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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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DOING EVERYTHING ALL AT ONCE

A friend of mine likes to say that she can do anything – just not everything all at the same time.

But that is exactly what we have to do to strengthen the regional food systems in this country – everything all at once. The good news is that this means whatever you are doing is the right thing! Whether you are protecting farm land, improving markets, training farmers, expanding access to fresh, local food – whatever you are doing is important.

And since no one of us can do it all, it means that we need lots of partners – new partners. We need to help others see how supporting local agriculture relates to their concerns. We have come a long way on this in the past few years, and we have the chance to do more.

It is a pleasure to be with you here in Michigan. I grew up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin and consider this part of the world “home”, even though I have lived in New York for many years.

As I have read about Michigan, I found the issues and challenges you are confronting here are remarkably similar to those we are working with in New York – especially the Hudson River Valley, which extends from New York City to Albany and is the main focus of Glynwood’s work.

First – Agriculture is in transition, and this is creating new opportunities:

- expanding consumer demand is leading to new markets for farmers both on and off the farm;
- direct sales - through farmers market, CSAs, and the like, allow farmers to get a higher percentage of the sales price, while building relationships with consumers;

- now that farmers and consumers are getting to know each other, farmers are responding to what consumers want and providing new vegetables and fruits and value added products of a type and quality rarely available through the conventional system;

- as products become more diverse, many farms are becoming more diverse, helping to protect genetic diversity – of domesticated and wild plants and animals; and

- and more farmers are welcoming consumers to their farms, at least exposing them to live farm animals, which will help them understand the importance of humane treatment.

There are important transitions going on within the farm community as well. Although the average farmer is pushing retirement age, a new cohort of farmers is entering the field - young, often college educated, very innovative, market oriented and environmentally savvy. Many of them are women.

And interestingly, attitudes toward the ownership of land are changing. I want to spend a minute on this one. As one colleague of ours says, “It is not your grandma and grandpa’s farm anymore.”

Quickly – envision a farm – and hold the first image that comes to mind. I bet that for many of us, the first image that comes to mind is a fairly square patch of land with the house and barn and fields and outbuildings - something like the quarter of a quarter of a section that my Dad inherited from his Dad, when it was on its way to becoming a Centennial Farm.

Traditionally, the goal of every farmer was to own his own kingdom. And for many it still is. But with escalating land values and real estate taxes, many farmers cannot purchase all of the land they need, or have decided that they would rather invest their capital in other ways. In the Hudson Valley, about half of the farmers rent at least some of their land, and it is not uncommon for them to be renting from several different owners in many different jurisdictions.

In areas like ours, which attract many people who commute or want second homes, but don't know how to farm, this creates an opportunity, which I will come back to.

And just as agriculture is in transition, the context in which we all work is ever changing. As one friend says, "It is hard to work outside the box when the box is moving." But the box is moving in our direction. More and more people are beginning to recognize that their issues – their missions – are related to our issues and our mission. Let's just consider a few:

- Concern about how we squander our land resources has lent fuel to the smart growth movement – and even planners are moving beyond their old assumption that farmland is just vacant land that was waiting for development to arrive.
- The soaring rates of obesity and diabetes – especially among children – and the resulting health care costs – have generated support for making fresh regional foods more widely available, particularly in schools and other institutions.
- The soaring cost of petroleum is sending tremors through the conventional food system.

The list could go on – climate change, immigration - each issue providing new opportunities for us to build bridges and affect change in ways that further our common interests.

These transitions in agriculture are creating challenges as well as opportunities:

First – For many consumers, the increased attention on food has resulted in a food deal of confusion and frustration. Just recall the last time a friend asked you to explain the difference between organic and local and which they should buy. And that is easy, compared to natural, vs. pastured, vs. grass-based. Or cage-free vs. free-range vs. humanely raised. Well, you know what I mean. How can we help people make informed choices in this increasingly complicated marketplace, rather than just giving up in frustration?

Second - The rising cost of food. Some, including Michael Pollan, see a silver lining in the fact that the rising cost of corn and petroleum is increasing the cost of conventionally produced food. The cost of this kind of food - which has been kept artificially low through subsidies and the ability to externalize environmental and other production costs - is now becoming more comparable to sustainably produced food. This may encourage some consumers to forego those 64 oz colas, or to try a burger from grass-based beef. But it makes life even more difficult for those on limited means. As Mark Winne puts it, how do we “reset the table” and equitably share this country’s bounty?

Third - Absolutism. The locavore movement has gotten lots of media play lately. The 100 mile challenge has encouraged many people to focus a great deal of energy and creativity on the sourcing locally. And that is great.

But I think we should be careful not to suggest that this is the standard to which everyone should aspire. Just consider how many people are likely to ever become this absolute, and then how much impact we could have if everyone just began spending a small percentage of their food dollar locally, and gradually increased it over time.

We need a big tent. And to invite our friends and neighbors to join this movement at whatever level, in whatever way, they can.

So, with those background thoughts on opportunities and challenges, let me share with you a bit about our work at Glynwood Center. Glynwood Center has been working to strengthen the RFS in the HRV for several years. Since we can’t do everything either, we have focused on a few key leverage points.

Glynwood’s genetics are in community capacity building, helping people at the local level find ways to conserve cultural and natural resources while enhancing their economic well-being. A key question in our work is - how can we help people - communities - move from interest to action? We believe that relationships and information are essential - visionary leaders will not get far or last long without a strong, informed constituency providing support.

So, after a round of convenings to explore the concept of the RFS and how the food system in the HRV could be strengthened, we produced the State of Ag in the HV. We simply took the ag census data and - for the first time in

New York at least – looked at it through a regional lens. We picked several critical data points and analyzed them for the individual counties and for the 10 counties that are considered the Hudson Valley.

Among the important facts that emerged:

- There are more than 1,000 square miles of farmland in the Valley. A fact like that makes it harder for naysayers to argue that agriculture is dead.
- There are more than 4,000 farms and 99% are owned by individuals and families. They are independent, not corporate owned. This helps us make the case that we should not allow these independent businesses to slip away. (We think that the 1% is mostly religious orders who are operating farms that were donated to them).
- Most of the farms are barely breaking even. Here, of course, is the challenge. But now we can begin to make the case that it is important to do whatever we can to help them become viable.

Next we developed Keep Farming. Guided by Glynwood’s process and specially designed workbooks, communities develop relationships with farmers, identify the agricultural resources in their community and determine what farming contributes to the local economy, environment and community character. Armed with this new understanding of the importance of farming, the community works with us to develop a strategy that fits its unique situation. In some communities the primary focus is on land protection, in others on economic development.

Let me share a few examples of what has been accomplished by the Town of Chatham, NY, where the dairy community feels growing pressure from second home buyers.

Through Keep Farming, the community learned that the farmers – those guys with the trucker hats and dusty boots – spend more than 1.25 million per year on goods and services. This is of great importance to other local businesses, and even more so when even modest multipliers are applied, reflecting the way money spent locally recycles within the community.

This fact along had a profound impact on the sense of urgency that local leaders and other residents brought to their consideration of an implementation strategy. The Town Board immediately created a standing

committee composed of farmers and others, to advise on any issues that come before any board in the community that would impact agriculture. Much of the information and many of the recommendations generated through the Keep Farming process have been incorporated in the Town's Master Plan. The Town has undertaken the complicated and arduous process of seeking the authority to impose a real property transfer tax to generate funds to be used to protect agricultural land. Local residents created a film featuring local farmers and a brochure and a new farm market. You get the picture. The community has been energized.

We are now working in other communities in the HRV and hope to expand the program to other regions.

At the same time that we are working at the community level – and building from the bottom up – we are also working on two key leverage points in the regional food system in the Valley – access to land and access to slaughterhouses.

I mentioned earlier that many farmers are taking a different view of land tenure issues and don't feel that they must own all – or even any – of the land they farm. At the same time, there are a growing number of landowners who bought their land because they love it, but they don't know anything about farming.

We are piloting a program designed to identify the roadblocks that keep interested landowners from farming their land – and then helping them find the information and resources they need to bring it back into production. This also involves working with farmers and helping them articulate their needs so that the relationships created can be long-lasting and both owners and farmers will be good stewards of the land.

The amount of land that could be made available in this way for the production of food is very significant. For example, we began our project by identifying and interviewing 11 landowners who have conservation easements on their land. This land will never be developed – but most of it is not being farmed. These owners control 2,000 acres of land, at least 1,000 of which they believe could readily be brought back into production.

We believe that the process and information we are developing will be of interest in other regions where the ownership of farmland has been changing hands.

A second key leverage point in our region is slaughtering capacity. Many of our farmers don't have the best soil, but our climate lets us grow good grass. The strong demand for pasture-raised beef provides a great new opportunity for farmers in the region, but they cannot respond until they can get efficient access to high quality, humane slaughtering. The network of small slaughtering houses and lockers and butchers that once stretched across the Valley – and likely here, too – has been shredded. The remnants are insufficient to meet current – let alone potential needs.

Therefore Glynwood has created a task force that has begun to create a regional strategy for improving the quality of what exists, help farmers access these facilities more efficiently, develop the market and financial pro formas that will facilitate investment in one or more new plants, and explore how more high quality meats can be made available to people of limited means.

I want to mention one last part of our work, since I want to ask your help. Six years ago we realized that so much good work going on around the country and people didn't know about it. We created the Harvest Awards to recognize farmers and others who are taking effective action to ensure our continuing access to fresh, healthful food.

The winners, who are selected after a national nomination process, are featured at an awards luncheon in New York City and in the media. Our goal is to provide these individuals and organizations with well-deserved recognition and to encourage others to take action in their own communities.

The sixth annual Harvest Awards nomination process will begin in May. I hope that you will submit lots of nominations. We have had winners from across the country – but not yet Michigan! Perhaps it is your turn.

Two years ago I in a meeting with representatives of major conventional, global food companies. The purpose was to explore ways that we might work together. After the public discussion, I took the representative of one of the companies aside and asked him why he had been so antagonistic – I knew that natural foods was the fastest growing category in the market, but

still it is tiny. He looked down his nose at me and said: “Because you are encouraging people to want what we cannot give them.”

It made me realize that that is at the heart of what we are doing and we need to keep on doing – encouraging people to want the kind of food that the conventional system does not and can not give them. We need to help people understand why they should want it and to believe that they can get it - that the vision of a network of strong, regional food systems stretching across this country can become a reality, with all of the benefits to our health, our environment, our communities and our economy, that will come with it.

There is a line from an old country song to the effect that “We many not have known where we were headed, but we got here just in time.” Well, here we are at the intersection of many of the most important issues of our day.

So let’s capture the moment. Build new partnerships. Do what we do with all the vigor and joy we can muster.

Together we can do everything all at once and create vibrant new food systems all across this country.