

## Beyond Organic: What's Really At Stake

by Fred Kirschenmann

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It was such a pleasure yesterday here at the Organic Summit to shake hands and get hugs and to see some of you with whom I've worked with for 25 or 30 years now. I got to thinking about all of you, and I thought...this is a time to speak from the heart.

I will do my best to share what is on my heart in terms of the challenges we face as an organic community, and for me as a farmer of 60 years now. The flip side of challenges are always opportunities—you can't be a farmer and not see things that way. I think over the next two decades we're going to see more in the way of challenges and opportunities than we've seen over the last two decades.

As you all know, we have some tensions within the organic community. It's important to honor this tension, which I tried to do in choosing the title for my talk. I don't know who first came up with the phrase, "beyond organic," but in my awareness it was Michael Ableman, in the essays he wrote some time ago about his passion growing up in the organic community, and recognizing some things that were happening that he didn't feel were appropriate to our future—it was then that he began to write about "beyond organic." Wherever the term came from, it refers to this tension between those who want to maintain the original principles of organic agriculture, and those who feel the need to move the organic community into the industry and into the mainstream. It's created a tension that we still have with us and that we know we want to resolve.

To understand this tension, it's important to understand a little bit of history. A recent book by Philip Conford, *The Origins of the Organic Movement*, points out the difference between organic practices and the organic movement. While organic practices have been around probably 10,000 years since agriculture began, the organic movement didn't start until the early 1900s. It started as a reaction against the industrialization of agriculture, when we began to use energy-derived, external



Connie Falk

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inputs as a substitute for soil fertility and for managing healthy soils, and pesticide inputs as a substitute for managing good predator-prey relationships. There were intelligent people at the time who looked at the industrialization of farming and recognized that this is not the way to have a reliable, long-term food system. Sir Albert Howard was one of those people. He referred to the fact that we have to maintain soil fertility by maintaining its health because it is critical to the survival of human civilization. In addition, there were Lady Eve Balfour, J.I. Rodale, Rudolf Steiner, and in Japan there was Mokichi Okada. They all had essentially the same message—that industrialization was the wrong direction, that we had to maintain these fundamental principles of how nature renewed and restored itself, and we had to be partners in that—that's what organic is all about.

It's important for us to recognize that value and that passion which is a part of our history.

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As food started to be produced in this organic way, out of this passion, there were consumers who started to say, "I want to eat *that* food." They didn't all want to eat it for the same reasons—some felt it had superior nutritional qualities, some thought it had health benefits. Whether they were right or wrong about that, that's not important. Some simply wanted to support the farmers who were farming this way. So the question was, how can people identify this food in the marketplace? That brought about the emergence of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), created in the early 1970s, and hundreds of organic certification programs which have been developed since then. In the 1990s the Organic Foods Production Act brought the USDA into the system to help consumers identify food that is produced this way.

As consumers continued to want this food, it created an opportunity for industry to step in, and then came the organic *industry*. The organic industry quite rationally had a very different set of priorities from the organic movement. As any industry, it was interested in bringing organic food into the marketplace in an efficient and a reliable way to meet the needs of consumers. While the organic *movement* was philosophically driven—about how we farm and how we relate to nature—the organic *industry* was sales driven, quite naturally.

It was predictable and perhaps inevitable that tension between these two aspects of organic reality emerged. That's where we are now. Back in 2002, recognizing this tension, IFOAM, in their international conference, selected as their topic, "The Organic Community." IFOAM was suggesting the need to move to the point where the organic movement and the organic industry can become an organic community, so that we can share these aspects of our values. I don't know any farmer who isn't interested in the industry being successful at improving sales and making organic products available in a reliable and efficient way. And I haven't met anybody in the organic industry that isn't interested in seeing those original organic principles retained. Sometimes we interpret things differently and have disagreements, and that is part of the conversation that I think the organizers of the Organic Summit want to start.

While this issue is important to resolve, it pales in comparison to other challenges we face as we move into the next couple of decades. One challenge has to do with what's happening in the marketplace. It is no longer adequate for us as an organic community to rely on the organic label as our distinction within the market. Because the organic label simply says to the consumer that the food was produced in a particular way, and while that's of interest and it has certainly enhanced our market, I would argue that our success has much more to do with what the food industry is *not* doing, than with what we *are* doing.

A good example is the melamine incident, when it hit the streets and people's pets were dying. My good friend David Vetter, an organic farmer near Marquette, Nebraska, has an organic processing and manufacturing company called The Grain Place. One thing they produce is organic pet food. Suddenly his sales doubled overnight because of melamine in the food system. One reason people seek organic food is not because of what we're offering them, but because of what the rest of the food system is screwing up. We in the organic industry are not paying sufficient attention to what the market is telling us.



The market is telling us a number of things that are really quite specific. Let me quote, as one way of expressing this, from Barbara Kingsolver's new book, *Animal Vegetable, Miracle*. It's about her own family and their decision to produce all their food from their own little farm in Virginia, and the struggles her family had with that. In the middle of the book she talks about organic:

*...the paper trail of organic standards offers only limited guarantees to the consumer. Specifically, it certifies that vegetables were grown without genetic engineering or broadly toxic chemical herbicides or pesticides; animals were not given growth-promoting hormones or antibiotics. "Certified organic" does not necessarily mean sustainably grown, worker-friendly, fuel-efficient, cruelty-free, or any other virtue a consumer might wish for.*

*The rising consumer interest in organic food has inspired most of the country's giant food conglomerates to cash in, at some level. These big players have successfully moved the likes of bagged salads and hormone-free milk from boutique to mainstream markets and even big box stores. But low price has its costs. In order to meet federal organic standards as cheaply as possible and maximize profits, some industrial-scale organic producers (though not all) cut every corner that's allowed, and are lobbying the government to loosen organic rules further. Some synthetic additives are now permitted, thanks to pressure from industrial organics. So is animal confinement. A chicken may be sold as "free range" if the house in which it's confined (with 20,000 others) has a doorway leading out to a tiny yard, even though that doorway remains shut for so much of the chickens' lives, they never learn to go outside. This is not a theoretical example.\**

I wanted to share this with you because this is one of our friends telling us, "Look, something is happening in the marketplace, something that consumers want, that organic is not providing." That's what we need to pay attention to.

There are other hints about how this is happening. You're all acquainted with these. The cover of *Time* magazine last

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March, said, “Forget Organic, Eat Local.” When Time Magazine spends six pages on an article telling you about that issue, we’ve got to pay attention. *The New York Times Magazine*, on March 30, had an article, “Fighting the Tide, a Few Restaurants Tilt to Tap Water.” It’s a story about restaurants that are giving up bottled water because their customers recognize that bottled water is an environmental disaster. On the same day, *The New York Times* published another article that headlined, “Is Wal-Mart Too Cheap for Its Own Good.” It’s about the fact that while price is extremely important in the marketplace, increasingly consumers are saying that’s really not what they’re after. They want certain quality characteristics that are more important than price.

What other things does the market want? The Hartman Group has done a remarkable job helping us put a finger on the pulse of the market. A recent Hartman report stated: *62% of the consuming public now wants to buy food that is consistent with their values.* I read that and it struck me...Sixty-two percent of the public is buying food as a *values exercise*. The fact that people are now buying food based on values means we have an enormous market opportunity to respond to those values needs. And for many of them it has to do with authenticity. That means you can’t just hype these values, they really have to be there, in the way in which the food is produced and brought into the marketplace.

About three years ago, I attended a speech given by Rick Schnieders, who is the Chairman and CEO of Sysco Corporation, the largest food distribution company in North America. He said that the cutting edge today in the food service business is all about *memory, romance and trust*. What he meant was that you want a food product out there that is *so good* that when your customer eats it they say, “Wow, where did that come from, I want that again.” They build a memory connection to that food.

Secondly, he said, consumers not only want good food, they also want to feel good about buying it and consuming it. The story that comes with that food is the romance part. People now want to know where their food comes from—they would prefer to know the actual farm family that produced that food, they want to know there was good environmental stewardship, they want to know the animals were treated appropriately.

Finally, he said, consumers who want good food with that good food story also do not want to be passive recipients, they want some kind of active engagement and involvement in the food chain and they’d prefer to have that as a trusting rela-



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tionship that goes all the way from their table to the farmer.

Those companies, he said, that achieve that three-fold purpose, and bring food into the marketplace with those characteristics—memory, romance and trust—will be the most successful in today’s cutting edge marketplace.

Everything I’ve seen since confirms exactly what Schnieders said. A survey by the University of Nebraska, looking at eight mid-western states asked the question, “When you go to

buy food, what is extremely important or very important in your food choice?” At the top of the list was taste, followed, in order, by health, nutrition and price. Price is very important, but not the most important. Everything below price that consumers chose had to do with the food story—they preferred to buy it from a family farmer and preferred to buy local—all of those food story attributes.

Then a year or so ago I read a book by a business design specialist named John Thackara, who works with CEOs of major multinational corporations. He wrote this wonderful book called, *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*. Thackara points out that the industrial economy is essentially over—it’s too exploitive, it’s too heavy on the planet and it cannot exist much farther into the future. He does a fascinating job of envisioning what our future food and agriculture system, and health care and educational systems will look like. Essentially he says that we will use technology to work together *within communities* to accomplish what we need. That’s the future he envisions because of changes we’re going to see in the way our planet functions. Then he says this interesting thing—at bottom, the future is going to be all about relationship value. This takes us right back to what Schnieders said about where we are in the growing edge of the market. And that’s what the market is telling us—that we are moving into a marketing phase that enables people to be a participant in the food chain and the future will be about relationship marketing.

**B**eyond what’s happening in the marketplace, the more serious challenge is one that’s going to start hitting us within the next 20 years if not within the next five to ten—and that is what’s happening in nature. First, our storehouse of concentrated energy is rapidly being depleted. That storehouse is in old growth forests, coal, oil and natural gas, all of which evolved over the last 3.6 billion years, and we have mined in the space of about two centuries. And then it’s going to be...*gone!* The big issue right now is not running out of oil, because we are just now at the peak of global oil production.

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What happens after we hit peak global oil production is that the amount of oil available starts to drop off quickly. As we start going down that other side of that peak—particularly as we're doing even more industry that is based on oil—it's going to deplete very rapidly. We're going to start seeing oil prices and natural gas prices escalate very, very rapidly.

So, what I've been asking myself on my own farm in North Dakota—and I would ask the same thing of you in your farms and businesses—is this: Will your farm or business be operational when oil hits \$250 a barrel? And at the same time when you have half the amount of water available and twice the severe weather events? Because as we see these energy changes take place, we also won't be able to use as much water as we've used in the past. Our current food system consumes 2,000 liters of water to supply each of us with the food that we eat each day. We can't continue to use this amount of water. The Ogallala aquifer has been drained by half just since 1960; farmers on the edge of the aquifer already have had to give up irrigation. Add to this what's going on in China: 80 percent of their grain production is dependent on irrigation and they are drawing their groundwater down at the rate of 10 feet per year, in some places pumping from 1,000 feet deep. In India, 60 percent of grain production is dependent on irrigation, and they're drawing down their groundwater at the rate of 20 feet a year, in some places pumping from 3,000 feet deep. You don't have to be a farmer or a geologist to know that this is not sustainable into the future.

The other challenge that's happening in nature is climate. I don't particularly care whether people are still in denial about climate change—because they don't think that greenhouse gases are that big a deal or for whatever reason. The fact is that the climate we have had over the last 100 years has been unusually stable in terms of the history of this planet. In 1975 we already knew this. A National Academy of Sciences panel on climate change studied it thoroughly, and what they said was that the climate that we've had in the last century is abnormal. This very stable climate is not the normal situation on our planet. This is important because our industrial food system, which has been so successful, has been dependent on that stable climate as much if not more than on green revolution technologies.

So even if you discount greenhouse gases, you cannot expect the future climate to be the same as the past climate. When you add greenhouse gases to that, we're looking at a situation where we could be in deep, deep trouble. As NASA climate scien-

tist Jim Hansen has reminded us, if we continue to do business as usual for another 10 years—he said this a year ago so we've got nine years left—we are likely to experience a mass extinction comparable to our planet's six previous mass extinctions, where virtually 90 percent of the species got wiped out. This is not a situation that we can readily come back from if we cross the threshold of 500 ppm greenhouse gases, and we're at 380 ppm now. This is changing our planet fundamentally, and that's going to make it very difficult and uncomfortable for us. It's going to be very difficult for us to survive.

What about all of this hype about alternative energy that we're hearing now? It's not going to solve the problem. Because with concentrated stored energy, we're getting 100 kilocalories of energy out for every one kilocalorie of energy in. That's the efficiency ratio that we've gotten used to and that is what our industrial economy is built on. With all of the alternative energy forms we're talking about, whether it's wind or hydroelectric dams or nuclear or biofuels, the efficiency ratios are much, much lower. Corn-based ethanol—which we are saying is going to wean us from Mideast oil—provides 1.3 kilocalories of energy out for each kilocalorie of energy in. Where do you think that kilocalorie of energy comes from? It comes from the Middle East. Wind power, one of the more efficient alternatives, provides about 15 kilocalories out for each kilocalorie in. But you still have to mine the ore, turn it in to steel, manufacture the towers and the turbines, and erect them and maintain them and build the infrastructure. Where is the energy coming from for all of that? It's petroleum. It's all based on a petroleum platform.

So the question we need to ask ourselves, particularly in farming and in agriculture, is this—let's use corn-based ethanol as the example—if you could *only* use corn-based ethanol as the sole source of energy to *produce* that ethanol, would you *do* it? That's what we've got to come to terms with. How much energy does it take to produce that alternative energy? This doesn't mean that we shouldn't do alternative energy—we're going to need it. But any of us who believe that it's going to allow us to continue to do business as usual, that all we've got to do is switch from oil to ethanol or from oil to wind or from oil to solar, then you're living in a fantasy world. We have in fact been living in a kind of fantasy world for the last 200 years, because we have had this concentrated, stored energy that we've been able to mine. But that's not the world we're going to live in.

**What I've been asking myself  
on my own farm in North  
Dakota—and I would ask the same  
thing of you in your farms and  
businesses—is this: Will your farm  
or business be operational  
when oil hits \$250 a barrel?**



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Why is all of that important in terms of how we position ourselves within the organic movement? The reason I think it is so important is because we have buried, in those works of Sir Albert Howard, Eve Balfour, J.I. Rodale, Rudolf Steiner and Mokichi Okada, principles that we need to pull into the future and marry them with the best science we have available now, to create a fundamentally new food system, a fundamentally new production system, based on those agroecological principles that were identified by these stellar individuals. That's the wave of the future.

Because the only thing that I can see that's going to enable us to produce the amount and the kind of good food we want and need is going to be through biological synergy—I had the opportunity yesterday to visit the botanical gardens down in Denver, which is a wonderful place. One of the exhibits that caught my eye was about ants and plants, and their synergy, where the ants provide everything that the plants need and the plants provide everything that the ants need. That's the model.

Fortunately, we have farmers out there, who, on their own, have begun to develop those kinds of models in their farming practices. We have Takao Furuno in Japan who has a duck/rice/fish system that uses no energy inputs whatsoever, and is more productive than any industrial monoculture I've ever seen. We have Joel Salatin in this country, who has not just an intensive rotational grazing system which already reduces energy inputs but also has a series of different species of animals, each of which contributes something to the health of the whole. Very little outside energy is needed, because the animals provide all the energy that's required. It is the kind of energy exchange that takes place in nature. These are the systems we ought to be looking at. Francis Thicke in Iowa is doing this in his dairy operation. So we have these models. What we need to do now is to put at least 30% of our public research dollars in agriculture into exploring these models, seeing how we can extend them, and what else we can learn from the sciences of ecology and evolutionary biology, which agriculture has until now paid almost no attention to.

Let me close with this: 1859 was a very interesting year in our history. It was the year that the first producing oil well was created in Titusville, Pennsylvania and it was also the year that Charles Darwin published *On The Origin of Species*. The oil was so seductive that this was the path we went on—we essentially ignored Darwin. If we had reversed that, and taken Darwin seriously in terms of how we produce our food and how we make food available, we'd have a very different kind of world now, one much better positioned for the future.

But we still have this little space of time, what Thomas Berry calls "moments of grace," because they provide us with the opportunity to bring about the changes we need. That's the good news. The other part of the good news is what it will

do for us. If you want to read somebody who's done a marvelous job helping us understand this—because I don't want any of you to feel like what I've said this morning means we're moving into a future of horrible deprivation—author Bill McKibben has pointed out, after looking at all of the psychological and economic research, that our well-being has actually gone *down* since the 1950s as our wealth has increased. Once you get out of poverty there is no correlation between wealth and well-being.

So, we have a wonderful opportunity to actually *improve* our quality of life as we move into the future, moving out of the industrial era into a new era based on agroecological systems. Cooperating with nature, using and adapting to nature's cycles, rather than trying to dominate and control them as we currently do with our technology. We in the organic community have a wonderful opportunity to take global leadership in this new future, because this is our past. This is the message I hope to leave with you. 🍌

\*Excerpt from: *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* by Barbara Kingsolver, with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver. Harper Collins Publishers, 2007.

## The Organic Summit — Renewing the Organic Conversation

More than 200 organic farming and industry advocates gathered in June at the Organic Summit in Boulder, Colorado. The goal of this inaugural Summit was, as described by OFRF's Bob Scowcroft, "To share our perspectives and experience and open a civil discourse for the betterment of organic."

Veterans of the organic industry and a handful of organic farmers filled the halls and meeting rooms of the St. Julien Hotel, exploring topics like Entrepreneurial Money for Organic; The Cutting Edge of Foodservice; and (Organic) Purists and Pragmatists: Finding a Public Balance.

Guest speakers reflected on the roots of organic farming, the economically thriving community we've become, and our public identity—both for better and for worse. One notable headliner asked, "Is this the organic we wanted? One response was, "You bet it is!"

Others weren't so sure. Pivotal issues like scale and messaging were aired but left unresolved.

Summit participants praised the event overwhelmingly, yet much remains unsaid. Nine out of ten attendees wanted more discussion of "hot topics" like local organic and national standards. Eight of ten wanted more discussion of consumer behavior and trends. One-half would like to attend a Summit again next year; the other half says wait a year then reconvene. Practically all participants hope to keep the conversation alive. "Raise tough discussions, like a family meeting," implored one.

Participants came from all around and met on common ground, a key accomplishment in itself. Yet the graying set of industry reps and organic growers in attendance reflected a current challenge—discover the next generation of organic leadership and bring their voices into the conversation. —JL