

Hope for the Future of Farming: Rediscovering Agriculture

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Things are not going well in agriculture. In fact, farming is in crisis. People will continue to eat, and someone will continue to produce their food. But farming, as we have known it, almost certainly is coming to an end. As agricultural production becomes increasingly specialized and standardized, decision making is becoming centralized among a few large multinational agribusiness corporations. As farms continue to become larger in size, fewer in number, and increasingly under the control of these large corporations, at some point farming is no longer farming, but instead becomes agribusiness management. Farming is associated with agriculture, not agribusiness. Agribusinesses may be capable of producing food and fiber, but if the occupation of farming is to have any hope for the future, we must rediscover agriculture.

So what's the difference between a farm and an agribusiness, and why does it matter? First, farmers historically have worked with nature. They attempted to tip the ecological balance to favor humans over other species, but still worked *with* nature. Farmers recognized that the laws of nature must prevail over the laws of "man." Farmers depended on unpredictable weather and worked with living systems that they could never expect to completely control. Farming always was as much a "way of life" as a "way to make a living." A farm was a good place to live and to raise a family, and farming was a good way to be a part of a community. The benefits of farming were never solely, or even predominantly, economic in nature. Farming carried with it a set of beliefs, behaviors, and customs that distinguished it from any other occupation. It was the "culture" part of agriculture that made a farm a farm and not an agribusiness.

Certainly most farmers have had times when they wished they could control the weather and longed to be more independent. If they could gain more control they could reduce risks, improve production, and make the farm more profitable. It always seemed easier to achieve the social and ethical rewards of farming than to keep pace with other occupations in terms of income and return on investment. Down deep, most probably knew that if they were to succeed in achieving independence and control, they would lose some of the things they valued most about farming. But little did they realize that they would lose the ability to continue being farmers.

As new technologies gave producers more control over production – commercial fertilizers, pesticides, livestock confinement, and now biotechnology – they took the physical culture out of agriculture. As new farming methods made farmers more independent – mechanization, hired labor, and financial leverage – they took the social culture out of agriculture. As "man" gained control over nature they took the spiritual culture out of farming. As farmers took the culture out of farming, they transformed agriculture into agribusiness.

As new technologies and methods succeeded in freeing farming from the constraints of nature, community, and morality; agricultural production became attractive to corporate investors. Corporations are not “real” persons – they have no heart or soul, they have no community nor national citizenship. Certainly, a family corporation may reflect the personal values of the family and closely held corporations can reflect the value of the stockholders. But once corporations acquire thousands of stockholders, including institutional investors, corporate managers lose the option of doing anything other than maximizing corporate profits and growth. National corporations may still reflect some allegiance to their country of origin, but multinational corporations soon abandon any sense of corporate citizenship for the sake of their multinational stockholders.

Such corporations place no value on working in harmony with nature – instead they must control nature to reduce risks and to ensure profitability and growth. Such corporations place no value on relationship within families, communities, or nations – instead they must separate people to ensure that each produces to their full economic potential. When management becomes separated from ownership, the corporation takes on a *life* of its own. The people who choose to work for corporations are powerless to change their fundamental nature. The multinational corporation has no sense of ethics or morality. The only thing it can possibly value is profit and growth.

Crisis is chronic in agriculture. But, the current crisis is different from those of the past. This crisis is not just a matter of farms continuing to become larger and fewer, instead it is a matter of completing the transformation of agriculture into an industry. If agribusiness has its way, everything from “dirt to the dinner table” will be corporately controlled – either through outright ownership or through various types of strategic alliances. A few giant multinational corporations will control each commodity sector and production will be stabilized at levels, which maximize profits for their stockholders. Consumers will become nothing more than faceless, nameless markets, and “farmers” will become contract laborers, at best, and in most cases, corporate hired hands.

With corporations firmly in control of the economic system, and seemingly in control of the political system as well, where is the hope for farming in the future? How can farming families hope to compete with the giant agribusiness firms? How can people who are committed to stewardship compete with corporations that have no choice but to exploit nature? How can people who are committed to being good neighbors and responsible members of society compete with corporations that have no choice but to exploit other people? The answer is that real farmers can't compete with corporate agribusiness – at least they cannot compete as bottom line, profit-maximizing businesses. So where is the hope for the future of farming?

Hope is found in those who, in the midst of crisis, are rediscovering agriculture. Paraphrasing Vaclav Havel, writer, reformer, and President of the Czech Republic, Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well or the willingness to invest in something that seems almost certain to succeed. Instead, hope is the *possibility* that

something good *could* happen. It is hope that gives us the ability to work for something to succeed, even when the odds are against us.

Hope definitely is not the same as optimism. It is not the conviction that things will turn out well. Instead, it is the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. Hope gives us the courage to do things simply because they are the right things to do. Hope gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even when the odds of success seem small. It's the possibility that something good could result that gives us the courage to continue trying.

Hope for the future of farming is in agriculture, not in agribusiness. Thus, farmers must rediscover agriculture. This does not mean that farmers should go back to technologies and methods of the past, although some may have merit for the future. Instead, they must choose technologies and methods that respect the fundamental nature of farming and that keep the culture in agriculture, regardless of whether they are old or new.

Certainly, farming in the future must yield an acceptable economic return to the farmer's resources – land, labor, capital, and management. But an acceptable economic return does not mean the same thing as maximum profits and growth. Farmers of the future must regain the realization that there is value in relationships among people – within families, communities, and nations. Farmers of the future must regain the realization that there is value living an ethical and moral life – in being good stewards or caretakers of nature and of human culture for the benefit of future generations. These are things that make sense regardless of how they turn out – they are the right things to do. In these things there is hope for the future.

The values that arise from relationships and stewardship cannot be purchased with dollars and cents, and thus they have no economic value. The industrial corporation views society and nature as constraints that must be minimized or removed to allow maximum profit and growth. The corporation is not human, and thus, cannot possibly realize the social value of human relationships or the spiritual value of human stewardship. Economics and business deal only with the individual, personal self. A corporation is the ultimate “economic man;” it is driven only by the need to prosper and to perpetuate itself.

We people, on the other hand, are real live human beings. Farmers, farm families, and their customers are people, not corporations. And, people are multidimensional. We have an individual or personal self, but we also have a social or interpersonal self, and an ethical or spiritual self. As whole people we have these three layers of self.

A part of us, our social self, is embodied in our relationships with other people. This part of us does not exist separate from others, and thus is not a part of our personal self. Its value does not exist in individuals; its value exists only in relationships among individuals. Its value is in such things as friendship or a sense of belonging – things that yield no individual economic rewards.

Humans are social animals. We simply value relationships with other living beings. Most people say that their relationships with their spouse, their children, or their friends are the most valued aspects of their lives. Yet we allow our economy to be dominated by corporations, which have no such feelings. We continue to be driven by an economic system that places no value on relationships. Economics considers families, communities, and nations as nothing more than collections of individuals. Our society is driven by a system that does not make sense regardless of how it turns out. The hope is in the people, not in the system.

Beyond the interpersonal layer, is the ethical or spiritual layer of self. This dimension of us exists only within the context of some higher order of things. Life gains its purpose and meaning from this spiritual concept of self. The purpose or meaning of a life cannot be discerned by considering only the individual. Nothing exists only for itself. If it did, it would have no value to anything or anyone else, and thus, would be irrelevant to the rest of reality. Nor can purpose and meaning be derived from our relationships with other people or things. The meaning of relationships among the parts or members of anything take on meaning only when viewed from the perspective of the whole. For example, we cannot derive the purpose of the brain from its relationship with the heart or the lungs. But rather, the purpose of each organ is discernable only in terms of their function within the whole of the human body. The body, the higher order of things, is the whole within which the organs gain their purpose and meaning.

As people, the value of ethical or moral behavior arises from our acting and living in ways that we believe to be in harmony with some higher order. A belief in a higher order of things, a sense of spirituality, is a prerequisite for realizing the ethical or moral value of our actions. In this sense, it makes no difference whether our belief in some concept of "God" arises from what we see in nature, or our respect for nature arises from our belief in a higher power. Both are consistent with a belief in some higher order. The vast majority of people, in all nations and cultures around the globe, admit to a belief in such a higher power. Yet we continue to be driven by an economic system that gives no consideration to the spiritual dimension of self. Our hope is not in the current system of economics. It doesn't make sense, regardless of how it turns out. Our hope is that people will again awaken to the spiritual dimension of self.

The hope is that farmers of the future will return to farming – that they will rediscover agriculture. Prior to the past half-century, farming had been about working with nature – about finding harmony with some higher, unchangeable, and uncontrollable order of things. Farming historically has had a strong spiritual dimension. Harmony was a means of ensuring productivity – of letting nature do more of the work. But, more direct rewards also arose from living and working in harmony with nature. Historically farmers valued stewardship because they felt a moral and ethical responsibility to take care of the earth for future generations. They would care for the land even if it obviously costs them more money than they could possibly ever expect to recoup in their lifetime. They practiced stewardship because it was of value to the spiritual dimension of self – not because of personal or individual motives. This kind of farming made sense, regardless of how it turned out.

Prior to the past half-century, farming had been about working with other people – in families, communities, and nations. On a family farm, the farm and the family were inseparable parts of the same whole. The farming operations were designed to build character and self-esteem in children as they grew up. Farm work kept the family together, not just because employing the whole family improved the bottom line, but because building a strong family was a valued purpose for farming. Farm families valued the sharing of equipment and labor with neighbors beyond just getting the work done quicker and less costly. There was value in being part of a farming community. States and nations also had strong agricultural identities. People realized that changing occupations and shifting production among regions and nations does not occur without large costs in terms of social well being. Historically, agriculture placed a high value on human relationships. This kind of farming made sense, regardless of how it turned out.

In reality, there is less reason to believe in the future of agribusiness than to believe in the future of agriculture. Agriculture has been around for centuries, while agribusiness is less than sixty years old. It's only in the past half century or so that we have allowed the economics of individual self interest to dominate, degrade, and ultimately destroy the ethical and social values arising from farming. Farmers have been coerced, bribed, and brainwashed into believing that the only thing that really matters, or at least the thing that matters more than anything else, is the economic bottom line. The hope for the future is that farmers will realize that their blind pursuit of profits is in fact the root cause of their financial failure -- that they will rediscover agriculture.

Farmers have been told that they are foolish to do anything more than that required by law to minimize soil erosion or protect the natural environment. Even now, some major farm and commodity organizations are working to reduce and remove environmental restrictions on industrial farming practices in the name of maintaining economic competitiveness. Under current laws, soils are eroding at rates far faster than they can ever be regenerated. We are putting agricultural chemicals into the natural environment with little more than scientific-looking “wild guesses” as to whether we are doing irreparable ecological damage. Yet, farmers are told that their troubles stem from too much environmental regulation. Only a few decades ago those who are promoting environmental degradation in their pursuit of economic gain would have been driven from the community as ethically unfit to farm. The hope for farmers of the future is in a return to the stewardship ethic of the past – that they will rediscover agriculture.

Farmers have been told that they are foolish to do anything for other people unless they expect their economic return to be greater than their individual investment. Farm programs are evaluated in terms of their economic rewards to individual farmers – not in terms of their contribution to a strong agricultural sector of society. Government programs, in general, are evaluated in terms of economic impacts on consumers, agribusiness, farmers, and taxpayers. Little, if any, consideration is given to the social and ethical impacts on families, communities, states, or even nations. Farmers in the past worked together because they cared about each other as people, they wanted to help each other succeed. Many farmers today seem to be more concerned about

getting their neighbors' land, after they fail, rather than in helping their neighbors succeed. The hope for the future is that farmers will return to valuing people over profits and to building relationships with other people – the hope is that they will rediscover agriculture.

The hope for the future is in people. People, in general, are beginning to question the industrial agricultural system. Consumers are becoming concerned about the quality and safety of food provided by the global, industrial food system. They trust neither industry nor government to ensure the healthfulness and safety of their food supply. People continue to question the impacts of agriculture on the natural environment. Recent rapid growth in consumer demand for organic foods gives a clear indication that the public is not buying arguments of industry advocates that high-input agriculture is both safe and necessary to ensure future food supplies. Public outcry in opposition to large-scale, corporate hog operations could signal the beginning of public concern for the social as well as ecological impacts of industrial agriculture. The “big hog” issue has been featured in every mass media outlet available. The public is becoming aware of the true nature of industrial agriculture and they don't like what they are seeing.

Genetically modified organisms (GMO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) may represent the strongest one-two punch yet delivered against the industrialization of agriculture. Biotechnology was seen as the ultimate weapon for bringing nature to its knees. Biotechnology would also be the means by which industry gained control of agriculture from genetics to the retail shelf. The World Trade Organization (WTO) was industry's strategy for removing constraints to exploitation of global natural and human resources. But, the people are rebelling to both. European and Japanese consumers have rebelled against GMOs, effectively blocking production and import of GMOs, and the rebellion is spreading around the world. People around the world have rebelled against the World Trade Organization – blocking a planned global meeting of the WTO in Seattle and continuing to harass WTO delegates as they continue their negotiations. The rebellion of ordinary people against these powerful tools of agribusiness creates hope for the future of agriculture.

However, the greatest source of hope for the future is among farmers who are seeking and finding new ways to farm¹. They may claim the label of organic, low-input, alternative, biodynamic, holistic, permaculture, practical farmers, or just plain farmer. But they are all pursuing the same basic purpose by the same set of principles. They are trying to build farming systems that are ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. They are pursuing a higher self interest – to satisfy the personal, interpersonal, and ethical self. They realize that quality of life is a product of harmony among the economic, social, and spiritual dimensions of their lives. They are building systems that will meet their needs while leaving equal or better opportunities for others, both today and in the future. They refuse to exploit other people or exploit the natural environment for short run personal gain. They are building an agriculture that is sustainable over the long run, not just profitable for today. They are rediscovering agriculture.

These new farmers are the hope for the future of agriculture. Hope gives them the strength to continually try new things, even though they are working against seemingly insurmountable odds. They are the explorers, the pioneers, on the new frontier of farming in America. They suffer frustrations, hardships, and even failures – but, such is the nature of being pioneers. These people are doing something that no one really knows how to do. They get relatively little help from anyone other than each other, yet they persevere. But increasingly, these new farmers are finding ways to succeed.

While there are no blueprints for the new American farm, some fundamental principles are emerging. These new farmers are creating new and better ways to make a living without abandoning the fundamental principles of agriculture.

The new farms tend to be more diversified than are conventional farms. These farmers are committed to caring for the land and protecting the natural environment. They work with nature rather than try to control or conquer nature, and nature is inherently diverse. They fit the farm to their land and climate rather than try to bend nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm. In most regions, this requires a variety of crop and animal enterprises. In some regions, however, diversity means crop rotations and cover crops. In other regions, diversity means managing livestock grazing to achieve diverse plant species or with multiple species of grazing animals. Through diversification, these new farmers substitute management for the off-farm inputs that squeeze farm profits and threaten the environment. Their farms are more economically viable, as well as more ecologically sound, because they farm in harmony with nature. They are rediscovering agriculture.

The new farmers tend to have more direct contact with their customers than do conventional farmers. Most either market their products direct to customers or market through agents who represent them with their customers. They realize that each of us value things differently, as consumers, because we have different needs and different tastes and preferences. They produce the things that their customers value most, rather than try to convince their customers to buy whatever they produce. They market to people who care where their food comes from and how it is produced – locally grown, organic, natural, humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free, etc. – and, they receive premium prices by producing what their customers value. Their farming operations are more economically viable, as well as ecologically sound and socially responsible. They are rediscovering agriculture.

To these new farmers, farming is as much a way of life as a way to make a living. They are “quality of life” farmers. To them, the farm is a good place to live, a good place to raise a family, and a good way to be a part of a caring community. Their quality of life objectives are at least as important as the economic objectives in carrying out their farming operations. Their farming operations reflect the things they like to do, the things they believe in, and the things they have a passion for, as much as the things that might make money. However, for many, their products are better and their costs are less because by following their passion they end up doing what they do best. Most new farmers are able to earn a decent income, but more important, they have a higher

quality of life because they are living a life that they love. They are rediscovering agriculture.

Finally, these new farmers build relationships, among each other and with their customers, as well as with their land. They freely share information, they form partnerships and cooperatives, to buy equipment, to process and market their products, to do together the things that they can't do as well alone. They are not trying to drive each other out of business; they are trying to help each other succeed. They are not trying to take advantage of their customers to make quick profits; they are trying to create lifelong social and economic relationships. They refuse to either exploit each other – or to exploit the land. They buy locally and market locally. They are bringing people together. They are rediscovering agriculture.

The ranks of new farmers are growing across the continent and around the world. At conferences all across North America, with titles such as sustainable agriculture, practical farming, organic farming, small farmers, beginning farmers, alternative agriculture, almost anything other than conventional farming, the numbers of farmers attending are growing. The people who attend these conferences are a diverse lot – young and old, female and male, families and singles, experienced farmers and new farmers. They represent wide ranges in formal education, income levels, and ethnicity. But they share a common belief in the possibility of building better lives for themselves, for their families, and for society through a new kind of farming. The people attending these meetings are not in crisis. They are hopeful, if not optimistic, about the future of their new kind of farming. These hopeful people are the hope for the future of farming. They are rediscovering agriculture.

Another hope for the future of farming is that the government of some nation, state, or province, such as Prince Edward Island, will help the rest of the world rediscover agriculture. This new kind of sustainable farming could grow stronger faster if some government could prove to the world, the wisdom of supporting true farming rather than corporate agribusiness.

The sustainability of agriculture is threatened today by globalization, primarily because the global economy is increasingly controlled by multinational corporations. By their very nature, such corporations maximize profits and growth, even if their actions lead to exploitation of nature and of people. In a global economy, as in the whole of life, the strong will exploit the weak – particularly if they are encouraged to do so. Every person has the right and responsibility to protect themselves, and the things for which they are responsible, from economic exploitation by others. Likewise, every government – every nation, state, or province – should have the right, as well as the responsibility, to protect its natural resources and its people from exploitation. The hope is that local, state, and provincial governments will begin to demand such rights, even as their federal or national governments remain committed to globalization.

Some states in the US have laws prohibiting non-family corporations from owning farmland or participating in farming, with varying degrees of effectiveness. Perhaps

such laws should focus instead establishing the rights and responsibilities of state and local governments to place the well-being of their people and the integrity of their natural environment ahead of national economic interests. Such laws would allow state and local governments to establish their own standards, even if more stringent than federal standards, for environmental protection and conditions of employment. Local and state governments should have the right to restrict, if not prohibit, multinational corporations from doing business in their jurisdiction. They also should be able to demand that national and local corporations accept the ecological and social responsibilities expected of non-corporate members of their particular community. The first priority of any government should be to protect its resources and its people from exploitation.

But the hope is that the government of some state or province, such as Prince Edward Island, will succeed going beyond preventing exploitation, to encouraging and supporting sustainability – as a public policy priority. Some governments in the US have given consideration to sustainability in their public policies – through programs that deal with environmental protection, resource conservation, community development, etc, and some even address sustainability directly. But, no government in the US, at least at the state or national level, has made sustainability a top priority. I am hopeful that the sustainability initiative currently being initiated by Prince Edward Island will become a model for the rest of the world.

Prince Edward Island has unique advantage, as an island province, to establish a “provincial identity” of sustainability. Your province is small enough that you can reach a consensus among the people concerning what you must do to make PEI a place where your children and your children's children will choose to live and grow – not because they have no other choice, but because they will choose to live here. You can establish acceptable standards for doing business in PEI that will ensure the long run economic, ecological and social sustainability of your society. Not everyone will agree with those standards, but with a “consensus” of the people, the government will have the power to protect the “common interests” of the people against both corporate and individual economic exploitation.

There will no scarcity of markets for your sustainably produced products. The goal of any sustainable enterprise should be to produce for local markets first – to allow those who support the policies of sustainability to benefit from sustainability as consumers as well as citizens. But, there are growing world markets for sustainable, natural resource based, products – from farms, fisheries, forests, and tourism. Concerns for global sustainability are growing all around the world. Provincial standards that ensure environmental integrity and social responsibility will create unique opportunities for long run economic viability by addressing those concerns. Competition in the current global economy, which is driven by price and quantity, is a “race to the bottom,” in which the weak cannot hope to compete with the strong, and ultimately no one will win. The hope for the future of humanity is not in short-run economic competitiveness, but is in long-run economic, ecological, and social sustainability.

Sometimes the situation may seem hopeless. We don't see how we, as individuals, can possibly bring about the necessary changes in our communities, our government, and our society. We are only one person, but we are one person. So, we can start by changing ourselves. We can begin to think and live in a way that recognizes that our own quality of life is not just about making more money or having more "cheap stuff." We can start devoting the time and energy to building relationships – within our families and communities – reflecting the value of human relationships to our own quality of life. We can refuse to exploit the land or to exploit other people for our own personal gain. We can start devoting the time and effort to stewardship – to living by principles rather than for profits – reflecting the value of ethics and morality to our own quality of life. Our economic well-being is important, but we are not simply economic beings. We need to start pursuing a higher quality of life rather than just a higher economic standard of living.

As we change ourselves, we will begin at least to influence a small part of the world around us. Farmers will begin to make a difference in the land on their farm, their neighbors, perhaps on the people downstream or downwind, and even on the people in town. We can all have an influence on the other people in our families and others with whom we work or on those who live in our communities. As we change our own lives in positive ways, we begin to have a positive influence on those in our "little piece of the world." One by one, as we change ourselves and then change our little pieces of the world around us, those whom we have influenced with begin to change their little piece of the world as well. Soon, we will find that little-by-little the world is beginning to change. Ultimately, this is all we can do, but all we really need to do, to help make a better world.

The noted anthropologist, Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." Never doubt that what you choose to do, here on Prince Edward Island, can change the world. Indeed, thoughtful, committed people, such as you, are "the only thing that ever has." If you can help the world to rediscover agriculture, indeed, you will have changed the world.

¹ For 50 real life examples, see "The New American Farmer – Profiles in Agricultural Innovation," the SARE Program, USDA, Washington DC. (\$10 US – call: 802-656-0484 or e-mail: sanpubs@uvm.edu , also available free on line at <http://www.sare.org/newfarmer>