

What is sustainable farming?

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Sustainability is one of those feel-good words that everyone likes to use, because it means pretty much whatever you want it to mean. I've lost my taste for the word ever since I heard a talk by the totally brilliant William McDonough, who put it like this:

'if someone asked you "how's your marriage?"', would you want to answer - oh, its sustainable?'

He envisioned a marriage - or an agriculture, for that matter - that was more vibrant, more diverse and enriching, and more forthcoming than just 'sustainable'.

For me, the sense of his vision mirrors the traditional definition of organic farming. The modern definition of 'organic' is just compliance with a set of production or processing regulations. But back in the 1920s, Sir Albert Howard, Lady Eve Balfour, Sir Robert McCarrison and the like saw "organic" not just a set of rules for production, but a means to a end. The health and welfare of people, communities, and the environment was threatened by the same industrializing forces which challenge us today - and that was 100 years ago! Such practices as feeding the soil, composting, implementing diverse rotations, and honoring the natural behaviors of livestock arose not just to produce food, but principally as a defense against the marginalization, commodification, and degradation of industrial agriculture.

To underscore the broader sense of traditional organics, its leaders were not just farmers, but also those responsible for coping with the adverse downstream impacts of industrial agriculture - physicians, public health officers, pathologists, veterinarians, foresters, and environmentalists. What caused these disparate concerns to coalesce around organic farming was the shared perception that soil, crop, livestock, and human health, as well as family and community health were integrally related - and integrally threatened - by industrialization.

The goals of organic farming were not just yield and profit - the twin drivers of industrial agriculture - but promotion of health through healthy and balanced nutrition, a fair and equitable return for farmers, compassionate livestock management, and honoring our place within the larger community of Nature. This is what many people still think of, and long for, when they reach for organic food.

I put it to you that this wholeness, robustness, and overarching vision - which was stripped away when 'organic' was reduced to just a set of rules - is what is missing from the word 'sustainability' today. Under our brand new national standards, the values and intentions which were the reason for organic practices have been excised, leaving just the practices themselves. And to add insult to injury, because organic practices are largely scale-neutral, organic is today very much at risk of being co-opted by the very forces it was designed to resist - industrial or Big Organic. Shorn of the values-based foundation of the founders, the organic label is becoming just another vehicle for concentrating power and wealth.

But traditional organic is not going quietly into the night. Traditional organic values are being

reintroduced into the organic agri-food system through the local food, slow food, fair trade, and other social movements - as embodied by this meeting today. It is worth remembering that today's social interventions are a response to the threats of marginalization and disenfranchisement of local producers by industrial agribusiness - albeit industrial organic agribusiness. In effect, we are now, 100 years later, re-vitalizing the traditional organic vision of Lady Eve Balfour and Sir Albert Howard - and for the same reason.

So what is sustainable farming? For me, it is organic farming in the sense originally envisioned by the founders. The goal is not to fill a market niche, but to affirm ecologically sound and resilient methods of food production, direct and equitable producer-consumer linkages, and transactions which acknowledge our responsibility to safeguard our environmental heritage for generations to come.

Recommended Reading: A blend of old and new contributors.

Balfour, Lady Eve. 1975. *The Living Soil and the Haughley Experiment* London: Faber and Faber.

A foundational text, brilliantly profiling the vision, optimism, and perhaps the naivete of the original organic thinkers. The goal of the Haughley Experiment was "to investigate the causes of positive health in crops and livestock, and particularly, the relationship between the health of the soil and of the crops and livestock raised upon it".

Conford, P. 2001. *The Origins of the Organic Movement*. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 287 pp.

This is a fascinating overview of the pioneers in organic thinking, yielding some rather surprising connections to diverse social movements. Also reveals that what we think of as 'new' today, dates back at least 80-100 years!

DeLind, L.B. 2000. "Transforming organic agriculture into industrial products: Reconsidering national organic standards," *Human Organization* 59 (2): 198-208.

Fromartz, S. 2006. *Organic, INC. Natural Foods and How They Grew*. Orlando, Florida: Harcourt, Inc., 294 pp

Guthman, J. 2004. *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Howard, Sir A. 1943. *An Agricultural Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 253 pp.
A font of experiential wisdom on the relationship between healthy soils, healthy crops, and healthy people, and popularizer of what became known as the Indore process for composting. His field studies led him to conclude that "the birthright of every crop is health.", "Disease (is) Nature's verdict on systems of agriculture in which the soil is deprived of its manurial rights", "pests are Nature's professors of agriculture", and

“artificial manures lead inevitably to artificial nutrition, artificial food, artificial animals, and finally to artificial men and women”

Howard, P. 2007. Organic industry structure: Significant acquisitions. Retrieved from <http://www.msu.edu/~howardp/OrganicSigAcqJan07.pdf>

McCarrison, R. 1961. *Nutrition and Health*. London: Faber and Faber.

A physician who was heavily published and passionate about links between health and nutrition. One frequently cited study compared rat growth when fed a diet of wholemeal grains, vegetables, fruit, dairy products, and limited meat with one eaten by lower class Britons - white bread, sweet tea, boiled vegetables, tinned meat, jam and margarine. He concluded that “...the former flourished.... and co-existed harmoniously (while) the latter became stunted and ill-proportioned...nervous and aggressive, and they suffered greater incidence of disease, particularly pulmonary and gastro-intestinal...”.

McDonough, W. and M. Braungart. 2002. *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things*. New York: North Point Press, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 208 pp

Totally brilliant, imaginative, watershed book by an architect/designer and a chemist. This book will change the way the world unfolds. Must read.

Pawlick, T.F. 2006. *The End of Food. How the Food Industry is Destroying our Food Supply - and What you Can Do about It*. Vancouver: Greystone Books. Douglas & McIntyre Publishing Group, 256 pp.

Pollan, M. 2006. *The Omnivore's Dilemma. A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: The Penguin Press.

Pyle, G. 2005. *Raising Less Corn, More Hell. The Case for the Independent Farm and Against Industrial Food*. New York: Public Affairs.

Sykes, F. 1946. *Humus and the Farmer*. London: Faber and Faber. Reprinted 1949 by Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA, 392 pp.

A renowned breeder of award winning livestock, Sykes became a vocal advocate for the composting process popularized by Howard, even inventing a specialized ‘muck shifter’ to enable farm-scale composting. Sykes is remembered not simply as an outstanding stock breeder, but as one who validated the profitability and health-giving attributes of compost-based farming in the real world of commercial agriculture.