

Reclaiming the Spiritual Roots of Farming

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American agriculture is in crisis. Until recently, the crisis had been a quiet one. No one wanted to talk about it. Thousands of farm families were being forced off the land, but we were told by the agricultural establishment – the USDA, Land Grant Universities, Farm Bureau, commodity groups, etc. – that their exodus was inevitable. In fact, the failure of some was seen as a sign of progress. Those who failed were simply the victims of their own inefficiency – their inability to keep up with changing times. Once these inefficient farmers were gone, their land could be farmed by their more efficient neighbors. Why should we be any more concerned about the demise of the “family farm” than we were about the “mom and pop” grocery store or the “family restaurant?” “You can’t stand in the way of progress,” so we were told.

Few seemed to question the ability of America's larger, commercial farmers to compete with farmers anywhere in the world. America was conceded to be the global leader in agriculture. Our commercial farmers were highly educated, well financed, and using the latest production technologies to cultivate the best agricultural land in the world. And, as our agricultural production units became more specialized, mechanized, and larger in scale, they were becoming even more efficient.

However, with farm commodity prices at near-record low levels for four years in a row, even the agriculture establishment has begun to realize that something is wrong. The U.S. Congress has passed “emergency” farm legislation each of the past four years to supplement already generous government programs – pushing U.S. farm subsidies to all-time record levels. American farmers today are among the most heavily subsidized in the world, and Congress shows little inclination toward risking a return to free markets in the new farm bill. Without these generous subsidies from taxpayers, American farm exports would be far less, and we would be in the midst of an American “farm financial crisis” at least as severe as that of the 1980s.

The U.S. share of global agricultural exports has plummeted, destroying farm profitability, and shaking confidence in the American farmer's ability to compete. Abundant land and favorable climates, coupled with low-cost labor and a favorable exchange rate, have given less developed countries, such as Argentina and Brazil, a clear competitive advantage in global grain production. U.S. livestock producers face strong competition from Canada and Mexico in domestic livestock and meat markets, causing some livestock producers to question the wisdom of the NAFTA, which opened our markets to competition from the North and South. Threats by agribusiness to move their large-scale confinement animal feeding operations to Mexico or elsewhere, to avoid growing environmental and animal welfare concerns, also cast a shadow on the future of U.S. meat production. South America and Australia are lower cost producers

of range cattle, and countries such as Mexico and China could gain competitive advantages in restructured global pork and poultry industries.

America's lack of competitiveness in farming is not just a short run phenomenon resulting from unfavorable exchange rates or a depressed global economy. As Steven Blank points out in his recent book, "The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio,"¹ rising costs of land and labor are destroying the traditional competitive advantage of American farmers in world markets. Growing demand for land in rural areas for residential purposes, as America's affluent urbanites acquire more living space, will make even good farmland too costly to farm. Employment opportunities arising from the "new economy" will make the economic sacrifice of an occupation in farming too high. Cornfields can't compete with condominiums for land and the Missouri Valley can't compete with the Silicone Valley for labor.

According to Blank, Americans will choose their best economic alternatives and will leave the farming to other countries. Americans will continue to be well fed, he says, we will simply import our food from other countries where it can be produced at a lower cost. It all makes "economic sense." And, although Blank didn't make an issue of it, if the multinational national corporations succeed in gaining control of global agriculture, this whole scenario is even more plausible, if not inevitable. These multinational corporations have no sentimental ties to family, community, or even to any given country, because they are not real people. They will simply move their agricultural operations, including contractual operations, to wherever on the globe they can make the most money, and increasingly, that will be somewhere other than in America.

American agriculture is in crisis. The future of farming in America is in doubt – even the agricultural establishment now grudgingly admits. The crisis in America agriculture has several root causes, but none is more fundamental or more important than is the dehumanizing and desacralizing of the American food and farming systems. As we have specialized, standardized, and centralized control of agriculture to make it more efficient, we have forced living systems – including plants, animals, and people – to behave as lifeless machines. American agriculture is dying from lack of respect for life.

When we removed the respect for life from agriculture; we also removed its soul. As we disclaimed the spiritual roots of farming, we proclaimed economics and technology as the "new theologies" of agriculture. We "believed" that free market would ensure social justice and that science could remove all any obstacle to human progress. Our "beliefs" have proven ill-founded. The economic timbers of farming are now rotting and its ecological foundation is decaying because it is dying – it has become separated from spiritual roots. We will never restore the ability of America's agriculture to meet the needs of people, its ultimate source of effectiveness and efficiency, until we restore its respect for life. We can never restore its respect for life until we restore its soul. Within the crisis in American agriculture, is the opportunity to reclaim its spiritual roots.

Crisis is most frequently considered something negative, something to be avoided, such as pain, distress, or disorder. However, crisis can be defined more generally to be

either positive or negative. A crisis is a decisive moment, a critical time or state of affairs whose outcome will make a decisive difference for either better or worse. In fact, the Chinese have a word for crisis that is used to mean both threat and opportunity. The current crisis in agriculture most certainly is a time of pain, distress, and disorder for farmers and rural communities. However, it is also a time of opportunity – a critical time and state of affairs that will make a decisive difference, either for better or for worse. It's up to all of us – to farmers and others – to confront the threat, to seize this opportunity, and to create the kind of agriculture and human society that we want rather than accept whatever might be imposed upon us.

The time to reclaim the spiritual roots of farming is at hand. The trends that have desacralized farming have run, and overrun, their course. There is a growing skepticism concerning the claim that more cheap “stuff” – be it larger houses, fancier cars, more clothes, or more food – will make us happier or more satisfied with life. There is growing evidence that when we replaced the sacred with science, we replaced the substance with pretense. As agriculture has been robbed of its natural productivity, our lives have been robbed of purpose and meaning. But, people now are beginning to question the wisdom of our materialistic society. We have more “stuff” than any society has ever had but our unmet wants seem as great as ever. How much is “enough?” Can anyone ever have “enough?”

The old questions of how can I make more money to buy more “stuff” are being replaced with questions concerning the purpose and meaning of work and of life. The answer to these questions can be found only through awakening the spiritual dimension of our lives. But, how can we reconnect with our spiritual roots? And, how will doing so change our lives? How will reclaiming the sacred change our farms, our communities, and our society? These questions will be addressed later, but first we need to understand why we took spirituality out of farming in the first place and why we now need to put it back in.

Farming is fundamentally biological. All of life arises from the soil. The essence of agriculture begins with conversion of solar energy through the living process of photosynthesis carried out by plants that feed on the soil. The food that sustains our lives as people comes from other living things. If life itself is sacred, then food and farming must be sacred as well. In fact, people considered food and farming to be sacred throughout nearly all of human history. Farmers prayed for rain, for protection from pestilence, and for bountiful harvests. People gave thanks to God for their “daily bread” – as well as for harvests at annual times of Thanksgiving.

Until some four hundred years ago, people considered nearly everything in life to be spiritual or sacred. The religious scholars were the primary source of knowledge in the intellectual segments of society. The uneducated masses accepted claims that kings, chiefs, and clan leaders -- the people who other people looked to for wisdom – had special divine or spiritual powers. Only during the seventeenth century did the spiritual nature of the world come under serious challenge. Among the most notable challengers was Descartes, a Frenchman, who proposed the spirit/matter dualism. This division

allowed scientists to treat inert matter as “dead” and completely separate from themselves, and to see the material world as made up of a multitude of different objects assembled as if parts of a huge machine. Sir Isaac Newton, an Englishman, also held this mechanistic view of the universe and shaped it into the foundation for classical physics. Over time, scientists expanded the mechanical model to include the living as well as the “dead.” Scientists now treat plants, animals, and even people, as complex mechanisms with many interrelated, yet separable functioning parts.

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

Over time, the concept of science shifted from a “science of understanding” to a “science of manipulation.” Over time, the goal of science shifted from increasing “wisdom” to the goal of increasing “power.” We didn’t want just to understand why things happen; we wanted to make things happen. We didn’t want just to understand the universe; we wanted to dominate it. The purpose of science had shifted from enhancing knowledge to enhancing our ability to influence, direct, and control.

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

Farming was one of the last strongholds for the sacred in the world of science. “Mechanical” processes – using machines to manufacture things from “dead” matter – were relatively easy to understand and manipulate. But, “biological” processes – involving living organisms, including humans – proved much more difficult to understand and to manage. Farming and food are fundamentally biological in nature. So it took far longer to learn to manipulate and control agriculture. Farmers continued to pray for rain, and people continued to give thanks for food – although scientists would have advised us that both were either unnecessary or futile.

However, science eventually succeeded in taking the sacred out of farming – at least out of commercial, industrialized farming. People tend to be difficult to understand and manipulate. But, machines took the laborers out of the fields, so farming became more

manageable. Selective breeding brought genetic vagaries more or less under control. Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are but the latest attempts by humans to manipulate and control other life forms. Commercial fertilizers gave farmers the power to cope with the uncertainties of organic-based nutrient cycling. Commercial pesticides provided simple scientific means of managing predator, parasites, and pests. Deep-well irrigation reduced the grower's dependence on rainfall. Processing, storage, and transportation – all mechanical processes – removed many of the previous biological constraints associated with form, time, and place of production.

For many, farming and food are still sacred. But for many others, farming has become nothing more than another business enterprise and food just something else to buy. Those who still treat food and farming as something sacred, are labeled as old-fashion, strange, radical, or naïve.

Farms have become factories without roofs. Supermarkets and restaurants are but the final stages in long and complex assembly lines for food. Why pray for rain when we can drill a deep well and irrigate? Why thank God for food created by ConAgra? Who needs God when we have modern science and industrial technology?

But now, this modern, commercial, industrial agriculture is in crisis. And the crisis brings with it opportunities for decisive, positive change. More than at any time in the past fifty years, people are questioning the wisdom of “scientific” agriculture. People are questioning the quality and safety of our industrial food system. They don't trust the corporations to put nutrition and wholesomeness before market share and profitability. And they don't trust government bureaucrats or their elected officials to give food safety and food quality priority over economic growth or corporate campaign contributions.

Economists have become the “high-priests” of the “new religion” of science and technology. Economists try to tell people that everything is happening just as it should. They argue the pursuit of profits, the motive for cost reducing technologies, ensures that consumers get the highest quality food at the lowest cost, even if some farmers are forced out of business in the process. Economic incentives guide scientific discoveries toward a better life for all, they say. The “invisible hand” of a competitive market economy transforms short-run, individual self-interests into long run, societal well being – so say the economists.

However, economists are defending corporate agriculture using hopelessly outdated theories developed more than 200 years ago in completely different times. And time will reveal the resulting fallacy of their prophecies. Contemporary economics is based on the observations of a British economist, Adam Smith, in his landmark book, The Wealth of Nations, published in 1776. From Smith's observations, economists developed the fundamental assumptions, which underlie all “free market” economic thinking even today. These assumptions must hold in order for Smith's “invisible hand” of competition to transform individual greed into the greater good for society in general.

Markets must be economically competitive – meaning numbers of buyers and sellers so large that no single buyer or seller can have any noticeable effect on the overall market. In such markets, the benefits of more efficient production are quickly passed on to consumers. It must be easy for new sellers to enter markets that are profitable and easy for sellers to get out of unprofitable markets, so that producers are able to respond to consumers' changing wants and needs with changes in production. Consumers must have clear and accurate information concerning whether the things they buy will actually meet their wants and needs. And finally, the consumer must be sovereign – their tastes and preferences must reflect their basic values, untainted by persuasive influences.

None of these assumptions is valid in today's society. Today agricultural markets are dominated by the large agribusiness corporations, certainly at every level other than the farm level, and increasingly even at the farm level. In addition, it is not easy to get into or out of any aspect of agriculture, and it is becoming increasingly harder even to get into or out of farming. Consumers don't get accurate, unbiased information concerning the products they buy, but instead get disinformation by design, disguised as advertising. Finally, consumers are no longer sovereigns. The food industry spends billions of dollars on advertising specifically designed to bend and shape consumers tastes and preferences to accommodate mass production and mass distribution, which enable corporate control of agriculture. There is no logical reason to believe that the corporate agriculture of today is evolving to meet the needs or wants of consumers. Such a system may produce lots of “cheap stuff,” but there is no assurance that it is producing the “right stuff.”

There is no logical reason today to believe food costs will be less or food quality will be enhanced when even more family farmers are forced out of business. There is no reason to believe that food will be cheaper or higher in quality when free market coordination is replaced with corporate contractual coordination of the food system. On the contrary, there is every reason to believe that the corporatization of agriculture will lead to higher costs and lower quality as they seek to maximize profits and growth. Corporate agriculture today is designed specifically to generate profits and growth for corporate investors. And, we no longer have a competitive, capitalistic agricultural economy to transform corporate greed into societal good.

As society becomes more enlightened, we are beginning to understand that the “markets don't always work” – at least don't work like the economists claim they do. We may not be able explain why we don't trust “the invisible hand” to transform greed into good, but they know that we don't. We no longer believe that society will be better off when our family farmers have been forced out of business, any more than we believe that we are better off without “mom and pop” grocery stores or without “family restaurants.”

We don't believe that Americans would be better off importing our food from other countries, even if it were cheaper, any more than we are believe that we are better off depending on other countries for cheap, imported oil. Perhaps we could keep the food imports flowing, as we maintain the inflow of oil today. But, how large a military force

would it take? What new “Organization of Food Exporting Countries” might be formed to control the market? How many “small wars” would we have to fight to keep a “renegade country” from restricting our supply of food? How many terrorist attacks will we suffer at the hands of people who feel oppressed by future corporate American food policies? *Change* is not synonymous with *progress*. Some things are worth keeping, and therefore, worth protecting, even if “free markets” indicate otherwise.

As society becomes more enlightened, we are beginning to realize that we are destroying our natural environment in the process of trying to produce cheap food. We are mining the soil through erosion and depletion of its natural productivity in the process of maximizing production and minimizing dollar and cent costs of production. We are polluting our streams and groundwater with residues from the pesticides and commercial fertilizers necessary for large-scale, specialized industrial crop production and with wastes from giant confinement animal feeding factories. We are destroying the genetic diversity, both below and above the soil that is necessary to support nature's means of capturing and transforming solar energy into energy for human bodies.

As society becomes more enlightened, we are beginning to realize that we are destroying the social fabric of society in the process of trying to make agriculture more efficient. We are destroying opportunities for people to lead productive, successful lives. We are turning thinking, innovative, creative farmers into tractor drivers and hog house janitors. There is dignity in all types of work, but all people should have opportunities to express their full human potential. Consolidation of decision making concentrates the opportunities among the privileged few while leaving the many without hope for a rewarding future. Industrial specialization also tends to separate people within families, within communities, and within nations. We are just beginning to realize that industrialization destroys the human relationships needed to support a civilized society.

As society becomes more enlightened, we are beginning to realize that our modern, industrial society quite simply is not sustainable. It is degrading the natural base upon which long run productivity must depend. It is destroying the social structure that it was designed to strengthen, and upon which it ultimately must depend for support. It is losing its productivity and usefulness to society, and thus, it is not economically sustainable over the long run. Our current system of development is not sustainable.

But what do these concerns for sustainability have to do with spirituality? The concerns all share a common source: the removal of spirituality from science and society. The science of manipulation, the quest for power and control, provided the conceptual foundation for the industrial revolution. The fundamental concepts of industrialization – specialization, standardization and centralization of control – are based on a mechanistic worldview. The science of Descartes and Newton became a science that sought to separate, standardize, sequence, and control all things, including life. Growing concerns for ecological, social, and economic sustainability all are consequences of the growing industrialization of all aspects of society. And, in the mechanistic worldview supporting industrialization, there is no active role for the sacred.

The science of manipulation is a science which separates – mind from matter, people from nature, people from each other, the body from the mind, and the mind from the soul. The science of modern economics soothes our conscience by assuring us that our greed is good – while largely ignoring the economic exploitation of nature and society. The same science that made the industrial era possible is the science that removed the sacred from matters of economics and politics and removed spirituality from the day-to-day matters of both individuals and their communities. We were led to believe that good science would bring about success and happiness without any help from “on high.”

But, biological and social phenomena never really fit the mechanistic, manipulative view of the world. Living things of nature had to be bent, twisted, bribed, and coerced to bring them under control. But, nature inevitably fights back. Questions of ecological sustainability invariably can be traced to unintended consequences of treating living things as if they were inanimate, programmable, controllable machines. Questions of social sustainability invariably can be traced to the unintended consequences of treating people as if they were inanimate, programmable, controllable machines. A science of understanding – of wisdom rather than power and control – must provide the foundation for the long run sustainability of human life on earth. Sustainability will require that we reconnect with the spiritual roots of humanity.

What is this thing called spirituality? First, spirituality is not religion, at least not as it is used here. Religion is simply one of many possible means of expressing one's spirituality. Paraphrasing William James, a religious philosopher, one might define spirituality as a felt need to live in harmony with some higher order of things. This definition embraces a wide range of cultural beliefs, philosophies, and religions. A common thread of all expressions of spirituality is the existence of an unseen order or interconnected web that defines the oneness of all things within a unified whole. We as people are a part of a larger “whole” that is defined at some higher level or organization. We may attempt to understand the whole, and even influence it, but we did not create nor can we control it. Thus, we must seek peace through harmony within a higher order that is beyond our control. This harmony may be defined as “doing the right things.” And, by “doing the right things” – for ourselves, for others around us, and for those of future generations – we create harmony and find inner peace.

The current crisis in conventional, commercial agriculture arises from its lack of sustainability. It is not ecologically sound, it is not socially responsible, and thus, it is not economically viable over time. The sustainability of agriculture ultimately is rooted in the need to farm in harmony with the higher order of things – in spirituality. Finding harmony with a higher order requires an understanding of that order – wisdom not power and control. Sustainable farming means farming in harmony with nature – nurturing rather than dominating or manipulating nature. Sustainable agriculture means fitting farming to the farmer and the farm – not forcing either to fit some predefined prescription for progress. Sustainable farming means farming in harmony among people – within families, communities, and societies. Sustainable farming

means farming in harmony with future generations – being good stewards of finite resources for an infinite future.

The goal of sustainability is to sustain a desirable quality of life. Quality of life is not something we can buy at Wal Mart or Disney World with the money we earn from farming for the “bottom line.” A life of quality is a shared life. A life of quality is a spiritual life. Quality of life is determined by our ability to “do the right things,” for ourselves and for others, both now and in the future. Quality of life, inherently and inseparably, is personal, interpersonal, and spiritual in nature.

As we reconnect with the spiritual roots of food and farming, it changes the way we farm and live. We learn to pursue peace and happiness rather than success. We seek “harmony” among things economic, social, and spiritual – not maximums or minimums. If we focus on any one, we tend to deplete the others, and lose rather than gain what we seek to achieve. Farming solely for the bottom line, for example, invariably takes time and resources away from family and community, degrades the natural resource base, degrades the human spirit, and eventually destroys the ability of the farm to even generate a profit. However, ignoring farm economics for short-run family or religious reasons can be just as devastating in the long run for both family and spirituality.

Our common sense tells us that we must have balance in our lives among the personal, interpersonal, and spiritual. Yet we are bombarded from every corner with the message that having more stuff will make us happy, that success means having more money. Or we may be told that happiness is found only in love of family and friends, and that money doesn't matter. On Sunday, the message is likely to be that happiness comes only from the love of God, that we should deny ourselves and follow Him. The thesis of sustainability is that “all these things matter, but than none alone is sufficient.” To sustain the sacred in farming, we must find harmony among things economic, social, and ecological – among the personal, interpersonal, and spiritual.

Spirituality does not mean that our rewards must be delayed until afterlife, any more than sustainability means we must sacrifice quality of life today for some future reward. We live only in the present, not the past or the future. If we are unhappy today, reaching some future tangible goal is likely to leave us unhappy. If we are happy today, we are quite likely to be happy in the future regardless of whether we reach some goal we now have in mind. The focus of faith and hope may be on things expected or hoped for in the future, but the true benefits of both are in the here and now. “Living in faith and hope” defines a life worth living far more than does achieving whatever is expected or hoped for in the future. Faith and hope are about “now,” not “when.” Faith and hope are fruits of the spirit. We find purpose and meaning through the spiritual.

Likewise the spirituality of sustainable farming is about “here and now,” not “there and when.” The rewards come from having adequate, not maximum, income; from having positive relationships with family, friends, and others; and from being a responsible steward of resources for the future. All of those things have rewards here and now, as

well as somewhere else at some time in the future. The key point is that the reward comes from knowing that we are “in harmony with some higher order of things.”

The crisis in America is not limited to agriculture, nor are the opportunities. On September 11, 2001, America was subjected to a terrorist attack of a magnitude unprecedented in its history. Since then, we have been a nation “at war,” with terrorists who committed the acts, with terrorists in general, and with the countries that support them. A national debate will undoubtedly arise, 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 has rekindled an uncommon sense of nationalism, of community and of spirituality within 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 have been phenomenal. While we may question the motivations of some, obviously seeking publicity for their contributions, millions of others have given anonymously and generously, with no concern for recognition or rewards. Americans seem to have been waiting for something that would give them “permission” to care and be kind to each other. Americans were simply waiting for a chance to constrain their narrow, individualistic self-interests and to be good people.

Underneath, Americans are still a spiritual people. The constant bombardment of materialistic messages, that continue even now with admonitions to “get out and spend,” has simply made Americans reluctant to admit that they really do care about each other and that we really do believe in a “higher power.” Down deep inside, we know that there is no “invisible hand” to transform our “greed into good” – that we have to choose to be good to each other. Down deep inside, we know that our unrestrained consumption is destroying opportunities for future generations – that we have to choose to be good stewards of the earth. Down deep inside, we know there is a higher order of things with which we ultimately must find harmony in order to find peace – that human life ultimately is rooted in spirituality.

Within the current crisis in America, is the opportunity to reconnect to our spiritual roots – not only in farming, but also in all aspects of American society. The sustainable agriculture movement is giving farmers permission to be good to others and to be good to the land. The environmental and social justice movements in the broader society are giving people, in general, permission to be good to each other and to be good to the earth. The current crisis in American agriculture, and in American society, is giving Americans an opportunity to reclaim our spiritual roots and to restore our national soul. Now it the time to confront the crisis and seize the opportunity.

¹Blank, Stephen C. The End of Agriculture in the American Portfolio, Quorum Books, Westport, Connecticut, 1999.