

Reconnecting Consumers and Farmers in the Food System

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Presented at “Reconnecting Consumers and Farmers” Conference, Sponsored by Citizens Policy Center, Innovative Farmers of Ohio, and Ohio Citizens Action, Columbus, OH, March 24, 2001.

The focus of this conference on reconnecting consumers and farmers through issues related to food and the environment seems particularly relevant to this particular point in time in American culture. We have become a nation of disconnected people who deal with each other only indirectly – through markets, through agents, or through lawyers and courts. Our relationships are defined by transactions, contracts, and laws rather than by common interests, commitment, and trust. Our disagreements are addressed through argument, arbitration, and lawsuits rather than through honest discussion of our differences. Truly personal relationships, based on believing, trusting, caring, and sharing, are labeled as naïve or idealistic. We Americans seem to have lost our sense of personal connectedness. We need to reconnect with each other throughout our society, if we are to retain our national identity – our sense of shared values, of being something more than a collection of individuals that happen to be living in the same country.

Nowhere is our disconnectedness more evident than in our systems of food and farming. Most consumers, particularly younger consumers, have no sense of where their food actually comes from. They may know that farmers grow crops and livestock, and that someone processes and packages these crops and delivers food to grocery stores and restaurants, but they have little sense of what’s involved in this process. For example, few people even stop to consider that soil is essential to all of life, including human life – as essential as air, water, or sunlight. Pure air and water alone cannot support life. All of life is rooted in the earth. Farming is the means by which we bring life from the soil. Farming, in the minds of many, conjures up some image from the past of a decent, hard working family living in rural isolation and trying to coax a living from the land. To others, farming is just like any other manufacturing process that turns raw materials into finished products. But, there is no sense of connectedness between the people who eat and farmers who tend the soil to bring forth their food.

What does it matter if people don’t understand where their food comes from? People don’t understand where their automobiles come from, or where their clothes, their houses, their movies, or anything else come from, and no one seems to be complaining about their lack of knowledge of such things. However, I believe that all disconnections among people matter, even if no one complains. The seeds of dissention are sown in the gaps of understanding and appreciation that exist among people. Conflict, frustration, depression, anger, and other miseries in life are but symptom of our disconnectedness. People have not associated the symptoms with the cause, but the cause still matters. But, it matters even more that we consumers understand our connections with farmers.

Many farmers feel a great sense of frustration that people don’t understand how life in general is connected to life in the soil and life on the land. They feel that they are virtually

forced to destroy the natural productivity of the soil, to degrade the natural environment, and to destroy the social fabric of their communities, because the only thing consumers are concerned about is the price of food in the grocery store. Many farmers feel that they are being forced to value the economic bottom-line above virtually all else, above their neighbors and communities, and sometimes even above their families, because the only thing consumers care about is that food is produced as efficiently as possible. Farmers want to be good neighbors and good stewards of the land, but the competitive pressures of a consumer-driven, market economy won't let them. Instead, they are slowly destroying the land, destroying the quality of rural life, and ultimately will destroy the ability of the earth to support human life, all because consumers don't understand their connectedness with the land and with the people who farm it.

Until fairly recently, nearly everyone farmed, had farmed, knew a farmer, or at least knew someone who had farmed for a living. Prior to the industrial revolution, some two hundred years ago, farming was the dominant occupation in the United States and no one was very far removed from the farm – either by distance or by personal relationships. A little as a hundred years ago around forty percent of the people in the US were farmers, and well over half lived in rural farming communities. Even during the 1950s and 1960s, most urban dwellers had either grown up on a farm or knew someone who had. It's only within the last couple of decades that farmers and their customers have become total strangers. Today, models of working farms are set up as tourist attractions, and there is serious discussion of a national network of farming museums to give people some sense of what farming is about. But tourist attractions will not reconnect consumers with farming any more effectively than zoos connect people with the jungle. Connectedness arises from meaningful relationships.

The Causes of Our Disconnectedness

If we are to help reconnect consumers and farmers, we need to start with an understanding of how people became disconnected in the first place. It's no coincidence that people have become disconnected during the last few decades – during the final stages of industrialization. Disconnectedness is an unintended, but inescapable, consequence of industrial approach to development.

The fundamental principles of industrialization are specialization, standardization, and centralization of decision making. When workers specialize in doing fewer things, each person can become more efficient in the task they perform, and by working with others can produce more with less total work. By standardizing the tasks of specialized workers and standardizing the things they produce, workers and their products become interchangeable, greatly facilitating the coordination of separate specialized functions. Finally, specialization and standardization simplifies decision making processes, and makes it possible to centralize management and to consolidate large numbers of workers and functions into large business operations. Economists call this achieving economies of scale. Regardless of whether the result is assembly line production by giant automobile manufacturers or a large scale confinement animal feeding operation, the principles are the same. The gains in efficiency from industrialization result from carrying out specialized functions by standardized means under centralized management.

Our current economic system has evolved over the past two-hundred years to

accommodate industrializing production and distribution processes. Again, it is no coincidence that competitive capitalism emerged as the dominant economic model during the industrial revolution. Adam Smith, in his landmark book of 1776, The Wealth of Nations, developed the blueprint for our industrial economy. He used the example of making straight-pins to illustrate the potential for tremendous gains in productivity from division of labor – specialization and standardization of production processes. But he went on to explain how free markets allowed specialized producers of food – the butcher, the brewer, and the baker – to best serve the needs of society in general by pursuing their individual self-interest.

“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker,” he said, “that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self love, and never talk to them of our necessities but of their advantages”(p. 7). Later, in reference to trade, Smith states, “he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention.” By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually (sic) than when he intends to promote it” (p. 199). These statements provided the foundation of the contemporary economic wisdom -- that pursuit of individual short run self-interests is transformed into achievement of the public good, as if by an *invisible hand*. The greatest societal good automatically results from the greatest individual greed.

As we have become specialized in our work, and as we have come to rely on the impersonal market place to reward us for our efforts and to make available the things we want and need, we have lost our appreciation for the value of personal connections. And, as the economy has become increasingly complex, we have become increasingly separated and disconnected from each other personally.

When America was an agrarian nation, people either produced their own food, or they bartered for or bought it from someone who had produced it. The relationship between consumer and producer was personal. As the economy became more specialized, merchants such as butchers, bakers, and brewers bought from producers and sold to consumers, and the farmer/consumer connections became one-step removed. Then came the grocery store owners, who bought from the butchers, bakers and brewers, and then, consumers were at least two-steps removed from the farm. As people left rural areas for the cities, consumers were separated by distance as well as function, and added functions such as transportation, further processing, storage, and packaging, magnified the degrees of separation. Consumers and producers alike became increasingly reliant upon the impersonal marketing system. They relied on laws to facilitate buying and selling, on grades and standards to define quality, on health requirements to ensure safety, etc. – and they relied less on personal relationships.

This same type of disconnection was occurring all across society – increasingly, people were relating to each other through the market place. Confidence, commitment, and trust were replaced by guarantees, contracts, and regulations. And when disputes arose concerning market transactions, they were settled in the courts. The reservoirs of personal goodwill from which conciliation and consensus must be drawn were rapidly depleted. Our national disconnectedness is no coincidence with industrialization; instead, it is a direct

consequence of industrialization. And equally significant, we will not become reconnected as a people until we move beyond industrialization to a fundamentally new and different era of human progress.

The Great Transition

Admittedly, if the dominant trends of the past two hundred years were to continue, there would be little hope for reconnecting people and building new partnerships. But, trends never continue, at least not indefinitely. A few years back, a couple of scientists proposed a list of the top twenty "great ideas in science" in Science magazine, one of the two most respected scientific journals in the world (Pool). They invited scientists from around the world to comment on their proposed list. Among the top twenty were such ideas as the relationship between electricity and magnetism, the laws of gravity and motion, and the first and second laws of thermodynamics. The top twenty also included the proposition that "everything on the earth operates in cycles;" everything physical, biological, social, economic – everything. Some scientists responding to the Science survey disagreed with the proposed theory of universal cycles, but most left it on their list of the top twenty great ideas in science (Culotta).

In essence, the theory of universal cycles implies that trends never continue forever. A trend is nothing more than a phase of a cycle and eventually will turn and move in the opposite direction. In reality, it's just common sense – everything that goes up eventually comes down, and everything that goes around eventually comes back around.

In fact, many futurists, people who study trends and cycles, believe we are in a time of a *great transition* that will reverse the processes of industrialization and take civilization in an entirely different direction for the future.

"We are at that very point in time when a 400-year-old age is dying and another is struggling to be born – a shifting of culture, science, society, and institutions enormously greater than the world has ever experienced. Ahead, the possibility of the regeneration of individuality, liberty, community, and ethics such as the world has never known, and a harmony with nature, with one another, and with the divine intelligence such as the world has never dreamed."

These are not the words of a priest or a philosopher but of Dee Hock, founder of one of the largest financial institutions in the World, the VISA Corporation.

Hock is certainly not alone in this thinking. A whole host of futurists from the political and business communities, including Alvin Toffler, Vaclav Havel, Tom Peters, Peter Drucker, John Naisbitt, and Robert Reich agree that we are in a time of fundamental change. They talk and write of a shift in worldview from the mechanistic, industrial model of the past, where people derived power from control of capital and the technical means of production, to a new life-centered, post-industrial era where knowledge becomes the new source of power, of wealth, and of future human progress.

The two world views are fundamentally different. One views the world as a complex machine; the other views the world as a living organism. Factories are mechanistic in nature. They are built, they function for a time, inputs go in and outputs come out, but they

eventually wear out, and must be replaced. Knowledge is biological rather than mechanical in nature – it is discovered, it changes, it grows, and multiplies over time, pretty much on its own. Living things can't be built and are difficult to control; instead they must be nurtured and cared for. Thus, the knowledge based era of human progress will require greater understanding of and respect for living systems, including people. The new source of power, wealth, and satisfaction with the uniquely human capabilities of people to think, to feel, and to relate to each other.

In the words of Peter Drucker, the time-honored writer and consultant to American industry:

"In the knowledge society into which we are moving, individuals are central. Knowledge is not impersonal, like money. Knowledge does not reside in a book, a databank, a software program; they contain only information. Knowledge is always embodied in a person, carried by a person; created, augmented, or improved by a person; applied by a person; taught by a person, and passed on by a person. The shift to the knowledge society therefore puts the person in the center" (p. 210).

The Agricultural Transition

The *great transition* is already under way. The sustainable agriculture movement is but one small part of the *great transition* that is taking place all across society. The questions that are driving changes in agriculture are the same as those being asked about our economy and society as a whole – how can we meet the needs of people, all people, today while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of generations to follow?

People are losing confidence in the industrial, free-market economy. They can see that Adam Smith's *invisible hand* has been mangled by industrial corporatism, and is no longer capable of transforming self-interest into societal good. We no longer have competitive markets, at least not in the economic sense to eliminate excessive profits. It's no longer easy to get into or out of businesses to accommodate changing consumer tastes and preferences. We don't have accurate information concerning the actual qualities of the things that we buy, but get disinformation by design in the form of persuasive advertising. Consumer sovereignty is a thing of the past – it began disappearing when the advertising agency started hiring Ph.D. psychologists to "shape" consumer demand. None of the necessary conditions for competitive capitalism exists in today's economy. In addition, the global economy is moving away from market coordination toward a corporate version of "central planning," as if the only problem with the Soviet economy was a lack of sophisticated management.

Today, we have a corporatist rather than capitalist society. The concept of corporatism is not limited to the economy, but permeates the political arena as well. People have abrogated their responsibilities as citizens as well as owners of productive resources. Shareholders allow corporate executives to speak for them in the political arena through the financing of political campaigns and to their legislators in the halls of Congress. Members of labor unions, professional organizations, and all sorts of special interest groups participate in the same corporatist political processes – substituting corporatism for democracy.

In the midst of the strongest economy in decades, the people of America seem to be looking for something different – for something more than economic prosperity. More and more people seem to be concluding that even if things are OK right now, what we are doing quite simply is not sustainable. They are looking for something that will bring lasting quality to their lives. They are searching for a sustainable quality of life.

The three cornerstones of sustainability are ecological soundness, economic viability, and social responsibility. Some people treat sustainability as an environmental issue, and fail to appreciate that it rests upon a foundation of social justice and intergenerational equity. An agriculture, for example, that is not socially responsible and ecologically sound, as well as economically viable, quite simply is not sustainable over time. Sustainability applies the Golden Rule both within and across generations. We must be concerned that others have enough to eat, as we would expect them to be concerned about our lack of food. We must treat those of future generations as we would have them treat us, if we were members of some future generation and they were the caretakers of the earth today.

Intergenerational equity has its foundation in human spirituality. Paraphrasing William James – a well-known religious philosopher – we may define spirituality as a “felt need to live in harmony with some unseen order of things.” The sustainability issue ultimately is rooted in a perceived “need to be in harmony with the order of things” – in spirituality.

Sustainable farming means farming in harmony with nature – nurturing nature rather than dominating or manipulating nature. Sustainable farming means farming in harmony with people – within families, communities, and societies. Sustainable farming means farming in harmony with future generations – being good stewards of the earth’s finite resources. However, sustainable agriculture also requires economic viability. A farm is not sustainable unless it is at least periodically profitable. However, sustainable farming systems must generate profits by fitting the methods of farming to the farm, the farmer, and the community – not forcing either to fit some predefined prescription for productivity. Sustainable farming requires that farmers reconnect with people, with people as customers, with people as neighbors, as they reconnect with the land.

Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer, has clearly articulated the connections among people, the land, and sustainable agriculture.

"...if agriculture is to remain productive, it must preserve the land and the fertility and ecological health of the land; the land, that is, must be used well. A further requirement, therefore, is that if the land is to be used well, the people who use it must know it well, must be highly motivated to use it well, must know how to use it well, must have time to use it well, and must be able to afford to use it well" (p. 147).

Farmers will not have time to use the land well or be able to afford to use it well, unless they have customers and neighbors that understand how important it is that farmers be able to preserve the ecological health of the land, and to use it well.

The New American Farm

The good news for the future of food and farming is that thousands of farmers already are finding ways to be good stewards of the land and the natural environment while sustaining

a desirable quality of life for themselves and their families and supporting their local communities. They may label themselves as organic, low-input, alternative, ecological, biodynamic, holistic, permaculture, or claim no label at all. However, they are all pursuing common economic, ecological and social goals. By their actions, these farmers are defining a new kind of American farm.

These new American farmers are a diverse lot, but they share a common pursuit of a *higher* self-interest. They are not trying to maximize profit, but instead are seeking sufficient profit for a desirable quality of life. They recognize the importance of relationships, of family and community, as well as income, in determining their overall well being. They accept the responsibilities of ethics and stewardship, not as constraints to their selfishness, but instead, as opportunities to lead successful lives.

These farmers, these common people, are the architects of this new approach to farming. These farmers, not the experts or the scientists, are the ones on the new frontier – they are the revolutionaries, the explorers, and the colonists of the post-industrial era. Life is difficult on the frontier because no one really knows how to do what these folks are trying to do – they are creating the future. They are getting little help from the government, their universities, or the agricultural establishment. They are doing it pretty much on their own. They will continue to confront hardships, frustrations, and there will be some failures along the road. But, more and more of these *new farmers* are finding ways to succeed.

There are no blueprints for the new American farm, but a few fundamental principles are beginning to emerge. In general, the new farming opportunities arise directly from exploiting the weaknesses resulting from misuses of industrialization -- specialization, standardization, and centralized decision making. The new American farm relies instead on the advantages of diversity, individuality, and decentralized networks of interdependent decision-makers.

New farmers focus on working with nature rather than against it. The natural resource base that ultimately must sustain productivity is inherently diverse. Industrial systems have had to *bend nature* -- to augment, supplement, alter, and force it-- to create an illusion of conformity out of diversity in order to meet the demands of large-scale, industrial production. The ecological problems arising from industrialization are symptoms of natural resources being used in ways that are inherently degrading to their productivity. Thus, industrialization has created tremendous opportunities for farmers who learn to utilize the inherently productive capacity of a diverse natural resource base, rather than wasting time and money trying to force nature to conform.

These new farmers utilize practices such as management intensive grazing, integrated crop and livestock farming, diverse crop rotations, cover crops, and inter-cropping. They manage their land and labor resources to harvest solar energy, to utilize the productivity of nature, and thus, are able to reduce their reliance on external purchases inputs. They are able to reduce costs and increase profits while protecting the natural environment, and thus, the health and quality of life of people of their local communities.

New farmers focus on value rather than costs. They realize that each of us value things differently, as consumers, because we have different needs and different tastes and

preferences. Industrial methods are efficient only if large numbers of us are willing to settle for the same basic goods and services – so they can be mass-produced. So, industrialization has to treat us as if we are all pretty much the same. Customers have to be persuaded, coerced, and bribed to buy the same basic things rather than the things they really want. That's why we pay more for packaging and advertising of food than we pay to the farmers who produce the food. The industrial system creates tremendous untapped opportunities for farmers who can tailor their products to conform to unique needs and preferences of individual customers, as people, rather than try to bend the preferences of customers to conform to their products.

New farmers market in the niches. They market direct to customers through farmers markets, roadside stands, CSAs, home delivery, or by customer pick-up at the farm. They use everything from the Internet to word of mouth to advertise their services. They market to people who care where their food comes from and how it is produced – locally grown, organic, humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free, etc. They are often able to avoid some or all of the processing, transportation, packaging and marketing costs that make up 80 percent of the total cost of mass marketed foods. They increase the value received by their customers, reduce their costs, and increase profits while protecting the environment and helping to build stronger relationships in local communities.

New farmers focus on what *they* can do best. They realize that we are all different -- as producers as well as consumers. We have widely diverse skills, abilities, and aptitudes. Industrialization has had to “bend people” -- train, bribe, and coerce them -- to make people behave as coordinated parts of one big machine rather than as fundamentally different human beings. Many social problems of today are symptoms of people being used by industrial systems in ways that are inherently degrading to our uniquely human productive capacities. Thus, industrialization has left tremendous untapped economic opportunities for farmers and others who can use their unique capacities to be productive rather than attempt to conform to systems of production that just don't fit.

These new farmers may produce grass finished beef, pastured pork, free range or pastured poultry, heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables, dairy or milk goats, edible flowers, decorative gourds, or dozens of other products that many label as agricultural “alternatives.” They find markets for the things they want to grow and are able to grow well rather than produce for markets where they can't compete. Or they may produce fairly common commodities by means that are uniquely suited to their talents. Their products are better, their costs are less, and their life is better because they are doing the things that they do best. New farmers focus on creating value through the uniqueness of relationships – among people as consumers, among people as producers, and between people and their natural environment.

In general, the new farmers link people with purpose and place. By linking their unique productive capacities with unique sets of natural resources to serve the needs and wants of unique groups of customers, they create unique systems of meeting human needs that cannot be industrialized. The more unique their combinations of person, purpose, and place, the more sustainable will be the value to customers and producers alike. The sameness and separateness of industrialization creates opportunities for unique farmers

who can create unique linkages and personal relationships with the land and with their customers.

Farmers Reconnecting with Consumers

The emergence of this new American farm gives cause for optimism but gives no assurance of success. These new farmers are fighting against tremendous odds in the economic arena. These new American farmers seem insignificant as players in the corporate scramble for control of the global food market. These new farmers are fighting against tremendous odds in the policy arena. While they struggle to understand how to better work with nature, billions of public dollars are spent each year to promote agricultural industrialization, through biotechnology, precision farming technologies, and other futile attempts to bring nature under the control of “man.” These new American farmers seem insignificant as claimants of public research and education funds to ensure the long run sustainability of the human life on earth.

But these new American farmers can succeed – they can succeed because they are building new personal connections as they go about their work of building a more sustainable agriculture. They are building connections with their customers through Community Food Circles – which list local suppliers of all sorts of farm and food products available for direct sales to local customers. They are building connections through Community Supported Agriculture, where customers pay for a seasons-worth of produce at the beginning of the season and farmers share both the risk and the bounty with their members. These new farmers are making new connections with customers at farmers markets, where many customers come each week to buy specific items from “their farmer.” They are making new connections with chefs and restaurant owners, not only by supplying high quality products, but also by making personal commitments to work together to build connections with customers.

Many also are making new connections with people that they never meet face-to-face. They market through personal agents who represent them as farmers, rather than just their product. They make new connections when they market on the Internet or through the mail, but they sell themselves along with their products. Some even make connections when they sell through supermarkets, when they back their products with their reputation rather than just a guarantee. Personal relationships are built by believing, trusting, caring, and sharing. These things are easier face-to-face but not impossible at a distance.

These new farmers also are making new connections with their own families and with other farmers, as they are learning to cooperate rather than compete, as they pursue a higher quality of life rather than merely a higher standard of living. They are making new connections with non-farmers through various “sustainable-agriculture-like” organizations, through community groups, and through a whole host of different types of conferences and workshops, which encourage diverse participation by farmers, consumers, educators, public officials, and the general public.

Maybe these efforts to reconnect seem futile in the face of overwhelming opposition. But remember, this same type of trend is taking place all across society – not just in food and farming. Agriculture is but a small part of the *great transition* – a unique and critical part, but still just a small part. Little by little, society is beginning to wake up to the

consequences of our disconnectedness, and people are beginning to reconnect in hundreds of thousands of little, but significant, ways. As we work to reconnection with others in our little part of the world, we are doing our part to bring about the great transition toward a more sustainable society. Ultimately, this is all we can do, and all we need to do, to make the world better. It's so easy; we have no excuse for not doing it.

The noted anthropologist, Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." So, let's get reconnected and change the world.

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