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THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER JOHN IKERD

Soul of the local food movement

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The local food movement has emerged from the erosion of public trust and confidence in organic foods. The organic food movement emerged as a consequence of declining trust and confidence in the conventional/industrial food system. As organic foods grew in popularity, there was a call for their standardization and certification to maintain the integrity of the movement. National organic certification also made organic foods accessible to more people by allowing organics to move into mainstream food markets.

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However, uniform organic standards also facilitated the consolidation of control of organic production by large agri-food corporations.

To maximize profits, corporate processors and retailers pressured organic producers to minimize production costs, which meant moving toward the minimum *enforceable* organic production practices. The social and ethical integrity of the organic movement couldn't be encoded in the sets of allowable and non-allowable organic inputs and production practices required for organic certification. Many organic consumers then turned to local

*Why an **Economic Pamphleteer**? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. I spent the first half of my academic career as a free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. During the farm financial crisis of the 1980s, I became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn't working and wasn't going to work in the future—not for farmers, rural communities, consumers, or society in general. Hopefully my "pamphlets" will help spark the needed revolution in economic thinking.*

farmers to restore trust and confidence in the social and ecological integrity of their food. The philosophical mainstreams of the organic and local foods movements parted ways. Organic production surged ahead, but the heart and soul of organics were left behind (Ikerd, 2008).

Many factors have contributed to the growing popularity of local foods. However, the modern local food movement was born out of the industrialization of organics.

If the local food movement is to fulfill its transformational potential, it must not betray the trust and confidence of its customers and supporters. Local foods must be profitable, but profits must be understood as a means of pursuing the higher purpose of meeting the basic human need of all for appealing, wholesome, nutritious food. The ecological, social, and economic integrity of local foods depends on the willingness of people to give *purpose* priority over *profits*.

We can't *prove* the existence of purpose, at least not scientifically. That's why most scientists either deny or ignore it. Others relegate purpose to the realm of religion or metaphysics. However, a world without purpose simply makes no sense. Without purpose, there would be no way of discerning right from wrong or good from bad. If there were nothing in particular we were meant to do with our lives, then whatever we might choose to do, or not do, simply wouldn't matter. Without purpose, our life would be meaningless. That being said, if we accept the existence of purpose, we must accept it as a matter of faith, not fact—a spiritually rooted belief.

Conversation about purpose, meaning, and spirituality can be uncomfortable. Most people seem to be okay with expressions of spirituality by clerics, poets, writers, or scholars. However, few seem willing to integrate the common sense of spirituality into their everyday lives. The spirituality of food is accepted as prose but rejected as prescription. For example, in an interview with Bill Moyers, Wendell Berry said, "There are no sacred

and unsacred places; there are only sacred and desecrated places. My belief is that the world and our life in it are conditional gifts. We have the world to live in on the condition that we will take good care of it" Moyers, Winship, & Mannes,

2013, minutes 6:10 & 12:01).

Most people seem to embrace such statements with expressions of awe or reverence.

They openly accept the abstract idea of spirituality.

However, few seem willing to allow spirituality to guide their day-to-day lives, including the ways they make their living.

Perhaps a spiritually guided world reflects how most people think reality should be understood—but is

not and probably never will be. Regardless, those who give the spiritual reality of purpose and meaning priority over the tangible reality of profits and productivity risk being labeled naïve, idealistic, or at least unrealistic.

Like it or not, purpose is the driving force of the local food movement. The purpose of the local food movement, like the organic food movement before it, is to create a permanent, sustainable food system that is essential for humanity to fulfill its purpose for being here on earth. Berry suggests our life on earth is a gift that is conditioned on our fulfilling our responsibility for taking good care of it. As Pope Francis puts it, "The biblical texts... tell us to 'till and keep' the garden of the world (Gen 2:15). 'Tilling' refers to cultivating, ploughing or working, while 'keeping' means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving....Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations" (Francis I, 2015, para. 67). The local food movement must be profitable if it is to achieve that purpose, but profits are only the means, not the end.

The local food movement is but the latest phase of the sustainable agriculture movement, which is commitment to meeting the sustenance needs of all today while taking care of the earth to

**The ecological, social,
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ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations. Sustainability is inherently purpose-based, and thus is inherently spiritual. If there were no purpose for human life on earth, why should we be concerned about its sustainability? If our purpose was to desecrate the earth rather than care for it, the world would be better off without us. We have a moral responsibility to care for others because we each have a sacred duty within the uniquely human purpose of caring for the other living and nonliving things of the earth. We are caretakers of the sacred earth.

The local food movement is a fragile reflection of the resolve of humanity to find some way to fulfill this awesome responsibility. Many people support local foods because they sense it is the “right thing to do”—even if they don’t see it as a sacred responsibility. They know the current industrial food system is not sustainable—but may not see it as a “weapon of desecration.” Industrial

agriculture will attempt to either destroy or co-opt and absorb any movement that threatens its supremacy. Any movement that prioritizes profits over purpose will be vulnerable to this ecological and social desecration.

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This not some theoretical, philosophical proposition. The consequences of a profit-driven food system are clear and compelling. Today’s industrial food system is neither meeting the basic food needs of all today nor ensuring that future generations will be able meet their needs for food. As Pope Francis suggests, those in the local food movement must continually

ask, “What is the purpose of our life in this world? Why are we here? What is the goal of our work and all our efforts? What need does the earth have of us?” (Francis I, 2015, para. 160). The local food movement must remain true to its purpose; it must not sacrifice its soul.



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