

Sustaining Communities Through Urban Agriculture¹

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A true community is something far more than a collection of individuals, who happen to be living in the same general geographic location, or even a group of individuals that happen to share common interests. A true community is made up of people who care about each other and are committed to each other. Their commitments may stem from the fact that they live in a common area or place, and have come to care about each other in the process of learning to share that place. Or their commitments might stem from the fact that they share some common concerns, and have come to care about each other in the process of learning to address those concerns. Regardless, the caring is what matters. Be it a community of place or a community of interest, a community is a reflection of the fact that people care about each other and are committed to each other's well-being.

Within true communities, there is a sense of belonging, a sense of connectedness, a sense of being interrelated – a sense of being more than a collection of individuals. The whole of a true community embodies something in addition than that which is in its individual members. It includes those things that do not exist within individuals, but between and among individuals – the connections, the relationships, and the sense of being a part of something beyond ourselves.

A Disconnected Nation

Most of the groups that we refer to as communities in America are nothing more than collections of individuals who happen to live in the same place or belong to the same organization. We have become a nation of disconnected people. Our families are scattered across the country. We don't know the people who live across town, down the street, and maybe not even the people who live next door. We don't really care much about most of the people we know.

We deal with each other only indirectly, for the most part – through transactions, through agents, or through lawyers and courts. Our relationships are defined by buying and selling, by contracts, and by laws rather than by common interests, commitment, and trust. Our disagreements are addressed through argument, arbitration, and lawsuits rather than through honest discussion of our differences.

Truly personal relationships, based on believing, trusting, caring, and sharing, are labeled as naïve or idealistic. Personal commitments are labeled as risky, maybe even foolish, unless they are confirmed in writing. It shouldn't be surprising that, as a nation, we have lost all sense of commitment to our *common good*. In general, Americans feel no commitment to each other, no sense of true community, no concern for, or connection to, each other.

Nowhere is this disconnectedness more evident than in our systems of food and farming – in agriculture. Most consumers, particularly younger consumers, have no

sense of where their food actually comes from. They may know that farmers grow crops and livestock, and that someone processes, packages, and delivers their food to grocery stores and restaurants, but they have little sense of what's involved in this process. Few people even stop to consider that soil is essential to all life – as essential as air, water, and sunlight – and that farming is the means of bringing life from the soil. There is no general sense of connectedness between the people and the earth.

But, does it really matter if people don't understand where their food comes from? Does it really matter whether people have become disconnected from the land? People don't understand where their automobiles come from, or where their clothes, their houses, their movies, or anything else comes from, and no one seems to be complaining about their lack of knowledge of such things.

However, disconnections do matter, even if no one complains. Seeds of dissension are sown in the gaps of understanding and appreciation that exist among people. Dissension leads to loss of trust, to lack of concern, to disconnectedness. Conflict, frustration, depression, anger, and other miseries in life are but symptoms of our disconnectedness. People may not have associated the symptoms with the cause, but the cause still matters. It matters very much whether or not people understand and appreciate each other. But, it matters even more that we consumers understand our connectedness with farmers, and through them, our connectedness with the earth.

Our disconnectedness matters because many farmers feel they are forced to mine nutrients from the soil, pollute the environment with chemicals, and abandon their communities, because the only thing that seems to matter to consumers is the cost of food. It matters because farmers feel that they are being forced to value the economic bottom-line above virtually all else, above their neighbors and communities, and sometimes even above their families. It matters because many farmers want to be good neighbors and good stewards of the land, but the competitive pressures of a consumer-driven, market economy won't let them. Disconnectedness matters because farmers are slowly destroying the land, and ultimately, may destroy the ability of the earth to support human life – all because people don't understand their connectedness with the land and with the people who farm it.

The Cause of Our Disconnectedness

It's no coincidence that America lost its sense of community during the last half of the 20th century – during the latter stages of industrialization. Disconnectedness is an inescapable, though unintended, consequence of the industrial approach to economic development. As we industrialized, we became disconnected.

The fundamental principles of industrial development are specialization, standardization, and centralization of decision making. When workers specialize in doing fewer things, each person can become more efficient in the task they perform, and by working with others can produce more with less total work. By standardizing the tasks of specialized workers and standardizing the things they produce, workers and their products become interchangeable, greatly facilitating the coordination of separate

specialized functions. Finally, specialization and standardization simplifies decision making processes, and makes it possible to centralize management and to consolidate large numbers of workers and functions into large business operations.

Economists call the gains from industrialization economies of scale. Regardless of whether the result is assembly line production by giant automobile manufacturers or a large scale confinement animal feeding operation, the principles are the same. The gains in efficiency from industrialization result from carrying out specialized functions by standardized means under centralized management.

Over the past two hundred years, our economic system has evolved to accommodate industrialized systems of production and distribution. Adam Smith, in his landmark book of 1776, The Wealth of Nations, developed the blueprint for our industrial economy. He used the example of making straight pins to illustrate the potential for tremendous gains in productivity from division of labor – specialization and standardization of production processes. But, Smith went on to explain how free, competitive markets allowed specialized producers of food – the butcher, the brewer, and the baker – to best serve the needs of society in general by pursuing their individual self-interest.

Up through the early 1900s, most Americans produced their own food, bartered for it, or bought it from someone who had produced it. Relationships between consumers and producers were direct and personal. As the economy became more specialized, however, merchants such as butchers, bakers, and brewers bought from producers and sold to consumers, and the farmer-consumer connections became one-step removed. Then came the grocery store owners, who bought from the butchers, bakers and brewers, and then, consumers were at least two-steps removed from the farm.

As people left rural areas for the cities, consumers were separated by distance as well as function, and added functions, such as transportation, further processing, storage, and packaging, served to magnify the degrees of separation. Consumers and producers alike became increasingly reliant upon the impersonal marketing system. They relied on laws to facilitate buying and selling, on grades and standards to define quality, on health requirements to ensure safety, etc. – and they relied less on personal relationships.

This same type of disconnection was occurring all across society – increasingly, people were relating to each other through the marketplace. Confidence, commitment, and trust were replaced by guarantees, contracts, and regulations. And when disputes arose concerning market transactions, they were settled in the courts. The reservoirs of personal goodwill from which conciliation and consensus must be drawn were rapidly depleted. Our national disconnectedness is not a coincidence with, but a consequence of, the industrialization of the American economy.

The Seeds of Change

Fortunately, we are beginning to realize that many of the promises of industrialization were empty. Certainly, society benefited from the tremendous gains in economic

efficiency, which freed the masses from lives of starvation, deprivation, and drudgery. No one would wish to go back to pre-industrial days when people lived by the sweat of their brow and spent most of their time and effort just feeding and clothing themselves. However, the only promises that industrialism could keep were material in nature – the promise of more *cheap stuff*. Many of its promises were not kept. Having more *things* did not translate into, or substitute for, a lack of positive personal relationships and a sense of purpose and meaning. We sacrificed our friends and family, we sacrificed our ethics and morality, and all of the *cheap stuff* in the world will not compensate us for our loss. Our quality of life has not kept pace with our standard of living.

People are losing confidence in the industrial, free-market economy. We no longer have competitive markets, at least not in the economic sense to eliminate excessive profits. It's no longer easy to get into or out of businesses, to accommodate changing consumer tastes and preferences. We don't have accurate information concerning the actual qualities of the things that we buy, but get disinformation by design in the form of persuasive advertising. None of the necessary conditions for competitive capitalism exists in today's economy. Capitalism has become corporatism. There is no longer any logical reason to believe that our pursuit of narrow self-interests results in the greatest societal good. Corporate industrialism may produce lots of *cheap stuff*, but there is no assurance that it is producing the *right stuff*.

The quality of our natural environment has not kept pace with our standard of living. We realized back in the 1970s that our environment was being polluted by industrial development. We established the Environmental Protection Agency at the national level, and began the task of cleanup and restoration at the state, city, and community levels as well. Each year, more effort and money is spent on environmental protection and resource conservation, but each year we introduce new chemicals, and now biological organisms, into the natural environment – and our natural ecosystems are increasingly at risk. The quality of our environment has deteriorated as we have accumulated more wealth.

The quality of our spiritual life has not kept pace with our standard of living. The foundation of industrialism is the science of logic and reason. For every effect there is a logical cause, every event has a logical explanation, and all “natural limits” are but temporary obstacles that eventually will be overcome through science and technology. By taking a thing apart and examining its pieces, we would discover the truth of the whole. But, the truth of a thing is not in its pieces, but instead in the whole. The knowledge of “how” something works does not answer the question of “why?” The purpose and meaning of a thing, the “why” of it, must be derived from the purpose of the whole of it, which can be discerned only from the next higher level of organization.

The purpose and meaning of life cannot be derived from science. Science is limited to telling us “how” things work, but not “why.” The purpose and meaning of life must be derived from the next higher level of organization, from somewhere beyond and above

all of life. As we have focused more and more on the “how,” we have lost our sense of the “why” – our sense of the purpose of it all.

Paraphrasing William James, the religious philosopher, spirituality is a “felt need to live in harmony with some higher, unseen order of things.” We have lost our sense of purpose and meaning in life, because as we have focused on “tangible reality” we have become disconnected from our “higher reality.” The quality of our spiritual life has deteriorated as science and technology has advanced our standard of living.

More and more people are becoming disenchanted with materialism and are demanding something better – something more than economic prosperity. More and more people seem to be concluding that what we are doing quite simply is not sustainable. We are destroying our relationships, within families, communities, and society in our blind pursuit of ever more and cheaper *stuff*. We are destroying our natural environment through pollution, depletion, and extinction, in our blind pursuit of ever more and cheaper *stuff*. We have lost our sense of ethics and morality, in our blind pursuit of science and technology. More and more people are looking for something of lasting value. The want to live lives of purpose and meaning. They are searching for a sustainable quality of life.

Dawning of the Post-Industrial Era

Thankfully, a new post-industrial paradigm is emerging from broad-based concerns for sustainability. The sustainability movement is about meeting the needs of the present, while leaving equal or better opportunities for those of the future. Sustainability is a common sense concept that applies the “Golden Rule” within and across generations. First, we must have a sense of self-respect, and concern for self, before we are capable of respect and concern for others. But, we also must be concerned for the well being of others, just as we would have them be concerned for us. Finally, we must treat those of future generations, as we would have them treat us if we were members of their generation and they were the caretakers of the earth today.

The three cornerstones of sustainability are ecological integrity, economic viability, and social responsibility. Any system of development that degrades the productivity of its resource base eventually will lose its ability to produce, and thus, is not sustainable. Any system of development that is not financially sound, eventually will lose the ability to make decisions concerning how resources are used, and thus, is not sustainable. Finally, any system of development that does not meet the needs of society, not only as consumers but also as people, will not be sustained by society, and thus, is not sustainable. All three are necessary.

The basic concepts of sustainability are the same, regardless of where they are applied within society – sustainable development, sustainable communities, sustainable resources, sustainable seas, sustainable forestry, etc. However, since all life arises from the earth, a sustainable agriculture must provide the foundation for a sustainable society.

Our farms must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible, otherwise, our human society will not be sustainable. Ecologically sound farming means farming in harmony with nature – nurturing nature rather than dominating or manipulating nature. Socially responsible farming means farming in harmony with people – within families, communities, and societies – not dominating or manipulating people. Economically viable farming means profits must come from fitting the methods of farming to the farm, the farmer, and the community – not forcing either to fit some predefined prescription for productivity. Sustainable farming means farming in harmony, both within and across generations. Sustainability is inherently rooted in spirituality – the need to live and work in harmony with the “higher order” of things. At its very foundation, sustainability is a matter of ethics and morality.

Sustainable farming requires that farmers reconnect with people, with people as customers and with people as neighbors, as they reconnect with the land, and through the land, with the fundamental order and nature of things. Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer and writer, has clearly articulated the connections among people, the land, and sustainable agriculture.

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

Farmers will not have time to use the land well, or be able to afford to use it well, unless they live in a society that understands how important it is that farmers be able to use the land well. To farm sustainably, farmers and consumers must become reconnected.

The good news for the future of food and farming is that thousands of farmers are finding ways to farm sustainably. They are finding ways to be good stewards of the land, while sustaining a desirable quality of life for themselves and their families and helping to build local communities. They may label themselves as organic, low-input, alternative, ecological, biodynamic, biological, holistic, permaculture, or claim no label at all. However, they are all pursuing common economic, ecological and social goals. By their actions, these farmers are defining a new kind of American farm.³

Reconnecting People through Agriculture

These new American farmers are reconnecting with their customers at farmers markets, roadside stands, Community Supported Agriculture organizations (CSAs), in-store demonstrations, on-farm recreational experiences. They even connect through less personal means of telephone or Internet, as they communicate directly person-to-person, rather than through some paid advertisement or promotion scheme. These farmers also are reconnecting with each other, as they are learning that they can accomplish more through cooperation than competition, once they break away from the economic, industrial mind-set. They learn from each other and work together for social, economic, and ethical reasons. They are building new farming communities.

Many urban people may not have an opportunity to reconnect to the land, to nature, and to each other by *farming*, or even buying food directly from farmers. But, through urban agriculture, people in cities have the same opportunities as farmers to reconnect with the land, with nature, and with each other. By reconnecting with the land, through gardening, we can reconnect with each other – forming communities of place around shared community gardens, and communities of interest, around a common commitment to growing things of usefulness and beauty.

Even if only in the small part of our life that relates to our urban garden, through gardening, we are making a tangible commitment to valuing nature and people over *cheap stuff*. We soon begin to realize how much we have sacrificed in our pursuit of ever more and cheaper *stuff*. As we begin to enjoy the bounty of our own harvests, we begin to understand the true meaning in product quality. We see and taste the difference between products that are local, fresh, and harvested at the peak of maturity, rather than being picked green and spending days, or weeks, in shipment over thousands of miles.

Not only do we benefit directly from gardening, but we also begin to understand how much we have compromised the quality of our food supply by demanding that our food be quick, convenient, and cheap. We begin to understand that the quick, convenient, and cheap food, at the supermarket or fast-food joint, may not be worth the time, effort, or money. We begin to seek out opportunities to buy fresh produce from nearby farmers, at urban farmers' markets, or through retail food stores who buy from local farmers. We begin to buy fresh products and learn to prepare foods for ourselves. We begin to understand that what we gain in nutrition, flavor, and overall quality, in addition to personal self-esteem, more than makes up for our investment of time and effort.

Through gardening, we come to realize that making friends and caring for the earth contribute to our quality of life in ways that quick, convenient, and cheap food never could. As we share in the tasks of caring for living, growing plants in a community garden, we come to share a common commitment. As we share concerns and insights about helping living things grow, we come to share a common commitment to understanding the nature of life.

Garden as Metaphors

The living things in gardens become a metaphor for the living people in families and communities – gardeners become connected through our common concern for the health and well being of our gardens. The interconnectedness among the living organisms in the soil, the living plants that are fed by the soil, and the insects, birds and people, who are fed by the plants, provide a metaphor for interconnected human communities. Soon, personal connections among gardeners begin to grow, in a pattern of positive interdependence, complementing, and extending beyond, our common connection to urban agriculture.

Communities of caring people, built around agriculture, are better able to address problems such as those relating to raising children, resolving family conflicts, investing in education, fighting crime, and building communities. We learn valuable lessons in how to relate to other people, as we learn how to grow plants, rotate crops, build soil fertility, manage pests, and create an interconnected garden that somehow is more than just a collection of plants.

As we care for our gardens, we come to realize in very tangible ways that the earth is the source of all life, and that our quality of life depends upon the quality of the earth. The garden becomes a metaphor for all of nature. All life on earth depends on the interaction of sunlight, air, water, and soil. Plants are solar energy converters. All fossil energy on earth is stored sunlight from times past. Plants must have air, water, and soil to grow. Even plants that grow in water must be fed nutrients from the earth. All of the living things on earth, including humans, are part of an interconnected web of life – none can live in isolation from the others. We learn also that while we humans may dominate other life forms, we are no less dependent on them than they are on us. We are all part of the same interconnected whole.

Gardeners also come to realize quickly that while humans may “manage” nature by tipping the ecological balance of nature in our favor, we most certainly do not control nature. There are fundamental laws of nature that underlie all of life, including human life. If we understand and learn to work with those laws, or principles, then nature will respond with a bountiful crop. However, if we violate the laws or principles of nature, our seeds will not germinate, our plants will not grow, the pests will devour our crops, and our efforts to “manage” nature will have been in vain. Gardeners learn quickly that there is a “higher order of things” within which we must carry out our vocation.

A garden can be a spiritual place, where the purpose and meaning of one's life is revealed. As we find our place within nature, we begin to understand our place within the larger order of things as well. We begin to understand that the working of nature is not some biological accident, or some mechanistic process set in motion by some clashing of stars in the distant past. There is an order, a harmony to it all. We see all things are working together according to some fundamental principles that cannot be changed or controlled by humans. There can be no logical reason for such laws of nature if there were no purpose for the processes of nature. There can be no logical reason for principles of human relationships if there were no purpose for human civilization. The only logical and reasonable explanation for the existence of order is to guide us toward some purpose, thus, giving our lives meaning. This order, this purpose and meaning, arises not from the science of rationality and logic, but from something beyond science, something higher – something spiritual. This spirituality is always present in a garden.

The lessons from nature's community within urban gardens complement, and extend, the social communities of people that arise around gardens. Communities built around urban agriculture are more likely to be spiritual communities – not necessarily in a religious sense, but in a sense of sharing a common understanding in the “higher order

of things.” People in garden communities learn to look for fundamental causes of problems rather than simply treat the symptoms. We can see that most social and economic problems arise from our violation of some fundamental law of nature, some spiritual principle, rather than some error in personal or political strategy. Thus, true solutions are far more likely to arise from an understanding of nature, including human nature, and from changes in our ways of thinking, or philosophy, rather than from some change in personal or political strategy. Gardeners understand that lives of peace and happiness, ultimately, must be lives lived in harmony, with each other and with the fundamental principles of life – just as the garden thrives in harmony with nature.

Sustainable Communities through Urban Agriculture

Urban gardeners are far more likely to understand the basic nature and importance of sustainable agriculture than are most people who are not connected with the land. We can understand why agriculture must be about far more than just supplying food that is quick, convenient, and cheap. We can understand why an agriculture that degrades and destroys the productivity of the land is not sustainable. We can understand that an agriculture that degrades families, destroys communities, and disconnects people from the land, is not sustainable. Gardeners can understand that agriculture must be productive and profitable – the economic costs must be covered. But gardeners can understand why agriculture also must be ecologically sound and socially responsible, if it is to be sustainable.

Urban gardeners and local farmers constitute natural “communities of interests.” Together we can form “community food circles” – to pursue a wide range of common interests in recreating a local food system. The goal of community food circles is not necessarily to bypass completely the industrial food system, although that might someday be possible. Instead, the goal is to create a “sustainable” food system, which in most cases will require a far greater reliance on independently owned and operated local sources of food. Sustainability will demand that consumers and farmers share a common commitment to maintaining food systems that are ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. The “free market” will not ensure sustainability. It will require conscious, purposeful decisions by connected, committed people.

Communities of urban gardeners, through connections with local farmers and a commitment to sustainability, can create a metaphor for sustainable urban communities. Sustainable communities, like sustainable agriculture, must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible – regardless of whether they are located in rural or urban areas.

A sustainable urban community must have a safe, healthful, and productive natural environment. The gardens, parks, and open spaces may constitute a small part of an urban environment, but they provide useful models for sustainability. The physical environment in which people live is no less important to their development and success than is quality of soil, water, air, and sunlight to the life and growth of plants. Healthy communities cannot be sustained in an unhealthy natural environment.

A sustainable urban community must be made up of socially responsible people. There must be a sense that the community is something more than a collection of individuals – it is an integrally interconnected whole, like a living organism. If the source of a problem in a community is quickly detected and addressed at its source, a community, like a living organism, can heal itself. However, if a problem in a community is allowed to linger and grow, if treatments never get beyond the symptoms, a community can wither and die, just like a diseased living organism. A socially responsible community is concerned about all of its members, not just the most prominent or influential. A socially responsible community understands that we are all part of the same whole.

Finally, people in sustainable urban communities must have opportunities to be productive and successful economically, just as a sustainable agriculture must be economically viable. This certainly doesn't mean that economic opportunity is the only thing that counts, or is even the most important thing, in sustaining an urban community. But without economic opportunity, people won't be able to take care of the natural environment, or to take care of each other. The key is harmony and balance among the ecological, social, and economic, in sustainable agriculture or in sustainable communities.

Sustainable urban gardening provides us with a metaphor for sustainable urban communities, a sustainable agriculture, and a sustainable society. As we come together around our gardens, we should not see our work as limited to growing food or engaging in a creative hobby. We have opportunities to create communities around our gardens. Our communities of interest can be extended into communities of place. We can link our urban communities with communities of local farmers and with other groups of caring people, who are committed to building a sustainable society. As we come together, as we connect, within sustainable communities, and as our sustainable communities connect with each other, we begin forming the critical connections that are necessary for a sustainable human society.

As we reconnect to each other and with the land, we rediscover true quality of life. Life is not just about us individually; it is also about the interpersonal and spiritual. Relationships and stewardship are not sacrifices, they are privileges – they give purpose and meaning to life. In the garden, we discover the meaning of a life of quality – a life of harmony and balance among the economic, ecological, and social. The garden is a metaphor for life.

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³ For 50 real life examples, see “The New American Farmer – Profiles in Agricultural Innovation,” the SARE Program, USDA, Washington DC. (\$10 US – call: 802-656-0484 or e-mail: sanpubs@uvm.edu , also available free on line at <http://www.sare.org/newfarmer>)