

Healthy Farms Healthy Communities<sup>1</sup>  
Our Link to a Sustainable Future  
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On September 11, 2001, the United States was subjected to a terrorist attack of a magnitude unprecedented in its history. Since then, we have been a nation “at war,” with the terrorists who committed the acts, with terrorists in general, and with the countries of the world that support them. The national debate undoubtedly will continue, as in a democracy it should, concerning the appropriateness of our political and military response to this crisis. However, there can be no doubt that this crisis rekindled an uncommon sense of nationalism, of community and solidarity among Americans.

The outpouring of prayers, expressions of condolence, and financial support for the families of those who suffered directly from the attacks in New York and Washington DC has been phenomenal. While we may question the motives of some in seeking publicity in return for their contributions, millions of others have given anonymously and generously with no concern for recognition or rewards. As a people, we seemed to have been waiting for something that would give us “permission” to be compassionate, to be generous, and to be kind to each other. We seemed to have been waiting for a chance to temper our narrow, individualistic self-interests and to express our more basic nature as caring, sharing people.

This recent expression of national unity and common commitment is noteworthy because it so untypical of U.S. society. The United States has become a nation of disconnected people. We deal with each other only indirectly – through markets, through agents, or through lawyers and courts. Our relationships are defined by transactions, contracts, and laws rather than by common interests, commitment, and trust. We are committed to competition, not cooperation. Our disagreements are addressed by arguing, threatening, and litigating rather than through honest discussion of our differences. We believe truth is revealed through arguing, not reasoning, in the courts. Truly personal relationships, based on believing, trusting, caring, and sharing, are labeled as naïve or idealistic. We seem to be a nation that has lost any sense of personal connectedness.

The U.S. *economy* may be the envy of the rest of the world, but we live in an increasingly dysfunctional *society* – a society that few would choose without the strong economic incentive to do so. The health of any society is reflected in the quality of relationships among its people – within families, communities, and society in general. And as our society has become increasingly disconnected, our relationships have become increasingly unhealthy and dysfunctional – our society has become ill.

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In the book, Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam provides measure after measure indicating the extent to which Americans have become socially disconnected over the past fifty years, most measures of social connectedness dropping by 30-50 percent. He says that we remain interested and critical spectators of the public scene, but we don't play. We remain affiliated with various civic associations, but we don't show up. We vote less often, we attend public meetings less often, and when we do, we are disappointed to find that few of our neighbors have joined us. We are less generous with our time and money, we are less likely to give strangers the benefit of the doubt, and they return the favor. Since 1970, the numbers of lawyers per person in the U.S. has more than doubled. We now spend 40 percent more for police and security guards and 150 percent more for lawyers and judges than would have been expected based on growth in population and the economy since 1970. As Americans have become disconnected, we have become a *sick* society.

*Social illness* is not merely a convenient analogy in this case. Putnam points out that the rate of mental depression among the past two generations in America has increased roughly “tenfold” – these being the generations most socially disconnected. It might be tempting to attribute this rise to a greater willingness to acknowledge depression; however, between 1950 and 1995, the rate of suicide among American adolescents more than “quadrupled” and among young adults nearly “tripled.” Suicide and clinical depression, fortunately, are not all that common among the general population. However, incidents of “malaise” – headaches, indigestion, and sleeplessness – are far more common, and show patterns similar to the more serious mental illnesses. Between the late 1970s and late 1990s, surveys have shown that each new generation has reported higher levels of “malaise” than the previous generation and each new generation has indicated that, on average, they are “unhappier” than the previous generation. As each generation has become increasingly disconnected, the nation as a whole has become increasingly mentally ill and physically miserable.

Nowhere in America is our economic and social disconnectedness more evident than in our systems of food and farming. Most consumers, particularly younger consumers, have no sense of where their food actually comes from or who produces it. Even those who know that farmers grow crops and livestock, and that others process and package these crops and deliver food to grocery stores and restaurants, still have little sense of what's actually involved in this process.

Few people even stop to consider that soil is essential to all of life, including human life – as essential as air, water, or sunlight. Pure air and water alone cannot support life. All of life is rooted in the earth. Farming is the means by which we bring life from the soil. Farming, in the minds of many, conjures up some image from the past of a decent, hard working family living in rural isolation and trying to coax a living from the land. To others, farming is just another manufacturing process that turns raw materials into finished products. But, there is no sense of connectedness between the people who eat and farmers who tend the soil to bring forth their food.

What does it matter if people don't understand where their food comes from? People don't understand where their automobiles come from, or their clothes, their houses, their movies, or much of anything else comes from, and no one seems to be complaining about their lack of knowledge of such things. However, all disconnections among people matter, even if no one complains. The seeds of dissent are sown in the gaps of understanding and appreciation that exist among people. Conflict, frustration, anger, depression, and many 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. And, it matters even more that we consumers understand our connections with farmers.

Many farmers feel a great sense of frustration that people don't understand how life in general is connected to life in the soil and the life of people who till the soil. They feel that they are virtually forced to destroy the natural productivity of the soil, to degrade the natural environment, and to destroy the social fabric of their communities, because the only thing consumers are concerned about is the price of food in the grocery store. Many 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, because the only thing consumers care about is "cheap food." 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. Instead, they are slowly destroying the land, destroying the quality of rural life, and ultimately will destroy the ability of the earth to support human life, all because consumers don't understand their connectedness with the land and with the people who farm it.

The health of a farm, like the health of a community or society, depends on healthy relationships. The productivity of a farm depends on the quality of *physical* relationships – among the various elements of the agroecosystem, including the farmer. The foundation for a productive farm is a healthy, naturally fertile 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 depends 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 quality of *social* relationships – 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 relationships between farmers and their suppliers and their customers. As these relationships have become more indirect and impersonal, farming has become less economically viable.

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 quality of rural life clearly depends of the quality of personal relationships.

The same types of personal interdependence exist throughout society, but in farming, they are easier to see and to understand. Healthy farms, healthy communities, and healthy societies are all dependent on the same things – healthy relationships among people and between people and the earth. The sickness of American agriculture, American communities, and American society are symptoms of the same root cause – social disconnectedness and dysfunctional relationships. Consequently, the remedies for an unhealthy community, society, or farm are essentially the same.

However, the nature of the problems and solutions are more easily seen and understood in farming than in communities or society in general. Thus, farming provides a useful metaphor for living. And more important, farming that reconnects people in healthy relationships with the earth and with each other – that is, sustainable farming – provides a useful metaphor for healthy, connected sustainable communities necessary for a sustainable society.

The dysfunctional relationships within American agriculture today are symptoms of agricultural industrialization – specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. Commercial fertilizers and pesticides allowed farmers to become more productive by specializing and moving away from diversified interconnected farming systems. But, unwise use of commercial fertilizers and pesticides has degraded the health and natural productivity of the soil, increasing costs and threatening future productivity. Specialization also weakened personal relationships, both among farmers and between farmers and other in their communities. Farmers who had shared work, and who had bought and sold locally, became increasingly “independent” of each other and of their neighbors.

Standardization and mechanization of farming practices made farming more manageable and controllable – making it both possible and necessary for each farmer to farm more land and to invest more capital in farming. In order to achieve economies of scale, to be competitive, farms had to be larger – meaning that some farms had to fail so that others could gain control of their land. And, as farms grew larger and farm families fewer, 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 industrialization of agriculture, which first led to fewer and larger farms, is allowing a handful of multinational corporations to consolidate control of American agriculture. These corporations are disconnected, and increasingly dysfunctional, economic enterprises. Ownership is separated from management, and to a great extent, is separated from responsibility for management decisions, once a corporation “goes public” – i.e. offers its stock to the highest bidder. Once ownership, management, and responsibility become disconnected, the corporation becomes incapable of responding to any motive other than profit and growth. Such corporations are not people, and thus, have no sense of connectedness to family, community, or nation. And under multinational corporate control, American agriculture might well be moved to other countries that have lower land and labor costs and fewer environmental regulations, and thus, greater promise of immediate profits. The sustainability of agriculture in America is very much in doubt – ecologically, socially, and economically.

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 quite 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 agriculture and its threats to ecological, social, and economic sustainability are both clear and compelling.

Those same relationships exist between industrialization and the health of communities and society in general. Industrialization has degraded the health of the natural environment – not just in rural areas, but also throughout global ecosystem. Industrialization has degraded the health of human relationships – not just in rural communities, but also in communities throughout human society. Industrialization has

separated people from the earth and from each other. Industrialization has separated ownership, management, and responsibility, and has transformed democratic capitalism into “corporatism.” As we have become increasingly disconnected, our relationships have become dysfunctional, and as a human society, we have grown increasingly ill.

Alex De Tocqueville, in his historic book, Democracy in America, stated that widespread participation of people, as individuals, in political affairs at local, state, and federal levels was a major strength of the American democracy. Tocqueville warned, however, of the tendency toward excessive wealth and power in the “manufacturing” sector – today’s “corporate” sector. He thought the American society ultimately might well evolve toward a “manufacturing” aristocracy.

Adam Smith, in his historic book, Wealth of Nations, suggests that individuals must make their own decisions and accept personal responsibility if capitalism is to work effectively. Smith wrote, “the pretense that corporations are necessary for the better governing of a trade, is without any foundation.” He also saw little legitimate use for “joint stock companies,” and saw potential mischief in anything that allowed individuals to act collectively in the marketplace.

The fears of both Tocqueville and Smith were well founded. As industrialization has effectively dissuaded people from personal participation in economics and politics, it has allowed both economic and political power to be consolidated in the hands of a new “upper class” of *corporate aristocrats*. Industrialization has fundamentally transformed both the American economy and the American democracy.

However, there is still time to restore both our democracy and our economy. The keys to building a healthier, sustainable society are no different in nature from the keys to building healthier farms. And thankfully, farmers all across America and around the world are already finding ways to restore the health to farming. They may call themselves organic, biodynamic, alternative, holistic, natural, ecological, practical, or just plain farmers. However, these new ways of farming all fit under the “conceptual umbrella” of sustainable agriculture. A recent publication of the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program highlights fifty such farmers from across the United States.<sup>3</sup> There are thousands more, each with a unique and different story, but each sharing a common vision for a brighter future for agriculture. These farmers are creating a new more healthy and sustainable agriculture, and in so doing, are creating a new metaphor for new healthy, sustainable human communities.

These new farmers face many frustrations and hardships along with the joys of success. They are trying to learn how to do what no one yet knows how to do, and they are doing it with little help from anyone other than each other. These farmers are on a new frontier, and life on any new frontier quite typically is difficult. But more and more of these new farmers are finding ways to succeed.

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<sup>3</sup> “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](mailto:sanpubs@uvm.edu) , also available free on line at <http://www.sare.org/newfarmer> )

The numbers of farmers at conferences like this one are growing every year. At least three regional “sustainable agriculture” conferences draw from 1200 to 1500 people each year, those drawing 400-500 people are not rare, and the number drawing 100-300 people have become quite common. But perhaps more important, the groups seem to be growing in energy, enthusiasm, and optimism each year. They are very diverse groups, with respect to age, gender, education, income, and ethnicity. But, they are pursuing a more desirable quality of life, by building farms that are more ecologically sound and socially responsible, and economically viable.

They are rediscovering the fundamental 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, fewer farm families, and fewer farm communities. They are finding ways to make a better living on smaller farms, making room for more, rather than fewer, farms and farmers. They are 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. As they reconnect with the land and with each other, they are creating a new kind of farming for a more sustainable future.

While there are no “blueprints” for the *New American Farm*, some basic characteristics are emerging. First, these farmers see themselves as stewards of the earth. They are committed to caring for the land and protecting the natural environment. They work with nature rather than try to control or conquer nature. They fit the farm to their land and climate rather than try to bend nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm. Their farming operations tend to be more diversified than are conventional farms – because nature is diverse. Diversity may mean a variety of crop and animal enterprises, crop rotations and cover crops, or managed livestock grazing systems, depending on the type of farm. By managing diversity, these new farmers are able to reduce their dependence on pesticides, fertilizers, and other commercial inputs that squeeze farm profits and threaten the environment. Their farms are more economically viable, as well as more ecologically sound, because they farm in harmony with nature.

Second, these new farmers build relationships. They 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 as consumers each of us value things differently 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 are not trying to take advantage of their customers to make quick profits; they are trying to create long-term relationships. They market to people who care where their food comes from and how it is produced – locally grown, organic, natural, humanely raised, hormone and antibiotic free, etc. – and, they receive premium prices

by producing what their customers value most. Their farms are more profitable as well as more ecologically sound and socially responsible.

These new farmers challenge the stereotype of the farmer as a fiercely independent competitor. They freely share information and encouragement. They form partnerships and cooperatives to buy equipment, to process and market their products, to do together those 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 refuse to exploit each other for short run gain; they are trying to build long-term relationships. They buy locally and market locally. They bring people together in positive, productive relationships that contribute to their economic, ecological, and social well being.

Finally, 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 healthy environment, a good place to raise a family, and a good way to be a part of a caring community. Many of these farms create economic benefits worth tens of thousands of dollars, in addition to any reported net farm income. 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 yield profits. 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 of these 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.

These new farmers are creating a more sustainable American agriculture. A sustainable agriculture must be capable of meeting the needs of the present, while leaving equal or better opportunities for people of the future. And to be sustainable, agriculture must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible – it must maintain healthy relationships among people and between people and the earth, across generations. The new American farm is based on healthy relationships.

The three dimensions of sustainability are not a matter of formal definition or legal precedent, but are a matter of common sense. If the land loses its ability to produce, the farm is not sustainable. If the farmer goes broke, the farm is not sustainable. And if a system of farming fails to support society, it will not be supported by society, and thus, is not sustainable. All are necessary but none is sufficient. A farming system that is lacking in ecological integrity, economic viability, or social responsibility, quite simply is not sustainable.

Some farmers mistakenly feel that farming sustainably must be a sacrifice – since sustainable farmers must be concerned about the land and about other people, as well as themselves. However, sustainable farmers pursue their self-interests, as is in the nature of humans. But, they pursue a broader, a higher, and a *more enlightened* concept of self-interest. This *more enlightened* self-interest recognizes that we have *broader* self-interests that are shared with others, and we have *higher* self-interests that



give purpose and meaning to life, in addition to our narrow, individual self-interests. These personal, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions of our lives are but different layers of our “self.” Thus, our economic self is inseparable from our social and moral selves. We must pursue our self-interest through harmony and balance among the three layers of self.

When enlightened, we explicitly recognize the value of our relationships with other people. We realize that the quality of our life is better when we not only care for ourselves, but also care for the well being of others – regardless of whether we may get anything in return. Relationships help give our lives context. When enlightened, we explicitly recognize the value of our relationships with the earth. We recognize explicitly that the quality of our life is better when we conserve and protect the natural ecosystem for the benefit of future generations – regardless of whether we may get anything in return. Stewardship helps give purpose and meaning to our lives.

Economic viability is about meeting the needs of our tangible self, social responsibility is about meeting the needs of our emotional self, and ecological integrity is about meeting the needs of our spiritual self. Quality of life arises from harmony and balance among all economic, social, and ecological dimensions of self.

*Enlightened self-interest* is not some “new age,” radical concept. De Tocqueville wrote that early Americans believed strongly “that men ought to sacrifice themselves for their fellow-creatures... that such sacrifices are as necessary to him who imposes them upon himself as to him for whose sake they are made.” Tocqueville believed that “self-interests rightly understood,” i.e. enlightened self-interest, reflected the fact that people benefit from fulfilling their proper role in the larger society in ways that could never be linked directly to one's narrowly-defined, individual self-interest. He believed that a culture of “enlightened self-interest” was necessary to constrain our greed, and to sustain the American democracy. Sustainable living is not a sacrifice; it is a uniquely human privilege.

The new American farm is metaphor for a new American society. And, sustainable farming is a metaphor for sustainable living. To create healthy sustainable communities, we must reconnect with each other and reconnect with the earth.

First, people must be made aware of the fact that many of the maladies of today's society are direct consequences of our social disconnectedness. We must come to recognize that we are not simply a collection of *independent* individuals that happen to share the same geographic space. Instead, we are *interdependent* individuals, who perhaps can survive for a while on our own, but whose quality of life is inseparable from the quality of life of others. We are all interconnected parts of the same whole – whether we recognize it or not. Our own individual health and well-being is interdependent with the health of the various “communities” of people of which we are members. Just as sustainable farmers have learned that they have to reconnect with their customers, with each other, and with their neighbors to succeed, we must

understand that our success ultimately depends upon our reconnecting with other people.

Second, we must recognize that restoring “communities of interest” will not be sufficient; we must also restore communities of interest that also are “communities of place.” We must reconnect with each other around a renewed interest in the earth. We cannot rely on government, special interest groups, or corporations to protect and restore the health of the natural environment. These are all “corporate” organizations, in the sense that those who are making the decisions are no longer “connected” with those they claim to represent. We must reconnect with each other personally, around issues of place.

We must take a personal interest in protecting the watersheds in which we live, and connect with others who share that interest. We must take a personal interest in protecting the quality of air and water in the communities, towns, or cities where we live, and connect with others who shared those interests. We must take a personal interest in maintaining wild and open spaces, diversity of living species, and the overall integrity of nature ecosystems, as members of the community of people who live on the earth. As we reconnect with each other, locally and personally, we will regain control of our government, our organizations, and of our economic enterprises. We can restore health to our economy and our democracy, but we have to become personally reconnected.

We can begin taking some very practical steps toward restoring communities of place by reconnecting with others who are committed to building more sustainable, local food systems. We can reconnect with others at farmers markets, through community supported agriculture organizations, or by other means of buying or selling foods locally at every opportunity. As eaters, we can get to know our farmers personally, and as farmers, we can get to know our customers personally. Together, we can inform others of the ecological and social consequences of the industrialization and corporatization of American agriculture, and can seize every opportunity to encourage the development of a more community-oriented, sustainable food system. The metaphor and reality of sustainability can be brought together in communities of interest, built around issues of sustainable local food systems.

Finally, in very simple and practical terms, the link between healthy farms, healthy communities, and our sustainable future is *love*. Healthy farms, healthy communities, and healthy people ultimately depend on the same things: faith, hope, and love. And, the greatest of these is love.

We must live with faith. Our faith in other people gives the incentive to connect with other people and to help build healthy communities. Our faith in the ultimate bounty of nature gives us the confidence to rely on working in harmony with nature as a means of sustaining humanity. And, our faith in a “higher order,” in God, gives purpose and meaning to our concerns for each other and to our stewardship of the earth. Healthy people are people of faith.

We also must be people of hope. Hope is not the expectation that something good is destined to happen, or even that the odds favor something good, but rather, that something good is possible. It is this “possibility” of something good that gives us the courage to challenge the status quo, to try new things, and to change – in hopes of achieving something better. The value of hope is not necessarily in getting the thing hoped for, but instead, is in having hope. Healthy people are hopeful people and hopefully people form healthy communities.

But, the most important link between health and sustainability is love. No one expresses the very practical connection better than does Wendell Berry – although, he doesn't specifically use the word love. In his book of essays, What Are People For? he writes, "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." If human life on earth is to be sustainable, we must have people taking care of the land who love the land.

Applying that same sense of love to communities, “if our communities are to remain viable, they must preserve the health and productivity of people, their physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being; people, that is, must be treated well. A further requirement is that if people are to treat each other well, they must know each other well, must be motivated to treat each other well, must have time to treat each other well, and must be able to afford to treat each other well. If human society is to be sustainable, we must have communities of people who love each other.

Healthy farms, healthy communities, a healthy society, and our sustainable future, ultimately, they all depend on the same things: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love – love of the earth, love of each other, and love of God. Our link to a sustainable future, to the earth, to each other, and to God, is love.

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