

Why be a Farmer?¹

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When I started high school in the fall of 1953, I joined the Future Farmers of America -now called simply the FFA. During the opening ceremony of each FFA meeting, the President would ask the members: “Future farmers why are we here?” The members would recite in unison: “To practice brotherhood, honor agricultural opportunities and responsibilities, and develop those qualities of leadership which future farmers should possess.”¹ In today's FFA, the words “future farmers” have been replaced with “FFA members.” The FFA creed once began with the words: “I believe in the future of farming...” It now begins: “I believe in the future of “agriculture...” Perhaps the modern FFA no longer believes there is a future for *farmers*.

The modern FFA emphasizes agribusiness rather than farming. However, learning how to make money is not among the reasons FFA members say “they are here.” Certainly, making a living is an essential aspect of farming, but farming has always been as much a way of life as a way to make a living. Farming traditionally has included honoring responsibilities of membership in rural communities and stewardship of the land -not just making money. In fact, making money is not a logical *purpose* for farming or doing anything else. Money is simply a *means* to some greater end or purpose. Money is not a purpose but simply a means of pursuing a purpose. Farming as a *purposeful* way of life apparently has become an inconvenience for the modern FFA organization.

In their defense, the FFA is simply reflecting the changes that have occurred in American agriculture since the 1950s. In fact, my education as an agricultural economist, including a Ph.D. degree and much of my 30-years academic career, focused on changing farming from a purposeful way of life to a bottom-line, profit-driven agribusiness. We told farmers to either “get big or get out” of farming, because only large farms could achieve the economies of scale needed to compete economically. However, during the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I was forced to confront the reality that there was no future in this kind of farming. I eventually understood that in order for some farmers to “get big,” others inevitably had to “get out” -even if they had to be “forced out.” I could see that if this process continued, eventually there would be no farmers left -just a handful of large corporate agricultural operations. There would be no future in farming.

Fortunately, the sustainable agriculture movement emerged in the 1980s -in response not only to the demise of family farms but also a variety of growing environmental and societal concerns. Sustainable agriculture is about meeting the basic food needs of all in the present while leaving equal or better opportunities for both farmers and consumers in the future. Sustainable agriculture reflects an understanding that all economic value ultimately must come from the earth, and beyond self-sufficiency, must come by way of society. Sustainable farmers

¹ Prepared for presentation at the Tennessee Local Food Summit, sponsored by The Barefoot Farmer, and Tennessee State University, Nashville, TN, December 4-6, 2015.

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know they must meet the basic food needs of society today, while leaving their land and their communities as healthy and productive as when they found them. Future generations of farmers must to be able to meet the future food needs of humanity. Sustainable agriculture reflects a belief in but also a commitment to the future of farming -a commitment firmly rooted in sense of *purpose -not profits*. In sustainable farming, enough profit to support a desirable quality of life is essential, but profit is only as a means of pursuing a *purposeful* way of life.

The sustainable agriculture movement gave new direction and a new sense of purpose to my professional and personal life, as it did for many farmers. The movement has not changed the world, at least not yet, but it has come a long way since the early days of ridicule and marginalization by defenders of the economic status quo. Virtually every agricultural organization, including the FFA, now has a sustainable agriculture initiative. Even large agribusiness organizations, such as Monsanto, DuPont, and Con-Agra claim to be committed to sustainability. However, such commitment seems very shallow: nowhere do they address the *purpose* of sustainability. In the absence of a greater purpose, there is nothing to guide decision makers, other than the pursuit of individual self-interests -typically economic self-interests.

Sustainability is commonly defined in terms of ecological integrity, social responsibility, and economic viability. In many cases, reduce, reuse, and recycle are accepted as proxies for ecological, social, and economic integrity. Such practices typically are deemed acceptable only if they are more profitable as well as more sustainable. “Green technologies” are hyped as means of protecting the planet, while creating jobs and sustaining economic growth -of continuing “business as usual.” Most people seem to believe if we simply use energy and other non-renewable resources more efficiently and substitute renewable energy for fossil energy, we can continue to live pretty much as we live today.

Sustainable farming likewise is often defined in terms of “best management practices.” Farmers who reduce tillage to limit soil erosion, use cover crops to reduce pollution, use crop rotations and organic fertilizers to replace synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, or put solar panels on their barns are called sustainable farmers. “Best management practices” can be profitable - particularly with the aid of government subsidies. Ecological and social integrity are treated as academic abstractions that threaten unnecessary intrusions into the “business of farming.” However, practices are not purposes, regardless of how good they may be. While practices can represent steps in the right general direction, sustainability is ultimately about purpose.

The purpose of sustainable farming, other forms of sustainable development, and sustainable living in general is to sustain a desirable quality of human life on earth -indefinitely into the future. Sustainability is human-centered in that it is concerned specifically with meeting “human needs.” Thus, sustainability *makes sense* only if there is some *positive purpose* for humanity. If humanity has no purpose, the rest of the earth probably would be better off without humans. So, sustainability accepts as its fundamental premise that our lives individually and collectively have *purpose*. Furthermore, sustainability accepts that the purposes of our lives, individually and as members of humanity, are intrinsically *good*, rather than bad. Otherwise, the sooner we rid the earth of humans, the better.

Current concerns about sustainability also reflect an understanding that the well-being of humans is integrally interrelated with all of the other living and non-living things of the earth. We depend on them for our well-being and they depend on us. Thus, sustainability is human-centered but also is earth or eco-centered: it is co-centric. We and all of the other things on the earth have a common purpose and to fulfill that purpose we must care for each other. We have not been fulfilling our responsibility to care for the other things of the earth, and as a result, it is questionable how long the earth can continue to care for us.

So what does this have to do with being or not being a farmer? It suggests that sustainable farming is a purposeful endeavor. It suggests those who choose to farm should have sense that farming is a means of fulfilling their purpose in life. Sustainable farming is a “calling,” not a job or occupation. Making money is an essential means of sustaining a farming operation but certainly not a legitimate purpose for farming. First, there are many easier ways to make money than farming. More important, we now know that using farming as a means of making money is not sustainable. Farming for the economic bottom line hasn’t met even the basic food needs of many, if not most, people of current generations and it most certainly is not leaving equal or better opportunities for those of future generations. It is not ecologically sound, socially responsible, or economically viable. If we humans have a worthwhile purpose here on earth, then farming for the economic bottom-line is certainly not a logical means of pursuing it.

I have proposed an Ethic of Sustainability as a guide to a purpose-driven approach to farming or any other aspect of life: *A thing is right when it tends to enhance the quality and integrity of life on earth by honoring the unique responsibilities and rewards of humans as members and caretakers of the earth's integral community. A thing is wrong when it tends otherwise.*

First, this ethic of sustainability goes beyond the current shallow approaches to sustainable principles and practices. With respect to farming, the ethic states that some things farmers might do are “right” and others are “wrong”. Questions of right and wrong are clearly ethical and moral in nature. Such questions cannot be answered using currently accepted scientific methods. They are accepted or rejected as matters of belief or faith. For this reason, scientists tend to avoid them, and as a result, most sustainability advocates do so as well. Yet, I believe questions of right and wrong must be addressed if we are serious about sustainable agriculture or sustainability in general. Failing to do so has allowed questions of sustainability to be ignored by scientists, trivialized and coopted by corporations, and marginalized by government agencies.

As Pope Francis observes in his Encyclical *Laudato Si, for Care of our Common Home*, “we can note the rise of a false or superficial ecology which bolsters complacency and a cheerful recklessness. Such evasiveness serves as a license to carrying on with our present lifestyles and models of production and consumption.”ⁱⁱ I would add, superficial sustainability today is “bolstering complacency and cheerful recklessness” in American agriculture and is being used as a “license” for blatantly unsustainable farming.

Second, the ethic of sustainability reflects an “integral worldview.” All life on earth, including human life, is viewed as integrally interconnected and interdependent, and all living things are integrally connected with all non-living things on earth.ⁱⁱⁱ Ultimately, sustainability is

about sustaining the ability of the earth to sustain itself as a *living* planet. A person's worldview depends on his or her individual perception of “how the world works” and the role of humans within it, individually and collectively. Since our worldviews determine what we accept or reject as fact or truth, worldviews are inherently based on beliefs, not facts or truth. Thus, acceptance or rejection of the “integral worldview” of sustainability is inherently a spiritual, metaphysical, or philosophical decision.

The ethic of sustainability is “integral-ecological” in that it accepts the proposition that human well-being is critically interdependent with the well-being of all other living and non-living elements of reality. It is also “integral-sociological” in that it gives specific attention and consideration to critical interdependencies among the ecological, social, and economic dimension of human well-being. This integral view of the world is completely consistent with the worldview of the early advocates of approaches to farming that fit under the conceptual umbrella of sustainable agriculture.

For example, Rudolph Steiner, the father of biodynamic farming, wrote: “Central to biodynamics is the concept that a farm is healthy only as much as it becomes an organism in itself - an individualized, diverse ecosystem guided by the farmer, standing in living interaction with the larger ecological, social, economic, and spiritual realities of which it is part.”^{iv} He used the term *organic* to mean the organization of the farm as a living *organism*. In addition, biodynamic farming is clearly spiritual as well as biological. Steiner was concerned that food grown on increasingly impoverished soil could neither support physical health nor provide the inner sustenance needed for spiritual health.

Third, the ethic of sustainability focuses on the quality and integrity of “life,” meaning the whole of life on earth. The other living things are our only means we humans have of acquiring the energy necessary to sustaining human life on earth. Our food, our clothes, our houses, and our cars all require energy to make and energy to use. Even our imagination, creativity, and thinking require energy, as about one-fifth of the energy used by the human body is used by our brain. It also takes physical and mental energy to reproduce, nurture, socialize, and educate each new generation of humans. Everything of any use to us, including everything of economic value, ultimately comes from the physical elements of the earth -air, water, soil, minerals -but it is the earth's energy that makes the other elements of nature useful to humans. Sustainability ultimately depends sustaining the *usefulness of energy*.

The first law of thermodynamics states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed, so sustainability might seem easy. However, the second law of thermodynamics states that each time energy is used, or reused, to do anything useful, some of its usefulness is lost. Energy isn't destroyed by use, but it always changes from more useful to less useful forms of energy. Thus, the universe as a whole is slowly trending toward a state of *uselessness*, which physicists call *entropy*. However, the “living earth” as a whole has the ability to move away from entropy. This “counter-entropic” tendency is possible only because of the daily inflow in new energy from the sun -meaning solar energy.

Only living things, primarily plants on land and plankton in oceans, are capable of capturing, organizing, concentrating, and storing this inflow of solar energy in forms that

are useful to humans, as well as the other species with which we are integrally related. We humans can capture and store useful energy, using windmills, falling water, and photovoltaic cells. However, we are biological beings and thus are inherently reliant on the other biological solar energy collectors for our life's energy. We can't eat the electricity generated by windmills or photovoltaic cells. So, the sustainability of human life on earth is inherently dependent of enhancing the quality, integrity, and thus "usefulness" of other life on earth to offset the inevitable tendency of the non-living world toward entropy.

The emphasis on life is important because we can't see the loss of usefulness of energy due to entropy, but we can see loss of life. Farmers can't see the loss of useful energy on their farms, but they can see the diminished quality of biological life in their soils, in their crops and livestock, and in the lives of the people who farm and live in rural communities. Any approach to farming that fails to enhance the quality and integrity not only of human life but of all life on earth is not only unsustainable, it morally and ethically "wrong." Farmers can *see* the tangible results of their commitment to sustainability in the enhanced quality and integrity of life on their farms and communities.

Finally, the ethic of sustainability reflects the *purpose* of human life on earth. It states that we are to honor our uniquely human responsibilities as both members and caretakers of the earth's communities. Without purpose, there can be no responsibility. Nowhere is this human responsibility clearer than in farming. As Pope Francis states it: "The biblical texts are to be read in their context, recognizing that they tell us to 'till and keep' the garden of the world (Gen 2:15). 'Tilling' refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while 'keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. This implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature. Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations."^v

Farmers' responsibility as caretakers was clearly understood by the pioneers of sustainable agriculture. J. I. Rodale, wrote, "The *organic* farmer must realize that in him is placed a sacred trust, the task of producing food that will impart health to the people who consume it. As a patriotic duty, he assumes an obligation to preserve the fertility of the soil, a precious heritage that he must pass on, undefiled and even enriched, to subsequent generations."^{vi} Sir Albert Howard began his classic book, *An Agricultural Testament*, with the assertion, "The maintenance of the fertility of the soil is the first condition of any permanent system of agriculture,"^{vii} as a means of providing a foundation for a permanent society.

So why be a farmer? First, only those who feel that farming is their calling or purpose in life should become farmers. That certainly does not include all of us, but it most certainly includes some of us. Those who are truly "called to farm," must trust that they *will* be able to find the economic means to sustain a desirable quality of life by farming. It wouldn't make sense to create a world in which people were unable to fulfill their purposes or would be miserable in doing so. It makes no sense to continue doing anything unless life somehow was meant to be "good."

Second the pursuit of purpose has rewards as well as responsibilities. As Pope Francis puts it: “We are led inexorably to ask other pointed questions: What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us? It is no longer enough, then, simply to state that we should be concerned for future generations. We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity.”^{viii} The reward of a life of purpose is human dignity, self-respect, and self-worth. In fact, a life of purpose is essential for human well-being or happiness.

In closing, the FFA Creed still provides words of wisdom for those who see profits as not an end in itself but a means of pursuing a life of purpose. It states: “I believe in less dependence on begging and more power in bargaining; in the life abundant and enough honest wealth to help make it so -for others as well as myself; in less need for charity and more of it when needed; in being happy myself and playing square with those whose happiness depends upon me.”^{ix} Why farm? Because farming can still be a way of life that has dignity and purpose rather than an enterprise of self-interest and profits. Why be a farmer? Because for those who are called, farming can be a quality way of life, a life of purpose, well-being, and happiness.

We all have responsibilities as members and caretakers of the “earth's integral community.” Farmers are just more directly and critically interconnected with the earth and other beings that live within and upon the earth than are most of us. As for the rest of us, we need to support those farmers who are faithful stewards of life with our food purchases and our public policy choices. We also need to find and pursue our unique purpose in life and be thankful that some people among us are “called to be farmers.”

End Notes

ⁱ Fillmore Central FFA, <http://www.fillmorecentralffa.org/FFA/FFAHandbook.aspx>

ⁱⁱ Francis “Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* Of The Holy Father Francis On Care For Our Common Home”. . (2015, May 24). Retrieved from http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html , para. 59.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a deeper discussion of worldview and sustainability, see John Ikerd, Lonnie Gamble, and Travis Cox, “Deep Sustainability; The Essentials,” 2015 <https://sites.google.com/site/sustainabilitydeep/>.

^{iv} Bio Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association, USA (2004) *Biennial Report*. Junction City, OR, USA. <http://www.biodynamics.com/index.html> .

^v Francis, *Laudato Si*, para. 67.

^{vi} J. I. Rodale, *The Organic Cultivator's Creed*, Chapter 8. *The organic front*. Rodale press: Emmaus, PA, USA, 1948. <http://www.soilandhealth.org/copyform.asp?bookcode=010133> .

^{vii} Sir Albert Howard, *An agricultural testament*. Oxford University Press: Oxford, England, 1940. also in *Small Farms Library* http://journeytoforever.org/farm_library.html#howard

^{viii} Francis, *Laudato Si*, para. 160.

^{ix} Fillmore Central FFA, <http://www.fillmorecentralffa.org/FFA/FFAHandbook.aspx> .