August 2019

Dear Friends.

The grid steadily unrolled beneath my window. Over eastern Arkansas, nearing Memphis, I could see one of the most ratcheted down, squared off landscapes in the world: Mississippi River bottomland agriculture. Surely these rectangles of green and brown, meticulously drained and laser-leveled, fortified behind levees, soil on one side and water on the other, are a victory hymn to human mastery of natural process. As John McPhee once wrote, our goal for the shifting channel of the Mississippi has been to "control it in space and arrest it in time." But tune your eyes to finer color contrasts and look down again – a new set of shapes emerges, this time less confined by the grid. These arcs, fans, and whorls in the soil are subtle, but their message is unmistakable: as dry as this farmland may be today, the river has run through this spot before.

Bear with me here: do a web search for the name Harold Fisk. Through the cultural magic of the internet, an astonishingly beautiful set of maps tucked into the back of a rather dry 1940s government report is experiencing a small popular revival in 2019. Ignoring the more prosaic printed title of "Mississippi River Meander Belt," a recent commentator provides a new caption: "The dance of the Mississippi over 3,000 years." And dance the river does. Across the color plates of Fisk's maps, in swirling, looping blues, greens, and reds, the Mississippi makes pass after graceful pass over the landscape as the centuries and millennia roll by, continuously renewing a river valley ecosystem of untold biodiversity and productivity. We've maintained the productivity in our way – millions of bushels of soybeans and rice from this alluvial plain, with a side order of corn and wheat. But there's been a cost: loss of diverse, perennial land cover. A steady diet of imported fertility and pest control. Billions of dollars spent up and down the river building and propping up levees and sills. But the river has run through this spot before. The river will run through this spot again.

Maybe someday we'll learn to follow nature's lead in the dance. Land Institute president emeritus Wes Jackson has lately been writing about the need for a "creaturely" worldview as an alternative to the industrial mindset that hotwires landscapes and genomes alike to respond to the products of cheap and endless fossil fuels. The perennial grain crops and high biodiversity cropping systems The Land Institute is working on, Wes argues, can't merely be regarded as the latest technological gimmick. Rather, the heart of the matter is the embeddedness of these new plants, these new ecological communities, and this new agriculture in the ages-old rhythm of the landscape.

Here in Salina, Kansas, and now at dozens of collaborating sites all around the world, we're out to ensure that people everywhere may be fed and lifted up by truly creaturely agricultural system. Perhaps such an agriculture, modeled for the first time in history on the resilient structure of natural ecosystems, can exist in long term harmony with the ecosphere, rather than at constant war with it. And maybe we'll learn a few new dance steps along the way.

Today, forty-three years after Wes and Dana Jackson founded The Land Institute, the prospect of achieving the diverse, perennial agricultural future that we seek has never been brighter – with the very earliest small-scale production underway of Kernza® perennial grain in North America and perennial rice in China, we now have definitive proof of concept that such things as perennial grain crops are possible. Now it's time to see this journey through. Farmers (and eaters!) will need not just early-stage perennial crops but fully developed ones, not just two crops but a diversity of them, and not just an ecological vision of perenniality but a cultural vision as well. The Land Institute has come a long way since 1976. But at this proof of concept moment, your gift – whatever the size – is more important and more decisive than ever.

Sincerely,

Fred Iutzi
President