

**LETTERS**

TO A

**YOUNG  
FARMER**

**ON FOOD, FARMING, AND OUR FUTURE**

---

**STONE BARNS CENTER  
FOR FOOD & AGRICULTURE**

Martha Hodgkins, editor   Illustrations by Chris Wormell

PRINCETON ARCHITECTURAL PRESS · NEW YORK

2017

## MARION NESTLE

---

Congratulations on choosing a profession that is socially, philosophically, ethically, morally, and—one dearly wishes—economically satisfying. Few jobs in our society can lead to the pride, pleasure, and sheer fun that come from growing food for yourself, your friends and family, or for others, in ways that promote human health and protect the environment.

At issue, of course, is how to make a living from doing what you love. Other writers in this volume no doubt have plenty to say about how to acquire land, equipment, seeds, animals, and people to help you get started and bring your production to the point of sale. They will talk to you about the importance of conserving soil and water, treating workers fairly, and producing food under conditions that are healthiest for plants and animals.

But I want to talk about something else: the politics of what you are doing.

In choosing to farm sustainably, you are presenting an explicit critique—a slap in the face—of America's industrial agricultural system. By growing crops and raising animals without harmful chemicals and feedlots, you are a living reminder of the harm done to the land, animals, and people by industrial farming methods. Whether or not you see it that way, the very existence of your farm and your ways of farming make a political statement.

Along with everything else you are learning to do, you must also learn to engage with the political system. Politics is a team sport. It's not something you can do alone. You will want to look for opportunities to join other farmers in cooperatives, unions, clubs, trade associations, and any other forum devoted to unity as strength. You will want to work with community and national organizations to make your needs and views heard by your local and state governments. You will want to learn the names of your congressional representatives and senators, go and meet their staff, and use your knowledge and skills to call and write them whenever you think they should be doing something to help you or to stop some rule or regulation that will make your life more difficult.

As part of a long-term strategy for promoting your way of farming, adding customers who appreciate what you are doing, and, yes, increasing sales of what you produce, you will need to become an expert on the Farm Bill, or at least the parts of it that directly affect your work. Whenever this bill comes up for renewal, which happens about every five years, it attracts major lobbying efforts from every conceivable business affected for better or worse by this legislation. You, or the groups that represent your interests, must be part of that process. The federal dollars now devoted to research and promotion of organic agriculture and other benefits to alternative agriculture, small as they may be, are there only because your fellow farmers did everything possible to advocate for them.

If you are farming sustainably, you are, by definition, an agricultural activist, working with your hands and sweat for a healthier and more sustainable food system. You may not feel like an activist, but because that is how you will be perceived, you might as well start acting like one. Make it part of your daily business and your long-term business plan to advocate for the kind of food system you want to create.

If you don't do this, who will?

I wish you all the courage in the world to take on this challenge.

**Marion Nestle** is the Paulette Goddard Professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University. She teaches and lectures widely about food policy and advocacy and is the author of several prize-winning books on the politics of food and nutrition, most recently *Soda Politics: Taking on Big Soda (and Winning)*.