

# Standards and Stewards

David Walbert, 2003

Last spring my wife and I began raising ducks. We bought seven Khaki Campbell ducklings, set up a brooder in a spare room, raised them to adulthood, watch them take their first wobbly flight across the yard, and now each day collect their eggs for our table. When we have extra eggs — which is most of the time, for our ducks lay prodigiously — we give, sell, or barter them to friends. On one occasion, accepting a dozen eggs from me, a friend asked, “Are they organic?”

Well, I thought, it depends on what you mean. By a commonsense, dictionary definition, the eggs are organic; they are laid by ducks who are raised outdoors, who eat a diet that includes the bugs and tender greens that ducks naturally eat, and who are integrated into the life of our household. They are, I could have answered, part of an organic whole that includes my family, my local ecosystem, and now my friends and community.

But that isn’t what my friend meant, and so I answered as he expected. The eggs were not produced in accordance with the USDA’s organic standards, I explained, because the commercial feed that is the basis of their diet in winter and supplements it in summer was not mixed from organically grown grain. Organic duck feed is not widely available — as far as I can tell, it is not available at all. So no, they are not “organic” after all.

But, I told him, I can tell you anything you want to know about the ducks and how they were raised. You can come visit, if you want, and see how they are raised.

There is nothing standard about my ducks or their eggs. They live in a suburban backyard, first of all. They don’t have a pond; they have a baby pool. They slept in a pen under our second-story deck until I had time to build them a proper house. They eat whatever grasses, garden thinnings, kitchen trimmings, insects, bugs, and slugs happen to be in season, alongside their ration of duck kibble. Their eggs are also far from standard; they vary in shape and size, as normal eggs do before the variations are culled by industrial processing. Rarely we find an egg that is small and almost perfectly round, entirely yolk inside. I have learned to judge by eye how many eggs of varying sizes I need to make up the number of “standard” eggs demanded by a recipe.

Last summer I killed chickens for the first time, and there was nothing standard about that, either. My friend who raised them underestimated how much protection the young broilers needed from predators, and after a raccoon mauled several of them, they spent their last few nights in the covered bed of an old pickup truck until I could arrive with cleaver and pot to dispatch them more humanely and purposefully. I botched the job of killing the first poor bird, and we shredded the skin of several chickens

before we found the proper method for removing feathers. I would recommend little of what we did to anyone else; let's call it a learning process. But they were without question the best-tasting chickens I have ever eaten.

When we decided to get ducks I could not have easily articulated my reason for wanting them. Now, I can: for breakfast this morning I fried two eggs over-easy that we had gathered only an hour before, and while I ate them I watched through the kitchen window as the ducks who laid them bathed contentedly (it seems to me) in their pool. That breakfast is what I wanted: good, rich, complex-tasting food from happy, healthy animals; a breakfast *in context*. I wanted to see the *process* of agriculture, from beginning to end; to participate in my own sustenance, but especially to know that it was made in a manner I believed to be right. It is not, on reflection, so much to ask. But that knowledge — intimate, personal, complete — is something I can't get from a supermarket, no matter what standards my food meets, no matter how many agencies certify it with how many eco-labels. I wanted knowledge not labels; process, not product; stewardship, not standards.

A desire for stewardship, this concern with process instead of product, was once behind the movement toward organic farming. The first proponents of organic farming in the 1940s argued for a link between soil health and human health, a link that raised fears for human health and nutrition but also spoke to a belief in the wholeness of nature. Even the most scientific of its backers believed that organic farming, being modeled on nature, was closer to God's will than its chemical alternative. By the 1970s, organic farming had become bound up with environmentalism, Appropriate Technology, feminism, and various social concerns that set agriculture in broader context. The market for organic food was bolstered by fears of rampant technology, by distrust of corporations and large-scale production, by a desire for food production on a personal scale — by people's desire to know where their food came from. And farmers and market gardeners started growing organically out of a desire to be good stewards of the land.

Organic agriculture now seems in danger of forsaking stewardship for mere management. That, ultimately, is the goal of the National Organic Standards — to codify the practice of "organic" agriculture and reduce it to a set of principles for managing the land. I am not going to criticize the organic standards *as standards*; that is, I am not going to quibble about whether a better set of standards could have been written. They represent a significant improvement over most agriculture in the United States, and our national agriculture would surely be improved if every farmer adopted them. Organic standards are a great step forward in farm management. But they are not, and cannot be, a guide to farm stewardship — at least not on their own.

The problem, I think, is in the very idea of standards. The purpose of standards, ultimately, is to do away with individualization, with variation, with diversity — to *standardize*. And I do not believe that farming, or food, should be standardized. Standardization is the cause of most of the problems organic farming was meant to solve or avoid: lifeless food, distant producers and consumers, farm

consolidation and rural depopulation. What we need, in American agriculture and American society, is not more standards, not better management. We need more stewardship.

What do I mean by stewardship? Like many words with moral overtones, its meaning is both obvious and murky. Consider, for example, the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, a local organization of which I am a member. Its title gives a hint of its mission, and that mission is very different from that of an organization called the Carolina Farm Management Association. Or consider the uses of “stewardship” in the Bible, which is, in Western culture, the source of most of that word’s connotations. The original, literal meaning of a steward was one who took care of a household, and descriptions of good stewards appear throughout the Bible. A steward is more than a good manager; he is “faithful,” “wise,” a member of the household he stewards and a loyal servant to his master, with a personal connection to both. Hence it is stewardship that becomes the model for the apostles’ relationship to God and to their church. They describe Christians as “stewards of the mysteries of God” (I Cor. 4.1) and as “stewards of God’s varied grace” (I Peter 4.7). One could not sensibly be a *manager* of God’s grace and mysteries.

Management is a more recent invention. Frederick Winslow Taylor’s 1911 *The Principles of Scientific Management*, which set the table for twentieth-century definitions of management, defined the goal of management to be efficiency, the maximization of production and the minimization of waste. The sole necessary attribute of a good manager was competence. “The principal object of management,” Taylor wrote, should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee.” He goes on to explain that “The words ‘maximum prosperity’ are used, in their broad sense, to mean not only large dividends for the company or owner, but the development of every branch of the business to its highest state of excellence, so that the prosperity may be permanent.” Management theory has no doubt come a long way since Taylor set out its principles, but those principles remain the same; American business is (or is meant to be) still run by them nearly a century later.

The differences between stewardship and management are subtle, but important. Most importantly, the thing of which one is a steward is assumed to have intrinsic value. Management is solely focused on the end, the product; stewardship is equally focused on the means. A good manager, say of a corporation, is expected to maximize production or profit, and all other goals (the quality of the product, the well-being of the workers) are subsumed under that end. The corporation itself nor any of its parts has value of its own apart from the profit it can produce. But a *steward* of a household or a farm or the earth (corporations do not have stewards) must also be concerned with the health and well-being of the household or farm or earth and of all of its members, because it and its members have a value in and of themselves. A steward may also fairly be expected to get results, but within certain bounds — namely, the long-term health of the persons and places involved.

Stewardship is also by implication performed in the service of someone or something, not as a

mere job or profession but as a duty. Stewardship of the land may be performed for God or for “the people” or for the earth itself, depending on the religion and politics of the steward, but it is not performed only in the service of oneself or of a multinational corporation and its shareholders. Stewardship implies *responsibility* — that the steward is responsible not only *for* something but also *to* someone.

Farm *management*, then, would have as its the goal the maximization of production and therefore of profits — and though economic success is surely one indicator of good stewardship, it is not the only such indicator. Farm stewardship implies that personal care is involved and that the farm has value apart from the profit it produces, that it is not a thing to be used up and thrown away when its productivity declines. Similarly, “land management” — which is what the Forestry Service practices, for example — requires maximizing the return to human masters (the farmer, a corporation, the government, the public). Good management requires maximizing that return over the long term, but it does not imply that the land has intrinsic value; its value is only as great as what it produces — the sum of its products. Those products may be intangible (“scenic resources” or even “biodiversity”) but they must nevertheless be categorized and quantified and assigned a monetary value, usually by being made to turn tangible profits (perhaps in the form of tourism) — to pay for their management.

If stewardship and management have different ends, they also demand different means. In particular, they require a different kind of knowledge. Whereas management requires only data, information that can be analyzed and assimilated, stewardship requires intimate, personal knowledge. The Spanish language makes a distinction between these two kinds of knowledge: *Saber* is to know as a fact (“I know that the sky is blue”), while *conocer* is to know personally (“I know you”). It is a distinction I wish I could as easily make in English, because *conocer* could also be extended to personal knowledge of a place, and thus to stewardship of a piece of the earth or of a farm. *Conocer* requires long experience: To say that I know my wife means that I know intuitively how she will respond in a given situation, not because I can predict her behavior from a mathematical model but because I have seen how she has responded in similar situations in the past. One could similarly know a piece of land from experience. A good steward can know the household or farm or place for which he is responsible, but can anyone really *know* a corporation — or “the environment”?

So stewardship must be small-scale, local, personal, experiential. Humans may be collectively stewards of the earth, but individually they can only be stewards of a small piece of the earth. They may, as the slogan goes, think global, but they can only act local.

And that brings me back to organic agriculture.

The word “organic” in agriculture once meant a host of things — a connection to natural processes, first of all, but also a sense of wholeness and harmony between producer, consumer, and nature. That combination of meanings was what attracted consumers to the term in the first place, the sense that “organic” food was safer and healthier but also more wholesome and planet-friendly. At first, though,

organic food exchanged hands at local farmers markets, where producers and consumers could communicate directly. There was, to use the Spanish word, *conocer*: people knew where their “organic” food came from.

By the 1980s, organic food had attracted a large enough market that companies began to process and package it — at first, mainly as juice and milk and frozen vegetables. Without direct communication between farmer and consumer, the consumer had no way of knowing what “organic” really meant, and so states and nonprofit organization wrote sets of standards to define the term for commercial use, by laying out what were essentially best-practice guides to farming.

Multiple, overlapping sets of standards are not quite standards after all; they allow for some diversity, communication, an opportunity for practitioners to learn from one another. And no one was prohibited from using the term “organic” to mean a somewhat different process of growing food. Now, however, we have created a set of national standards to define that process once and for all — literally, to standardize it, to make it the same, at least within certain bounds, everywhere.

But standardization violates the very idea of stewardship. No set of standards can replace personal knowledge, *conocer*, of where our food comes from. Organic standards provide a consumer with some information, and they are better than nothing, but they are merely a stopgap, an unfortunate necessity of the failure of *conocer*.

The organic standards, first of all, fail to relate intimately to place — as stewardship must. Some farmers in Michigan, I am told by a participant in the process of developing the standards, argued that “organic” farming should preclude amending the soil with *any* off-farm product — a grand idea in the upper Midwest, perhaps, where the soil has retained much of its ancient fertility, but an impossibility in the South, where centuries of tobacco and corn and carelessness have stripped the soil of its ability to support such high-mindedness, at least in the short term. The stricter standard was not adopted, and southern farmers may continue to practice “organic” agriculture. Yet the reduction of naturally based but industrially produced fertilizers is an admirable goal, and who is to say that farmers who begin with better land should not work toward that goal sooner rather than later? The Michigan farmers had a valid point — but for Michigan, not North Carolina. Farmers from Maine or Pennsylvania or Oregon no doubt had equally valid points for their own regions or localities, but they too were by necessity excluded from the standards, which must of course be the same everywhere. But the goal of organic agriculture was originally to model farming practice after nature, and nature is different everywhere. Clearly, that is no longer the goal of “organic” agriculture.

Proponents of the organic standards, like those of any set of standards, claim that standardization increases knowledge, by making sure that we really do know what we think we know. But in fact standards only define, and definitions do not expand knowledge. Definitions set limits on knowledge by drawing lines around it, categorizing it, bounding it. A set of standards does not (to borrow the legal term) take cognizance of what it does not define. As far as the organic standards and their legal enforcement are concerned, anything not explicitly mentioned in the standards does not exist. A farmer may, in fact, go beyond the organic standards, but there is no label or incentive for this. The old idea of

“transitional organic,” too, has now been eliminated. A farm could formerly call itself and its produce “transitional organic” if it was in the process of becoming organic, but under the national standards, a farm is either organic or not — period. So much for the idea that organic is about process and not product.

The organic standards, though they purport to be about the process of growing food, take even that process out of context, and this is my central concern with them. Not only does “organic” take cognizance of a fixed, limited set of practices, but organic certification ends when the food leaves the farm. Food may be abused, processed until all flavor and nutrition have been beaten out of it, and still be called “organic” — just so long as it is not adulterated with too much food not grown in adherence to the standards. It is now possible to buy “organic” cheese puffs, an absurdity made possible only by an Orwellian reduction of language to officially sanctioned terms for officially sanctioned purposes.

What lies outside the bounds of “organic”? Consider, for example, the immediate human context of agriculture, the health and well-being of farm workers and farm communities. True, if no chemical pesticides are sprayed to drift downwind and no ammonia fertilizers are applied to leach out as nitrates into groundwater, farm workers and the local community are certainly less likely to develop various forms of cancer. But nothing in the organic standards mentions the farm workers or community explicitly. Some organic farms now span hundreds of acres; the loss of farms and farmers to consolidation poses the same threats to local communities — economic stratification and eventual depopulation — whether the consolidated farms are organic or conventional. Such large-scale farms are under no particular obligation, at least as far as the organic standards are concerned, to treat their laborers with dignity and respect, let alone to give them a living wage. This is not to say that large organic farms are breeding grounds for social ills; in practice, organic farmers of any sort are likely to be more socially responsible than their conventional peers. But the standards do not require it of them, and without personal knowledge of the farmer and farm, we really have no way of knowing.

Or consider the use of inorganic fertilizer. Organic standards prohibit the application of petroleum-based fertilizers for a number of reasons. Their contribution to the nutrition of crops is minimal (they provide only a few basic chemicals in simple form) and they are harmful to the long-term health and productivity of the soil. They are also not a sustainable practice, because their manufacture requires petroleum, an extractive and limited resource, and produces pollution. But the standards say nothing about the use of petroleum in other aspects of “organic” farming and agribusiness. Most obviously, the land on which “organic” crops are grown may be (and on large scales, is likely to be) farmed with a tractor powered by petroleum. Worse, probably, is that organic food grown on the West Coast to be eaten in the East must be shipped from producer to consumer by truck — which requires, again, petroleum. If it reaches the consumer in the form of frozen organic dinners, it has likely been shipped several times to and from several locations, requiring even more petroleum — and that doesn’t begin to account for the petroleum used to process the foods or make the plastic packaging. The costs of

all that petroleum in the depletion of fossil fuel reserves, in increased dependence on foreign oil, and in pollution and potential global climate change are externalized — in other words, dumped on someone else — by organic agriculture just as they are by conventional agriculture. By the time it reaches the consumer, “organic” food may not be organic at all.

And then there is animal welfare. I am not a vegetarian; I ask only that the animals that produce my meat, milk, and eggs be treated with respect, raised as close as possible to nature, and slaughtered with a minimum of trauma. This is, I think, not so much to ask, but it is more than the organic standards demand. To be certified as organic, livestock must have access to the outdoors, but how much access is not defined. According to the Northeast Organic Farming Association (NOFA), certifiers are bound accept the farmer’s judgment on whether animals have access to the outdoors; “virtually any documentation will do to support when and how much access is granted.”<sup>1</sup> Certifiers and consumers are thus at the mercy of farmers’ claims, the very situation that standards were intended to remedy.

But standards, after all, can never be truly standard; they can never provide perfect knowledge. It is folly to think that they can. Life is complex. Every human being is unique and highly complex; nature is deeply and richly complex. Any interaction between humans and nature is therefore bound to be wondrously, unfathomably complex. And thank God for it: Life would be dull indeed if it were simple and predictable. But standards, to be manageable, must look for the simple and predictable. A set of standards for an activity such as agriculture is like a model of an ideal version of that activity. But a model can include all of the detail of the thing it models only by reproducing it precisely, and then it is no longer a model. No set of standards can anticipate every contingency in the activity it seeks to standardize. There will always be room for interpretation, no matter how carefully the standards are written. And because interpretation will vary, true standardization will be impossible.

The danger of claiming as “standards” rules that are open to interpretation is already clear in the area of animal welfare, and the USDA is making it worse. Last fall, the Massachusetts Independent Certification (MIC) was ordered by the USDA to overturn its denial of certification of a poultry farm. MIC inspectors found that the operation failed to satisfy the National Organic Standards’ requirement that poultry have access to the outdoors, but the USDA now decided to reinterpret (or rewrite) the standards in such a way that, according to NOFA, “as it now stands, eggs and meat can be sold as organic even if the animals spend their lives essentially indoors.”<sup>2</sup> Since the standards as approved require that poultry have access to the outdoors — though they are notoriously vague on just how much access — this interpretation appears to be in violation of the law, not to mention of the desires of most of the thousands of consumers and farmers who commented on the draft standards in the late 1990s. But I suspect that this incident will be the first of many such “interpretations” of the organic standards to benefit the USDA’s core constituency of large-scale producers. When we substitute standards for knowledge, we are at the mercy of those who define and interpret them.

1 From the December-January 2002–03 issue of the NOFA-Mass News, previously available at <http://www.nofamass.org/programs/social/hen1202-103.html>.

2 *ibid.*

Were perfect standardization possible, we would have no fear of interpretation, but there is only one realm where precise standardization is possible: the factory. If what is desired is a precise mechanical object, we can and do define standards for its manufacture. Such standardization is the basis of the industrial system. But agriculture is not (or should not be) about producing precise mechanical objects; agriculture is about life. Genetic diversity, microclimates, variation in soils, and a myriad other factors make farming a variable process, not subject to standardization — unless we turn agriculture into a factory, which we are, in fact, rushing to do. Precisely bred livestock remove most genetic diversity, and cloning will soon eliminate the rest; designer fertilizers (whether organic or conventional) eliminate soil variability; genetically engineered crops will eliminate variability in product. Organic farming was begun in opposition to such mechanical and industrial farming, but the fetish for standards only makes these things more likely.

Indeed, organic agriculture is already taking on the aspects of the industry it once opposed: We are seeing what happens when an idea like organic farming hears the siren song of bigness. And *bigness* is what this whole business is really about. Standards are, as I suggested earlier, both necessity and effect of bigness, for we rely on standards as a substitute for knowledge when what we attempt to control is bigger than what we can truly know. The national organic standards are no exception; they were adopted as a means of making organic food available to a mass, i.e. national, market. If all organic food were to be purchased directly from farmer by consumer and eaten locally — or sold through a single personally known and trusted agent, such as a cooperative grocery store — national standards would be unnecessary. Local and regional standards would suffice for local and regional food production; national standards become necessary only when food is to be grown in one region, processed (perhaps) in a second, and eaten in a third. But national distribution means bigness.

One could imagine a nationwide system of production and distribution of organic food that is separate from the industrial-agricultural economy and does not replicate its evils, and I suspect that this is what many organic farmers and activists who supported the drive for national standards did envision. But if such a system is possible in theory — and I am not convinced that it is, or that any single “system” of agriculture designed to feed 280 million people can avoid replicating many of the evils of our current system — it is not possible in practice, not at least in the United States of America at the turn of the twenty-first century. Organic agriculture is, therefore, slowly being co-opted by Big Agribusiness. Nearly 70 percent of the retail market for organic milk is controlled by one corporation, Horizon; General Mills’ organic division, which includes the Cascadian Farms and Muir Glen brands, dominates several markets. Some \$10 billion in organic food is now sold in the United States each year.<sup>3</sup>

Our industrial system of agriculture has one fundamental goal: to produce and distribute food at minimal cost to the consumer. By cost, I mean cost in both time and money, and minimizing these costs

<sup>3</sup> Figures from Horizon’s 2002 investor report, available on its website at [www.horizonorganic.com](http://www.horizonorganic.com).

leads to the twin defining characteristics of most American food: cheapness (in quality as in currency) and convenience. So what happens when the organic standards are married to this principle of minimal cost?

In the part of North Carolina where I live there is, or was until recently, a local chain of grocery stores that sells primarily organic food. In the mid-1990s, this chain was bought out by a national chain, Whole Foods, and what has happened to it since is instructive. Wellspring Grocery, as the local chain was known, had three stores at its peak, all within a half-hour's drive of its original location. As a local retailer, selling locally grown food was an important part of its mission. The high walls of the produce aisle were adorned with poster-sized photographs of the farmers who supplied the fruits and vegetables, making it seem a once-removed farmers market. The purpose was marketing, of course, but the photographs were visible proof of the truth behind the marketing.

Since the corporate takeover, those photographs — and the truth behind them — have gradually disappeared. One local farmer who would not wish to be named, after supplying Wellspring with seasonal tomatoes for years and being one of their literal poster boys, was recently told that his prices, which had not risen significantly over the years, were now too high, and that he would have to lower them to compete with organic producers out of state. He refused, on the grounds that at the prices they offered he could not both farm responsibly and turn a profit. The grocery severed the tie and now sells tomatoes from Florida and California; the farmer spends more Saturdays at the local outdoor market to make up the difference in income. The desire for local food lost out to the demands of bigness. Whole Foods' mission is still to sell organic food, but (apparently) the cheapest organic food possible — and, as a quick walk down the aisles of one of its stores will confirm, in the most convenient form possible; literal whole foods are scarcer than processed and packaged foods, and growing more so. The company's website summarizes these principles as "exceptional value" for the consumer, but this is marketing talk. Organic has merely supplemented, and not replaced, the principles of cheapness and convenience that defines industrial agriculture.<sup>4</sup>

We might wonder, too, what organic really means in this context. But one has only to look at its marketing to know. Despite the usual overtures to "the environment" or "the planet," most marketing of organic food hones in on what the typical American consumer really cares about: personal health. A 2000 poll found that only 26% of consumers saw the good of the environment as a reason to buy organically grown food; 38% cited flavor, and 66%, by far the largest number, claimed health — their own personal health, not the health of the farm, farm workers, livestock, farm community, or environment.<sup>5</sup> And even personal health seems to be defined more by fear of pesticides and the cancers

<sup>4</sup> Whole Foods notes on its website that "We obtain our products locally and from all over the world, often from small, uniquely dedicated food artisans," but a careful reader will note the equally careful wording that conceals the company's operating procedures. In its list of "core values," Whole Foods ranks "exceptional value" to the consumer far above an explicit commitment to buying local. Indeed, as a publicly traded corporation with stores nationwide, it could reasonably be expected to do little else.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Cowley, "Certified Organic," *Newsweek*, September 30, 2002, 52, 54.

they cause than by a belief that whole foods (literally) are the building blocks of health. Hence organic cheese puffs become possible: If there is nothing particularly healthy to them in a positive sense, at least they contain a minimum of dangerous pesticide residues.

There is certainly nothing wrong with a concern for one's personal health, or with a justifiable concern for what long-term consumption of pesticide-laden produce might do to it. But it is dismaying to see organic food represented only by this concern for personal health, because to reduce agriculture to individual concerns forsakes stewardship. This is why organic food is able to fit so easily into the paradigm of industrial agriculture: it, too, minimizes costs to the consumer. We have long labored to minimize cost of the consumer's time and money; organic-industrial agriculture seeks also to minimize costs of the consumer's health. It is a good addition, but it puts us no closer to stewardship — no closer to putting our food in context, to seeing it and ourselves as part of a literally organic whole; no closer to seeing the process as clearly as the product. To blame any particular food chain for this is beside the point: The logic of bigness is simply antithetical to the logic of stewardship.

What, then, are the alternatives to organic standards? Is local better than organic? Is, for example, the environmental cost of shipping food 3,000 miles across the country greater or less than the environmental cost of using petroleum-based fertilizers locally? And what about pesticides? Is it better to buy local strawberries to which pesticide has been applied (as it usually must be in the South, if they are to be grown on a commercial scale) or to buy organic strawberries from California, where the climate is more conducive to growing certain crops organically? From the standpoint of the physical health of the consumer, the organic berries are preferable, but how do we weigh environmental costs? The questions are important ones, and difficult, and I do not have ready answers. But we need to be asking them — and the organic standards discourage us from doing so.

It is not merely "environmental" concerns, nor merely personal health that is at stake here. By buying local berries I am contributing to the health of a community and of a local economy, without which the health of one individual consumer or of one individual farm is unsustainable. This context, too, is missing from the organic standards — as it must be, of necessity, from any set of standards. The health of a community, to which I may contribute by purchasing food directly from a farmer with whom I have a relationship that is at least not solely economic, is based on personal, intimate knowledge, on *conocer*. When I say "I know that the moon is full," I am not stating anything unique; any other person may say and mean exactly the same thing. The same is true if "I know that this food was produced in accordance with the National Organic Standards." But to say that I know a person or that I know a place is to stake a claim to uniqueness of relationship. Inherent in such a statement is the belief that I am unique, that the person or place I know is unique, and that my knowledge of that person or place is unique — a belief that defies the very idea of standards.

And so the organic standards end up with too much environmentalism, abstracted, standardized, cut off from any knowledge of place — and therefore from any place, and therefore from everyplace.

Organic standards, being a roadmap for mass marketing, are ultimately designed not for farmers or for rural consumers but for urban consumers and for those who supply them, for people with no knowledge of a farm or a community or a place and for the people who accommodate their desire to live in ignorance. Consumers who buy “organic” frozen dinners at outrageous prices in gourmet grocery stores are using those standards as a blindfold to the ills of “modern” agriculture.

All else being equal, I would prefer to buy organic food. But “all else being equal” is a hypothetical standard, a condition only imaginable by one with no real and particular knowledge. In practice, I would be willing to accept less than organic from farmers whom I know — as I would accept less than perfection from people I know, because they are not equal to all else. But in a supermarket aisle I have no choice but to assume all else equal; I have no means of determining whether it is equal or not.

Eating food that merely meets a fixed set of standards for production is, to me, rather like sleeping with someone you’ve never met but who can produce a doctor’s note certifying them free of venereal disease. It’s safe, but it isn’t good, and it isn’t meaningful. I would rather know where my food comes from.

Since the organic standards were adopted in 2001, several prominent individuals and organizations have proposed additional or alternative standards that would provide at least partial answers to these questions. The American Humane Association certifies meat, eggs, and dairy products as “Free Farmed” that are produced in accordance with standards of animal welfare. I have read or heard several discussions about the wisdom of creating a new term that sets different or higher standards than the national organic rule. But to create new standards would only repeat the mistakes of the past; the problem is less with the national organic standards as adopted and interpreted than with the very idea of standardization.

As another alternative, Eliot Coleman, one of the great gurus of organic farming, has proposed an “Authentic Food” label that would define “local, seller-grown, and fresh” food. The standards for such a label would not, as Coleman says, be set in stone, but would require that farms attempt, to the greatest extent possible, to replicate the processes of the natural world. They are written in general terms: “Soils are nourished, as in the natural world, with farm-derived organic matter and mineral particles from ground rock.” Perhaps most significantly, Coleman would require farms producing “authentic” food to welcome visitors so that customers “can be the certifiers of their own food.”<sup>6</sup> Such principles or guidelines — for lacking an expectation of standardization, they are not really *standards* at all — would encourage the sort of personal, intimate, thoughtful knowledge for which true standards pretend to eliminate the need. They invite us — all of us, producers and consumers alike — to ask questions based on shared principles, rather than to accept the answers of legally enforced dogma.

Organic standards do not, of course, preclude us from asking questions, or from growing to have

<sup>6</sup> Eliot Coleman, “Beyond Organic,” *Mother Earth News*, December/January 2001–2002, 73–74.

that intimate and thoughtful knowledge. Organic farmers are, on balance (“all else being equal”), more likely to know their land than conventional farmers, and a consumer may well take an initial interest in knowing a farmer because she farms organically. But I fear that “organic” will become an end in itself rather than a step on the road to better agriculture, a final goal for consumers rather than what it really is — a stopgap substitute for knowledge and stewardship.

Should that happen, it will, in the long run, only reinforce the trends, cultural, economic, and social, that led our agriculture to become inorganic in the first place. Organic agriculture began as organic gardening, as an alternative to an industrial system of agriculture. But it is now being co-opted by those who wish to perpetuate that system, who profit from it and wish to continue profiting from it by converting organic agriculture into a market niche. The victory of organics will then be a pyrrhic one: it will have somewhat reformed a bad system, but at the price of extending and legitimizing it.

The one true alternative to standards — short of neglect and disinterest — is stewardship. But we live in a society based on neglect and disinterest, not on questioning and personal knowledge and placing our food and our lives in context; that is why we have standards in the first place. Standards give us the illusion of control, of broad, sweeping knowledge, but they do not provide understanding, and that is what stewardship demands. And because one can only know so much in the thoughtful, careful way that true understanding requires, one can only steward so much — and so we must all become stewards. This is, needless to say, much harder work than standardization, more difficult to build and maintain than a set of management standards. But it is absolutely necessary if we want real change in agriculture, in our food supply — and in society.

Is this too much to expect from a society increasingly dependent on the crutch of standards? Perhaps, but it is not too much to ask. Keeping ducks (for example) has not required me to reorganize my life; it has required no great investment of capital. It is not, really, all that much to do. But think what it could mean to have thousands or millions of Americans, each with their own backyard flock, producing eggs for themselves and their neighbors, asking and discussing and learning from one another, adhering to basic principles of stewardship but finding their own paths to agricultural wisdom. Think how much more we could learn and improve if we encouraged true diversity rather than giving one “best practice” the force of law. Think how much more secure our food supply would be with not only more producers, but more diverse producers, immune from any single tragedy or wrong turn. Think of the havoc it would wreak on our industrial economy if everyone decided to do — and think — for themselves.

I know, of course, that millions of Americans are not about to begin raising ducks, or to take up any similarly productive agricultural activity. I can indulge myself for a few minutes at a time by imagining that they will, but they won't, at least not anytime soon. Until they do, we will continue to rely on standards to save us from our own negligence. And yet it is absolutely imperative that our standards not be so rigid as to discourage independent thought and experimentation — that they not, in other

words, succeed completely in standardizing our food production or any other vital human activity. We must continue at least to allow some room at the margins for diversity, even if our economy and culture do not actively encourage it, if for no other reason than that such marginal diversity produced organic agriculture in the first place.

At the very least, we need to use standardized organic agriculture as a scaffold on which to build the next generation of improvements to agriculture. But since those standards now have behind them the force of law and forbid explicit scaffolding, farmers who want to continue to improve their agriculture may have to work outside those standards entirely. I know several professional farmers who have done just that, giving up the organic certification they worked so hard to obtain and of which they were once so proud that they might instead maintain the freedom to innovate, to produce on a small scale for local markets, to explore the possibilities of stewardship rather than standards. The loopholes and omissions in the national organic standards make it easier for many to forsake them, and in that sense it may be for the best that the standards are imperfect: If they were more satisfying to more people, they would be harder to eschew, and much future innovation might be lost — even if that innovation only happens at the margins.

All of this leaves would-be agricultural revolutionaries in the uncomfortable position of working to change the world one farm — indeed perhaps one backyard — at a time. But perhaps to imagine anything more would be to get ahead of ourselves. If it is stewardship we want, the change we need most is one of attitude: to give up the illusion of control, trusting instead in ourselves, in nature, and in the inherent value of diversity, taking up the challenge of building personal knowledge and understanding. And that is a change that can only happen one person at a time. So I've begun with my own nonstandard family and our nonstandard ducks. It is a very small beginning, one that gives me no cause for self-satisfaction or self-righteousness. We have a long way to go; we are still learning, and knowledge, like stewardship, is a path, not a destination. But it is a beginning.

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