

This determination is making an impact well beyond the campus. Alumni of the Real Food Challenge are heading into communities where they're using their passion and organizing skills to expand the market for real food across the country. When I asked Galarneau and Steel for examples, they rattled off a bunch: Sue DeBlieck from Iowa State University is running a farm-to-school project in Maine; Sam Lipschultz, a 2009 Sarah Lawrence graduate, is starting a youth-run farmers' market in one of Brooklyn's poorest neighborhoods; and UC Irvine's Hai Vo, who had been consulting with other

youth-empowerment projects after college, just sent in his applications for programs in farm apprenticeship.

The organizers know that shifting 20 percent of school food to "real food" by 2020 is ambitious; but their vision is even bolder—and broader—than that. Currently less than 2 percent of food on most campuses is "real." Nationwide, the figure isn't much different. As Steel said, "If we can't make this shift happen on a campus, how can we expect it to happen elsewhere? And if we *can* do it on campuses, then we can start asking, Why can't we do it everywhere?" ■

Wendell Berry's Wisdom

Today's conversation about food was started by dot-connecting writers like Berry in the 1970s.

by MICHAEL POLLAN



A few days after Michelle Obama broke ground on an organic vegetable garden on the South Lawn of the White House in March, the business section of the Sunday *New York Times* published a cover story bearing the headline IS A FOOD REVOLUTION NOW IN SEASON? The article, written by the paper's agriculture reporter, said that "after being largely ignored for years by Washington, advocates of organic and locally grown food have found a receptive ear in the White House."

Certainly these are heady days for people who have been working to reform the way Americans grow food and feed themselves—the "food movement," as it is now often called. Markets for alternative kinds of food—local and organic and pastured—are thriving, farmers' markets are popping up like mushrooms and for the first time in many years the number of farms tallied in the Department of Agriculture's census has gone up rather than down. The new secretary of agriculture has dedicated his department to "sustainability" and holds meetings with the sorts of farmers and activists who not many years ago stood outside the limestone walls of the USDA holding signs of protest and snarling traffic with their tractors. Cheap words, you might say; and it is true that, so far at least, there have been more words than deeds—but some of those words are astonishing. Like these: shortly before his election, Barack Obama told a reporter for *Time* that "our entire agricultural system is built on cheap oil"; he went on to connect the dots between the sprawling monocultures of industrial agriculture and, on the one side, the energy crisis and, on the other, the healthcare crisis.

Americans today are having a national conversation about food and agriculture that would have been impossible to imagine even a few short years ago. To many Americans it must sound like a brand-new conversation, with its bracing talk about the high price of cheap food, or the links between soil and health,



or the impossibility of a society eating well and being in good health unless it also farms well.

But the national conversation unfolding around the subject of food and farming really began in the 1970s, with the work of writers like Wendell Berry, Frances Moore Lappé, Barry Commoner and Joan Gussow. All four of these writers are supreme dot-connectors, deeply skeptical of reductive science and far ahead not only in their grasp of the science of ecology but in their ability to think ecologically: to draw lines of connection between a hamburger and the price of oil, or between the vibrancy of life in the soil and the health of the plants, animals and people eating from that soil.

I would argue that the conversation got under way in earnest in 1971, when Berry published an article in *The Last Whole Earth Catalogue* introducing Americans to the work of Sir Albert Howard, the British agronomist whose thinking had

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deeply influenced Berry's own since he first came upon it in 1964. Indeed, much of Berry's thinking about agriculture can be read as an extended elaboration of Howard's master idea that farming should model itself on natural systems like forests and prairies, and that scientists, farmers and medical researchers need to reconceive "the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal and man as one great subject." No single quotation appears more often in Berry's writing than that one, and with good reason: it is manifestly true (as even the most reductive scientists are coming to recognize) and, as a guide to thinking through so many of our problems, it is inexhaustible.

That same year, 1971, Lappé published *Diet for a Small Planet*, which linked modern meat production (and in particular the feeding of grain to cattle) to the problems of world hunger and the environment. Later in the decade, Commoner implicated industrial agriculture in the energy crisis, showing us just how much oil we were eating when we ate from the industrial food chain; and Gussow explained to her nutritionist colleagues that the problem of dietary health could not be understood without reference to the problem of agriculture.

Looking back on this remarkably fertile body of work, which told us all we needed to know about the true cost of cheap food and the value of good farming, is to register two pangs of regret, one personal, the other more political: first, that as a young writer coming to these subjects a couple of decades later, I was rather less original than I had thought; and second, that as a society we failed to heed a warning that might have averted or at least mitigated the terrible predicament in which we now find ourselves.

For what would we give today to have back the "environmental crisis" that Berry wrote about so prophetically in the 1970s, a time still innocent of the problem of climate change? Or to have back the comparatively manageable public health problems of that period, before obesity and type 2 diabetes became "epidemic"? (Most experts date the obesity epidemic to the early 1980s.)

But history will show that we failed to take up the invitation to begin thinking ecologically. As soon as oil prices subsided and Jimmy Carter was rusticated to Plains, Georgia (along with his cardigan, thermostat and solar panels), we went back to business—and agribusiness—as usual. In the mid-1980s Ronald Reagan removed Carter's solar panels from the roof of the White House, and the issues that the early wave of ecologically conscious food writers had raised were pushed to the margins of national politics and culture.

When I began writing about agriculture in the late '80s and '90s, I quickly figured out that no editor in Manhattan thought the subject timely or worthy of his or her attention, and that I would be better off avoiding the word entirely and talking instead about food, something people then still had some use for and cared about, yet oddly never thought to connect to the soil or the work of farmers.

It was during this period that I began reading Berry's work closely—avidly, in fact, because I found in it practical answers to questions I was struggling with in my garden. I had begun grow-

ing a little of my own food, not on a farm but in the backyard of a second home in the exurbs of New York, and had found myself completely ill prepared, especially when it came to the challenges posed by critters and weeds. An obedient child of Thoreau and Emerson (both of whom mistakenly regarded weeds as emblems of wildness and gardens as declensions from nature), I honored the wild and didn't fence off my vegetables from the encroaching forest. I don't have to tell you how well that turned out. Thoreau did plant a bean field at Walden, but he couldn't square his love of nature with the need to defend his crop from weeds and birds, and eventually he gave up on agriculture. Thoreau went on to declare that "if it were proposed to me to dwell in the neighborhood of the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived, or else of a dismal swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp." With that slightly obnoxious declaration, American writing about nature all but turned its back on the domestic landscape. It's not at all surprising that we got better at conserving wilderness than at farming and gardening.

It was Wendell Berry who helped me solve my Thoreau problem, providing a sturdy bridge over the deep American divide between nature and culture. Using the farm rather than the wilderness as his text, Berry taught me I had a legitimate quarrel with nature—a lover's quarrel—and showed me how to conduct it without reaching for the heavy artillery. He relocated wildness from the woods "out there" (beyond the fence) to a handful of garden soil or the green shoot of a germinating pea, a necessary quality that could be not just conserved but cultivated. He marked out a path that led us back into nature, no longer as spectators but as full-fledged participants.

Obviously much more is at stake here than a garden fence. My Thoreau problem is another name for the problem of American environmentalism, which historically has had much more to say about leaving nature alone than about how we might use it well. To the extent that we're finally beginning to hear a new, more neighborly conversation between American environmentalists and American farmers, not to mention between urban eaters and rural food producers, Berry deserves much of the credit for getting it started with sentences like these:

Why should conservationists have a positive interest in... farming? There are lots of reasons, but the plainest is: Conservationists eat. To be interested in food but not in food production is clearly absurd. Urban conservationists may feel entitled to be unconcerned about food production because they are not farmers. But they can't be let off so easily, for they are all farming by proxy. They can eat only if land is farmed on their behalf by somebody somewhere in some fashion. If conservationists will attempt to resume responsibility for their need to eat, they will be led back fairly directly to all their previous concerns for the welfare of nature.

—"Conservationist and Agrarian," 2002

That we are all implicated in farming—that, in Berry's now-famous formulation, "eating is an agricultural act"—is perhaps his signal contribution to the rethinking of food and farming under way today. All those taking part in that conversation, whether in the White House or at the farmers' market, are deep in his debt. ■

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