

Reclaiming the Sacred: Sustainable Farming as a Metaphor for Sustainable Living

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The problems confronting agriculture and the problems confronting society in general share a common source: the dysfunctional nature of relationships among people and between people and the earth. Consequently, the solutions to the problems of society are essentially the same as solutions to the problems of agriculture. In farming, the critical nature of the interrelationships among people and between people and the earth is perhaps more apparent than in any other form of human activity. So, the nature of the problems and solutions are more easily seen and understood in agriculture than in society in general. Thus, farming provides a useful metaphor for living. And more important, a sustainable agriculture, an agriculture that reconnects people with the earth and with each other, provides a useful metaphor for a sustainable society.

The productivity of a farm clearly depends on the health and natural fertility of the soil. And, the fertility of soil depends not only on its mineral and chemical composition but also upon the millions of organisms that live in the soil, in a symbiotic relationship with the roots of plants. The productivity of farms clearly depend on the health and natural vigor of plants and animals, which in turn depend on soil, water, air, and sunlight – and upon the biological diversity of their natural environment. Healthy soils feed healthy plants and healthy plants feed healthy animals – including we humans who eat both plants and animals.

The profitability of a farm depends on the nature of relationships among people – between farmers and their customers and between farmers and their suppliers. A profitable farming operation must have good markets – someone somewhere must be willing and able to pay for things that farmers offer for sale. A profitable farming operation also must have some control over its costs of production. No selling price is high enough if input suppliers simply raise their prices and absorb the farmer's profits. The economic viability of a farm clearly depends on economic relationships, which in fact, are nothing more or less, than impersonal relationships among people.

The quality of life on a farm certainly is affected by farm income, but clearly depends at least as much on quality of personal relationships among those who live and work on farms and between farm families and their communities. Historically, family farms have involved the whole family in important farming decisions, as well as depended on all members of the family for labor. Historically, farm families have been more isolated by geography than have non-farm families, and thus, have relied more on each other for social, recreational, and emotional relationships. Likewise, many farming communities have remained isolated from the economic mainstream, making the interdependence between farm families and the social and political life of rural communities more clear.

The same types of personal interdependence exist throughout society, but in farming, they are easier to see and to understand.

The environmental, social, and economic problems confronting American agriculture today are symptoms of the industrialization of agriculture – specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. Specialization leads to separation and to the destruction of interconnectedness. Large-scale, specialized farming operations must rely on commercial fertilizers and pesticides that destroy the health and productivity of the soil. The demise of family farms is a symptom of simplification, routinization, and mechanization of farming, which made it both possible and necessary for each farmer to farm more land and invest more capital. As some farms failed so that others might get larger, local businesses suffered, local schools were lost to consolidation, church pews were left empty, and rural communities withered and died. Relationships among people and between people and the land were sacrificed for the sake of physical and economic efficiency.

The specialization and standardization, which first led to fewer and larger farms, is now shifting control of farming to a handful of multinational corporations. Under corporate control, American agriculture might well be moved to other countries with lower land and labor costs and fewer environmental regulations. People are becoming even more separated from their roots in the soil by a global, industrial food system. The long run sustainability of agriculture depends on maintaining healthy relationships. And, the sustainability of American agriculture is in doubt.

Large-scale confinement animal feeding operations (CAFOs) epitomize the industrialization of American agriculture. With these giant animal factories – producing poultry, eggs, hogs, milk, etc. – the economic, ecological, and social impacts of industrialization on rural communities are clear. These corporately controlled animal factories move to economically depressed rural areas where people are desperate for jobs. They provide a few low-paying jobs in the community – the high-paying jobs are invariably located somewhere else – but they displace far more family farmers who were producing those same commodities elsewhere. They may enhance the local tax base but they increase demands on local public services far more than they add to local government coffers. In addition, CAFOs inherently pollute the natural environment, with noxious odors in the air and animal waste in streams and groundwater, raising legitimate concerns for human health and for the health of natural ecosystems.

Rural communities are split by continual feuding, with those who benefit from new jobs and increased tax revenues on one side and displaced family farmers and local residents who bear the costs of polluted air and water on the other. The community loses its ability to govern itself effectively, and the corporation fills the leadership vacuum. The corporations continually threaten to move their operations elsewhere where environmental regulations are less bothersome and local people are less hostile. And, when the corporation finds somewhere else, either at home or abroad, where people will work even harder for less pay, they move on and leave the community with the mess to clean up and with relationships to mend. In these large-scale, animal

factories, the connections between the industrial paradigm and its threats to ecological, social, and economic sustainability are clear and compelling.

Those same relationships exist between industrialization and threats to sustainability for society in general. But, modern society is extremely complex and the relationships are not quite so clear. All of life, including human life, is dependent upon a healthy natural environment – water, air, sunlight, soil, and diversity of living species. Industrial systems of economic development degrade the health of the natural environment in general, just as industrial agriculture degrades the natural productivity of farms. Industrial systems degrade the productivity of people. As Adam Smith wrote in his Wealth of Nations, regarding division of labor, people who only perform specialized, routine tasks eventually lose their ability to solve problems, to be innovative and creative. In Smith's words, they become “as stupid and ignorant as is possible for a human creature to become.” Industrial systems, in general, degrade the physical and mental well being of people while they pollute and degrade the natural environment -- just as industrial agriculture degrades the social and ecological health of rural areas.

With industrial systems, profits and growth take precedent over personal relationships and social responsibility. Specialization and standardization separate people within families and within communities and devalues human relationships. Relationships among people are reduced to buying and selling or other forms of legal transactions. As relationships become distant and impersonal, exploitation of workers, consumers, and taxpayers becomes accepted business practices. The social, ecological, and economic degradation of America is no different in concept from the demise of our family farms and the ecological, economic, and social decay of our rural communities. The linkages between cause and effect are just easier to see in agriculture.

On the positive side, the keys to building a more sustainable human society are no different in nature from the keys to building a more sustainable agriculture. Thankfully, farmers all across America and around the world are finding ways to make agriculture more sustainable. A recent publication of the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program highlights fifty such farmers from across the United States.¹ There are thousands more, each with a unique and different story, but each sharing a common vision for a more sustainable agriculture. These farmers are creating a new agriculture, and in so doing, are creating a new metaphor for human society.

This is a “new breed” of farmer, with a new vision for the future. They are rediscovering the roots of agriculture; they are reconnecting to the land and to each other, and in the process, are redefining farming. They are finding ways to capitalize on the weaknesses of the industrial paradigm that has dominated agriculture for the past century. They are successfully bucking the trend toward larger farms, which has meant fewer farms and fewer farmers. They are finding ways to make a better living on smaller farms, making room for more, rather than fewer, farms and farmers. They are lowering the barriers to farming by creating an agriculture that depends more on knowledge and understanding of nature, including human nature, and less on capital and access to technology. This new breed of farmers is creating new opportunities for anyone who has a willingness to

work hard, a commitment to continual learning, and a love of the land and people. They are reconnecting people to the land and to each other and are creating a new kind of farming for the new century.

While there are no blueprints for the new American farm, some fundamental principles are emerging. 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. They are farming in ways that are more economically viable, as well as more ecologically sound, by reconnecting with nature.

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 because they produce what their customers value. They are farming in ways that are more economically viable, as well as socially responsible, by reconnecting with people.

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 reconnecting with their own basic nature.

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, and 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 with customers. They buy locally and sell locally. They refuse to either exploit each other – or to exploit the land. They are reconnecting people with the land and reconnecting people with each other.

Perhaps most important, these new farmers are challenging the conventional wisdom that farmers must either get bigger, give into corporate control, or get out of farming. They are challenging the conventional wisdom that farming is just another bottom-line business, and that farmers who fail to maximize profits are destined to go broke. They are challenging the conventional wisdom that farmers must adopt the latest science-based technologies, chemical or genetic, or they will become obsolete and fail. They are challenging the conventional wisdom that a farm is nothing more than a factory without a roof and that fields and feed lots nothing more than biological assembly lines. They are challenging the conventional wisdom that “man” must conquer and control nature and that some must fail so that others may succeed. These new farmers are rejecting conventional wisdom and relying instead on their “common sense.”

Their common sense tells them that they must work with nature, respect their customers, live with integrity, and help each other – if they are to be truly successful. Their common sense tells them that their farms must be ecologically sound and socially responsible if they are to be economically viable over the long run. Their common sense tells them that quality of life has personal, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions, and that preoccupation with any one of the three destroys the harmony and balance necessary for a life of quality. Implicitly, if not explicitly, these farmers realize that there is a higher order of things, an order they did not create nor can they change, to which they must conform if they are to lead lives of purpose and meaning.

Common sense, as the name implies, is something that is shared in common among all sensible human beings. Such common sense is not a product of education, experimentation, life experience, culture, or environment. It spans all economic and social strata of all cultures across all eras of time. This concept of common sense is related to Plato's concept of “pure knowledge.” Plato argued, in around 400 BC, that one can never gain “pure knowledge” through observation because anything that can be observed is always changing, whereas, pure knowledge never changes. He argued that we observe only imperfect examples of the true “form” of things – the order or architecture of pure knowledge. Thus, we can observe examples of “form” and we can visualize ideas of true “form” in our minds. But, we can never actually observe true “form,” i.e., the order of pure knowledge, because it exists only in the abstract.

Our common sense is our “insight” into the nature of “pure knowledge.” Through our common sense, we can “visualize in our minds” a higher level of organization, or higher order of things. Through observing the interrelationships among things in nature, including human relationships, we can gain insights into the nature of this higher order. But we can never fully understand it, because it exists only in the abstract.

Conventional wisdom is something fundamentally different from common sense – although the two are sometimes mistakenly used interchangeably. Both represent widely held opinions, but the sources of those opinions are quite different. Conventional wisdom is rooted in logic and reason – in conclusions drawn from past observations. Sometimes the logic and reasoning are faulty, and thus the conclusions are faulty, but conventional wisdom is always based on some past observation or experience. Conventional wisdom need not be based on first-hand observation; it may be passed down from generation to generation. And conventional wisdom may include some things that make common sense. However, something “makes sense” to us only if we “sense” it is true – only when the truth of it is validated by the spiritual or metaphysical rather than the logical part of our being. Some people choose to deny their common sense, and instead rely solely on logic and reason. But, we all have access to common sense, if we choose to use it.

Even the founding fathers of our country were capable, at times, of denying their common sense in favor of the conventional wisdom. The rightness of owning slaves was conventional wisdom until well into the 19th century – it had always been done. However, it has never made common sense that one person should dominate another. Thomas Jefferson wrote and spoke out against slavery, because he knew it was ethically and morally wrong. Yet, he helped draft a constitution that allowed slavery, and he personally owned slaves. Jefferson allowed conventional wisdom to take precedent over his common sense.

Until the 20th century, women in the U.S. were denied the right to vote – the conventional wisdom: their husbands should vote for them. In fact, former slaves were given voting rights in the U.S. before voting rights were granted to women. It didn't make common sense, not then and not now, to deny women their voting rights. Thomas Payne, among other prominent revolutionary leaders, spoke out in favor of women's suffrage in the writing of the U.S. constitution. But again, the leaders of the country allowed conventional wisdom to take precedent over common sense.

Most people today know that it is wrong to exploit the natural environment and we know that it is wrong to exploit other people for our personal benefit. It is just common sense that we should make conscious, purposeful decisions to take care of each other and to be stewards of nature. Yet, we participate in an economic and political system that is based on exploitation of nature and of people. We allow the conventional wisdom to take precedent over our common sense.

Historically, human societies haven't had a particularly impressive record in relying on their common sense. “Common sense hasn't been all that common.” However, over the past couple of hundred years, the concept of common sense has been purposely debased and its value denied. The emergence of the “age of reason” challenged human civilization to insist on scientific validation of their insights and intuitions – if you couldn't “prove” it, you had no way of knowing that it was true. If you couldn't observe it, you certainly couldn't prove it. And if you couldn't prove it was true, it was discarded as irrational superstition.

If common sense couldn't be converted into scientific knowledge, through observation and validation, it was relegated to the category of illogical beliefs. The concept of common sense was derided as the "wisdom" of the foolish, the uneducated – the unscientific. In essence, unverifiable common sense was relegated to the realm of the metaphysical or the spiritual. And matters of spirituality were related to the realm of the unscientific and therefore unreal.

Among the most notable challengers to the irrational and spiritual was Descartes, a Frenchman, who proposed the dualism of spirit and matter. This division allowed scientists to treat inert matter as "dead" and completely separate from themselves, and to see the material world as made up of a multitude of different objects assembled as if parts of a huge, complex machine. Sir Isaac Newton, an Englishman, also held this mechanistic view of the universe and shaped it into the foundation for classical physics. Over time, scientists expanded the mechanical model to include the living as well as the "dead." Scientists today treat plants, animals, and even people, as complex mechanisms with many interrelated, yet separable, functioning parts.

Scientists consider the spiritual realm, to the extent considered at all, to be in the fundamental nature of things – the unchanging relationships that they seek to discover. In science, there is no active spiritual aspect of life, only the passive possibility that the supernatural was involved somehow in the initial creation of the universe that we are now exploring. The more we learned about the working of that universe, the less we needed to attribute to God. The more we "knew" the less we needed to "believe." As we expanded the realm of the "factual" we reduced the realm of the "spiritual" until it became trivial, at least in the important matters of life.

Without a spiritual foundation, the concept of science shifted from a "science of understanding" to a "science of manipulation." Over time, the goal of science shifted from increasing "wisdom" to the goal of increasing "power." We didn't want just to understand how things happen; we wanted to make things happen. We didn't want just to understand the universe; we wanted to dominate the universe. The purpose of science had shifted from enhancing knowledge to enhancing our ability to influence, direct, and control.

During the early part of 20th century, physicists developed fundamentally new theories they called quantum physics. The emergence of quantum physics challenges the old mechanistic worldview. Quantum physics views everything as interconnected – there are no independent and dependent elements. Everything is "interdependent." Reality exists as "potentials," which become "real" only when "observed," within a specific context. The reality observed always depends upon the observer – they are related. The "living" and the "dead" are inseparable. However, mechanical reductionism, which attempts to explain all biological processes as purely chemical and mechanical processes, still dominates the applied biological sciences from agriculture to medicine.

The industrialization of agriculture was a direct result of this mechanistic, scientific worldview. Farming was one of the last strongholds for the sacred in the world of science. “Mechanical” processes – using machines to manufacture things from “dead” matter – were relatively easy to understand and manipulate. But, “biological” processes – involving living organisms, including humans – proved much more difficult to understand and to manage. Farming and food are fundamentally biological in nature. So it took far longer to learn to manipulate and control agriculture.

However, science eventually succeeded in taking the mysteries and miracles out of farming – at least out of commercial, industrialized farming. Science eventually brought nature under its control. People are difficult to understand and manipulate. But, machines took the laborers out of the fields, so farming became more manageable. Selective breeding brought genetic vagaries more or less under control. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are but the latest attempts by humans to manipulate and control other life forms.

Commercial fertilizers gave farmers the power to cope with the uncertainties of organic-based nutrient cycling. Commercial pesticides provided simple scientific means of managing predators, parasites, and pests. Deep-well irrigation reduced the grower's dependence on rainfall. Confinement feeding facilities protected livestock from the adverse elements of weather. Processing, storage, and transportation – all mechanical processes – removed many of the previous biological constraints associated with form, time, and place of production.

Supermarkets and restaurants are but the final stages in long and complex assembly lines for food that begins with manufactured genetics and ends with electronic scanners. Why pray for rain when we can drill a well or dam a stream and irrigate? Why thank God for food created by ADM and ConAgra? Who needs God when we have modern science and industrial technology?

The new sustainable paradigm of farming, however, challenges the conventional wisdom of a mechanistic, industrial agriculture. Sustainable agriculture is firmly rooted in *common sense*. It embraces respect for the spiritual, the mystery and miracles of life, without rejecting the science of understanding. Sustainable farmers know that science can be used to gain greater understanding of the nature of things. But, sustainable farmers also know that there are fundamental laws of nature, including human nature, that cannot be manipulated by science and technology. Sustainable farming is based on the common sense that we must conform to the laws of nature rather than the conventional wisdom that science and technology can solve any problem and overcome any obstacle that nature might present.

Sustainable agriculture is rooted in the belief that plants, animals, people, and all living things are interconnected with each other and with the earth in some higher order of things that we can neither conquer nor control. If we are to sustain agriculture, and sustain human life on earth, we must learn to live in harmony within that order – in

harmony with the spiritual dimension of reality. If we are to sustain agriculture, we must return to our common sense.

The road to a more sustainable human society, like the road to a more sustainable agriculture, must begin with a return to common sense. This is not a call to return to superstition and mysticism, but to return to the spiritual and sacred. This is not a call to embrace the irrational, but a return to what we know to be true. Plato didn't consider it irrational to believe in the existence of an unknowable "form" of pure knowledge. Einstein didn't consider it irrational to try to understand the order of the universe by asking, "how might God have designed it to work?" It is not unscientific to believe that God gave us all a common sense of right and wrong or truth and falsehood, it's just against the current conventional wisdom. The call for sustainability is a call to embrace the science of understanding while rejecting the science of manipulation and control. It is a call to challenge the conventional wisdom that "man can be his own God," to reclaim the sacred, and to return to our common sense.

A return to common sense is an acknowledgement of the existence of a higher order of things of which we are a part. It is an acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of all things in a web of life defined by a set of inviolate laws of nature, including human nature, to which we must conform. It is an acknowledgement that we are not our own God, nor can we ever be our own God. Instead, we are a part of God's creation and the purpose and meaning of our lives is defined by our place in the order of that creation. We can never acquire pure knowledge through observation, because it exists only in the abstract. While observations of examples of reality may be useful, our only source of true knowledge must come through intuition and insight – through our common sense.

The emergence of a new more sustainable American farm gives cause for optimism for the future of humanity because it signals a return to common sense. These new farmers are facing tremendous odds in the practical arenas of economics and politics. They may seem insignificant as players in the corporate scramble for control of the global food market. While they struggle to understand how to better work with nature, billions of public dollars are spent each year to promote agricultural industrialization, through biotechnology and other futile attempts to bring nature under the control of "man." These new farmers also seem insignificant as claimants of funds for public research and education, while politically and economically powerful biotech firms court university researchers and administrators. But, while conventional wisdom is against them, common sense is on their side.

These new American farmers can succeed – they can succeed, in part, because they are rebuilding personal relationships as they go about their work of building more sustainable farms. They are building connections with their customers through Community Food Circles – which list local suppliers of all sorts of farm and food products available for direct sales to local customers. They are building connections through Community Supported Agriculture, where customers pay for a seasons-worth of produce at the beginning of the season, and farmers share both the risk and the bounty with their members. They are making new connections with customers at farmers'

markets, where many customers come each week to buy specific items from “their farmer.” And, they are making new connections with chefs and restaurant owners, not only by supplying high quality products, but also by making personal commitments to work together to connect with diners. They are succeeding because they are rebuilding the web of personal relationships and thereby creating a new web of understanding.

Many also are making new connections with people that they never meet face-to-face, as they market through personal agents who represent them as farmers, rather than just their product. They make new connections when they market on the Internet or through the mail, whenever they sell themselves along with their products. Some are even connecting when they sell through supermarkets, when they back their products with their personal reputation rather than with just a guarantee. Personal relationships are built by believing, trusting, caring, and sharing. These things are easier when done face-to-face but can be done at a distance. And, these things must be done among people – not corporations. By reconnecting people, they are restoring integrity to the food system and improving their odds of success.

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

There is added reason for optimism because this same type of trend is taking place across society – not just in food and farming. Agriculture is but a small part of the broad-based *sustainability movement* that spans nearly every aspect of society – a unique and critical part, but still just a small part. Little by little, society is beginning to wake up to the consequences of our disconnectedness from nature and from each other, and people are beginning to reconnect in hundreds or thousands of little, but significant, ways. As we work to reconnect with others in our little part of the world, we are doing our part to bring about the transition to a more sustainable society. By restoring the web of relationships, we are creating new sources of strength through harmony.

One by one, as we find the courage to challenge the conventional wisdom of the status quo with common sense need for change, we are helping to create a better world. Susan B. Anthony, the champion of voting rights for women in the U.S. once said, “Cautious, careful people, always casting about to maintain their reputation and social standing, never can bring about reform. Those who are really in earnest must be willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation.” It takes courage to bring about change. But Margaret Mead, an award winning cultural anthropologist, 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.” As each of us finds the courage to change our

selves and to influence our little piece of the world, we can change the world. Indeed, this is the only thing that ever can.

The rest of us need to learn from the example of the new America farmers – the new farmers for the new century. We need to reclaim the sacred in our lives, as they have reclaimed the sacred in farming. We need to start a new economic and social revolution as they have started in farming. We need to reject the science of manipulation in favor of the wisdom of sustainability. We need to return to our common sense.

¹ “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>)