

# Noble Farming

Joel Salatin

If you want responsibly raised food, encourage the next generation's best and brightest to become farmers.



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I'll never forget my guidance counselor's apoplectic fit when I announced to her that I wanted to become a farmer. It was the last fit I let her have on my account, the first one having come the previous year, when I elected to take typing instead of physics. At the tender age of 16, I had already decided to be a farmer-writer and needed typing skills more than physics, but that did not fit in her paradigm for National Honor Society college-bound students.

Recently, I judged a 4-H districtwide public-speaking contest. One of the young men competing gave a speech about how poorly he'd been treated by his school's guidance counselors and administration when he announced his intentions to be a farmer. As he verbalized his soul's anguish, I relived my own experiences and by the end of the speech wrestled with twin emotions: sadness for being disrespected and anger toward a culture—and especially its academic elitists—who dare to question the nobility of farming. (I wish I had a nickel for every middle-aged farmer who starts his story with a self-deprecating, "I stayed on the farm, so I guess I was the dumb one. . . .")

A few years ago, one of our apprentices returned to his small family farm near Spokane, Washington, able and willing to make a go of it. At a church-related summer camp, he met a young woman from British Columbia, just across the border. When they decided to marry, they had to fill out Immigration and Naturalization Service paperwork so she could join him in his farming enterprise.

When he filled in the line for occupation with *farmer*, the INS rejected the request because, according to them, farming is not a valid occupation. In order to bring his bride across the border, he had to agree to pursue a five-year bona fide—that is, *non-farming*—occupation. He's now a truck driver, but he has quite an animal menagerie on his small acreage.

The stereotype of the redneck, hill-billy, trip-over-the-transmission-in-the-front-yard, tobacco-spittin' hick

farmer is a long way from Jefferson's vision of the agrarian intellectual. When a culture assumes that farming is beneath the dignity of its A and B students, it consequently entrusts its most precious natural resources—air, soil, water—to the least thoughtful and innovative minds.

**I'll know a cultural shift has come when I overhear a mom proudly proclaim, "My Johnny is going to be a farmer!"**

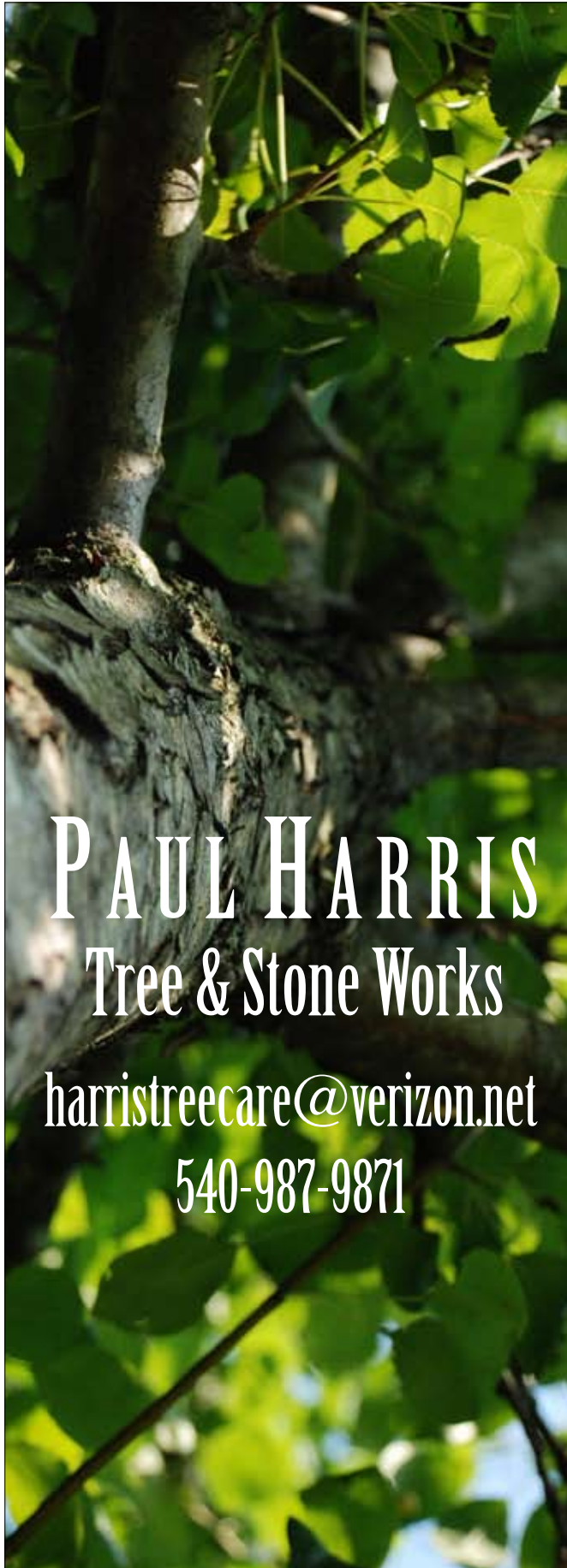
I suggest that the reason farmers believe industrial food superstitions—for instance, that crowding chickens in "concentrated animal feeding operations" does not encourage disease—is that we've had an agrarian brain drain for several generations. Maybe that's because the dot-com revolution recently, and the industrial revolution in the past, siphoned off creative entrepreneurs and left a bunch of not-so-independent thinkers tending the food system.

The intellect required to grow food has gradually been subcontracted to multinational businesses that extract wealth from the countryside and depend on duplicitous farmers to do little for themselves. "Composting to grow and create your own soil can't work," farmers are told. "Buy fertilizer—made with petroleum from the Middle East—from us." Another common line? "To be efficient, you must crowd your animals into factories that require copious amounts of energy, concrete, and steel . . . and ultimately pharmaceuticals to keep the animals from dying . . . and fuel to haul feed in and manure out."

Unless—and until—our culture begins honoring and respecting agrarian pursuits as noble and viable occupations for the best and brightest, our food system will continue to be held hostage by industrial



Children gathering eggs at Belle Meade's summer camp in Sperryville, VA.



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superstition. I'll know a cultural shift has come when I overhear a group of soccer moms postulating about whose prodigy will go farthest in the world and one mom, without batting an eyelash, proudly proclaims, "My Johnny is going to be a farmer!" Rest assured that the day parents are proud of sons and daughters who farm, thinking people will again be stewarding our precious air, soil, and water.



MOLLY McDONALD PETERSON

How do we prepare the next generation of farmers? We start by getting our kids off the computer and into the kitchen and the garden. Today's children are growing up with an unprecedented assumption of control: In video games, dead guys come back to life; if your car wrecks, you wait a few seconds and get another one; if you don't like this game, you can create another one. When you inhabit a virtual world that is subject to your whims, you enter life with an incredibly jaundiced view of nature and reality.

In the kitchen and in the garden, however, we learn that the universe is bigger than we are. I'm not always in control. My carefully tended squash plant may suddenly wilt and die from a vine borer. A hailstorm may wipe out the corn just as it silks. And I cannot undo my mistakes: When a tomato plant dies because I didn't shield it from frost, it won't heal up overnight. When chickens die because I neglected to give them water, they won't be there to greet me tomorrow. If we hope to raise a generation with more humility and less hubris, our work needs to begin in the soil and at the sink. Adults who spent their youth raising things and observing the power of nature appreciate those who tend the fields and flocks.

I played trumpet in high school and thought myself pretty good. But when I hear professional trumpeters, I'm in awe, because I have a sense of how hard it is to do what they do. Likewise, the best way to instill respect for those who provide our food is to grow some ourselves. When eaters grasp the work and skill that brings food to their plate, they will no longer assume that only the daffiest and dumbest are worthy of producing our food.

Our food quality is tied to, and can never exceed, the honor we give to good, thinking farmers. The quality of our food is a direct result of our nation's attitude toward agrarianism. Let the attitude shift begin.

*Internationally acclaimed conference speaker and author Joel Salatin and his family operate Polyface Farm in Augusta County near Staunton, Virginia, producing and direct marketing "salad bar" beef, "pigaerator" pork, and pastured poultry. He is now also co-owner, with Joe Cloud, of T&E Meats in Harrisonburg. Visit [www.polyfacefarms.com](http://www.polyfacefarms.com) for a list of restaurants and stores that feature Polyface products, a calendar of Joel's speaking engagements, and information on his many books.*