

From Prophetic Vision to Sustainable Development: The Mission of the Asian Rural Institute in the 21st Century.

G. Dean Freudenberger

Keynote Address to the Annual General Meeting
AFARI - American Friends of the Asian Rural Institute
Wesley United Methodist Church, San Jose, California
June 20, 2008

Early History:

Let me begin by sharing with you some of my own early involvement with the Asian Rural Institute. During the year of 1970 (38 years ago) I was serving the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church as its Agricultural Programs Officer. This was a part of a Quadrennial Program emphasis entitled: “The Bishop’s Call for Peace and Self Development.” Dr. Harry Haines, then the general secretary of UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Overseas Relief) asked if I would go to Japan to visit a young man called Dr. Tom Takami at the Tsurakawa Christian Seminary and Rural Institute, founded in 1956 by the Southeast Asia Christian Rural Leaders Conference.

The focus of this special program at the seminary was to train seminarians to reach out more effectively to farmers across Southeast Asia (Thailand, Malaysia, Korea, Indonesia, the Philippines, and New Guinea). There was an obvious need for rural evangelists to have some background in the fields of rural sociology, rural church, skills in animal husbandry, field crops, rural economics, tree crops and farm management so that they would have a better understanding of the needs and challenges facing the rural people in the above mentioned countries. This was very similar to the work I was later to do from 1990 to 1999 for the Lutheran Seminary at St. Paul, Minnesota.

It was the Reverend Jonah Yu, a graduate of the Taiwan National University then serving at the Tsurakawa Seminary, who recognized the special need for rural-issue orientation for seminarians preparing for ministry in rural areas. By 1961, a thirty week training program for third year seminary students was instituted. Later, a young Japanese PhD graduate in rural sociology from Yale University named Tom Takami accepted an appointment to give leadership to the rural program at Tsurakawa.

I was asked by UMCOR, in 1970, to visit the seminary and to meet with Dr. Takami so that I could make a recommendation, one way or the other, for funding assistance in order to move the rural program to a better location in Nishinasuno. I visited, and gave my recommendation both positively and enthusiastically. I was “blown away” by Takami’s insights about the need for strong rural leadership which would be relevant to struggling, usually neglected, people in their quest for food and justice. I had dealt with these issues in parts of Africa during the previous ten years. In Takami I encountered a visionary with tremendous convictions about what needed to be done. Well, you all know what has unfolded since at ARI.

My wife and I have been able to help support ARI from those early days until now. We have worked with Don Tarr at St. Olaf College and at one point in the mid-1990's, we attended the graduation exercise at St. Olaf when Tom was presented with an honorary doctorate degree.

From Prophetic vision to Sustainable Development:

Takami, early on, had developed insights about human community, peace with justice, and the need and vision of sustainable development. Long before the United Nations issued a now well accepted definition of sustainability: "Meeting our needs in our time without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs" (1987, World Commission on Development), Takami recognized profoundly the ecological dimensions of peace, justice and sustainability.

He had an incredible understanding of the interdependencies of life... an ecological understanding of potentials and limitations of human connectiveness with nature. He understood how humanity is dependent on the dynamics of nature ... of the workings of natural systems on which we are totally dependent. He knew (and knows) that chemical fertilizers cannot substitute for organic agricultural technologies. He knew that civilizations that built their economy on an extinguishing resource (i.e. oil) could not survive. He knows to this day, that careful stewardship of natural resources and their processes is our only way to actualize a sustainable lifestyle. In other words, caring for God's creation and creating a sustainable food system is dependent on harmonious and enlightened, skilful and committed, rural communities of people.

Through these many years, Takami has articulated the essence of human life with all of its challenges and responsibilities. Through careful practices, he has inspired us to actualize in many ways the principles of sustainable living. At ARI there is no extravagance or waste. Everything goes into a process of energy renewal. The essence of the process is the capture of solar and biological energy. Biological diversity is maximized. So is the maximization of the rich diversity of human culture. Recognizing the potentials and limitations of natural systems is at the heart of the value structure of the ARI community.

Leadership skills have everything to do with the nurture of all these insights and values. Producing food on a regenerative basis is the most profound approach to sustainable living. ARI teaches how to meet our needs and at the same time, how to lay the foundation for future generations to meet their needs. In short we cannot continue as we are, literally eating our children's future!. The need is for a trans-generational justice which acknowledges that any enterprise which is not sustainable is, in terms of future generations, simply not just. Aboriginal traditions speak of a "7th Generation Ethic" – i.e. making today's decisions with a mind to their consequences seven generations down the line. This infers by its very nature, interspecies justice as well. Protection of species of life in its fullness is a critical moral imperative and the basis for resource regeneration.

Some years ago I was invited to be part of a study in Kenya trying to discover why the once lush grasslands all the way from Nairobi to Mombassa had become an arid wasteland. The project involved setting aside a tract of land, reintroducing thereto the indigenous/traditional animal species, and barring the intrusion of imported species. Within several years the vegetation began to re-emerge, made possible by the cycle of life of interdependent animal species – eg: the

hooves of the gazelles do not destroy the root structure of the grass as do the hooves of cattle. A similar tale can be told for the American prairies – once nurtured by and able to support vast herds of bison and now being eroded away at twice the rate of what they are able to produce.

Monoculture agriculture and the destruction of natural habitat systems are part of the suicidal industrialization of our global food system. We have built a food system totally dependant on a depleting resource – oil. And more of the same will not save us from the prospect of global famine. China, for instance, is currently buying up farmland in Africa via which to feed its citizens. This does not auger well for Africa’s future ability to feed itself.

The Mission of ARI in the 21st Century:

ARI is in the business of preparing visionary leadership for the rural sectors of society everywhere. In its 35 years it has produced more than eleven hundred wonderful people for addressing the complex challenge of creating a just and therefore sustainable agri-culture in a soon to be “post-petroleum world.” This is the most fundamental mission of the ARI. The lead editorial in the Los Angeles Times dated May 9 of this year addressed the crisis created by the recent cyclone in Myanmar. It validates the importance of what we are doing in the financial support of ARI through AFARI.

“We urge all Americans to give now. And, we offer this advice on how to give wisely. First, support that which our government will not support. In the case of hunger, that means directing a portion of your donations to third world agricultural and sustainable development projects. It is easy to get Washington to pay for famine relief, and President Bush has already pledged generously. But, it is almost impossible to persuade law makers to fund long-term environmentally sensible agricultural programs, even though this is the only way to forestall future famines.”

The business of ARI is that of providing for many nations of the world, leaders for forestalling the possibility of future famines. To achieve adequate and sustainable food production in the 21st century will require a radical departure from the approach of the 1950’s “Green Revolution”, i.e. pump in the nitrogen fertilizers and increase the yield. In contrast to the comparatively simple approach of the first green revolution the strategies of what I call the “second green revolution” will be much more complex. They will focus on the development of sustainable, and therefore socially just, food systems within very diverse environments. They must create a productive agriculture within poor natural resource areas and among people who are still on the margins of society.

The rural unemployed and landless must be brought into the food systems. The experiences and wisdom of indigenous peoples need to be incorporated into the design of sustainable domestic food systems. After decades of undermining rural communities, we must do what we can to nurture them.

To accomplish this complex goal, the strategies of the next green revolution (of which ARI is providing leadership) will involve the recruitment of people from across a wide span of disciplines that will include not only plant breeders and agronomists but also those representing

the social sciences. A profound interdisciplinary analysis of agro-ecosystems is required, along with the development of massive biodiversity in crop and livestock production appropriate for croplands, rangelands and forests. The emphasis should be on the rehabilitation of stressed ecosystems within which an agro-ecology can evolve. This strategy moves far beyond the dominance of the biological sciences.

If the vision of global food security, with its underlying commitment to the evolution of sustainable or regenerative, self-reliant food production is to become a reality, then the first priority in research and development will be reaching the marginalized sector of national populations.

Obviously the next green revolution, designed to be regionally specific and focused on marginalized landscapes and peoples, must address issues that were not taken into consideration during the first green revolution. The needs are many: self-reliant soil nutritional management, water management, including surface and underground resources, mangrove and coral reef protection, reducing pollution from farms runoff, regional genetic-resource preservation (biodiversity), alternatives to slash and burn agriculture, the development and maintenance of mountain agriculture, changes in land tenure traditions, innovative market accessibility, careful farming designs for the integration of crops and livestock, including the maintenance of wildlife habitat. We also need national and international policies that give priority to developing essential rural infrastructures, including public health and educational services, as well as roads, railways, bridges and storage processing facilities for agricultural products.

The agenda is long. The needed “second green revolution”, if it is to reach or approximate the goal of adequate supply of food globally, must focus on (1) food production with justice, (2) be ecologically benign, and (3) be economically viable. The challenge is to understand production efficiencies in ways that measure all of the production, social and environmental costs. We must move beyond the present paralysis in production research, our dependency on fossil fuels, and the mindset that some must produce more in order to feed others. We must give priority to the ability of people to feed themselves sustainably, rather than to the production of crops for world markets. The plants we need for survival need to dictate the market, not vice versa.

These are radical ideas. But they are essential components of the 21st century challenge which is to create, for the first time in history, an agriculture (food system) that does not destroy the integrities of natural ecological systems, threaten social justice, nor be dependent on fossil fuel derivatives in the form of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

ARI is helping, with its inspired graduates, to create a post-petroleum food system. This is probably one of the most important initiatives emerging at the beginning of this pivotal new century. ARI is a critically strategic initiative at work in our time. We need to be profoundly grateful for the pioneering leadership of Tom Takami and for those who continue with the unfolding mission of ARI in the decades ahead. We remain profoundly grateful for those who assist in providing financial support and for the faculty and administration of ARI and its volunteers who press forward with this mission. We need to remain grateful for all of the students who come to ARI for further inspiration and for nurturing their sense of responsibility as rural community leaders.

Quotable Quotes:

- “Enlightened self-interest is a good starting point, but it that’s all you’ve got to keep you motivated you’ll soon burn out.”
- “Unfold a layer at a time the wonder of God’s earth. What are the dynamics that pump life into this planet?”
- “We need a ‘regenerative agriculture’ that can sustain itself.”
- “The American mid-west loses two bushels of soil for every bushel of grain it produces.”
- “Every 20 minutes enough topsoil to fill a 50 gondola freight train washes into the Gulf of Mexico.”
- “Only 1/10th of the world’s surface is arable. Of that 10%, 1/3 is too cold and 1/3 too dry. 1/2 of the remaining 1/3 is range land suitable only for grazing; only the remaining 1/6 is suitable for growing food. How do you feed 10 billion people on that?”
- “We have shaken the foundations of nature.”
- “In any ecosystem, if one species dominates, that system collapses.”
- “You can have all the farm equipment in the world but if you don’t have good rural leadership it won’t make any difference.”
- “A good question is an answer in embryonic form.”
- “We need a ‘no growth’ economic theory, for the earth has boundaries we must live within.”
- “Caring is the most tangible way of saying thanks; for expressing gratitude to God , life and nature.”
- “On Thanksgiving Day we no longer say ‘thank you’; we say ‘forgive us for taking so much.’”
- “If you’re not lonely in what you’re doing, you’re not on a frontier.”
- “It takes a society 30 years to catch on to a new issue.”
- “We’ve transformed nature before we understood it.”
- “Development has been understood as economic growth; we need to think of it also in terms of quality of human life and our symbiotic relationship with nature.”
- “Justice today involves human justice, eco justice, interspecies justice, and transgenerational justice.”