

Farming as a metaphor for Living

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In farming, the critical nature of the interrelationships among people and between people and the earth is perhaps more apparent than in any other form of human activity. The problems confronting agriculture and the problems confronting society in general share a common source — the dysfunctional nature of relationships among people and between people and the earth. The solutions to the problems of society are essentially the same as solutions to the problems of agriculture. It's just that the nature of the problems and solutions in agriculture are more easily seen and understood. Thus, farming provides a useful metaphor for living. And more important, sustainable farming provides a useful metaphor for sustainable living.

The productivity of a farm clearly depends on the health and natural fertility of the soil. 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 depend 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 nature of relationships among people — between farmers and their customers and between farmers and their suppliers. A profitable farming operation must have good markets — someone some- where must be willing and able to pay for things that farmers grow. 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 economic relationships, which in fact, are nothing more or less, than impersonal relationships among people.

The quality of life on a farm certainly is affected by farm income, but clearly depends at least as much on quality of 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 relation- ships. 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 same types of personal interdependence exist throughout society, but in farming, they have been easier to see and to understand.

The environmental, social, and economic problems confronting American agriculture today are symptoms of agricultural industrialization — specialization, standardization, and consolidation of control. The health and productivity of the soil is being destroyed by the commercial chemicals needed to support large-scale, specialized farming operations. The demise of family farms is a symptom of simplification, routinization, and mechanization of farming, which made it both

possible and necessary for each farmer to farm more land and invest more capital. Get bigger or get out, they were told. As family farms failed, local businesses suffered, local schools were lost to consolidation, church pews were left empty, and rural communities withered and died. Specialization and standardization, which first led to fewer and larger farms, is now shifting control of farming to a handful of multinational corporations. Under corporate control, American agriculture might well be moved to other countries with lower land and labor costs and fewer environmental regulations. The sustainability of American agriculture is in doubt.

Those same relationships between the industrial paradigm and sustainability exist for society in general. But, modern society is extremely complex and the relationships are not quite so clear. All of life, including human life, is dependent upon a healthy natural environment — water, air, sunlight, soil, and diversity of living species. Industrial systems of economic development degrade the health of the natural environment in general, just as they degrade the natural productivity of farms. Industrial systems threaten human health and well being, as they pollute the natural environment with chemicals and other industrial wastes.

Human civilizations depend upon healthy human societies, based on inviolate principles of healthy human relationships — such as respect, trust, freedom, justice, and equality of opportunity. Industrial systems, in facilitating ever-greater specialization, separate people from each other. Complex systems of markets separate buyers from sellers, consumers from producers, and corporate investors from managers. Relationships become defined by laws, rules, regulations, and contracts. Profits and growth take precedent over personal relationships and social responsibility. Exploitation of workers, consumers, and taxpayers becomes routine business practice. The degradation of American society is no different in concept from the demise of our family farms and the ecological, economic and social decay of our rural communities. The linkages between cause and effect are just easier to see in agriculture.

The keys to building a more sustainable human society are no different in nature from the keys to building a more sustainable agriculture. And, farmers all across America and around the world are finding ways to make agriculture more sustainable. A recent publication of the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program highlights fifty such farmers from across the United States. But, there are thousands more, each with a unique and different story, but each sharing a common vision for a more sustainable agriculture. While there are no blueprints for the new American farm, some fundamental principles are emerging.

The new farms tend to be more diversified than are conventional farms. These farmers are committed to caring for the land and protecting the natural environment. They work with nature rather than try to control or conquer nature, and nature is inherently diverse. They fit the farm to their land and climate rather than try to bend nature to fit the way they might prefer to farm. In most regions, this requires a variety of crop and animal enterprises. In some regions, however, diversity means crop rotations and cover crops. In other regions, diversity means managing livestock grazing to achieve diverse plant species or with multiple species of grazing animals. Through diversification, these new farmers substitute management for the off-farm 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.

The new farmers 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 each of us value things differently, as consumers, 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 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. Their farming operations are more economically viable, as well as ecologically sound and socially responsible.

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 good place to raise a family, and a good way to be a part of a caring community. 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 make money. 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 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, who are finding ways to farm more sustainably, are creating a metaphor of a more sustainable human society. If we are to sustain productivity, we must stop exploiting our natural environment. We should look again to the timeless principle of diversity in finding new means of sustaining human progress, economically and socially, while maintaining the health and integrity of our natural environment — not just in agriculture but all across society. If we are to sustain human civilization, we must stop exploiting each other. We should focus on providing people with the things they need and truly value rather than coercing and bribing people to buy ever more “cheap stuff” — not just in agriculture but all across society. We must not allow our pursuit of short-run, economic self-interest to diminish our overall quality of life — neither in agriculture nor elsewhere in society. We must seek and find balance and harmony among the economic, ecological, and social to find balance and harmony among the personal, interpersonal, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. A sustainable agriculture must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. The sustainability of human society must be ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially responsible. Sustainable farming is a useful metaphor for sustainable living, because the critical nature of relationships among people and between people and nature are easier to see on the farm.

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