

ON ORGANIC INTEGRITY

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The Notion of Integrity

Integrity signifies uprightness of character, probity, honesty. The word also means unimpaired or compromised or the state of being complete. As applied to ORGANIC, integrity may be all of these meanings and more. Uprightness or moral correctness is where the organic movement started. Integrity has to do with conduct measured against a standard. Integrity implies that judgment is being made. The organic standard is what the organic movement brought formally into agricultural practices. Upon what is that standard based?

Classic Organic

If you look at the writings of [Rudolph Steiner \(1924\)](#), [Albert Howard \(1940\)](#), [Lady Eve Balfour\(1943\)](#), [J. I. Rodale \(1945\)](#) and others, you see a TRUST in biological resilience as the basic counter to synthesized chemical convenience. That convenience based in the work of [Justus Von Liebig \(1880\)](#) drove the chemical fertilizer and pesticide industry after WWI. Convenience became convention for producers and consumers. Personal comfort, ease of production and distribution, displaced trust in biological processes. This synthetic, petroleum-based, convention funded the land grant institutions and most other agricultural research. It continues to drive the current sustainable rhetoric. Consumers got used to having any food they wanted, without regard to season or locality as part of this chemical revolution. Biologically based agriculture became radical. Convention was suddenly "better living through chemistry", even though forms of biological agriculture had been practiced all over the planet by every culture for thousands of years. The twist ripped the trust in locally based, biologically derived foods from most people's understandings. Food went from a community- or village-based means of nutritional survival to national and international commodities available at all times and in ever more processed or convenient forms. This process of the industrialization of foods speeded up during the 1950s and 60s as supermarket retail became the norm. Then came our generation of moralists in the 1970s. We dissected lies imposed by the dominant culture in order to begin building a life closer to inherited Nature as opposed to corporate design.

Integrity, moral correctness is based on perception. The "alternative community" measured our collective understanding or reality in terms of naturally occurring processes as opposed to humanly imposed processes. The natural foods movement, like the organic movement, defines itself as being one with, or aligning our food production processes with ALL OUR RELATIONS, meaning all the molecular/cellular beings on this planet. Behind our decision-making lies an assumed primordial state, a pure land ethic, an assumed correctness of behavior that does not maim or destroy that balanced natural condition. (see the writings of [Wendell Berry](#)) Our standards for growing and distributing human and animal foods and fiber go back to an abiding trust in the integrity of naturally occurring processes.

One Hundred years after Van Liebig's discovery that the burnt residues of plants were primarily made up of nitrogen, phosphate and potassium (NPK), the Organic alternative to synthesized food production became a movement. Market demands began to lead to greedy people who would make the claim of Organic production while using the convenience of chemical inputs. Thus Oregon became the first state in the union with an Organic law. That law was based on a Natural understanding. It was very loose. It was really based on trust between producer, customer, and the state.

Discussions among the producers of Regional Tilth,(early 1980s) at that time a five-state organization, led me to write the first Standards and Guidelines for Organic Agriculture. Why? Because we were taking a production system based in a biological trust of the interactions of all our relations into a market system based in gain at any cost. By beginning to codify rules rooted in interactive biology as opposed to synthetic chemistry, we defined violation. Violation of what? Perceived Natural processes. Our goal was to codify food production that supported or enhanced natural biological processes. Our collective assumption was that a food system rooted in gardening, farming and ranching practices closely aligned with natural processes would produce highly nutritious food free of manmade chemical inputs. Primal innocence? Kind of.

Industrial Organic

Those first standards and guidelines were clearly reflective of our collective moral code, even though that code had never been formally written down. My grandfathers who were "horse farmers" could have abided by those rules. But times were moving in the direction of rapid expansion of Organic markets in the mid and late 1980s. Yvonne Frost had the foresight to see organic processing as the next big hurdle for the organic movement. I was an organic processor in those days. Along with several others we crafted processing standards, again rooted in the biological production paradigm. We quickly learned that processing realities are not those of a farm. And it was around processing that questions of organic integrity began to be raised. Why? Processing is market driven, industrial practices defined by industrial need.

In the 1990s as [Oregon Tilth](#), [CCOF](#), and [WSDA](#) worked together forming the Western Alliance of Certifiers, we learned about processing chemicals. We learned about needs of processors for minor inputs not available in organic form at that time. We learned about chemicals used to clean tubes in processing facilities for which there were no natural substitutes. (the 2006-2007 rule change discussion and the allowance of more than 30 non-organic ingredients in organic products, is not new.) We learned, in essence, that we were moving from a biologically based trust in food production to an industrially based, pragmatically realistic food production system that could fulfill the demands of an ever-growing organic consumer base. Face it. We learned that the money is in the processing and distribution ends of the industrial organic system.

Problem is that it is the industrialization of organic looked at from the point of view of classic organic that shows compromise, raising a new level of questions of integrity. (hence the [Harvey lawsuit](#)) It was for those reasons that we worked long and hard to write updated standards in all our organizations. The new standards relied on materials lists, the materials eventually being tested by [OMRI](#). It was for those reasons that we worked on national standards and fought the battles to get them accepted. But all along the way toward the [USDA organic standards](#) we have

in place today, those of us who started with trust in natural processes felt a nagging sense of compromise. What can maim or even crash a naturally based food system? How much is personal organic integrity damaged by the perceived need to have an organic system that feeds huge urbanized populations?

Questions of Organic Integrity

Given our current situation, namely that organic production is market driven, expanding rapidly worldwide, and is of necessity industrialized, Integrity becomes a discussion of measurement rather than trust or character. Realistically a consumer or a producer should ask:

- Do the USDA Standards for Organic reflect classic organic intent?
- Does an independent certification agency do a thorough and unbiased job of enforcement of those standards?
- Do we collectively need to rely more heavily on testing as I suggested in my Bio Balancing list of four crucial tests for soil, water, and nutrition? (see [In Good Tilt soil issue 2007.](#))
- Do vested financial and market interests manipulate present and future changes to national and international standards as lobbyists and political power supporters?
- Do ingredients in organic processed foods meet USDA standards? (E.g. questions of conditions in China and elsewhere)
- Are we pushing organic production systems too fast?

All answers to these questions could involve measurement on scales. They are great data producers.

But it is the last question of integrity that seems most crucial to me. For instance, I can make compost in 6-8 weeks, which by USDA standards is considered finished compost. If I lab check that compost I will likely find that it is highly bacterial. But I could let that compost sit for a year and it would likely show another whole range of beneficial microorganisms. I could push three green leafy crops a year through my farm beds. I can do this by adding composted chicken manure or other kinds of nitrogen-heavy amendments to my soils, or by using foliar fertilization, but both those methods quickly burn up the carbon elements of my organic system, compromising carbon/silicon interactions resulting in large, water heavy (better for market price) but nutrient deficient vegetables, the water/nitrogen uptake offsetting the mineral/vitamin/amino acid balance negatively). What is the natural "pasture" for ruminant animals? Doesn't it involve brush as well as grasses and legumes?

These are the kinds of day to day questions of organic integrity with which even small producers struggle if we remain involved in very competitive markets. If interactive soil biology is used as our criteria for making daily judgment calls, then it is clear to me that we either have to slow down, or flounder in compromise.