

More than any other institution, the American industrial animal farm offers a nightmarish glimpse of what capitalism can look like in the absence of moral or regulatory constraint ...

In the same way that we can probably recognize animal suffering when we see it, animal happiness is unmistakable, too ...

— Michael Pollan, "An Animal's Place," *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov. 10, 2002.

"Government isn't necessarily supporting local farming," Atkinson says. "You might see on the news that the governor is going on some agricultural foray with the farm bureau people to Asia, say, to sell vegetables or to sell seed. But as far as the more sustainable, smaller farms, they seem to be overlooking them to a large extent."

He does watch for moves in the right direction. "Something the government did do," he says, "and that came from the federal level, is a program where they had vouchers for seniors to go to farmers markets. That's the direction we ought to be talking about so people at the local level get to share the good through their purchases." Government, Atkinson explains, could be decidedly more proactive in its support of small local farms by insisting that hospitals, jails and school lunch programs buy a certain percentage of their food from local growers.

"Instead," he continues, "government generally talks about how we have the cheapest food in the world, and government policies are built around that — that's what's important."

The care for things of the natural world are constant themes for Atkinson. I can see it as we walk the along the garden to the cow pasture. His mind is constantly working at a different or more efficient or hope-

fully better way to do things. And always in the forefront of his concerns is the stewardship of the land: "You don't own the land," he says emphatically. "You only hold title to it."

Atkinson makes a clear connection between his work as a farmer and his spiritual beliefs, rooted in Roman Catholicism. He has advocated for and worked with community supported agriculture (CSAs), and is particularly excited about the work he is doing with the Rev. John Pitney of the First United Methodist Church for congregational supported agriculture.

He doesn't seem to have any mushy attachments to the animals on his farm, though he does talk to the pigs, and he is gentle with the turkeys and hens as we move about during their feedings. The animals seem content — whether it's chickens trotting and clucking in the cow pasture, or turkeys gobbling and strutting in the next field over, or mama sows lolling in the hay bed or scratching their sides against their wire-fenced pens. I know that the turkeys will go to Greener Pastures Poultry soon to be butchered and processed for Thanksgiving, and there are always more orders for pigs than Atkinson can fill. But I can say with all confidence that at this moment these animals have a fine life.

During my first visit at Laughing Stock, I

get to help as Atkinson and his son Ansel clean eggs for sale at market. Ansel and I rinse the eggs in soapy water and they travel a conveyor system to Atkinson, who packages them in cartons. When I have to leave, we all shake hands, and Atkinson hands me a dozen eggs of my very own.

I look him in the eyes and know that my conversion is inevitable (though it requires buying better less often, given that moderation is key when cost is still an issue). I've seen the hens that laid these eggs, and I've read about the hens that lay the 79-cent eggs. It really has to be no eggs or local eggs when you know the difference.

Since the stink incident, we haven't had store brand chicken. I've indulged twice in organic varieties that do, indeed, taste more like chicken than anything I've ever bought; which begs the question: What have I been eating all these years? I'll be thinking about this very carefully on every grocery trip from here on out. **EW**



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