

University of Massachusetts Extension and  
The Berkshire Regional Food and Land Council

# Toward An Agricultural Ethic

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*Which is personal,  
community responsible,  
globally appropriate,  
practical, undeniable,  
and pleasing*



Bonner J. McAllester  
Illustrations by Victoria B. Reed



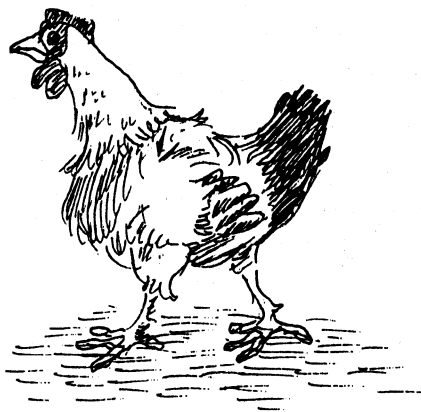
**TOWARD AN AGRICULTURAL ETHIC  
WHICH IS PERSONAL,  
COMMUNITY-RESPONSIBLE,  
GLOBALLY APPROPRIATE, PRACTICAL,  
UNDENIABLE, AND PLEASING**

4th Printing

The essay which follows developed out of a lively and provocative discussion among local farmers and rural community members in Berkshire County, Massachusetts. As such, it is not a policy statement of the sponsoring organizations, but rather an invitation to explore and develop further thinking about agriculture and rural communities in Massachusetts.

Bonner J. McAllester  
for the  
Agricultural Ethic Study Group  
Berkshire County, Massachusetts

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The Three Life-Giving Sisters,  
Corn, Beans, and Squash

And now this is what Our Creator did. It was indeed at this time that he thought, "I shall leave them on the earth and the people moving about will then take care of themselves. People will put them in the earth, they will mature of their own accord, people will harvest them and be happy." And up to the present time we have indeed seen them. They bring us contentment. They come again with the change of the wind (from cold to warm). And they strengthen our breath.

quoted from Seneca Thanksgiving Rituals

by Wallace L. Chafe  
Smithsonian Institute  
Bureau of American Ethnology  
Bulletin 183  
U.S. Government Printing Office  
Washington, D.C. 1961



## Foreword

Since the 1970s, the number of working farms in Berkshire County has been reduced by more than half. The retirement of older farmers, increasing land and production costs, low food prices and profits, competing land uses, disincentives for young people to enter farming, and the fundamental restructuring of the region's and nation's economy all combine to make farming in the Berkshires an increasingly difficult task.

As a result, old ties to the land are lost, open pastures revert to brush and woods, and a sense of our rural communities as agriculturally-related places is significantly altered. In addition, instead of providing abundant local food supplies, we have become dependent on out-of-state sources for 85% of the food we consume in Massachusetts. This huge import imbalance causes us to lose farms, farmers, and farmlands, and to send four billion food dollars outside of the state on an annual basis.

Are concerns about the loss of agriculture and its contribution to the integrity and vitality of rural communities simply nostalgic? Or, is interest in maintaining a strong and enduring local agriculture sound, appropriate, and realistic? The answer to these questions and the issue of local agriculture's importance to our lives and communities have gone mostly unexamined. Toward this end, UMass Extension and the Berkshire Regional Food and Land Council brought together farmers and concerned community members to form an agricultural study group under the sponsorship of the Massachusetts Foundation For The Humanities.

Participants in the study generated a number of ideas which group member and writer, Bonner McAllester, developed into the following essay, "Toward An Agricultural Ethic." Through publication of these guidelines and working principles, the study group wishes to extend discussion to a wider audience, create a broader base of understanding, provoke a more critical examination of the importance of Massachusetts agriculture, and

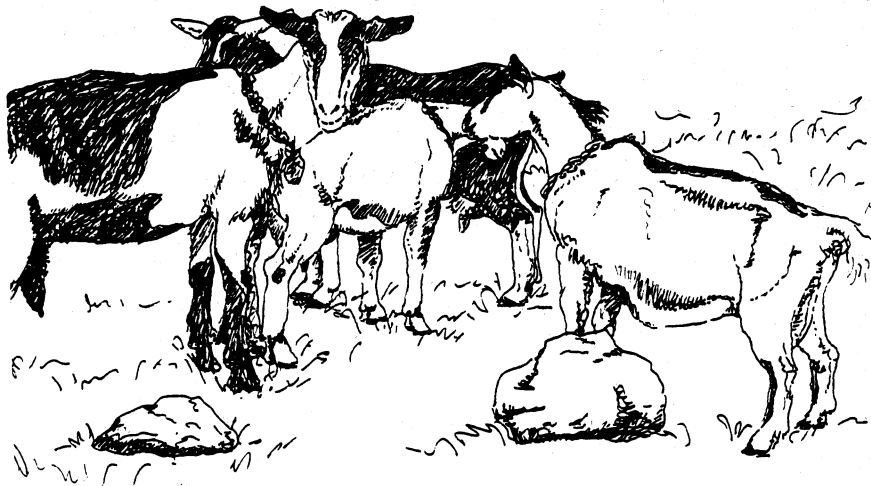
generate commitment to ensuring agriculture's future in rural communities.

While you, like some study group members, may not agree with all the prescriptions of "Toward An Agricultural Ethic," our hope is that you will join with others to discuss, debate, and determine why and how local agriculture matters.

Project Co-Directors:

Cathy Roth, UMass Extension, Economic and Community Development

Edward Misch, Simons Rock College of Bard, Professor of Philosophy and History



## Introduction

Changes in the landscape, which reflect changes in land-use over a period of time, are nowhere more apparent than here in South Berkshire County, Massachusetts, where open farm land has dwindled from 85% at the end of the last century to less than 5% now. The view from any of our mountains, hills, or cobbles hereabouts reveals a pleasant succession of ridges and valleys, all forested in sugar maple, oak, birch, hemlock, beech, white pine, ash and other handsome trees. Here and there we may see a bare spot, a rocky knob, but except for the occasional open field, ski slope, or thin winding line of a highway passing through the trees, you wouldn't know anyone lived here. From a distance, thanks to the trees, the visible evidences of people's effects on the land are barely apparent.

This lack of visible evidence reflects a shift in South Berkshire from an agricultural economic base, traditionally centered on animal husbandry and feed, to a reliance on serving the needs of tourists and owners of summer homes which at first glance is less clearly useful, (though arguably more immediately remunerative in cash) to community members than the old agricultural value.

Tourism and the resultant soaring land prices as distinct, perhaps, from land values, have achieved predictable heights in this beautiful community. As the cities deteriorate, communities like ours become more valuable (and land like ours becomes more expensive) than ever to city-dwellers who have the means to visit South Berkshire for vacation or to buy land for second homes. The farmer sells land to pay the taxes, to balance the books, to send the kids to college, to pay the health insurance, to make up the difference in market competition with corporate agribusiness of the Midwest and California. We can understand how this has happened, as we admire the woodsy view from the Cobble. We see the obvious cultural wealth of South Berkshire, the general high standard of living enjoyed by a high percentage of community members which is in large part attributable to the financial support of our visitors. When they come here, they spend here. We may think, especially if we have first-hand family experience with the hard work of farming and the

business risks inherent in anything which hinges upon New England weather patterns, that these changes, besides being inevitable, are desirable.

The following agricultural ethic has arisen from the discussions, writings, and readings of an "Agricultural Ethic Study Group" which met over a period of six weeks in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. There were fifteen members of the group, all full-time residents of Berkshire County. They included farmers, teachers, land-use planners, members of the business community, and community members interested in food, land and agriculture. They came together to address the question: "What is the value of local agriculture in South Berkshire," and to contribute to the construction of this agricultural ethic.

As we consider the following definitions, values, objectives and imperatives ("an ethic is not meek," writes Hank Ervin, of the study group, "because a trampled inheritance is despoiled"), we realize that their usefulness is at once personal and communal, local and global. What emerges is a pattern that at first looks like an expanding metaphor, the small farm as metaphor for the community, the community for the bioregion, but each concept reveals itself to be cyclical or interdependent. What is essential to the well-being of the individual community member, farmer or otherwise, is essential to the community, the bioregion, the country, the planet, and the cosmos. As small but essential members of the cosmos, we can say with logical certainty that if all is right with the cosmos, then all will be right with us, and vice versa. The converse, of course is also true.

We perceive a change in our community. It is a shift away from local agriculture and all that it entails. We consider the value of local agriculture and decide whether or not it is important to ourselves and the cosmos. Finally we ask, "Where does the global revolution in attitude and action begin?" The answer, of course, is, "in me, in my house, in South Berkshire."

## I. Definitions

As we consider the question, "What is the value of local agriculture?" and formulate our agricultural ethic, we need to accept some definitions. We still may not agree on certain values of agriculture or of land use, but as we describe the goals of our ethic for our community, we must be clear and fair in our use of language.

In 1962 "agriculture" was defined as "the science or art of cultivating the soil, harvesting crops, and raising livestock: husbandry, farming, the science or art of the production of plants and animals useful to people and in varying degrees the preparation of these products for people's use and their disposal, as by marketing."<sup>(1)</sup>

This definition tells us that science and art are not the same thing but that agriculture may be both. The last part of the definition may more properly be called "industry," as it refers to processing, packaging, advertising, transportation and whatever else is necessary to get the goods to market. Another branch of the agriculture industry includes supplying farm machinery and materials used in production of crops.

In 1982, "agriculture" was defined as the combination of "the science, art, and business of cultivating the soil, producing crops, and raising livestock; farming."<sup>(2)</sup> This definition unabashedly puts business right up there with science and art.

Any dictionary or etymology reference gives the Latin origins of *agri cultura* so we see that long ago the word may have meant "nurturing or fostering the land."

What does it matter? Do we all know what we mean by agriculture? In the Agricultural Ethic Study Group of Great Barrington, agriculture was very nearly all things to all people. To Ellen Pearson, it includes the art and science of nurturing her broody duck, and the business of doing that, also. David McAllester avoids using the term agriculture but takes it to include the woodlot well-loved and the fish pond well-loved. To George Wislocki, agriculture involves farming and a farm is a

"great green grassy place with a silo and a tractor." To many New Englanders, agriculture means cows, milk, and hay and all that these entail. To market growers, proponents of Community Supported Agriculture, subsistence farmers (and remnant '60's back-to-the-landers such as myself), agriculture means a vegetable garden, an orchard, a woodlot and maybe some animal husbandry.

The term "husbandry," for all its current recognizable sexist effects, derives from the Middle English *husebund* which means "house" and "dwelling." The archaic definition of "husband," "a manager or steward as of a household," gives rise to the second definition of "husbandry": "good careful management of resources; economy." (In its first definition, "husbandry" is synonymous with "agriculture".)<sup>(3)</sup>

David McAllester reminds us that "people are a crop on the land as much as all other creatures and all other things," and this prepares us for the following revolutionary notion put forth by Aldo Leopold in his "Land Ethic" written in 1948. "The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land." If we embrace the concepts of McAllester and Leopold, and the definition of agriculture as nurturing the land, with farming and husbandry as acceptable synonyms, we are ready to say what we mean by an ethic and get on with its construction. Our concepts and definitions so far have been broad and revolutionary, good equipment for building a new ethic.

An ethic is a set of guiding principles, guidelines governing conduct of individuals in a society. It is a response to some kind of trouble, a crisis, a perceived need for rules or order in the way people are doing things. The English author and psychologist Havelock Ellis wrote, "The sphere of ethics for the Greeks was not distinguished from the sphere of aesthetics." If a code of ethics tells us what we as a society or community understand to be what is good and bad, then it would also have told us, if we were ancient Greeks, what was beautiful and what was not. This is a good connection to bear in mind later on as we add to the definition of ethic the qualification of that science and art, agriculture.

In his "A New Land Use Ethic for the U.S.A.," the Englishman Graham Ashworth writes, "An ethic is not only prescriptive and proscriptive but also descriptive." He quotes others saying, an ethic "...expresses ideas of goodness, rightness, and obligation. Statements of goodness (also called values) identify what material conditions, states of being, social structures and processes are desirable."

Aldo Leopold points out that ethics "...rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts." He says that although a person's instincts prompt competition for a place in the community, the individual's ethics prompt cooperation.

"An ethic may be regarded as a mode of guidance for meeting ecological situations so new or intricate, or involving such deferred reactions, that the path of social expediency is not discernible to the average individual. Animal instincts are modes of guidance for the individual in meeting such situations. Ethics are possibly a kind of community instinct in-the-making."

Philosophers will always find rich ground for digging under the subject, "The Role of the Individual in Society." Garrett Hardin, longtime champion of the Zero Population Growth movement, addresses this in his "The Tragedy of the Commons," written in 1968. He writes that the moral obligation or ethic governing the behavior of individuals in population control, namely that we should limit our "breeding" to produce zero population growth, cannot and should not be adopted or enacted by an appeal to conscience. For one thing, in the case of ZPG, this approach may select for a population with no surviving traits of conscience! But also, no good ever came through the application of guilt. He quotes Paul Goodman: "The guilty do not pay attention to the object but only to themselves, and not even to their own interests, which might make sense, but to their anxieties." Hardin advocates "mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon" and cites taxation as a good coercive device.

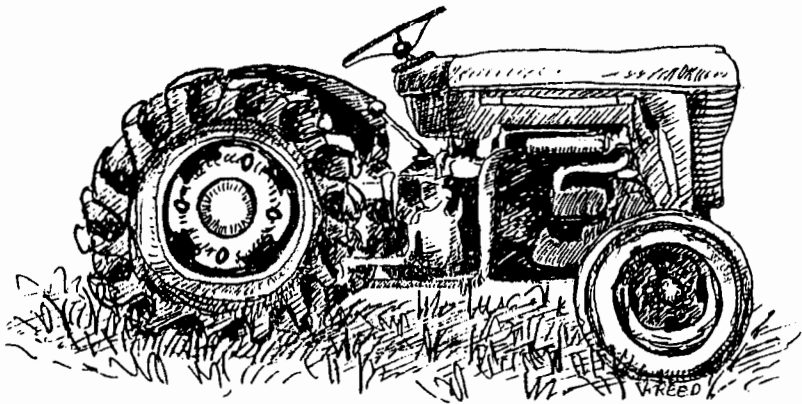
Hardin's idea is instructive for anyone who is setting down an ethic because an ethic, though it is defined as being simply a



set of guidelines, must be seen to be mutually desirable, practical, and useable. In this "land of the free," coercion may at first glance seem to be a dirty word. In his qualification of coercion as "mutually agreed upon," Hardin points the way to democratically accepted methods of regulation, for example, the New England Town Zoning Bylaw, as voted upon at Town Meeting.

Our laws reflect our ethics, and like our definitions and our communities, they are changing and changeable. Hank Ervin writes, "An ethic is interdependent, creating harmony and clarity in its diversity." He takes the broad view that one cannot write an "agricultural ethic," only an "ethic." Aldo Leopold cautions, "I have purposely presented the land ethic as a product of social evolution because nothing so important as an ethic is ever 'written'."

To this we can only say, "You may be right, but we wrote one anyway."



#### Reference Notes:

- (1) Webster's Third International Dictionary. I have cleaned up some sexist language, but otherwise quoted directly.
- (2) Second College Edition of the American Heritage Dictionary.
- (3) Webster's Third International Dictionary.

## II. The Values of a Local Agriculture

Agriculture had its beginnings with the gathering or harvesting of wild crops. How and why people changed to a system of cultivation or domestication is a story told in legend and speculation. Some argue that this organized, directed system of cultivation marks the beginning of an attitude of exploitation which has led to abuse of the land on such a scale that the landscape we see today in many parts of the world in no way resembles what once was here, in the topography or in the biotic community.

Aldo Leopold describes the effects of animal husbandry (grazing) upon the American Southwest: "The result today is a progressive and mutual deterioration, not only of plants and soils, but of the animal community subsisting thereon. The early settlers did not expect this: on the cienegas of New Mexico some even cut ditches to hasten it. So subtle has been its progress that few residents of the region have been aware of it. It is quite visible to the tourist who finds this wrecked landscape colorful and charming (as indeed it is, but it bears scant resemblance to what was in 1848)."

Such destruction of the land is not found here, and we have in South Berkshire today a deep affection for farming, for agriculture. This affection may represent a romantic and inaccurate picture of the life of the farmer and the decreasing effects of agriculture upon the life of the community.

We may feel as we list the values of a local agriculture that there is something of nostalgia at work here. This is probably true, but these values also hold up well in the bright light of our current personal and community needs. And when we speak of community, it is in the Leopoldian sense: "it includes soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land."

As we consider these values, we have to assume we refer to ecologically sound and sustainable agriculture, whether it be dairy, nursery, animal feeds, animal husbandry, tree farms, or truck farming. There is now a controversy, or an ethical imperative in the making, as to the degree of "organic" a farm



ought to be. It is not the purpose of this essay to argue the ecological or economic pros and cons of the diverse methods of agriculture except to say we *assume* our local agriculture to be one which is not environmentally degrading, that it not produce "overdrafts on the soil" of the kind that has caused the erosion and destruction of farmland. We also assume it to be one which is not humanely degrading (as in certain kinds of feedlot-style raising of animals). These kinds of agriculture will not reflect nor support the values identified in this ethic.

Local agriculture is valuable because it:

1. creates harmony for us as people with the earth we live on. It keeps us ultimately involved with all the elements of our Leopoldian community.
2. offers us beauty and solitude, a landscape which is pleasing to the eye and the kind of privacy which is afforded by open spaces. We can be "alone without being alone," as we are part of our community.
3. establishes a permanent residency by creating for people a direct connection with the soil.
4. represents the ancient rule of neighborliness and the common bond of the love of a precious thing (the land, living things).
5. provides a seasonal and life cycle perspective for our daily lives and teaches us practical and delightful things.
6. provides a sense of place and an anchor in the community that is past, present and future. Local agriculture gives people something to love, to care about, something which responds to a visceral need and which encourages dependency and interdependency of community members. It points out a sense of history and an expanded sense of time.
7. promotes a pride of region and pride of home place.

8. is a vital resource for the modern world in a way in which large-scale agribusiness is not. Local agriculture is regional and gives individuals a sense of community which is essential to mental health in the modern world.
9. instills human and community values, such as cooperation, and a love of family and of work.
10. encourages a sense of stewardship within the community for the land which sustains it.
11. enables us to see ourselves as part of a larger economy which is itself a sustaining community that needs every part of itself.
12. keeps land open, free of suburbanization.
13. provides food. We cannot live without food and it is of great value to provide food locally since the systems of import of food from other parts of the world are ecologically expensive and structurally fragile. Our local dependence upon the interstate transport system makes us feel insecure; we know that we in Massachusetts have on hand only 10-14 days' food supply.

\* \* \* \*

We have identified these values of our local agriculture as we see it today, as we have experienced it in the past, and as we would like to see it in the future. This is not at all to say that local agriculture has not or should not change. We do not mean to imply a wish to "stick to the old ways." The French author and politician Andre Malraux wrote, "insecurity comes chiefly from an unwillingness to change." Our values as well as our agriculture will change and so will our ethics, our proscriptions, our laws. We can learn much from an examination of the old ways, but stability comes from equilibrium and equilibrium is balance, which is not static. We have derived an agricultural ethic based upon our local values and experience. It is a list of imperatives, moral obligations to "do this" and by implication "do not do this." There is rightness and wrongness defined in

our agricultural ethic, and these things, like the shifting elements in the Leopoldian community, may change.



### III. The Agricultural Ethic

The following agricultural ethic has been produced in response to the values of agriculture listed in the preceding section. These values reflect what we feel to be basic needs of humans and of the land community. They are:

1. Harmony and balance (human and natural cycles are one)
2. Food (local production)
3. Aesthetics (solitude, beauty, a sense of place)
4. Community values (neighborliness, respect, cooperation, commitment)
5. Land (stewardship)

The current agricultural ethic, in this country and in our South Berkshire region, is seen to be "very far down the wrong direction," as Bob Swann has put it. It is one which is now and has historically been based upon the economics of land as a commodity, a possession to be used for personal or corporate financial gain in the form of investment and speculation. The resultant attitudes toward land, on the part of many farmers as well as other people in the community, have not served some of the needs identified above.

These are the positive imperatives of the agricultural ethic:

1. Land should be nurtured; farming and agriculture, as they are so directly involved with the land, should themselves be nurtured. In order to be nurturing we must have understanding of the needs, capacities for production, and limitations of agriculture and of farmers. We should look carefully for indications of exploitation, overpopulation and stresses of all kinds in this community and respond immediately to these cries for help. We should be aware that the balancing needs of the community are changeable, not fixed.

2. Food should be produced and consumed locally as much as possible. George Wislocki, in his "Credo for Agricultural Loyalists," calls us to "the moral high ground" where we shall buy locally and patronize only those who recognize the importance of the local farm industry. In our production of, demand for, and consumption of locally produced food, we should remember that the soils and climate in the place where we have chosen to live are particularly well-suited to the production of certain kinds of nutritious and delicious foods but not of others. As agricultural loyalists we in South Berkshire should switch our support from the importers of bananas and oranges to farmers who grow apples and Concord grapes. We can do this with pride in our home place as well as confidence that our food will be fresh and well-suited to us and our lives here. Sally Bell writes that our nurturing actions must include, "a commitment to sacrifice diversity of menu to promote (the well-being of agriculture)."
3. We realize that agriculture, in the words of Bill Turner, "is much more than a pretty view," but at the same time we recognize the importance of an environment which is comfortable, even inspiring, and that a landscape which is in ecological harmony will also be harmonious to behold. Therefore we should assure the preservation of open space, of cultivated lands in balance with the woodlots and wild lands, as well as the developed lands. Our land use regulations should reflect an aesthetic concern, an appreciation for the value of beauty.
4. We must recognize agriculture as a vital part of the community. In our actions, our lawmaking, and our teaching we must remember the interdependence of the various elements of the Leopoldian community. Jim Larkin said, "Agriculture should be thought of and treated as if our lives depended upon it," as clearly we must eat to live. Agricultural employment also should be promoted

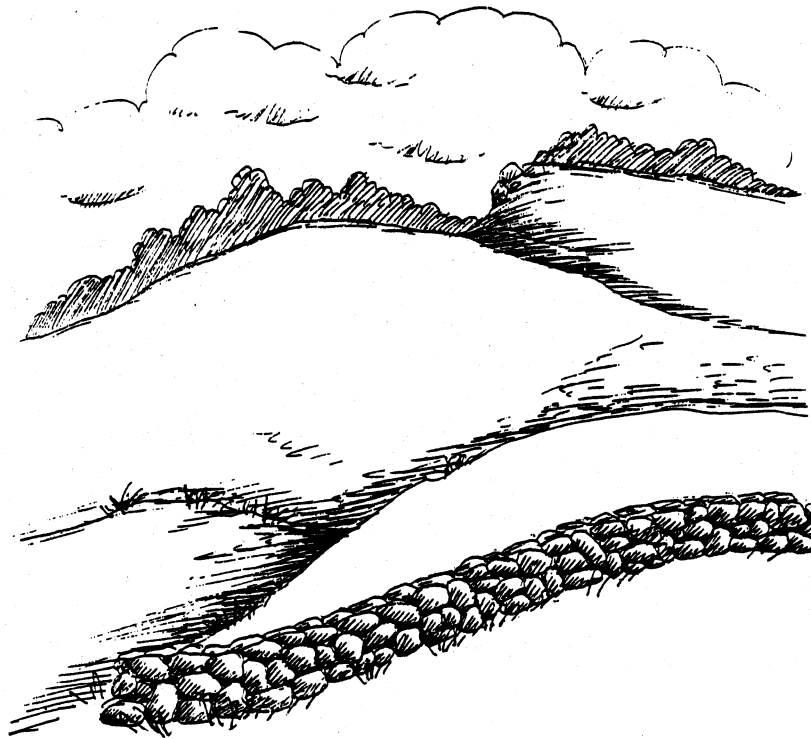
in every way possible, through training and apprentice programs, through stewardship plans and land trusts and Community Supported Agriculture programs. The agricultural production of food and livelihood locally reflects a communion or connection which, as Cathy Roth has written, "lies at the heart of farm culture that has known and served land, soil, family, community and universe by knowing and preserving the wholeness." This "wholeness" is community in the Leopoldian sense, of which we as humans are "plain citizens" who have equal rights with the other members: soils, water, plants, and other animals.

As humans we tend to separate ourselves too much from the other elements of the Leopoldian community. The result is tragic because it is so inaccurate and so isolating. It isolates us from the world around us, from other humans, and ultimately even from ourselves as we lose our identity as parts of a whole and lose our strength as community members.

We must reverse this view of ourselves: we are part of our community. Our community is us.

5. Ecologists use the pyramid as a model to show the relationship between living things and the land. Energy which originates in the sun flows upward through the layers of this pyramid in a series of food chains consisting of direct connections of one thing consuming another, thus passing along energy. The soil is at the bottom layer, the plants are next, then insects, then birds and rodents, and so on until the larger carnivores which form the apex. Aldo Leopold writes, "Food chains are the living channels which conduct energy upward; death and decay return it to the soil." Thus we see that as land sustains the living community, the living community returns energy to the land. We must treat land well, in all our relationships with it. We must view ourselves as privileged stewards,

not as owners, users, or dealers. To despoil land is to despoil ourselves. In our agricultural relationship to the land we have the opportunity, the challenge, the imperative to behave with informed respect, with nurturing love.



#### IV. Revolution: Non-violent, nurturing, and now

The agricultural ethic for South Berkshire points out clearly the changes in attitude and in action which are needed to preserve and promote local agriculture. We see from our list of values (Section II) that we want a local agriculture. Section III tells us what we must do. The next step is for each town, each family, each individual to determine how to do these things. Our agricultural study group, which has produced this essay, did not undertake the task of directing the coming revolution, the changes in attitude and action.

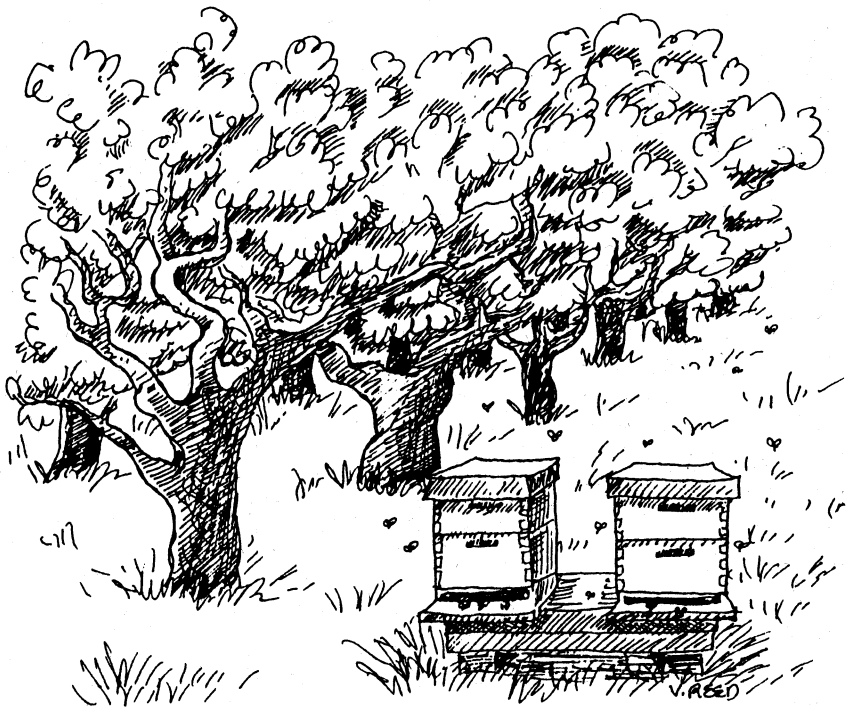
History tells us that revolution occurs only when the community is ready for it. This principle applies to us as individuals, also, and any therapist will tell us that however painful or counter-indicated may be the status quo, change is so frightening that we will continue on our painful path which is familiar to us rather than risk the unknown.

This agricultural ethic has been presented in its most positive light, emphasizing construction, proposing that which we must do rather than that which we must not. In this way we have hoped to make the prospect of change less frightening to a community which we hope is ready for revolution. It is time for us to set up the structure for Garrett Hardin's "mutually agreed upon coercions," which will be based upon mutually agreed upon right actions and attitudes. The revolution begins with each of us, spreads immediately to our family, our neighbors, and our Town Meeting.

Hegel said, "Freedom is the recognition of necessity." Hardin asks, What does freedom mean? When we "mutually agreed to pass laws against robbing, (we) became more free, not less so."

When the individual good and the common good can be recognized as being one and the same, can be mutually agreed upon and regulated and enforced, and when we apply this way of thinking and acting to local agriculture, the revolution will be under way. We can begin at home with the study of apples and an appreciation of all the ways in which they are good. As we

grow, sell, buy, and eat apples right at home, then put all the "waste" from apples into our home soil, our land, we can be conscious of the goodness of these things we are doing. This goodness will ease the pain of revolution, of separation from oranges and bananas. The agricultural loyalist loves best the taste of local fruit.



Members  
Agricultural Ethic Study Group  
Berkshire County, Massachusetts

Sally Bell, attorney, land use planner. "A local agriculture respects the nurturing earth..."

Hank Ervin, First Agricultural Bank loan officer. "An ethic is not complicated, we hold its truths to be self-evident."

Rachel Fletcher, environmental activist. "Farming ought to make one aware of the interdependency of all living things."

Michael Hogg, Southern Berkshire Chamber of Commerce, Director. "How do we establish criteria within our bylaws and town plans which will project and protect our agricultural ethic?"

Jim Larkin, dairy farmer. "Agriculture should be thought of and treated as if our lives depend on it..."

Bonner McAllester, homestead farmer, writer. "We have an obligation to walk lightly on the earth, to keep in harmony with our community."

David McAllester, Wesleyan University, professor emeritus of anthropology. "A land ethic requires that we live with the land rather than on the land and that we share rights and expectations with every part of the land."

Ed Misch, Simons Rock College of Bard, professor of philosophy and history. "We need to live as stewards of the land, to desire to preserve it, not act as predators."

Ellen Pearson, small farmer, poultry raiser. "I advocate an ethic which preserves the heart and soul of the farm, (lets people) feel the connections and get the insights."

Cathy Roth, University of Massachusetts Extension, Educator. "Communion or connection lies at the heart of the tradition of agriculture."

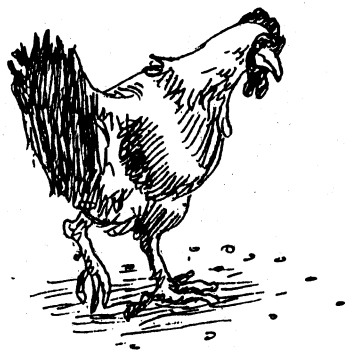
Jenny Russell, Berkshire Conservation District, Director. "We have the cheapest food on earth, but this is bought at a terrible price."

Bob Swann, Community Land Trust, Director. "We must change our thinking, to hold land and all natural things in trust..."

Bill Turner, dairy farmer and fire chief. "Agriculture is a vital and valuable industry."

Robyn Van En, organic grower, Community Supported Agriculture organizer. "Agriculture is the mother of all our culture..."

George Wislocki, Berkshire Natural Resources Council, Director. "Preserving farming in the Berkshires is the moral equivalent of fighting an economic war..."



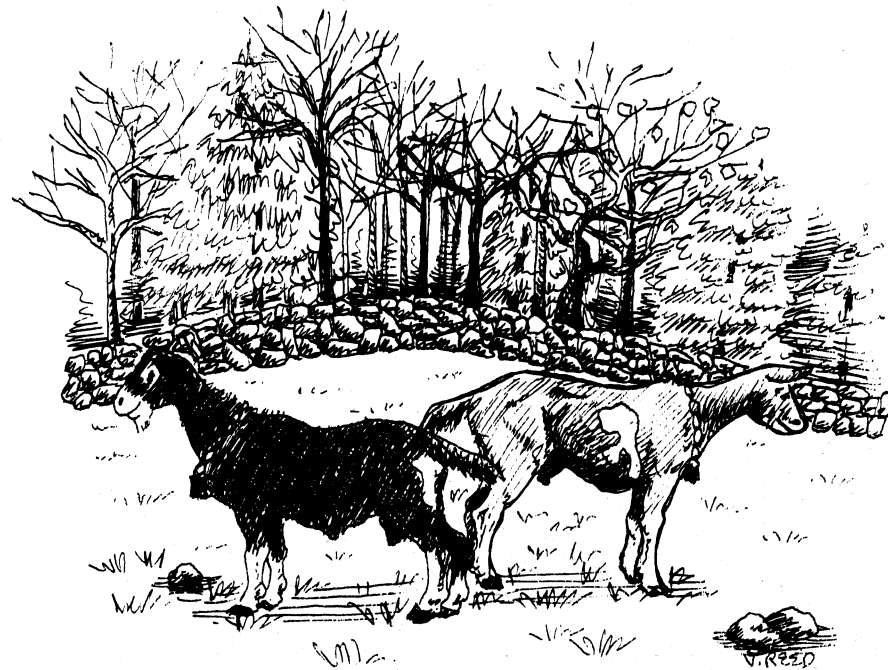
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