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The Future of Food and Farming, Part II

by Gordon Clark

There are now more prisoners in the United States than farmers.

This is a remarkable "side-effect" of the industrial agriculture system, which has been systematically driving farmers off the land for decades. And as I explained in Part I of "The Future of Food and Farming," published in the April Voice, this is but one of the many well-documented effects of petrochemical intensive industrial agriculture. It is also systematically destroying our soil, water and air (it's one of the leading emitters of greenhouse gases), not to mention our collective health.

The monocrop model of industrial agriculture is also especially vulnerable to the increasing effects of climate change - think floods, droughts and pests - and it can only exist with a continuous supply of cheap petroleum. For all these reasons, and most obviously because of the last, industrial agriculture is unsustainable.

As food author/superstar Michael Pollan soberly reminded us in [The Omnivore's Dilemma](#), unsustainable means that sooner or later it must collapse. Bear in mind we've been running on this system for 50 years now.

Is there an alternative to this dangerous, ultimately self-destructive method we currently have for growing our food? Yes, and most of you reading this already know the rough contours of that alternative - it's described by the words local, organic and sustainable.

Yet at the same time, the biggest obstacle to a new and different form of food and farming could well be our inability to envision it. This is because the process and products of industrial agriculture have become so intertwined with our lives, it's hard to imagine anything else. Even now, local, organic and sustainable account for just a tiny sliver of our total food production, maybe 4% nationally - i. e. 95+% is industrial food.

Thus, it's as hard for us to imagine a future where we produce most of our food locally as it must have been for those living in the pre-Civil War South to imagine a black U.S. president, or for pre-suffrage Americans to imagine female political leaders.

Likewise, it's as hard for us to imagine a catastrophic collapse of industrial agriculture - the day when we can't depend on trailer trucks full of food from somewhere else arriving at our supermarkets - as it is to imagine, let's say... a catastrophic oil spill that blackens hundreds of miles of U.S. coasts and wipes out our coastal fisheries. Until, of course, the inevitable finally happens.

So what could this radically different, sustainable future of food and farming look like?

Positive models abound. Montgomery County has a relative abundance of farmers markets selling healthy food, and we are chock-a-block with organic Community Supported Agriculture, or CSAs (farms that sell "shares" of their produce and then deliver them weekly during the growing season). Productive small organic farmers, from Mark Israel and Judith Lesser at Query Mill Hill Farm out in Travilah (west of Gaithersburg) to Charlie Koiner, who operates a 1/2 acre "farmette" a mere four blocks from downtown Silver Spring, show that large amounts of delicious, safe, healthy food can be grown in relatively small areas, even urban ones.

Some farms also point us toward new social structures. Red Wiggler Community Farm in Clarksburg not only grows enough organic food to feed 100+ families through their CSA program, they also employ a large number of developmentally disabled citizens, their "growers".

Religious congregations, which have considerable access to land, could play an increasingly important role in our new food future. Currently there are at least 16 congregations - Christian, Jewish and Muslim alike - that have established community gardens in Montgomery County, and have formed a new Congregational Community Garden Network. They come in all shapes and sizes, up to the immense 10,000 square foot garden (more like a farm, really) operated by the Cedar Ridge Community Church outside Burtonsville, which delivers thousands of pounds of fresh food to local shelters and food pantries. There are at least another 700 congregations in our county - imagine how much food could be grown.

Our schools will also have to play an increasing role to create this new future - first and foremost by teaching our kids what healthy food looks like, where it comes from, and what it takes to grow it. While our own county school system currently (incredibly, stupefyingly) bans vegetable

gardens, there are thousands of other schools that are successfully operating these classrooms of healthy eating and living. First Lady Michelle Obama has, thankfully, taken up this cause.

Our \$2 billion a year school system is also the largest institutional buyer of food in the county, serving more than 13 million meals a year. Certainly some of the money used for that food could be thoughtfully turned toward supporting local farms. Tony Geraci, the nationally-known food director of the Baltimore City School System, not only buys from local farmers, he has established their school system's own farm to help feed (and teach) its kids.

Meat consumption will probably decrease in our new food and farming future - but given that we Americans currently eat an astounding 200 pounds of meat per person per year, that's a good thing. More importantly, revolutionary farmers such as Joel Salatin in Virginia (of Omnivore's Dilemma fame), are demonstrating that you can raise healthy animals in a humane fashion while actually improving the soil they graze on - as opposed to the environmental destruction wreaked by the industrial factory meat farming system. A little closer to home is Wagon Wheel Ranch in Howard County, and Grassentials, the first free range, naturally fed meat, poultry and egg farm in our own county, just started by Salatin protégé Matt Rales outside Potomac.

Perhaps most fundamental to our new food and farming future will be individual gardeners. Americans grew 40% of their own vegetables during WW II in countless Victory Gardens. We know we can do this. Certainly some portion of the estimated 10 million new food gardeners since the start of the recession are in Montgomery County, with more on the way. All those suburban lawns just might come in handy after all.

Of course, the other huge obstacle to this new vision of food and farming is the special interests that make so much money off the current system, from developers right here in Montgomery County to agribusiness giants operating in our nation's capital. There is a reason our county is sprouting new condos and highways instead of new farms, and why cheeseburgers cost less than broccoli, and it has a lot more to do with the influence of these interests' political contributions than with any free market economics.

The ultimate beauty of our new food future, however, is that we can make a lot of this happen ourselves. We can defy those who would force us to eat bad food. We can change county land use policy (more easily at least than federal policy). We can change our school system's policy and practices. We can use our dollars to support the local food system we want. And we can always grow our own food. By reversing the industrial agriculture trend and putting more people

back into food production as opposed to more oil and chemicals - that's the key - we can grow enough healthy and safe food for everyone.

We can do this. We can create a flourishing, community revitalizing, life and planet-preserving food system. Or we can wait for the inevitable collapse of industrial agriculture, which is moving toward us as inexorably as an expanding oil slick.

Liberation is ours to choose, and now is the time to act.

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