

# THE TRANSITION DOCUMENT

## *Toward a Biologically Resilient Agriculture*

*A Book Review by Dan Armstrong*

“One of these fine days the public is going to wakeup and will pay for eggs, meat, vegetables, etc., according to how they were produced.”  
-J.I. Rodale., 1942.

The recently published and expanded fourth edition of *The Transition Document: Toward a Biologically Resilient Agriculture* (200 pages) by Harry MacCormack is arguably his most important work in a long and winding career of poetry, politics, farming, writing, and spiritual discovery. Originally published in 1988, this edition of the book is the result of a major rewriting by MacCormack and includes a considerable amount of new material and insights gathered in the 15 years since the third edition. Along with fundamental discussions of soil biology, farming practices, nutrition, and much of what he teaches in his workshops at Sunbow Farm, MacCormack narrates *The Transition Document* like a progressive journal, commenting as he goes along about how various ideas expressed in earlier editions of the book have changed, developed, or proven out—making this work absolutely critical to understanding the steady evolution of organic practices. Sixty-seven years after J.I. Rodale wrote the quote above, it is safe to say the awakening is upon us.

Harry MacCormack came to Oregon in the late 1960's. In 1972, he bought Sunbow Farm outside Corvallis and entered into the adventure of raising a family on a homestead farm. As a back-to-the-land farmer and natural-born activist, he immediately focused his efforts on getting the chemicals out of farming, and in 1984 became a central player in the creation of Oregon Tilth, one of the nation's first organic farming advocacy organizations. MacCormack became Tilth's executive director in 1989 and later was the director of research during a time when the Willamette Valley was the proving ground for leading edge organic practices. And this, in a sense, is the tale within the tale that is new to the fourth edition of *The Transition Document*. While primarily a handbook on organic farming, MacCormack's narrative provides an intimate view of the organic movement at

ground level—in the soil labs, brewing compost tea, helping put together the guidelines for the Federal Organic Foods Production Act of 1990, and doing the fundamental work of transitioning farming practices from conventional to organic.

This is where book's title *The Transition Document* comes from. As MacCormack writes in the introduction, "When we first conceived of *transition* the direction was clear. We were speaking of a move from conventional or chemically-based agriculture to organic or biologically-based agriculture. We were challenging the slogan that guided post WWII society throughout the 50s and 60s: *Better living through chemistry*. What was termed conventional agriculture was understood to be an aberration, a deviation from customary, prescribed, or natural condition." This book is about the long and difficult process of reversing sixty years of chemical farming and transitioning not only tainted land, but also long imbued ideas and practices as basic to farming as the moldboard plow.

*The Transition Document* begins by detailing the motivation for the transition. What does it really mean to have a chemically-based agricultural system? What is the long-term impact of two generations of Americans being raised on products tainted with DDT or chlordane? Chapter two describes the process of transitioning the land. This includes chemistry lessons and anecdotal stories about how long the chemical residues are in the soil and how they can be absorbed and concentrated into the things grown in it. Chapter three talks about the agricultural practices that can facilitate the transition. Chapter by chapter, piece by piece, MacCormack thoroughly discusses tilling techniques, crop rotations, green manures, weed management, and the soil itself—focusing on the biology of the soil, the "herd," as he refers to it, of microscopic living things—microorganisms, bacteria, fungi, protozoa, and nematodes—that form the soil foodweb and are so critical to mineral absorption by the plant, the health of the plant, and nutritional value of what it produces.

This last piece is an important new theme in the book. Increased awareness for microbial populations and the soil foodweb represents a key advance in the philosophy of organic farming during the last fifteen years and is emphasized by MacCormack, not only throughout the book, but also by his change in the book's subtitle. In the three previous editions of *The Transition Document*, the subtitle was "toward an environmentally sound agriculture." The new subtitle, "toward a biologically resilient agriculture," reflects this

elemental philosophy change, and as MacCormack puts it, encapsulates “where we were” twenty years ago, and “where we are” now.

The book includes a chapter on genetics, genetic engineering, and what it means to be patenting living systems. There is a view of organic farming through the lens of modern physics, quantum mechanics, quantum waves, the biodynamic resonance of all living things, and the deeper meaning of life itself. No clump of clay is left unturned. This is as much a spiritual discourse as it is a handbook of practical applications. One chapter is devoted to the value of using compost and compost tea. Another delves our diet, the minerals and amino acids that are critical to optimizing nutrition and our health.

The book’s final chapter, “Toward a Local Agricultural at the End of the Petroleum Age,” appraises the impact of peaking oil production on agriculture and outlines a vision for our future—what will the rebuilt food system look like once the transition has been completed and how it will contribute to food security and healthier living in an age beyond cheap petroleum fuels and inputs.

In many ways, the expanded fourth edition of *The Transition Document* is a compendium of modern organic practices. With an assortment of tables and charts, articles and drawings compiled over twenty years, MacCormack describes the work of soil scientists like Alan Kapuler, Elaine Ingam, Diana Tracy, Arden Anderson and many others who have influenced his ideas and fueled the evolution of organic agricultural science through the last twenty-one years.

No matter what one’s level of understanding, MacCormack’s *The Transition Document* is a must read for anyone involved in or interested in organic farming or anyone who simply wants to know what they are eating. This is an important book by a long-time contributor to what might be the most crucial work of our time—the transition from better living through chemistry to better living through natural processes.