



CR PUBLIC DOMAIN

Vincent van Gogh, 1853-1890 *Farmer sitting at fireside reading.*

Racing the clock

who will run the family farm?

JOEL SALATIN

Champion of small-scale intensified farming and a trainer of farm interns, Joel Salatin outlines what happens when aspiring farmers can't get into farming and older farmers can't get out. He suggests we establish non-farming agrarian partnerships as a way of building resilient local economies and a vibrant landscape.

Who will produce our food? Who will steward the land? We are living in a time of unsettling convergence. On the one hand, world population is at an historical high and needs food. We need farmers. But worldwide, and perhaps most acutely in the U.S. and Australia, [NZ too. Ed.] the average farmer is now about 60 years old. According to agricultural statisticians, in the next couple of decades, nearly 50 percent of farmland will change hands.

We're in a race of time against this aging farm population, not just from a food production and land stewardship angle, but also from a functional society angle. Rather than repeat all the issues, I'd like to move directly to the compelling question of who will touch this land?

Almost every day I receive a letter from a farm owner that goes something like this: "My wife and I are aging and our children don't want to farm this land that has been in our family for three generations. I'm 75 years old and simply can't keep it up. Our middle-aged children don't want us to sell the farm, but their careers keep them too busy to take an active part and help me out. I can't get up and down from the tractor like I used to. Getting in the yards with the cows is becoming unsafe for me and my wife. Can you send us a young person who will partner with us and caretake this farm for our family?"

Doesn't that break your heart? Another frequent theme is: "My husband and I will inherit a farm but we have careers elsewhere and want to keep the farm in the family. We don't want to be the generation to lose the farm, which our family has owned for more than a century. Is there a way for a young person to actually make it on this farm? My parents did, but all I remember is hard work, dust, and obnoxious odors. I couldn't get away fast enough. Now I wish I had taken more interest, but my husband and I are in our early 50s and not in a position to go back to the farm. We desperately need a young partner to work alongside my parents before they pass away, to learn what my parents know, and to eventually manage this beautiful farm. Can you help us?"

No civilisation has ever survived an inability to feed itself.

And here is an increasingly common plea: "My husband and I made good money during the e-boom and always wanted a piece of land. Our financial picture enabled us to buy a farm but we're floundering a bit. We now realise it's not as easy as we thought, that it takes more skill and understanding than we thought. And we've got used to traveling so we don't want to be tied down to the farm. Do you have an intern who could come and manage our farm? We have equipment, buildings, and equity; what we need is know-how and youthful energy. Can you help us?"

Each story has its own twist, but you get the picture. Sometimes the needs are more sophisticated, such as urban nonprofits looking for someone to manage an inner-city micro-farm. Energy costs and food quality concerns converge to stimulate interest in urban farming, which offers reduced food miles and re-localisation. Nearly every time I speak in an urban setting, someone will come up to me with a story about a family farm in jeopardy and beg for one of our interns to come and help them out.

I've even received letters from very elderly farmers asking me to find a young person that they can pass their farm to. One I'll never forget went, "I'm 85 years old. None of my three children has taken an interest in the farm, except to cash it out when I'm gone. I love this land. I love this farm. I've spent my life here on these 125 acres, helped my children through college, and thrived on the work and seasons of this spot. I think it's close to paradise. But if I give it to my children, they'll sell it for development. Can you find me a young person I can inherit it to?"

Folks, I'm not making any of this up. If I printed verbatim the distress signals that come across my desk every day, you couldn't read the words through the tears in your eyes. Few things capture the summation of our memories, our relationships, and the progress of our lives like the land we love. We remember the tree with the swing, and the day the tree blew down in a windstorm. Building a little

dam with rocks in the creek. Lying on our back, with that favorite cousin, enjoying cozy conversation and watching a circling vulture overhead. These form life centerpieces.

I'm sure a certain percentage of people would respond to all this with, "Who cares? Farmers destroy the landscape anyway, so the fewer we have, the better. Reversion to wildness and wilderness is far better than producing food and fiber. At least the land won't be harmed."

Frankly, that kind of sentiment is only uttered by someone who hasn't missed a meal for awhile. The food you're enjoying must be produced somewhere, somehow, by someone. Is it righteous to move the damage caused by some kinds of farming from here to somewhere else? China perhaps? Africa? If we can't see the degradation our diet causes, does that make us feel better? Regardless of land use, farming and food production requires an eclectic skill-set we're in danger of losing. The land transfer issues may not be as important as the information transfer issues. No civilisation has ever survived an inability to feed itself.

Yes, much land has been damaged - from greed and from simple ignorance. But the fact that it was damaged in the past doesn't mean it must be damaged in the future. The whole local-food tsunami, the nutrient-dense integrity food movement led by the Weston A. Price Foundation, and the groundswell of interest in sustainable, regenerative agriculture are testament to how a society can learn, make good, and change.

Now I ask the question again, Who will farm this land? You see, farmland is not public land; it's privately owned. In most areas, privately-owned land forms the foundation of the local economy. The glaring reality is that much privately owned farmland is in short-term limbo. When I say short-term I mean anything under 20 years. That's a blink of an eye on a landscape timeline. Land cannot be in limbo for very long. It must be transferred out of the current owner's control to someone or something else.

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When we say the word farm, what we really mean is something a farmer has done to the land. We don't think primarily of trees, soil, and grass. We think of barns, tractors, cows, corn, and fences. Without the farmer's effort, the farm ceases to be a farm. It's a privately-owned piece of wilderness. Unless we figure out a way to retain active farmers, all our farmland preservation efforts will simply give us high falootin' private wilderness which does nothing to employ people, feed people, or contribute tangibly to society.

I don't share the notion that farmers inherently damage ecosystems. If farming inherently damages the landscape,

then we'd better eliminate farmers. Believing in the inherent destruction idea promotes environmentalism by abandonment, which sees nature as too pure, too perfect, to be adulterated by human touch. To many radical environmentalists, if all humans died tomorrow it would be cause for planetary celebration. I find that a hard option to sell. When I look in the mirror and ask why I have this huge brain and opposing thumbs, is it to inherently damage the earth?

A mandate on farmers to heal landscapes through the act of farming.

No. The reason for this blessed endowment is to learn and then practice how to massage our ecological womb to stimulate more efficient solar conversion into decomposable biomass to build more soil than nature could in a static state. Now that's a mouthful. But it is nonetheless a mandate on farmers to heal landscapes through the act of farming. While most of us know about farms that have caused tremendous damage, we also know about others that have built soil and restored springs of water. Human activity is the most efficacious destroyer and healer. For more on this, read my book *The Sheer Ecstasy of Being a Lunatic Farmer*. It'll give you all the details, with tons of humor.

One final note on this discussion about farmers destroying the earth: we need to include the culpability of a society that abandoned domestic culinary arts. Americans during the 1950s and 1960s quickly embraced TV dinners, Velveeta cheese, soda pop and mega-corporate food processing, which dramatically altered the household food-scape as rapidly and profoundly as farmers who adopted feedlots, factory houses, and chemicals. Today, the fast food and snack food industries — as well as the headlong rush into genetically modified organisms (GMOs) — convict both producer and consumer as accomplices in wrong-headedness.

Promising convenience and freedom from menu preparation and planning, the big-food industry more than happily filled the opportunity created by vacated kitchens. That people could so quickly embrace the vacuous notion that ultra-pasteurised, shelf-stable, destroyed-then-pseudo-enriched foods could actually yield wellness should give us all pause. The Nature Conservancy member who does not resist a grandchild's incessant plea for a 'Happy Meal' aids and abets this whole damaging food and farming system. Goodness, letting children watch TV bombarding them with government and corporate mischief implants in young minds hunger and thirst for nutrient depleted, soil eroding, sickness-engendering pseudo-food. I think there's enough blame to go around, don't you? Me included.



CR: EARTH MATTERS.

Adrian White, farmer, Hawkes Bay. Having farmed all his life Adrian now enjoys a smaller property. Upholding the mandate that a farmer's job is to heal the land, his use of biodynamic methods has wrought huge change in the soil. When Telecom contractors laid cable through the farm they remarked that compared with neighbouring properties, Adrian's soil was so friable their machines cut through it "like a hot knife through butter."

Let's agree that we need food; that farms are generally where we get the food; and that farms can't exist without farmers. Let's even agree that we need good farmers, not bad farmers. We could even agree that bad farmers and good farmers exist, and we need more good farmers, not fewer. Losing good farmers, the food they produce, and the land they massage, is not some theoretical problem to be solved by nerds in an academic focus group. The loss is serious, immediate, and pressing.

Anytime a business or economic sector drops below age 35 in average worker age, it's in decline. I don't know how long it has been since the average American farmer was 35, but it's definitely decades. What happened between Thomas Jefferson's vision of intellectual agrarians and today? What happened to farming's allure? Farmers used to be held in high esteem, voted into public office, honored by the community.

Today, school guidance counselors steer promising, intelligent young people away from farming and towards just about anything else. As a society, we've relegated farmland stewardship and the foundation of our food system to society's bottom socio-economic tier. When is the last time you heard a cluster of mothers excited about "my Jane wants to be a farmer"? On the contrary, the cluster would mourn for that poor underperforming child. I

look for the day when such an announcement is met with an affirming chorus of, “Wow, cool, awesome!”

Unfortunately, our society affords farmers little respect. Maybe the day of the celebrity chef will eventually morph into the day of the celebrity farmer. I look forward to the day when parents encourage their children to be farmers, rather than discouraging them from choosing such a bottom-tier vocation. No parent is more secure than one who has a farmer for a child.

Farms offer a haven of rest and retreat, food, and care. Farmers are used to babysitting lambs and calves and chicks. Farms are well suited to multi-generational living, allowing grandma and grandpa a useful role in farm life and connection to the next generation even as their adult children help keep them away from the anonymity of the nursing home.

As families abdicate their kitchens they buy processed food that fundamentally changes the economic landscape in which farmers operate.

When I returned to the farm full time my friends and mentors mourned the squandering of brain power. What a tragedy, that I would throw away my academic prowess for a lowly farmer’s life. I’ll never forget the high school guidance counselor who went into veritable apoplectic seizures when I demanded to take typing rather than physics. Then when I told her I really wanted to farm for a career, we had to call paramedics to revive her. Not really, but you get the picture. It was not a pretty sight. I never counseled with her again.

Even with all this societal prejudice, however, I’m convinced the main reason young people don’t aspire to farming is economic. Be real; young people follow the money. Money follows opportunity. Most farmers aren’t earning a good living. [NZ dairying excepted. Ed.] As a result, many if not most farmers don’t want their children to become farmers. “I want a better life for you,” they admonish.

Much of this loss in economic opportunity is a direct result of consumer disconnectedness and a profound lack of participation in preparing, packaging, and preserving food in the home. While some may blame seductive advertising campaigns, in the end all of us are responsible for our choices. Otherwise, we dismiss irresponsibility with the excuse: “I’m just a victim.” Nobody made us abdicate our kitchens. Nobody required that we become dependent on industrial food conglomerates and supermarkets. We chose to change. When domestic culinary arts are subcontracted to Kraft Foods, Cargill, and Archer Daniels

Midland, not to mention McDonald’s and Taco Bell, the portion of retail food dollar going into the farmer’s pocket dwindles. In the 1950s farmers received nearly 40 percent of the consumer dollar. Today that figure averages 9 percent and is continuing to trend down. The old saw about there being more money in the cardboard Wheatbix box than in the wheat it contains is actually based on truth. If this is the expected template, who would bother to farm?

As families abdicate their kitchens for shopping malls, celebrity entertainment, and recreation, they buy processed and prepared food that fundamentally changes the economic landscape in which farmers operate. Instead of selling into a short food-custody chain, they sell into a long one. Between field and fork a host of aggregators, wholesalers, speculators, laboratories, packagers, distributors, processors, marketers, warehouses, attorneys, and cash registers dip into the farmer’s former profit margin.

This is why direct purchasing on the part of eaters is as important as direct selling on the part of farmers. Localisation and shortening that chain of custody does more to create economic opportunities for aspiring farmers than any other thing. A permutation on this theme is bio-regional aggregation whereby a group of farmers dedicated to a protocol sell under one brand name but maintain a regional marketing persona.

Electronic aggregation is coming on strong now and promises to create economies of scale in local distribution. These are virtual farmers markets, using Internet shopping cart software to consolidate local offerings for consumers who pick up at a designated drop point. This takes some of the marketing pressure off the farmers (who are notoriously bad marketers), allows them to stay on the farm instead of spending a day at the farmers’ market, and offers buyers a convenient pickup time for the entire local inventory. Buyers aren’t limited to what is only available at a single point in time on farmers’ market days.

I talk with hundreds of young people each year and I’m convinced that if farming were seen as an economically viable vocation, it would immediately lose its dust-and-drudgery stigma. We’re already seeing accelerating interest in farming among young people, but we’ll get to that in a minute.

The single biggest element of this economic hurdle is entry level capitalisation. The phrase “start farming” is rife with assumptions about buying land, buildings, and equipment. Expensive land, buildings, and equipment, I might add. This impediment raises a barrier of entry, keeping young people from being readily able to get into farming. Are you ready for a revelation? When young people can’t get in, the old people can’t get out.

If farmland can't get transferred to the next generation, old people are stuck with it. Most don't want to sell it outside the family. Most don't want to see it abandoned. [or in NZ's case, amalgamated into mega-farms well beyond the purchase of young farmers. Ed.] But barring some miracle that defies societal prejudice, economic assumptions, and human resources, the land is in limbo until death or some other catastrophe jars it into other hands.

Meanwhile, most young people aspiring to be farmers complain about not being able to find an opportunity. What's the difference? Why is one group regularly turning away opportunities while so many struggle to find a way in? Very simply, a credible internship experience. It makes all the difference.

Young people need a jumping off point as much as the older farmers need a partner. While I have no desire to match up the actual participants individually, I find great pleasure and emotional reward in facilitating a platform that allows the matchmaking to occur. Young people need the self-confidence and resume in order to access the opportunities. The older farmers needing a partner rightfully demand a resume that's more substantial than smiles and dreams.

Established farmers want and deserve a vetted young person, someone with a track record. This nexus of need and aspiration is what interning is all about. I believe this partnering is the most important aspect of our food

system today. If we don't figure out a way to get these two together, important and valuable farmland will languish unproductively [farms are being abandoned across the US. Ed] and our food system will deteriorate. Rural communities will deteriorate as well. This is much broader than family transfer, although that is one partnering possibility, and arguably the most historically common. Today, we need to embrace non-family multi-generational agrarian partnerships as the key for this land and informational transfer.

We need to embrace non-family agrarian partnerships if we want vibrant landscapes.

Multi-generational farm partnerships create vibrant farm landscapes for all of our grandchildren, both urban and rural. Ultimately, this leaves a legacy of food and farming that is more secure and stewardship oriented. The future demands it. Tomorrow's generation deserves it. Now let's make it happen. 🌱

FIELDS OF FARMERS: INTERNING, MENTORING, PARTNERING, GERMINATING BY JOEL SALATIN, POLYFACE INC. 2013, WITH KIND PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR.

*City people have a role in helping to address the problem of farm succession and potential loss of food security. Launched at the Salatin's Auckland seminar in Feb. this year, **The Land Trust** was acknowledged by Joel as having a significant role in growing a resilient future for NZ. See pages 18-21.*

