

Reweaving the Fabric of Rural America Food as a Common Threadⁱ

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When a museum today finds a piece of precious fabric that has been torn, conservators are called in to analyze the threads and to restore the fabric by reweaving it. I also recall from my childhood when my mother found a tear in a linen tablecloth or in a favorite dress, she would talk about finding someone to reweave it. Reweaving apparently requires a good deal of patience, skill, and diligence, but when something truly precious is torn, it's worth reweaving. During my lifetime, I have seen the precious fabric of rural American torn asunder.

This conference has been about “weaving a diverse landscape using food as the common thread.” We have talked about health, environment, economics, community, and spirituality among the diverse interests that can be woven together through our common interests in food. If we are to succeed in this effort, we must recognize that we are not creating a new landscape but are mending a landscape that has been ravaged by forces that are quite capable of ravaging again. Thus, we must reweave the torn fabric of rural American with thread strong enough to withstand the inevitable ravages of time.

Before we can judge just how strong our thread must be, we must first understand the nature of the forces it must withstand. We get some sense of the strength of these forces from the devastation they have left behind. We see their strength in the rural economy. Once thriving rural communities have withered and died as farm families have been forced off the land by chronically depressed prices for the things they sell and relentlessly rising cost of the things they must buy. It takes people, not just production, to support rural communities, and when farms become larger and fewer, rural economies suffer. The light industries that were recruited to replace the loss of farming are now moving to other countries, where people are willing to work even harder for less money.

Many of the people who still live in rural communities no longer work there and no longer support local merchants with their dollars. They buy their groceries, clothes, and gasoline at a Wal Mart super center in another town, or in a nearby city where they work. It's cheaper to buy things elsewhere than locally. Many rural people have lost any sense of common commitment to the economic good of their communities. Rural communities that have survived the economic ravages of the past are still searching desperately for a new economic reason for their being.

We see the strength of the ravagers of rural areas in the rural environment. The once pristine rural environment has been plundered and polluted, both by industry and by the industrialization of agriculture. As industries have left rural areas for other countries, many left behind legacies of pollution as well as unemployment. Now, the industrialization of agriculture, with its reliance on agricultural chemicals and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations, are fouling the

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clean air, streams, and aquifers that the earlier industries missed. Many people have chosen to stay in rural areas or to move to rural areas because historically they have been clean, healthy, pleasant places to live.

The current initiative to combine industrial agriculture with ethanol production promises only to accelerate the process of ecological degradation. How can we justify mining the soil nutrients that will be needed to feed the people of a hungry world and using them to fuel the automobiles of one wealthy nation, particularly as global energy supplies decline and global population rises? The common wealth of rural America is being flushed down our streams and burned in our SUVs.

Perhaps more important, we are also ripping apart the social fabric of rural America. Many rural communities are so desperate for new jobs and a new tax base they will grasp at almost any economic opportunity. Rebuilding an economy from within is a long, slow process and many rural people are simply unwilling to invest the necessary time and effort to develop from within. Unfortunately, outside investors see rural communities, with their open spaces and sparse population, as ideal places to locate things that urban people simply won't accept in their neighborhoods. Some rural communities actually compete for prisons, while others are willing to settle for landfills or toxic waste incinerators. Those who miss these "opportunities" are almost certain to be courted by agribusinesses looking for places to locate their giant contract confinement animal feeding operations.

Nearly all rural development strategies from outside the community allow a few local people to benefit, but only at the expense of others who live nearby, downwind, or downstream. Actually, those who benefit most are the outside corporate investors who need some place to dump the wastes from their profit-making enterprises. It seems to be okay in rural communities for some people to benefit even if others do not, but when some benefit at the expense of others, it seems to violate an important rural ethic. This ethical offense inevitably leads to social conflicts among community members, which eventually rip the social fabric of the community apart. Many rural communities are rapidly losing their willingness and ability to work together for the common good.

We need to understand the nature of the forces resisting our efforts to reweave the economic, ecological, and social fabric of rural places. We need to understand that increases in unemployment, poverty, and public dependency in rural areas are all symptoms of the continued extraction of economic wealth or capital from rural areas. Erosion of soil, degradation of landscapes, and pollution of air and water are all symptoms of the continued extraction of natural resources or ecological capital from rural areas. Increasing conflict, physical abuse, drug use, and crime in rural areas are all symptoms of the continued exploitation of common civility or social capital of rural areas. Rural areas are being robbed of the economic, social, and natural resources that must sustain future generations of rural people. Sensing intuitively that something is deeply wrong, the most precious rural resource, the next generation, is abandoning rural communities. The continued extraction and exploitation of rural America quite simply is not sustainable.

Intuition is an important aspect of understanding, but intuition is no longer enough. It will take courage to confront the forces that are ravaging rural America. And, we will need to have

confidence in our convictions. We need to know that our instincts regarding the lack of sustainability of current trends in rural America are supported by some of the most fundamental laws of science, the laws of thermodynamics. We need to be able to explain to farmers, consumers, rural leaders, and policy makers at all levels of government why it is so critically important that we succeed in reweaving the diverse social, economic, and ecological landscapes of rural areas.

Sustainability ultimately depends upon our use of energy because anything that is useful in sustaining life on earth ultimately relies on energy. All material things that are of any use to us – our food, clothes, houses, automobiles, – require energy to make and energy to use. All human activities that are of any use to us – working, managing, thinking, teaching, – require human energy. This human energy is energy extracted from the things people use. Physical scientists lump all such useful activities together and call them “work.” Thus, all *work* requires energy.

Any time we use energy to perform work, some of the *usefulness* of the energy we use is lost. In performing work, energy is always changed from more-concentrated to less-concentrated forms. Material things, such as food, gasoline, wood, plastic, and steel actually are concentrated forms of energy. Materials or matter can be changed into energy, as when we eat food or burn gasoline. Different forms of energy also can be changed, as when we burn natural gas or breathe oxygen. However, the total energy embodied in matter and energy always remains the same, unchanged. When the energy stored in matter is released in the process of performing work, it always changes form, becoming more dispersed and disorganized, but no energy is lost. This is the law of energy conservation, as in Einstein's famous $E=MC^2$. At first, it might seem that we could simply go on recycling and reusing energy forever. If so, sustainability would be inevitable.

However, once energy is used to perform work, before it can be used again, it must be reconcentrated, reorganized, and restored. A basic problem arises because it takes energy to reconcentrate, reorganize, and restore energy. The energy used to reconcentrate, reorganize, and restore energy, is simply no longer available to do anything else. It has lost its usefulness; meaning it has lost its ability to perform work. This is the law of entropy; the tendency of all closed systems to tend toward the ultimate degradation of matter and energy; a state of inert uniformity of component elements; an absence of structure, pattern, organization, or differentiation.¹ As a burning log releases radiant energy, for example, the log turns to ashes; its structure, pattern, and organization is lost as it tends toward entropy. The barren surfaces of the Moon or Mars are scenes about as close to entropy as any of us have seen. Since this loss of useful energy is inevitable, it might seem that sustainability is impossible. And in fact, life on earth would not be sustainable without the daily inflow of solar energy, which could be used to offset the usefulness of energy lost to entropy.

So what does this have to do with what's happening to rural communities? Industrialization inevitably dissipates, disperses, and disorganizes the physical energy or natural capital embodied in natural resources. Thus, the industrial economic development strategies that dominate rural communities today, by the logic and reason of the laws of science, quite simply are not sustainable. Industrial systems are very efficient in using and reusing both natural resources and human energy, but they do nothing to offset the inevitable loss of usefulness of energy due to entropy. That's why they are so efficient. Industrial farms, like other industries, are essentially

resource-using systems; they use land, fertilizer, fuel, machinery, and they use people, but they do nothing to replace the energy that is inevitably lost when anything is used to do any kind of useful work.

Industrial farmers don't use the solar energy from the sun to restore the productive capacities of their farms; instead, they transform solar energy into crops and livestock that are sold off the farm to be used up elsewhere. In fact, our industrial food system uses about ten calories of fossil energy, in addition to solar energy, for each calorie of food energy produced, amounting to about 17% of the total fossil fuels used in the U.S.. An industrial agriculture invests in means of resource extraction and exploitation but invests nothing in regeneration or renewal for the use future generations. It's simply not economically efficient to do so.

Industrialization not only uses up the natural resources required for sustainability, it also uses up the human resources. The law of entropy applies to social as well as physical energy. All human resources – labor, management, innovation, creativity – are products of social relationships. No person can be born or reach maturity without the help of other people who care about them *personally*, including their families, friends, neighbors, and communities. All organizations, including farms and businesses, also depend on the ability of people to work together for a common purpose, which depends upon the civility of the society in which they were raised.

Industrialization inevitably dissipates, disperses, and disorganizes *social* energy or social capital, because it weakens personal relationships. Maximum economic efficiency requires that people relate to each other *impartially*, which means, *impersonally*. People must compete rather than cooperate if free markets are to work efficiently. When family members work away from home, they have less time and energy to spend together, and personal relationships are threatened. When people shop in another town rather than buy locally, personal relationships among community members suffer from neglect. Industrial economic development inevitably devalues personal relationships and disconnects people, dissipating social energy. There are no *economic* incentives for industries to invest in renewing or restoring personal relationships within families, communities, or society. It's always more economically efficient to find new people and new communities to exploit. Thus, industrialization inevitably tends toward *social entropy*.

Economies are simply the means by which we deal with relationships among people and between people and the natural environment in complex societies. There are simply too many of us to barter with each other and to produce our own food, clothing, shelter. Economies actually *produce* nothing; they simply transform physical energy and social energy into forms that can be traded or exchanged in *impersonal* marketplaces. All economic capital, meaning anything capable of producing anything of economic value, is extracted from either natural capital or social capital. Thus, when all of the natural and social capital, or energy, has been extracted and exploited, all of the energy in the system has been dissipated, and it can no longer produce anything of economic value; it has reached a state of *economic entropy*.

So where is the hope for the future of rural areas? The hope is in restoring the health and vitality of the living things in rural communities, in the land and people of rural places. Sustainable economic and community development must mimic the processes of living, biological systems. Living things are naturally self-making, self-renewing, reproductive, and regenerative.² Living

plants have the capacity to capture, organize, and store solar energy to offset the energy that is inevitably lost in the processes of performing work. All living things have a natural capacity for renewal and regeneration. Obviously, an individual life is not sustainable because every living thing eventually dies. But, communities of living individuals clearly have the capacity to be productive, and at the same time, to devote a significant part of their life's energy to conceiving and nurturing the next generation, thus sustaining the life of the community. Living things – plants, animals, families, communities, societies – are clearly capable of permanence as well as productivity. A sustainable farm or community need only utilize its inherent capacities for both productivity and regeneration.

Agriculture is the living system upon which human society is most critically dependent. Food, along with air and water, are the common threads of all life. People are still as dependent upon food as when all humans were hunters and gatherers, and thus, we are still as dependent upon the productivity of the land. In modern society, there are simply too many of us to return to producing our own food, so people are still as dependent upon farmers as people ever were. A sustainable society clearly must be built upon the foundation of a self-renewing, regenerative, sustainable agriculture because to sustain life we must sustain food production. A sustainable agriculture uses its physical and human energy to meet our present need for food, while devoting a sufficient portion of its life's energy to ensure those future generations will be able to meet their needs for food as well.

While a sustainable agriculture is clearly essential for a sustainable society, it also provides a useful metaphor or model for sustainability in general. Economic or social systems that rely on non-renewable energy sources, quite simply are not sustainable over the long run. But even systems that rely on solar energy from photovoltaic panels, wind, and water must devote a significant portion of their energy to renewal and regeneration. Systems that rely on other means of capturing solar energy must still rely on living biological systems to convert solar energy into food for humans. People simply cannot survive on sunlight, wind, and water. The living systems metaphor is essential to sustainability, biological systems are essential for human life, and again, food is the common thread.

Thankfully, while the forces of industrialization are strong, the forces of sustainability are even more powerful. The forces now pulling farmers toward sustainability are the unrelenting forces of human nature. We saw these powerful forces in the growing popularity of organic farming, but we now see them even more clearly in the movement beyond organics to sustainably and *locally* grown foods. People are being drawn toward reconnecting with farmers, toward community-based food systems, by the natural attraction of human relationships.

Steven Covey writes in his best selling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, “there are principles... natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as unchanging and unarguably ‘there’ as laws such as gravity in the physical dimension.”³ We usually think of gravity as the attraction or pull of the earth. However, in a recent space experiment, scientists observed that particles of dust, when floating in a gravity-free vacuum, had a natural tendency to be attracted to each other, to form themselves into clumps. They obviously were attracted to each other by a gravity-like force. People likewise are drawn to each other by a gravity-like force that we might call “social gravity.” Throughout history, people of all times in all cultures have

yielded to this force of social gravity in a universal natural tendency toward forming relationships within families, communities, and societies. Certainly, examples exist of individuals who have chosen to live in isolation, defying the pull of social gravity. But, there are also things that orbit the earth, because other forces are offsetting the pull of gravity. The natural tendency of humans is to relate, personally and socially, with other humans.

The force of industrialization has dispersed and disorganized people within modern societies, leaving many of them much like the dust particles floating aimlessly in empty space. However, the relentless forces of social gravity now appear to be pulling people back together. As with the dust particles, disconnected people first reestablish personal relationships by forming little “clumps,” small groups of people attracted by common interests. These little clumps of people eventually form communities of people with common commitments, and eventually grow into cultural, social, economic, and political movements. Such movements reflect the natural tendency of people toward social connectedness, toward community, and society. Communities are stronger and more durable when people with common interest live in close proximity, but communities of interest can also become powerful political and economic forces. Today, a growing number of people – farmers, workers, consumers, and citizens – with common interests, concerns, and commitments are driving the new sustainable, local food movement. Food is the common thread.

Most non-industrial farmers today have a good basic understanding of sustainable production methods. For those who don't, both research and experiential information is becoming more widely available. So, ways of dealing with the sustainable half of the sustainable/local movement seems fairly clear and straightforward.

The local or relational half, of the sustainable/local combination represents a greater challenge. Not only is there far less research and experiential support related to building relationships, but perhaps more important, farmers traditionally have prided themselves on their independence. They simply have not thought it necessary to understand the science or to practice the art of personal relationships, at least not beyond their close friends and family members. However, those who master the art and science of relationships may well find it to be one of the most rewarding aspects of farming in the future.

A relatively small set of essential principles underlie all positive human relationships. These principles are a part of every major enduring religion and philosophy and transcend all races, nationalities, and cultures of the world. Different people obviously hold different values, but they also share a set of common values. The Institute for Global Ethics has conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups with people around the world, asking people, “What do you think are the core moral and ethical values held in the highest regard in your community?”⁴ From a wide variety of responses, five values consistently ranked high in virtually every inquiry. They were honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect. Even without such research, we know intuitively that a mentally sound person cannot maintain a positive personal relationship with someone who is consistently dishonest, unfair, irresponsible, disrespectful, and uncaring. The key to positive personal relationships is to treat other people, as we would like to be treated, with honesty, fairness, responsibility, respectfulness, and compassion.

The first three values, honesty, fairness, and responsibility, together define the principle of integrity. Integrity suggests wholeness, completeness, and soundness, in addition to honesty and truthfulness. A person of integrity must be reliably or responsibly honest and fair, not just fair in some respects or honest some times. The people of the sustainable, local food movement are seeking relationships with farmers of integrity. Relationships of integrity are relationships of trust and trustworthiness. Farmers who reliably treat their customers with honesty and fairness can be trusted. And such farmers will be able to find customers who are willing to be responsible, honest, and fair in return, both economically and socially.

The social values of respect and compassion define the principle of empathy. Empathy requires that one person be willing and able to visualize him or herself in the place of another, and then, to treat the other person as they would have liked to be treated, if they were the other person. Empathy is ultimately rooted in respect, in that we must show the same respect for others that we would have them show for us. Respect also requires humility; we must be sufficiently humble to realize that we just might be wrong and the other person might be right. Empathy goes beyond integrity, at times requiring us to be more than fair or less than completely honest – if necessary in treating others as we would like to be treated. Emphatic relationships are not relationships of usefulness; they are relationships of caring, kindness, or love.

The people of the sustainable/local food movement are not merely searching for a reliable source of fresh, local food; they are searching for ways to reconnect with people in kind and caring ways. Their food choices may be motivated by concerns about health and nutrition, the local economy and environment, or a lost sense of connection to the land. However, these new food customers are also motivated by a need to reconnect personal with other people. In return, these new customers must be willing to put themselves in the position of their farmers and to reward their farmers, both socially and economically, as they would like to be rewarded.

The final principle of positive personal relationships is courage. Courage requires self-confidence, discipline, and perseverance. Integrity and empathy are necessary, but they are not enough. It takes courage to form meaningful relationships with other people and to stay committed to those relationships through times of inevitable misunderstanding, disappointment, and hurt feelings. Social entropy is inevitable, even in positive relationships, so we must find the courage to restore the social capital. We must have confidence in ourselves or we will not be willing to confide in others. But, we cannot allow self-confidence to compromise our integrity or empathy. We must have *moral* courage.⁵ We must have the discipline to keep on being honest, fair, responsible, compassionate, and respectful, even when we feel that we have not been treated with integrity and empathy by others.

If we expect to maintain relationships, we must be persistent, but that does not mean we should be close-minded, stubborn, or masochistic. We need to “keep on keeping on” as long as we are convinced that the relationship ultimately could be worth the time and effort. But we all make mistakes and we need to keep our minds open to the possibility that a relationship we have formed and have valued can no longer be beneficial to either party. We shouldn't give up easy, but neither are we obligated to endure persistent disrespect and abuse from others, just because we have made a commitment. Relationships are not easy; they require the courage to move on, the courage to endure, and the wisdom to know when to do which.

It takes courage for those who have chosen farming as a way of life for the independence, privacy, and solitude of working with the land rather than dealing with people. But their independence to choose privacy and solitude in the future might well depend upon their willingness and ability to choose to relate to others today. Sustainable farmers of the future should be prepared to relate, personally and meaningfully, with their customers and neighbors. When farmers work cooperatively to access higher-volume food markets, some may take the lead in facilitating relationships with retail and institutional buyers. In these cases, it's critical that farmers be able to relate personally to each other because relationships based solely on economic interests are inherently unsustainable. In addition, retail and institutional customers who identify with the new food culture still need to feel a sense of personal connectedness with their farmers. While such relationships may be less personal and less demanding, farmers still need to be willing and able to relate to their customers.

The people of the sustainable/local food movement are wise to the marketing schemes of the food corporations, which create an illusion of integrity and empathy where none actually exists. Most of these folks can spot a con man in a minute. Those few trusting souls who might be taken in by a folksy marketing scheme will never forgive the ones who betray their trust, and they will spread word of their betrayal far and wide. Building relationships is not about being strategic, savvy, or cunning; it's about being trustworthy and kind. And food provides a common thread for building relationships of trust and kindness among farmers and their customers and neighbors.

Finally, positive relationships not only are essential to sustainable economic success or human health, relationships also are essential to happiness. After all, happiness is the ultimate purpose of everything that we do, regardless of whether it's making money, making friends, or simply doing nothing. Understandably, happiness has been a subject of intense interest throughout human history. The *hedonist* philosophers equated happiness with feeling pleasure or avoiding pain – individual, sensory experiences. However, most philosophers, including Aristotle, believed that happiness is inherently social in nature, that it is realized by individuals, but only within the context of family, friendships, and community – through meaningful personal relationships. Equally important, this social happiness was considered a by-product of actions taken because they were believed to be intrinsically good. In essence, Aristotle and his followers believed that true happiness was not something to be pursued, but instead, was a natural consequence of *right* relationships.

However, we don't need to defer to the philosophers. We know that our individual economic well-being is necessary for a desirable quality of life, but we also know income or wealth alone cannot make us happy. We know that relationships with other people – trusting, caring, loving relationships – also are essential to our happiness. We were created as social beings. And, we know that in order for relationships to bring us happiness they must be based on honesty, fairness, responsibility, compassion, and respect. We know the difference between right and wrong relationships.

We know also that there must be a sense of rightness in our relationships with the things of nature. We understand that we are a part of something far larger than the things we can touch or see that transcends both space and time. We know intuitively that stewardship adds purpose and

meaning to our lives. We will not be here forever, but it matters what we do here, while we are here. We realize that we owe a debt to those of the past that we can only repay to those of the future by taking care of the earth while we are here. We are moral and ethical beings. Our common sense tells us that our happiness depends upon the rightness of our relationships.

Today, the physical, social, and moral fibers of our rural communities are being torn apart by the relentless forces of economic industrialization. We see the unraveling everywhere we look. We simply cannot continue doing what we have been doing to rural areas. Industrial economic development quite simply is not sustainable because its productivity relies on extraction and exploitation, it does nothing to renew or regenerate either the natural or human resources that must sustain the future of humanity. Industrialization inevitably tends toward entropy.

The torn fabric of rural America must be rewoven using the metaphor of living systems. Living things have the inherent capacity to be productive, while devoting a significant portion of their life's energy to renewal and regeneration. In fact, living communities, including human communities, have a natural tendency toward renewal and regeneration. The regenerative capacity of living communities depends on their capacity for nurturing relationships. In modern human communities, personal relationships have been sacrificed for the sake of economic efficiency. We have become a socially disconnected, dispersed society, but we are still drawn toward relationships with other people – as if by gravity.

The pull toward economic efficiency is still strong, but the forces of social gravity are relentlessly pulling people back toward family, community, and society. The sustainable/local food movement is a reflection of these forces of social attraction. As farmers build trusting, caring relationships with their customers and their neighbors, they are working against industrialization, but they are working with an irresistible urge of people to find ways to reconnect with others. All across America, we see people beginning to reweave the physical, social, and moral fabric of a ravaged society. And, we see people beginning to reweave the torn economic, ecological, and social fabric of rural communities, by using food as the common thread.

End Notes

¹ For a more in depth discussion of entropy, see John Ikerd, *Sustainable Capitalism: A Matter of Common Sense*, Chapter 3 (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press Inc., 2005).

² For a more in depth discussion of living systems, see Ikerd, *Sustainable Capitalism*, Chapter 5.

³ Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 34.

⁴ Rushworth M. Kidder, *Moral Courage* (New York: William Morrow, HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 43.

⁵ Kidder, *Moral Courage*.