

So You Want to be a Farmer?¹

John Ikerd²

When I was growing up, I wanted to be a farmer. I grew up on a small dairy farm in south Missouri before the rural electrification reached that part of the country. We milked cows by hand, twice a day, every day in my early years. So, I knew that farming wasn't an easy way life. But I still wanted to be a farmer. I didn't leave the farm because of the hard work or lack of economic rewards but because there were five kids in my family and only one farm. I had other ideas of things I might also like to do. My younger brother has never wanted to do anything other than be a farmer. In spite of the odds against small farmers at the time, he has been able to make a good living on the "home farm" – and it is still small.

When I graduated from high school in 1957, poor kids of modest intelligence could still attend their state universities. I left for college with something like \$300 in my pocket and was able to pay my way through college working in university cafeterias. After a three-year stint working with a large meatpacking company, I returned to graduate school and eventually earned my Ph.D. degree in agricultural economics. I ultimately concluded that I really wasn't *meant* to be a farmer. I was meant do what I have been doing for the past 40 to 50 years: trying to understand how the world works and where we humans fit within it, so we can decide how best to live our lives. It took me quite a while, but I finally found my *purpose*.

Ironically, much of my 30-year academic career was 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," because only large farms could achieve the economies of scale needed to be competitive. 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. If this process continued, I could see that eventually there would be no farmers left – just a handful of large corporate agribusinesses. Then, no one would have the choice of being a farmer.

Fortunately, the sustainable agriculture movement emerged in the 1980s. It was a 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 know they must be productive to meet the food needs of today but also must leave their land and their communities as healthy and productive as when it was passed down to them.

¹ Prepared for presentation at the John Kinsman Award Luncheon, hosted by the Family Farm Defenders, Madison, WI, March 12, 2016.

² John Ikerd is Professor Emeritus, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO – USA; Author of, *Sustainable Capitalism-a Matter of Common Sense*, *Essentials of Economic Sustainability*, *A Return to Common Sense*, *Small Farms are Real Farms*, *Crisis and Opportunity-Sustainability in American Agriculture*, and *A Revolution of the Middle-the Pursuit of Happiness*, all books available on [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com): [Books](#) and [Kindle E-books](#). Email: JEIkerd@gmail.com; Website <http://faculty.missouri.edu/ikerdj/> or <http://www.johnikerd.com> .

The sustainable agriculture movement reflects a commitment to continuing opportunities for new generations of farmers as well as new generations of consumers. It is a commitment firmly rooted in sense of *purpose – not profits*. Profits are necessary to support a desirable quality of farm life. But, profits are only a means of pursuing a *purposeful* way of life. The sustainable agriculture movement gave a new sense of purpose and direction to my professional and personal life, as it has for many farmers.

The sustainability 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 now has a sustainable agriculture initiative. Even large agribusiness organizations, such as Monsanto, DuPont, and Con-Agra proclaim their commitment to sustainability. However, such commitments are shallow: nowhere do they address sustainability as a purpose rather than a management strategy. In the absence of an organizational 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 its requisites: ecological integrity, social responsibility, and economic viability. In many cases, reduce, reuse, and recycle are accepted as proxies for ecological, social, and economic integrity. Substitution renewable energy for fossil energy is also a popular sustainable strategy. Incidentally, such practices typically are deemed acceptable only if they also are more profitable. Similarly, sustainable farming is often defined in terms of “best management practices” or BMPs. Farmers are called sustainable if they 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 perhaps put solar panels on their barns. Sustainable BMPs can be profitable – particularly with the aid of government subsidies.

However, *practices* are not *purposes*, regardless of how innovative, well-meaning, or good they may seem. While business strategies and farming practices can represent steps in the right general direction, sustainability is ultimately about purpose. The ultimate purpose of any sustainable organization, including a sustainable farm, must be to sustain a desirable quality of human life on earth – indefinitely into the future. Sustainability *makes sense* only if there is some *positive purpose* for sustaining humanity. If we humans have no purpose, the rest of the earth probably would be far better off without us. 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 the earth rids itself 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 co-centric, meaning it is both human-centered and earth- or eco-centered. We and the other things of the earth have a common purpose to fulfill. To fulfill that purpose, we must care for each other and care for the earth. If we humans persist in failing to care for the earth, is questionable how long the earth can continue to care for us. People can choose whether or not to believe that life has purpose and whether the purpose of humanity is integral to achieving some greater common good. But without some worthy purpose for being, sustaining humanity makes no sense.

So what does this have to do with being or not being a farmer? It suggests that sustainable farming must be a purposeful endeavor. It suggests those who choose to farm should have a sense that farming is their means of fulfilling their purpose in life. Farming is a “calling,” not just a job or occupation. Making money is a means of sustaining a farming operation but is certainly not a legitimate purpose for farming. First, there are many easier ways to make money than farming. More important, we now know that farming as a means of making money, or farming for the economic bottom-line, is not sustainable. This kind of farming 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. Simply changing farming practices, while necessary, will not be sufficient to achieve sustainability. Sustainability is a purpose.

I recently came across a blog piece on the National Young Farmers Coalition website. It began: “You want to be a farmer?”¹ That’s great news because we need a lot more farmers! But there are some things you should know before diving in.” The author is a young farmer who has been farming with her partner in the Pacific Northwest for more than 10 years. She went on to name five things that anyone who wants to be a farmer should understand: 1. Farming is really, really hard. (Let me stress that one more time....) 2. Farmers are not just farmers (They have to do a lot of other things.) 3. Farming can be dangerous. (You can get hurt farming.) 4. It takes money to make money (particularly to get into farming).

She finished with 5. “It’s the best work you’ll ever do.” She went on to explain: “Do you want to feel completely satisfied and fulfilled by your work? Lay your head down at night knowing you are doing something that helps the planet and your fellow humans? There is nothing more satisfying than providing a basic need: food. I love what I do, and wouldn’t trade it for anything—sore muscles, financial risks, and all.”

I hear similar comments from young farmers who attend sustainable agriculture conferences all across the county. These farmers know they have to find some way to make a living economically, but that’s not why they want to be farmers. They feel they were meant to be farmers – that farming gives purpose and meaning to their lives. To help these young farmers, and anyone else who wants to help create a sustainable future for humanity, I have proposed an Ethic of Sustainability: *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 practices and management strategies. The ethic suggests that some things farmers do are “right” and others are “wrong”. Questions of right and wrong are moral or ethical in nature and 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 lacking a scientific basis, 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 focuses on the quality and integrity of *life* – both human and non-human life on earth. Living things are the only possible means of sequestering 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. Everything of any use to us ultimately comes from the earth or nature – air, water, soil, minerals. However, it’s the earth’s *energy* that makes the other elements of nature useful to humans.

According to a basic law of physics, the law of entropy, whenever energy is used to do anything useful, some of its usefulness inevitably is lost. Only *living things* have the capacity to use solar energy to offset the tendency toward entropy by renewing and restoring the usefulness of nature. So humanity, and the agriculture that sustains humanity, ultimately must be sustained “by nature.” The emphasis on life also is important because 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. Sustainable farming must enhance life.

Third, 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.” Since our worldviews determine what we accept as fact or truth, worldviews also are based on beliefs – not facts. Thus, acceptance or rejection of the “integral worldview” of sustainability is inherently a spiritual or philosophical decision.

Rudolph Steiner, the founder of Biodynamic farming, understood the earth as an organ within the larger organism of nature. He conceived of the farm – soil, plants, & animals – as an individual organ within the sub-organism of earth. He wrote: “A farm is true to its essential nature... if it is conceived as a kind of individual entity in itself.”^{iv} He considered the farmer to be an integral part of the farm. He wrote: “We, in our farm, are going about in the belly of the farm.” Steiner and other early advocates of organic farming embraced a worldview of the farm, the farmer, humanity, and earth as integral organs within the larger organism or whole of nature.

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 *organiculturist* 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 should anyone want to farm? First, the opportunities for beginning farmers today are far greater than when I was growing up on south Missouri. Back then, the industrialization of agriculture was gaining momentum and there was no means stopping it from running its course. Today, the organic and local food movement reflect a growing rejection of industrial agriculture, creating opportunities for a different kind of agriculture with a different purpose: to produce good food for everyone, not just those with money, and to provide a good way of life for farmers – including a way to make a decent living. I wrote in the foreword of my book, *Small Farms are Real Farms*, “if I were 25-30 years old today I would choose the life of a farmer.”^{viii}

I honestly don’t know if farming would ever have been the right choice for me. Only those who feel that farming is their calling or purpose in life should become farmers. That does not include all of us, but it does includes some of us. Those who are truly “called to farm,” must trust they *will* be able to find a means of sustaining a desirable quality of life – economically and otherwise. A world in which people were unable to fulfill their purpose, or would be miserable doing so, just doesn’t make sense – in farming or elsewhere.

Another good reason for being a farmer is that the pursuit of one’s 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 need does the earth have of us? We need to see that what is at stake is our own dignity.”^{ix} Our sense of self-worth, meaning, and happiness arise from a life of purpose. “Do you want to feel completely satisfied and fulfilled by your work? Lay your head down at night knowing you are doing something that helps the planet and your fellow humans? There is nothing more satisfying than providing a basic need: food.”^x

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 So You Want To Be A Farmer? First, Know This.... *National Young Farmers Coalition*, Posted By Chelsey Simpson On Monday, December 14, 2015, <http://www.youngfarmers.org/so-you-want-to-be-a-farmer-first-know-this/> .

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} Rudolph Steiner, “The Agriculture Course Agriculture Course: Lecture 2,” On-line since: 26th June, 2007 <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA327/English/BDA1958/19240610p01.html> .

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

^{vi} J. I. Rodale, The Organiculturist’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} John Ikerd, *Small Farms are Real Farms, Sustaining People through Agriculture*, (Austin, TX: Acres U.S.A., 2008).

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

^x So You Want To Be A Farmer? First, Know This.... *National Young Farmers Coalition*, Posted By Chelsey Simpson On Monday, December 14, 2015, <http://www.youngfarmers.org/so-you-want-to-be-a-farmer-first-know-this/> .