

**THE FAMILY FARM RESURGENT-** Eliot Coleman

I want to celebrate small farmers, to celebrate what we do and how we do it. I think we have a value and an importance far in excess of our small numbers. I think we offer a solution in bringing the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century back into balance.

I am very fond of a quote from Amory Lovins, the energy guru, which I read in a magazine article a number of years ago. From the way the article was written it appeared that the interviewer was having a difficult time understanding Lovins' confident answers to her questions. She seemed to assume he should be spending a great deal more time giving long and complicated replies and bemoaning the great difficulty and potential insolubility of the problems. When she confronted Lovins with this concern, his simple reply was, "I don't do problems; I do solutions." Lovins attitude is right on. Our society tends to expend needless angst highlighting problems and studying them to death rather than focusing on solutions. I am reminded of René Dubos statement in his book *The Wooing of Earth*. "*There are no problems in Nature, only solutions, because the natural state is an adaptive state that generates a coherent system*".

And that is where we come in. Small farmers are the solution because we are part of a coherent system of food production and cultural values. To keep civilization on the right track, there need to be more of us. By our existence we allow the rest of the world to see that there is another life, there is another way. However, for many years you would have been hard put to deduce any value in our existence from the numerous USDA pronouncements that I first encountered over 50 years ago when I started farming. Although this has been forgotten today, back then the USDA would proudly proclaim every year that the number of small farmers as a percentage of the population had fortunately continued to drop. The previous year it was, say, 5.1% percent but the department was now giddy with delight to announce that it was down to 4.9% the next year. The USDA obviously approved of the fact that everyone who left the farm became a potential wage slave for industry. They accepted the fact that a large farm would gobble up the deserted small farms to become even larger. Wow! Talk about being co-opted by prevailing economic theory into celebrating the demise of your own demographic.

Back in 1970, Paul Goodman, who was a wise commentator on all things human for many years, wrote in his introduction to Scott and Helen Nearing's *Living the Good Life* that:

*“American society would be far more viable if we could push the present five percent rural ratio back to something like twenty percent, as an option and a standard of people who respect the environment and who, as [Thomas] Jefferson pointed out, cannot be pushed around because they can feed their faces.”*

Unfortunately, what we have today is not “The Good Life” that the Nearings envisioned but rather something you might call “The Hydroponic Life”; sterile surroundings, chemical nourishment, tasteless food, and no connection whatsoever to the soil and its contributions to life. Our society looks down upon those of us who do creative manual work on the land and it negates the importance of people who make things in favor of those who merely manipulate them. But, come on, who in the modern world wants to go against the prevailing mentality and celebrate people who do hard physical work with their own hands? One evening at dinner, a number of years ago, my daughter Melissa, who was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade at the time, told me how glad she was that I was an “organic” farmer. I remember thinking how great that was; that she was beginning to understand these concepts; that she recognized the importance of these ideas. But instead of saying thank you, I made the mistake of asking her why she was glad I was an organic farmer. “Well,” she said, “because organic is cool. If you were just an ordinary farmer I couldn’t hold my head up among my friends.”

Barbara Kingsolver wrote a very amusing paragraph about her experience of celebrating the rural in a world that has totally devalued it: *“In my professional life I’ve learned that as long as I write novels and nonfiction books about strictly human conventions and constructions, I’m taken seriously. But when my writing strays into that muddy territory where humans are forced to own up to our dependency on the land, I’m apt to be declared ‘quaintly irrelevant’ by the small, acutely urban clique that decides in this country what will be called worthy literature. I understand their purview, I think. I realize I’m beholden to people working in urban centers for many things I love: they publish books, invent theatre, produce films and music. But if I had not been raised such a polite southern girl, I’d offer these critics a blunt proposition: I’ll go a week without attending a movie or concert, you go a week without eating food, and at the end of it we’ll sit down together and renegotiate ‘quaintly irrelevant.’”*

The small family farm is important not only because we produce food but also because we represent deeper values that are worth preserving. Let me use the activities of the organization Slow Food as an example to further this discussion. I think the effort by Slow Food to prevent the disappearance of unique food products is noble work. Let's say there is a magnificent carefully aged cheese now produced by only two farmers in the Alps who are the last ones still maintaining small herds of the endangered heirloom breed of cattle whose milk coupled with the unique aging process in special caves are the keys to the renown of this cheese. I think that product should absolutely be supported in any way we can. However, sometimes even those who should understand what is involved here seem to miss the point. Recently I have heard Slow Food criticized as elitist because only the very wealthy can afford to import and purchase that cheese. Sadly, that criticism is totally blind to the real issue. It is not important whether you or I or anyone else in the US ever gets to taste that particular cheese. What is important is that it exists. What is important is that there is one small corner of the planet still unconquered by Kraft or Nabisco or Monsanto: one secret little rural holdout inhabited by a few hardworking people who still know what quality is and have a passion for producing it

Even if there is only one unconquered farm left, we need to know it is there. But, thankfully, that farm is not alone. All small farmers are like that little farm up in the hills. All of us are that last unconquered hamlet. We are the ones who understand that from our farms will come the many new cheeses or tastier fresh vegetable varieties or more succulent cuts of meat of the new world food order. These are the products that will be treasured by the Slow Food movement in decades to come. These are the products of our soils.

Like many wiser minds in an earlier age when farming was respected, William Butler Yeats, the Irish poet and playwright, understood the essential harmony between the people and the land. In a poem touching on the history of Ireland and the source from which its literature draws its strength, he wrote:

*"All that we did, all that we said or sang  
Must come from contact with the soil, from that  
Contact all things Antaeus-like grew strong."*

The Antaeus mentioned in Yeats poem was the son of the Greek earth goddess Gaia. Antaeus was a legendary giant in Greek mythology who was invincible as long as he remained in contact with the earth, as long as he kept his feet on the soil. And that, to me, is the whole story.

The earth, the soil, is the foundation of our invincibility. The more our farms can be self-supporting from the soil, the better off we are. And by self-supporting, I mean in all things agricultural – in soil fertility, in pest control, in livestock feed, and in efficiency by devising systems that require less work because the next part fits neatly into the one before.

I am aware that the information for this sort of farming is nothing new. I know that perceptive farmers, tuned in to the rhythms of the earth, have always been aware that their soil was their greatest resource. If we went back to the 1950's to meet James Bower, a very successful British small-scale grower at the time, he would have had this to say to us:

*“The truth is that the only ‘secret’ I use, and the only observation I have to make on the subject of compost and plant diseases, is that as one’s soil approaches optimum fertility, so diseases – and pests – gradually disappear, or at any rate become innocuous. When a soil has reached optimum fertility, it has, in effect regained its virginal fertility. It then has a natural mechanism of its own, perfect in every detail, which works regardless of weather conditions. Air and water circulate freely; plant roots have ideal conditions in which to obtain their requirements. This result has been obtained simply by the systematic use of compost. On one occasion, lettuce growing [just across the property line] on our neighbor’s land, within two feet of our own crop, were so badly infested [by aphids] that they had to be ploughed in; yet not a single aphid could the experts find on ours.”*

When soil is used to produce at its full potential the soil on our own farms can provide everything we need in low-work systems by taking advantage of the synergy inherent in all the diverse pieces of the biology at our disposal. A fertile soil has the power to make the small farm ever more independent of purchased inputs and ever more independent of the corporate/industrial world. But the obvious question is this: if these systems work so well now and were so clear to our predecessors, why have the benefits of organic matter and compost and crop rotation and mixed farming had to be rediscovered? Why has raising ruminant livestock on grass rather than on purchased grain had to be rediscovered? Logically, in a corporate dominated world, any idea that leads to empowering the independence of individuals gets dismissed, gets overpowered by propaganda that typically derides ideas that don't purchase the latest inputs as old fashioned, outmoded and unworthy of the modern way of life. But, we know differently. In the eyes of those of

us who understand the benefits of producing food at the family farm scale, this is the way farms should be run and the way life should be.

Fortunately for the planet, the movement toward real food, toward local food, toward food produced with care by farmers who care is the wave of the future. And it can't be stopped as long as we understand our advantages in working with the natural forces of the earth. The social and cultural influence of the productive family farm can once again extend from the fertile soil under the farmer's feet far out beyond the boundaries of the farm itself. Back in 1915, Cornell professor Liberty Hyde Bailey, who understood the power of the small farm and the farmer to make a difference in the world, wrote a little book entitled *The Holy Earth* in which he summed up the heart of the situation in a few words: "*One does not act rightly toward one's fellow, if one does not know how to act rightly toward the earth*".

Rediscovering the immutable value of the small farm is the first step toward a new agriculture for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and, possibly, toward a new world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.