It asks us to do for those of future generations as we would have them do for us if we were of their generation and they were of ours. The sustainability revival is about reviving, restoring, and renewing the social and spiritual dimensions of our beings: being intentionally multifunctional farmers, eaters – human beings.

Certainly, we are physical beings; we have individual economic needs. We need food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and the other economic necessities of life. However, we are also social beings; we need positive personal relationships with other people. We need to care and be cared for, to love and be loved – for our sanity. Finally, we are ethical or moral beings; we need believe that what we do matters. We need to feel some sense of rightness and goodness in what

we do and how we live. This was the message of those old-time revivals: that we must learn to listen to the quiet voice within: that we are spiritual as well as physical and mental beings.

In many respects, the local food and family farming revival is much like the revival at that little country church that I remember from my childhood. It is about repenting and returning to being fully human – physically, mentally, and spiritually. The essential dimensions of sustainable foods and farming are the essential dimensions of a well-rounded life of quality or happiness. *The Local Food and Family Farming Revival is not only essential for sustainability, it is our best hope for a fundamentally better future for ourselves, our families, and of humanity.*

End Notes

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