

Family Farms: Our Promise for a Sustainable Futureⁱ

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What will farms be like in the future? Bigger or smaller, family or corporate? Most so-called farm experts apparently just look at trends of the past and assume those same trends will continue indefinitely in the future. Most seem to think farms will continue to become larger and more industrial, meaning more specialized and mechanized, and corporate in ownership and control. They see family farms as farms of the past, not farms of the future. However, trends never continue indefinitely. Everything is cyclical. At some point, all trends reverse themselves and move in the opposite direction, in agriculture and elsewhere.

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 most respected scientific journals in the world.¹ They invited scientists from around the world to comment on their proposed list. Among the top twenty were such ideas as the laws of thermodynamics, gravity, and motion. The top twenty also included the idea: "Everything on the earth operates in cycles," including everything physical, biological, social, economic, – everything. Some scientists who responded to the article suggested tweaking the wording a bit, but no one suggested removing the "law of cycles" from the top-twenty list of great ideas in science.² The world of the future, including farms of the future, will not be simply more of the same but something very different. The industrialization of agriculture is a trend of the past, not a trend of the future.

That said, the past never exactly repeats itself. Time moves forward, never back, and everything on earth is continually evolving into something new and different. No two days, mood swings, seasons, political cycles, or business cycles are ever identical, but they still are reoccurring in nature. Like the pendulum on a grandfather's clock, when trends go so far in one direction the laws of nature, including human nature, inevitably slow their momentum and eventually swing them back the other way. Family farms in the future will be different from those of the past. New production technologies, changing consumer preferences, and a new food distribution system will allow family farms to be better than before. However, the unique characteristics that made family farms of the past "real farms" make them the only farms consistent with the natural cyclical evolution of farming – the only promise for a sustainable future in farming.

The signs of an agricultural revolution and reversal are already readily apparent – for those who are willing to think and to see. They are apparent in growing public awareness that something is fundamentally wrong with industrialization of the so-called modern food system: It

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has gone too far. The signs are apparent in the sustainable agriculture movement: In the growing popularity of organic foods, and the emergence of local, community-based food systems. Many farmers are already taking farming in a different direction. The “experts” fail to realize the importance of these new trends because they view such changes through the lens of industrial development. Trends in the food system are seen in isolation or separate from overall trends in the global economy and society, both of which are in the midst of transition.

Every couple of hundred years throughout human history, societies have gone through “great transformations” – such as the one we are experiencing today. Great transformations represent reversals in overall economic, social, and cultural trends. Old trends are halted by growing public awareness that things that seemed to work in the past aren't working any longer, and aren't likely to work in the future. Change becomes imperative, not just the usual change in technologies, strategies, or tactics, but fundamental changes in ways of thinking. The reversal of such epic trends as industrialization, result from changes in worldviews: Changes in societal understanding of how the world works and the place of humans within it – or in relation to it. Changes in worldviews change the ways people feel, think, and act and eventually change virtually every aspect of human life. Such changes are not the everyday, ordinary changes of life; they change our understanding of the purpose and meaning of life.

I believe the changes we are experiencing now are at least as important as those of the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s, perhaps as important as the beginning of science in the early 1600s, and maybe as great as the transition from hunting and gathering to farming. I'm an old man and I have seen many changes during my 74 years. But, the changes I've experienced are not even remotely comparable to the changes I believe today's young people will see during their lives. People who are born in the mid-21st century won't even be able to imagine the world of today – including the farms of today.

Today's great transformation is being driven by questions of sustainability. How can we meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future? How much longer can we keep doing what we are doing? How much longer will the trends that characterize the industrial era of economic development continue? I believe these will be the defining questions of the 21st century. When we ask these questions of sustainability earnestly and honestly, we must come to the inevitable conclusion: We are not even meeting the basic needs of many people today, and we most certainly aren't leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. We can't keep doing what we have been doing for much longer. Fundamental change is no longer just an option; it is an absolute necessity. Our current way of life is not sustainable.

Nowhere is the lack of sustainability clearer – yet less understood and appreciated – than in our systems of farming and food production in the United States. We are told by the agricultural establishmentⁱⁱⁱ that our food system is the envy of the world. U.S. consumers spend less than 10% of their disposable incomes on food, arguably less than in any other nation. U.S. supermarkets are filled year-round with an abundance and variety of fresh and processed food

ⁱⁱⁱ The “agricultural establishment” refers to the large agribusiness corporations, agricultural commodity organizations, the American Farm Bureau Federation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and state Departments of Agriculture.

products from every corner of the earth. Our food is quick, convenient, and cheap. Why would we want to change the American food system?

First, the current abundance of food has been made possible by the industrialization of American agriculture. Many people equate industrialization to the migration of people from farms and rural communities to find manufacturing jobs in urban areas. However, the shift from agrarianism to urbanization is only a symptom of the industrial model or paradigm, characterized by specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. Specialization increases efficiency by facilitating division of labor. Standardization is then necessary to facilitate coordination, routinization, and mechanization of specialized production processes. Standardization simplifies production and management processes, allowing consolidation of control into large-scaled, eventually corporately-controlled, business enterprises. This is the basic industrial process by which “economies of scale” have been achieved in agriculture as well as manufacturing. The industrialization of agriculture made it possible to produce more food with fewer farmers, thus “freeing,” in many cases forcing, farmers to find employment in the factories and offices of a growing industrial economy.

Admittedly, agricultural industrialization has resulted in tremendous increases in economic efficiency and total agricultural production. The basic problem is that it has also brought many unintended ecological, social, and economic consequences. Industrial agriculture is inherently reliant on non-renewable fossil energy, chemically-dependent monoculture cropping systems, and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations. We see the ecological consequences of industrialization in eroded and degraded soils, polluted streams and groundwater, depleted streams and aquifers, and the growing threat of global climate change. In addition, the readily accessible sources of fossil energy have been depleted, and fossil energy will be less available and more costly in the future. The negative consequences of “fracking” for oil and natural gas is but the latest example of the growing ecological and social costs of our continuing dependence on fossil energy. Industrial agriculture is driven by profits, not ethics, and thus shows utter disregard for the other living and non-living things of the earth upon which the sustainability of food production ultimately depends.

We see the socioeconomic consequences of industrial agriculture in the demise of independent family farms and the social and economic decay of rural communities, as the farms grow larger in size, fewer in numbers, and increasingly corporate-controlled. In addition, the most basic human rights of self-determination and self-defense are systematically denied to rural residents who are forced to live with clear and compelling threats to public health associated with large factory farms.³ “Right to farm” laws were never meant to ensure the right to operate “farm factories” that pollute the air and water with toxic chemical and biological wastes. Industrial farming is all about the economic bottom-line, and there is no economic value in doing anything solely to protect either society or nature – the foundations of economic sustainability.

Second, but less widely recognized, the so-called modern, industrial food system has been an absolute failure in its most fundamental purpose. It has failed to provide domestic “food security”: To ensure that all have access to an adequate quantity of safe, wholesome food to support healthy, active lifestyles. A larger percentage of people in the U.S. are “food insecure” today than during the 1960s, with more than 20% of U.S. children living on the verge of hunger

in food insecure homes.⁴ The “Green Revolution,” which also relies on industrial farming methods, has similarly failed to bring food security to developing countries of the world. Millions of once self-sufficient, subsistence farmers remain unemployed in urban slums.

In addition, the only foods affordable to many lower-income families are high in calories and lacking in essential nutrients, leading to an epidemic of obesity and other diet-related health problems. Obesity-related illnesses, such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and various forms of cancer, are projected to claim about one-in-five dollars spent for health care in the U.S. by 2020 – erasing virtually all of the gains made in improving public health over the past several decades.⁵ The irresponsible use of agricultural chemicals, growth hormones, antibiotics, and a multitude of additives in industrial foods add to a growing list of diet-related illnesses. Health care in America already consumes more than 17% of the total GDP or economic output, nearly twice as much as in 1980.⁶ If past trends continue, health care will claim more than one-third of all economic output by 2040. As much as half of this cost is likely related in one way or another to the American diet. We simply can't afford the high and rising costs of more cheap food. The industrial food system, including industrial agriculture, is not sustainable.

Admittedly, many people are still living in denial of the need for a fundamental change in the general economy or in agriculture. They look to a new technological revolution that will somehow address the growing ecological and social problems without the changes in worldview or ways of thinking that would ultimately change their way of life. They cling to the false hope that human ingenuity will somehow be able to repeal the fundamental laws of nature that conflict with the core principles of industrial economic development.

However, the tide of public opinion is slowly turning toward a new and different worldview. An increasing number of people are beginning to view us human beings as an integrally interrelated part of the earth, not as beings apart from the earth. They are beginning to understand that we must learn to live in harmony with nature, rather than try to conquer nature. They are beginning to realize that human happiness arises from balance and harmony among the ethical, social, and economic aspects of life, not ever-greater income or wealth. We saw the beginning of reversal with the environmental, civil rights, and peace movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Understandably, those in positions of economic and political power have fought back in defense of the status quo. However, the recent financial collapse and continuing economic stagnation has once again flamed the fires of the inevitable revolution and eventual reversal of direction.

In agriculture, we have seen the forces of change most clearly in the modern organic movement, which also began in the U.S. in the 1960s but didn't gain widespread support until the sustainable agriculture movement emerged in the 1980s. Organic food sales in the U.S. grew rapidly during the 1990s and early 2000s, averaging 20%-plus per year and doubling every three to four years. With the economic recession of 2008, growth rates declined and stabilized at around 10% per year, reaching \$31.5 billion in sales by 2012.⁷ While organic sales still account for less than 5% of total food sales in the U.S., organic fruits and vegetables claim over 12% of their markets – an impressive accomplishment in a nation dominated by industrial agriculture.

The defenders of the agricultural status quo also have attempted to first stop and then co-opt the organic food movement. The early organic movement was about replacing a mechanical,

industrial agriculture with a biological, sustainable agriculture – a permanent agriculture for a permanent human society. Organic farming reflected an *anti-industrial* worldview. It began as a group of small, back-to-earth farmers and small, cooperative natural foods retailers. As organic sales grew, economic pressures brought on a call for uniform national organic standards which opened up organic production and distribution to large, specialized farming operations and mainstream supermarkets. By 2007, the mainstream supermarkets had taken over 47% of the organic foods market, 46% was controlled by specialty supermarkets, such as Whole Foods and Trader Joe's. Direct sales through small coops, farm stands, and farmers markets were left with just 7% percent of the organic market.⁸ Organic farming also had become similarly dominated by large, specialized, “industrial organic farms.” Organic foods became industrialized.

The local food movement emerged in response to the “industrialization of organics.” Like the early organic farmers, many organic consumers are concerned about the ecological and social integrity of the food system, which defies a precise legal definition and thus cannot be certified by government. As organic production moved to larger farms and into mainstream markets, organic consumers increasingly looked to farmers in their own communities to ensure the ecological and social integrity of their food. The local food movement began with roadside stands, farmers markets, and Community Supported Agriculture programs or CSAs. New food-related cooperatives have helped facilitate the growth in local foods. A 2008 food industry study estimated that sales of local foods had grown from \$4 billion in 2002 to \$5 billion in 2007 and were projected to reach \$11 billion by 2011.⁹ Local foods have replaced organics as the most dynamic sector of the U.S. food market.

The growing popularity of local foods is most visible in the growing numbers of farmers markets and CSAs. USDA statistics indicate the number of farmers markets in the U.S. increased from 1,755 to 8,144 between 1994 and 2013, increasing more than four-fold in less than 20 years.¹⁰ Current estimates by the *Local Harvest*¹¹ organization indicate there were 2,700 CSAs in the U.S. in 2009, compared with less than 100 in 1990.¹² The 2007 Census of Agriculture indicated about 12,500 farmers had sold products through CSAs. This reflects the growing number of multi-farm CSAs or collaboratives, where farmers pool their production to better serve their customers in rural communities and urban areas. The local food movement is evolving to better meet the needs of more people – both farmers and consumers.

The potential for a new and different food system of the future can be seen most clearly in the growing number of local foods cooperatives or collaborations between farmers and consumers. Examples include, *Grown Locally*,¹³ *Idaho's Bounty*,¹⁴ *Viroqua Food Coop*,¹⁵ and *the Oklahoma Food Cooperative*.¹⁶ The Oklahoma Food Cooperative website lists 20 similar cooperatives in other states. The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service lists over 230 multi-farm “food hubs.”¹⁷ By cooperating, farmers can offer a wide variety of local products with purchase and delivery options ranging from CSA shares to on-line orders of individual items. All of these organizations provide opportunities to link purchasers of local foods to specific farms and farmers. These new food systems range in scope from local to state or regional in size and from a dozen or so to hundreds of farmer/consumer members. I believe these innovative organizations provide a compelling vision for a sustainable future for food and farming.

Again, the so-called experts tend to underestimate the importance of the local food movement. The most frequently mentioned advantage of local foods is superior freshness and flavor.¹⁸ Food safety and nutrition also are common reasons mentioned by those who buy local. Others buy local foods to support local farmers and keep their money in the local economy. An even more important sign of reversal, buying local is seen as a means of regaining a “sense of community,” of reconnecting with friends and neighbors, and regaining some “sense of place” or connectedness with the earth. All of these reasons reflect a rejection of industrial agriculture. However, the sense of community and sense of place that characterize local food systems are essential aspects of the new ecological and social worldview of sustainability. As with authentic organics, authentically local foods cannot be standardized or defined by a set of definitions or rule, such as “food miles” or the distance food has traveled. *Local* is but a means of expressing the social and ecological aspects of a new worldview essential for agricultural sustainability.

I believe the challenge of the future will be to replace the industrial food system with a network of community-based, sustainable food systems. Many of today's local “food hubs” will need to be “scaled-up” to achieve greater economic efficiency. A fundamental question is how much they can be scaled-up without sacrificing food safety and quality or losing the economic benefits they provide for people in their local communities. How large can they become without losing their social sense of community or their ecological sense of place? At some point, for some perhaps even now, the emphasis must shift from scaling-up to achieve economic efficiency to replication and reproduction, keeping their size consistent with social and ecological integrity. Regional, national, and even a global network of local, community based food systems must be made up of cooperative organizations small enough to retain their social and ecological integrity. Networks of community-based food systems seem our best hope for revolution and reversal.

So what does this hope of a sustainable food system have to do with family farms? First the sustainability of local food systems depends on the integrity of personal relationships within the communities they sustain and are sustained by them. The sustainability of food freshness, flavor, safety, nutrition, and of economic and social benefits for communities and societies all depends on sustaining the integrity of relationships among farmers, customers, society, and the integrity of their relationships with the earth. Relationships of integrity – creating and maintaining them – will be the greatest and most important challenge in transforming the local food movement into a new sustainable food system. Family farms have always depended on relationships of integrity.

The essence of *real* farming has always been as much about relationships as revenue; farming as a way of life, as well as a means of making a living. Farming as revenue producing industrial enterprise is a recent aberration in a long history of farming. The word “*farm*” comes from the Middle English word, *ferme* (“variously meaning: tenant, rent, revenue, stewardship, meal, feast”), from Old English *feorm*, *farm* (“meaning provision, food, supplies, possessions, rent, feast”), from Proto-Germanic *firmō*, *fīrjumō* (“means of living, subsistence”), and from Proto-Indo-European *perk^wu-* (“life, strength, force”).¹⁹ Farm is also related to other Old English words such as *feormehām*, *feormere* (“purveyor, grocer”), *feormian* (“to provision, sustain”), and *feorh* (“life, spirit”). The Old English word was borrowed by Medieval Latin as *firma*, *ferma* (“source of revenue, feast”), and strengthened by the word's resemblance to the Latin words, *firma*, *firmus* (“firm, solid”) and *firmitas* (“security, firmness”).

Sustainable farming is about reclaiming the richness of the historic meaning of farms and farming, while rejecting ruthlessness of factory farms and industrial agriculture. Certainly, economic concepts such as “rent, revenue, tenant, and means of living” are historical aspects of farming. But, farming also has been consistently identified with the provision of physical and mental sustenance for society: “provision, grocer, subsistence, life, benefit, spirit, and feast.” Farming has always included a moral or ethical commitment to long run food security or permanence: “stewardship, strength, firm, solid, security, and sustain.” Real farming has always been an ethical, social, and economic way of life – a means to pursue happiness. Sustainable farming isn't really a new idea. A real farm has always meant an economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable farm.

True family farms are the epitome of “real farms” – the only kind of farms with a future. True family farms have always contributed to the quality of life of a farm family in ways other than just making money. Ask any true family farmer why they farm and they virtually all will mention that a farm is a good way to live and to raise a family. Farm families spend more quality time together – work and family life happens at the same place. Children on family farms grow up knowing they are valued, productive participants in the work of the family, which gives them a better chance of growing up with a healthy sense of self-worth. Family farms survive and thrive by creating and sustaining the kind of positive, caring relationships that are essential aspects of the cultural imperative of sustainability.

True family farmers have a “sense of community.” Ask family farmers why they farm, and many will mention that they like the sense of belonging and caring that comes with being part of a vibrant rural community. Farm families often identify themselves and identify others in terms of their networks of familial and social relationships. Family farmers also have a strong sense of place. On true family farms, the farm and the family are inseparable. The same farm with a different family would be a different farm and the same family with a different farm would be a different family. The family and the land are an interconnected part of the same whole. Sustainable farms and farm families are resourceful, resilient, and regenerative living systems, reflecting the essential characteristics of *sustainable* economies and societies.

In general, family farms are about the pursuit of happiness, rather than the pursuit of wealth. Certainly, some level of economic or material well-being is necessary for happiness, but both philosophers and ordinary people have always understood that happiness is also about relationships, within families and communities, and happiness is about ethics and morality. Certainly, we are material beings; we need food, clothing, shelter, rest, and other economic necessities of life. But, we are social beings; we need to care and be cared for; we need to love and be loved. And we are ethical and moral beings; we need a sense of purpose and meaning in life to distinguish right from wrong and good from bad. Ask a true family farmer why he or she farms and many will tell you it's about relationships. Others will say: “I farm because I feel I have to. I feel like this is what God meant for me to do.” These are the core values of the new cultural imperative of sustainability and they still exist on many family farms.

Some see the call a return the social and ethical values of family farms as little more than agrarian nostalgia, or a longing for an idealized past that never really existed. However, the call for a return to traditional core values is not unique to agriculture or rural communities. People in

all sectors of the economy and in all walks of life are beginning to understand there is simply no logical reason to continue giving the pursuit of income and wealth priority over the pursuit of happiness. For the skeptics, a few quotes from arguably the most widely respected economist of the 20th century, John Maynard Keynes, may shed some light on the emerging reversal of priorities. Back in the early 1920s, Keynes wrote, “the *economic problem* may be solved, or be at least within sight of solution, within a hundred years. This means that the economic problem is not... *the permanent problem of the human race*.”²⁰ Man's permanent problem will be “how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares ... to live wisely and agreeably and well.”

As it turned out, Keynes was right. The “economic problem” has been solved for the vast majority of Americans, as well as most of those in the rest of the so-called *developed* world. In fact, most Americans probably had as much material wealth as we needed as far back as the 1950s. A 2003 British cabinet office report confirmed that “Despite huge increases in affluence compared with 1950, people throughout the developed world reported no greater feelings of happiness.”²¹ A 2004 review of more than 150 scholarly studies indicates that as developing national economies grow, beyond some very modest level of material well-being – around \$10,000 to \$15,000 per capita – there is little if any correlation between increasing wealth and the overall happiness or well-being of people in a nation.²²

These and other studies have consistently found that personal relationships – friends, family, and community – are necessary for happiness, as is a sense of being treated with equity and justice within society. And perhaps most important, they concluded our happiness depends on our having a clear sense of purpose and meaning in life to define what is right or wrong and good or bad – our sense of ethics and morality. This is something real family farmers have always known. The challenge for Americans today is not to restore economic growth, but instead to learn to live “wisely, agreeably, and well” – ethically, socially, and economically.

This challenge of revolution and reversal can be met only within the context of a new worldview: A worldview of humans as a part of the earth, not apart from the earth; as critically interconnected with each other and with the earth; whose health and happiness is inseparable from the health and happiness of other people and of the other living and non-living elements of the earth. Only when we accept this new ethically, socially, and economically interdependent worldview will we find the courage to cease our futile striving for wealth and return to the pursuit of happiness.

This is not some New Age utopian vision that is unattainable. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that happiness was a natural consequence of “right relationships” among friends and within families and communities. Alex Des Tocqueville, in writing about democracy in America in the early 1800s, termed concern for the well-being of others as “self-interest rightly understood.” The Dali Lama calls it being “wisely selfish” – understanding that our well-being is dependent on the well-being of the other living and nonliving things of the earth. It's simply time to return to those things people of great wisdom have always known to be true.

I can think of nothing that better epitomizes this new worldview essential for sustainability and happiness than a good family farm. The social and ethical relationships that are sustained on good family farms will be essential to sustaining relationships of integrity within community-

based food systems that eventually evolve into the new cultural imperative that will be essential in sustaining a new global sustainable food network. Certainly, family farms of the future will be different in many respects from those of the past, but the most fundamental and essential characteristics will be the same as they always have been. The pendulum of industrial agriculture is losing its momentum. It has gone too far. The laws of nature are demanding a reversal – a return to the ecological and social reality. Society is no less dependent on the bounty of the earth, and those who bring that bounty forth, than in the days of hunters and gathers. Real family farms are the best hope for a sustainable future for farming and for humanity.

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¹⁴ Visit the *Idaho's Bounty* website at <http://www.idahosbounty.org/> .

¹⁵ Visit Viroqua Food Coop website at <http://viroquafood.coop/> .

¹⁶ Visit the *Oklahoma Food Cooperative* website at <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/> , list of other cooperatives: <http://www.oklahomafood.coop/Display.aspx?cn=otherstates> .

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¹⁸ Vern Grubinger, "Ten Reasons to Buy Local Foods," University of Vermont, <http://www.uvm.edu/vtvegandberry/factsheets/buylocal.html> .

¹⁹ Wikipedia; The On-line Dictionary, "farm."

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