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## **Q & A WENDELL BERRY: Food and consequence**

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Wendell Berry is a celebrated author, an advocate of sustainable agriculture and himself a small farmer in Kentucky. He was in the Twin Cities recently to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Land Stewardship Project, a Minnesota nonprofit that supports small farmers and environmental stewardship. He spoke with editorial writer Dave Hage.

**Q** A few years ago, in an essay about globalization and the economics of food, you coined the phrases "total economy" and "local economy." Can you explain what you meant?

**A** Yes. The total economy is an economy in which people do nothing for themselves. It's an economy in which they pay for everything; they are total consumers. A local economy is one that exists by virtue of people's willingness to take back a certain amount of economic initiative and do things for themselves. It's a way to recapture economic choice. It's self-determination.

**Q** Do you see our society today in a struggle between those two?

**A** It's not a struggle yet, but there is a movement toward the local economy. And it's coming about as a response to people's understanding of the costs to the world of an economy based entirely on long-distance transportation. They say that the average distance that food travels from the field to the dinner plate is 1,500 miles. And this has a cost in fuel depletion and pollution. It's a part of the permanent drawdown of necessary resources that are the basis of an industrial economy.

**Q** There's a good deal of talk today about community-based agriculture and buying local. Is this significant?

**A** Well, it's the most reasonable thing going on in agriculture. To shorten the distance as far as possible from the farm to the dinner plate just makes sense. But it also begins to elevate food in human culture back up to where it ought to be. We've allowed it to decline from a kind of sacrament and a kind of center of conviviality, through commodification, to a kind of stuffing.

**Q** But some people would say, gee, I like having fresh tomatoes in January, even if they come from Mexico. Does this mean Minnesotans would get fresh tomatoes only in July?

**A** Yes, but it also means you like them better. (Laughs) Of course people like to have things out of season. It's part of the general culture of self-indulgence. If you want a raspberry, why

shouldn't you have a raspberry? But the present economy doesn't give people any idea of the true cost involved. So, yes, you want the raspberry. The question is do you want to pay the cost -- in pollution, in the drawdown of resources, in the damage to the environment?

**Q** You've been writing for a long time about sustainable agriculture. Do you think the concept is gaining ground?

**A** Yes, no question. The concept is gaining ground. But it's still a losing side. I mean, who's for it? Where are your champion politicians who are willing to talk about sustainability? I saw Al Gore's movie -- there's nothing in that movie about sustainability. The assumption is that we can keep on living the way we're living in an economy that is necessarily destructive and wasteful, yet somehow make adjustments to keep the glaciers intact. I think we've got to face the possibility that the industrial economy is essentially destructive.

**Q** Would that mean going back to the kind of life that our grandparents led -- where you can your own vegetables and don't fly on airplanes?

**A** Canning vegetables is not a bad idea, and it's not a difficult science. So, yes, that's a possibility. But we're not going back to anything. That's not a possibility. Our grandparents lived the way they did because they knew how, and they were by and large far more skillful than we are and had better use of their own minds than we do. But we can't be them.

**Q** Absent leadership from the public sphere, what can an individual do to bring about a sustainable economy?

**A** Well, it's fairly limited. There's none of us without sin on this -- my wife and I own two vehicles. We live in the country; we have different duties in different directions. That's just the way it is. It would make sense in a lot of ways if we didn't have any vehicles, but the fact of the matter is that my great-grandfather had better public transportation than I do -- true!

But individuals can learn something about their food economy. And the first thing they learn is how extraordinarily difficult it is to learn anything about it. If you wanted to find out where your December head of lettuce came from and what it cost, to the people and the land it came from, you'd have a hard time. So the next thing they ask, if they can't find out much about the mainstream food economy, is where can I find food that I can learn about? And that's your local food economy: Where can I find a farmer who could sell me a quarter of beef? Where can I find a farmer's market? How can I join a local community-supported agriculture enterprise? Or where are the restaurants that buy from local farmers? Those questions, nearly everywhere in the United States, now have answers.

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