

Barnyard dance: Farming that honors animals

by [Norman Wirzba](#) in the [January 23, 2007](#) issue

A series of recent books, like Erich Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and Andrew Kimbrell's *Fatal Harvest*, have exposed the deadly side of America's highly industrialized food production system. The system relies on monocultural crop production, extensive use of fossil fuels and chemicals, massive injections of growth hormones and antibiotics, expensive capital investment, the confinement of animals, standardized production, farming practices that erode soil and deplete groundwater, and a deceptive way of calculating gains and losses.

This is a system obsessed with control and maximum profit. It offers a technological fix for every problem—like the idea that we should irradiate our entire food system to kill the bacteria that the system creates.

An entirely different approach to food production can be glimpsed at Joel Salatin's Polyface Farm in central Virginia. Salatin is explicit about saying his Christian faith informs the way he raises and slaughters the animals on his 500-acre farm. He sees it as his responsibility to honor the animals as creatures that reflect God's creative and abiding love.

Not that there is anything sentimental about his approach. Salatin knows that the animals are not pets. They are raised to be food. But Salatin's method of food production is designed to honor God's work.

It does so by learning from and attending to the patterns of symbiotic life, noting carefully how different species live best with each other, and making use of those patterns rather than imposing on creation an industrial or market-efficiency model. Creation forms a complex whole in which its members—in this case, the grasses and animals—live in a complex dance of interdependence. Salatin is like a choreographer who has learned to bring the best out of his troupe.

At Polyface Farm the cattle eat the grass in the pasture, but only on a limited section each day. The following day the portable electric fences are moved and the cattle enjoy a fresh patch. The movement of fences is crucial since it ensures that the grass/legume mix is not depleted beyond the point of recovery.

Following behind the cattle is the “eggmobile,” loaded with laying hens that are free to roam and rummage through the pasture just vacated by the cattle. As they forage through and disperse the manure, they aid in fertilizing the field. Both chickens and cows are thus free to do what they do best—eat grass and roam for bugs and larvae—while stimulating optimum grass growth. The pasture will produce an excellent hay crop for winter feed or be ready for a new rotation.

This system honors the creatures by enabling them to live the way God intended them to live. The cattle, ruminants created to eat grass, are not fed corn, nor are they stacked up and confined to standing in their own waste. As a result, they do not need the hormones and antibiotics that have become indispensable in industrial beef production. Nor do they produce the deadly strains of *E. coli* that now regularly surface in our food supply. The chickens, meanwhile, do not peck at each other like their confined and stressed industrial counterparts. They are free to roam.

The fields, in turn, do not require the synthetic fertilizers and the toxic pesticides that other farmers routinely use. They are fertilized and kept relatively pest-free by the activity of the animals feeding upon them. Conventional farmers who visit Polyface Farm are routinely baffled by the fact that Salatin has no need of costly and toxic inputs.

Salatin’s pigs enjoy their own kind of delights. Rather than being confined to crates, they live during the warmer months in woodlots, where they root around in the undergrowth. In the spring they are let into the barn that has held cattle for the previous few months. During the winter months, Salatin adds corn and woodchips (harvested from his forest) to the barn floor to keep the cattle dry and happy.

After the cattle leave for pasture, the pigs dig into several feet of manure left behind, looking for fermented corn. Their digging aerates the barn floor, creating some of the most marvelous compost one can imagine (Michael Pollan calls it “a miracle of transubstantiation”). Here again we see a symbiotic dance in which the natural activity of the pigs contributes to the fertility and health of the entire farm.

Nothing draws people to Polyface more than Salatin's broilers. People drive for as many as 100 miles to buy freshly slaughtered chickens. The pride of his chicken system is the moveable pen. Young broilers are kept in 10-by-12-foot floorless pens that systematically criss-cross another of Salatin's pastures. They eat their feed, but they also peck at the grass and bugs beneath their feet, all the while returning a day's manure and nitrogen to the field. Any more than a day of their manure droppings would be too much for the field; any less, not enough. By the end of the season Salatin has mature, healthy birds to butcher—and a healthy pasture.

Not surprisingly, while many farmers are losing topsoil to erosion, compaction or toxic death, Salatin is building it, gradually filling the gullies (some 14-feet deep) that were on the farm when his dad bought the place in 1961.

Working with creation rather than against it has made Polyface Farm amazingly productive. It produces annually 40,000 pounds of beef, 30,000 pounds of pork, 10,000 broiler chickens, 1,200 turkeys, 1,000 rabbits and nearly a half million eggs.

Chefs throughout Virginia and the Washington, D.C., area cannot get enough of Salatin's eggs and meat because they simply taste better. With this food you don't have to worry about poisoning or periodic recalls. As a bonus, the grass-fed beef (because of the protein structure of the grass) is much healthier than the corn-fed variety.

Salatin refers to his method as "forgiveness farming." Industrial food production has no room for kindness or mercy, since it is all about maximizing the bottom line. Fields and animals are put through the stresses of confinement and forced feeding, and fields are subjected to a regimen of fertilizer and pesticide—all of which takes a huge toll on creation. But in the dance that is Polyface Farm, the fields and the animals play off each other's strengths. There is room for failure and acceptance here because each member of the dance can be itself, and each is in harmony with the activity of the other. There is time for delight.

Polyface Farms shows us that our production of food need not be a desecration of creation. It can serve to promote the dance of creation, and so bring praise and thanksgiving to our lips and glory to God.