

THE FARM IS HERE



Rodale Institute corporate office

Chapter 1

THE FARM SPEAKS TO ME

The Farm speaks to me.

Sometimes it's loud. Like really loud. Especially in July.

My office is in a 250-year-old farmhouse.

Like other CEOs, I have a desk, a conference table, a laptop, and a phone. But when I take one step outside of my office door, I enter a 400-acre farm.

This farm is teeming with life.

Several times per day, I go for walks on the farm. The farm calls me to walk, and at some point in my day, I always answer. It is the moment in my day that I most cherish.

In the heat of early July, there's a *hummmmmm* coming from the ground. A pulsation. Proclaiming *I'm alive, I'm alive, I'm alive*.

Everywhere I look, nature is thriving. Apple orchards pumping fruit, amber waves of grain swaying in the breeze, vegetables pushing up from the earth, wildflowers splashing color onto the landscape. All growing in harmony, like a natural symphony.

I realize that this is a rare gift that very few people get to experience these days. Life on a farm.

We grow many different kinds of crops on our farm, while most farms focus on just a few crops like corn and soybeans.

Here on our farm, the land is alive with diversity, just as nature intended.

The beauty here isn't only in the plants; the animals are essential too.

The air is filled with birds singing. Some rare species have recently returned to our farm as if they know something significant is happening here.

We have pigs roaming freely in the pasture. We also have cows. Pigs and cows are not meant to live solely in buildings, which is how most livestock are raised these days.

I am not interested in a debate as to whether or not we should be consuming them. Animals simply make the land healthier. Research shows that they need the land to thrive, and the land needs them too.¹

In one field, we let the meadow grow without mowing it in order to create a habitat for pollinators.

On some days, my job requires me to be on the farm late into the evenings. Around 9 p.m., millions of fireflies light up the night sky. It always stops me in my tracks. Like nothing I've seen before. Fireflies used to be prevalent. Until humans started spraying chemicals. But here, they're flourishing, thanks to a healthier ecosystem that we have created on our farm. Another sign that when we give the land what it needs, it gives back in ways we never could have imagined.

On a summer day, when I walk the farm and listen, I deepen my relationship with the life beneath my feet and all around me. But I also cherish connecting with the part of nature we often overlook: humanity.

As I walk down one of the pea-gravel paths on the farm, I see Dr. Arash Ghale, our director of research, checking in on one

of our many research projects in progress. Our farm is a living laboratory for cutting-edge science.

Arash is from Iran. He was drawn to the organic farming movement as a young boy when his parents would take him on drives into the Iranian countryside. After attending college, he eventually got a job working for a German-based company that certified farms to the organic standards in Iran and throughout the Middle East.

His job was to go out and inspect farms to ensure they were compliant with international organic standards. He once inspected a farm near the volatile borders of Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—an area so dangerous he needed an armed escort just to reach the farm fields.

For Arash, working at Rodale Institute is more than a job; it's the fulfillment of a long-held dream to be a part of a growing movement.

Everyone working here on this farm listens closely to the land, to the farmers, to the rhythm of the work — because that's where real intelligence lives. In an era of the acceleration of artificial intelligence, we turn to nature for the most intelligent answers.

At this moment, as I walk the farm, I feel connected to all the people on all the farms all over the planet. Farmers are some of the most innovative people in the world.

And then, there's this moment in July when I taste my first cherry tomato of the season. That first bite takes me back to being four years old in my great-grandmother's garden in Norristown, Pennsylvania. Her garden holds memories, too.

If I keep walking, I'll pass more of our fields growing a wide range of crops. Blackberries, kale, peas, purple potatoes, scallions, collard greens, green beans, lettuce, and the list goes on. Despite their differences, every fruit and vegetable is rooted in the same soil.

Just like us.

Our soil is more than dirt. It's expansive with life. If you took one teaspoon of soil from any of our fields and put it under a microscope, you'd find more than 10 billion microorganisms working together.² Think about it: That's more than the entire human population.

With that much life in a single teaspoon, imagine all that radiant energy circulating across 400 acres. That's a lot of life in one place.

The *hummmmm* is the life force that is pulsating across every square inch of this farm.

By the way, the average soil on an industrial farm is rapidly degrading.³ Most farmland is turning into dirt, not living soil.

If we keep farming the way most farms do using industrial agricultural methods, we will face a soil health crisis in our lifetime. For real.

The good news?

It does not have to be this way. We can turn things around – quickly.

For as long as humans have been farming, natural, organic methods were the norm.

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Indigenous people across the globe stewarded healthy ecosystems for thousands and thousands of years.⁴ It's what kept the human species alive and evolving.

We need to recover the sacredness of the land that humans carefully cultivated for millennia. And we need modern science to understand how we can work in harmony with nature, using biological methods, to improve the health of the soil and to accelerate the healing of our ecosystems.

That's what we're doing here at Rodale Institute.

As J.I. Rodale, our founder, said in 1942,

"Healthy Soil = Healthy Food = Healthy People."[®]

The farm reminds me of that every day.

Soil health and human health are inextricably linked.



Sometimes, the farm isn't loud. It's quiet. Like really quiet.

January is the quietest month, if you ask me.

During the winter, the farm hands me a silent invitation to slow down.

An addiction to work can be cured by what the farm says in January. To rest the soil, to rest my body, and to rest *the* body—the Earth.

And yet, winter is one of the most mysteriously powerful times on the farm.

The land appears to be doing nothing, but in that stillness, *something* is happening.

Like a quiet that's actually quite purposeful.

A silence that's hidden from our eyes, taking place deep beneath the soil.

The snow plays a part in that. It offers the farm a blanket for protection and cover.

Some farmers even plant their seeds right before the first frost. The freezing pulls their seeds deeper into the ground, allowing them to germinate come springtime.

Sometimes growth comes from getting still and allowing things to happen beneath the surface.

The quiet of winter is a "nothing" that's actually a something.

Without this cold stillness, there would be no loud, rhythmic vibrancy in the warmth of summer.

You can't have July without January.

No matter the season, the farm is constantly teaching us.

Rodale Institute is part of this growing movement. It's happening here on our farm in Pennsylvania, on farms all around the world, in local communities, and in backyard gardens.

We're constantly learning more about how monumental this global shift back to the farm is and its implications for society. What it means for our future. And the expansive, abundant implications.

Take politics, for example. This movement is a wrecking ball for polarization.

If you work in regenerative organic agriculture, any division of a right and a left is demolished. We're all humans who need to eat healthy food. And the urban and rural divide gets smashed too. Most of us rely on rural communities to feed us.

Obviously, this extends to healthcare too, which often operates more like "sickcare."

In 1960, we spent twice as much on food as we did on healthcare. Sixty years later, we now spend three times more on healthcare than on food.⁵

And yet, we're collectively getting sicker. So, when we invest in a better food system, we feed people healthier food which makes them healthier and end up spending less on the outrageous costs of a broken healthcare system.

And of course, there's the chemicals.

For the first time in human history, people are eating food sprayed with significant amounts of chemicals. Many of which we are now discovering are linked to an increased risk of certain forms of cancer.⁶ The chemical playbook of commercial agriculture is eradicating life in the soil in the name of extraction, efficiency, yields, and profit. But again, we know how to turn this around.

At the deepest level, our society is beginning to reconnect with where our food comes from, how what we're eating was produced, and ensuring everything we grow is nutrient rich.

Everything we do in regenerative organic agriculture is rooted in endless innovation combined with ancient wisdom. In our movement, there is no playbook, no chemicals, and no extraction. Simply put: Extraction is no longer sustainable.

Humans long for what is real and enduring.

In a world that is presumably more connected than ever through social media, we are lonelier than ever as a society. The farm has a lot to teach us about authentic community.

Annie Brown in Boulder, Colorado started a community potluck in partnership with her local farmers market called the Boulder County Seasonal Supper Club. Four times a year, they choose a vegetable that's in season and invite the community to make a dish that showcases that vegetable. What started as a few people making vegetable dishes grew into a sought-after event, gathering upwards of a hundred people together in the name of local, organic food.

Here at Rodale Institute, I see a similar phenomenon with our employee CSA. Yes, we give our employees a free share of vegetables each week to take home to their families. This is a component of our healthcare benefits package. We are investing in the health of our employees and their families, and in turn, we create a stronger and more connected workplace culture.

Further along in my walk, I see our students who have come from all over the world to spend nine months with us, learning how to become regenerative organic farmers.

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Every Thursday at noon, the entire Rodale Institute staff gathers to collect produce from the farm grown by our students, which has now become a weekly community celebration and ritual.

We've built a workplace culture that literally breaks bread together.

Turns out, food and regenerative organic farming are the antidotes to loneliness. Creating a shared space for connection, for meeting new people, and for delivering nourishment that goes beyond the body and feeds the ache of the soul.

What we keep discovering is that the farm can transform nearly every area of our lives. The farm contains answers to our world's greatest problems.

What we're learning in this movement is the things we were told had nothing to do with each other are actually interconnected.

Everything from eating a proper tomato to getting good sleep to who you vote for to feeling like you belong, it's all the same thing, endlessly connected, like a giant infinity loop.

Labels, categories, and "us vs. them" become absurd when sharing a meal together from the farm. When we begin to reconnect with our food, we reconnect with each other.

This is the miracle of life on Earth.

What we put on our plate can change the future of humanity.

Really, the farm is a living, breathing organism that needs to

be fed and nourished, just like you and me. When we feed the land, it feeds us.

And so, I walk and walk and walk the farm. And I listen for what it has to teach me today.

The farm tells me reciprocity, nourishment, and connection are the way forward. That we are all called to be farmers—stewards, caring for the land, ourselves, and each other.

So, this book is for everyone.

And for me, it's really, really personal.