

**Staying Home For Dinner:
Ruminations on Local Foods in a Cosmopolitan Society**

Lisa Heldke
Professor, Department of Philosophy
Gustavus Adolphus College

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Life on a tiny island ten miles off the coast of Maine preserves some features of life in another century. Sure, people wear contemporary clothing and own satellite dishes and talk about the news everyone else in the country is hearing. But underneath it all, I detect a sentiment I associate with pre-industrial life; an intense recognition that everything that *is* here had to get *brought* here somehow. And that the “somehow” involved a boat. And that when the thing is used up, it has to get *off* the island again. By another boat.

Boat-dependence makes for intense and immediately visible differences in island ways of doing things. When we arrived at the ferry dock yesterday morning, for instance, there was an old, obviously very dead, refrigerator sitting there. On the side of it, someone had written in magic marker, a name and the instructions “to the dump.” Old refrigerators have to be very intentionally—and very literally—ferried away. Last night, I wanted an ice cream cone. First, there was the rather astonishing price (2.50 for a scoop smaller than a golf ball)—and then there was the fact that the only flavor left was Grape Nut. “We’ll get more on a boat tomorrow,” the server told the line of frustrated waiting customers. Same thing had happened in the restaurant earlier; they’d run out of zucchini. When you’re that many miles offshore, you can’t run over to an all-night supermarket to pick up enough zucchini to get you through the dinner rush.

Once I start thinking about the matter, it becomes almost overwhelming, the effort and expense required to haul things across those miles of water, and then haul the carcasses of those things back again, when they’ve been exhausted. The dresser in our room at the inn. Solar panels for the house down the way. An old fire truck from Nobleboro.¹ Case upon case of bottles of water. Because boats are so important, one quickly becomes attuned to the rhythms of their arrivals; the island’s battered little battalion of delivery pickup trucks lines up at the ferry dock, ready to offload whatever the most recent boat brought: zucchini, ice cream, bundles of tee shirts for island gift shops, visitors’ suitcases, more bottled water. Everything gets schlepped one last time from that boat to its island home in the back of a pickup.

But here’s the thing: for all the obviousness of this schlepping and hauling and toting, for all its early-nineteenth-century quality, Monhegan is no different from anywhere else in this country. *Everywhere* is an island—or a mountaintop, or a remote prairie outpost, or a dense city far from any forest or field. *Everywhere* is really *really* far

from *somewhere* else that matters to it; a long, arduous distance that some object—some foodstuff, for instance—had to travel in order to get to that island, mountaintop, prairie outpost or city.

We have wallpapered over that difference in the last century, making the arduousness of those journeys disappear behind a thick layer of paste and a lovely floral pattern. The wonders of transportation have allegedly rendered those distances immaterial to us as “consumers.” Orange juice from Brazil, drunk in Abercrombie, North Dakota, is not only *not* unusual; it’s absolutely ho hum commonplace to the point that its absence on a family breakfast table would be a cause for comment. Wheat flour from Kansas is, increasingly, a commonplace ingredient in the diets of Nigerians, whose per capita consumption of the grain has tripled in ten years, to 20 kg a year.²

The difference between all these other places and Monhegan is not really that Monhegan is harder to get to than many other places. Economists will tell us it’s this: There isn’t enough volume on Monhegan to make it “cost effective” to haul stuff out here. One refrigerator might be needed, but not an entire Best Buy store’s worth of them. Consumer goods are required on Monhegan Island in bathtub-sized quantities, not container-ship lots. And, as we learned from Sam Walton, “how we do it” is with volume. Monhegan doesn’t have any volume, and at ten miles from the next chunk of land with any sizeable population, it’s not exactly on anybody else’s supply routes either.

It doesn’t really take any more energy or struggle to get that orange juice to Monhegan than it does to haul it to North Dakota. The economies of scale have made it cheaper to send it to North Dakota; true. But an economic fact cannot tell the whole tale about an environmental reality, which is this; hauling orange juice across the globe is hauling orange juice across the globe. (Indeed, hauling it those last ten miles to Monhegan is probably a lot less energy intensive than hauling it, say, up the hill to my own college’s campus, given the relative differences in land and water transportation).³

What if we all acted just a bit more like we lived on Monhegan, and a little less like we lived in a Walmart warehouse? What would it be like? This, in a nutshell, is the locavore challenge. What *if* we all “stayed home” to eat a local diet?

The local foods story: Most of this country ate a primarily local diet until relatively recently. Until even *more* recently, much of the rest of the world’s population did the same—though this reality too is changing rapidly and dramatically in many places, as the Nigerian wheat example illustrates.⁴ The fact that a local diet was an absolutely routine fact of life until very recently makes the *astonishingness* of efforts by people like Barbara Kingsolver, Alisa Smith, and J.B. Mackinnon, who set themselves the task of eating only local foods for a year, astonishing on a *meta*-level. Isn’t it amazing that we *find* it amazing that someone could survive by eating all and only those foods that can be grown inside the circumference of some fairly small circle with them at its center? Isn’t it weird how quickly it came to seem normal to us *not* to eat that way?

In the last year, Americans have devoured book after news article after blog, chronicling *someone's* efforts to eat locally. Inspired by the website and books tracking Alisa Smith and J.B. Mackinnon's "Hundred Mile Diet," and fueled by blockbuster novelist Barbara Kingsolver's book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, chronicle of her own family's local foods adventure, eaters have begun shopping closer to home in significant numbers. "Is it local?" is a question asked—and answered in the affirmative—more and more often in grocery stores and restaurants across the country. Locally grown foods are one of the fastest growing sectors of the retail foods market; sales of locally grown foods have increased 25% in five years.⁵

Eaters choose local foods for flavor, freshness and food safety, as well as to support local economies and small farmers; however, the reason most often mentioned in newspaper, magazine and blog articles about this movement is the reduction in energy that results from shipping food fifty miles, instead of fifteen hundred. Local foods are more environmentally friendly. Think of this as the "local or long distance?" version of the "paper or plastic" issue. And the answer? Local. Definitely local. No question about it.

Probably.

About this "paper or plastic?" approach to ethical decision making: Paper-or-plastic thinking begins by constructing our ethical choices as a dichotomy: do this OR do that. If we have set up the dichotomy correctly, one choice will be the right moral choice, and we, the moral decision makers, will always be able to tell which one it is. Our choosing will *not* involve some Byzantine chain of logic, hinging on the phrase "it depends." We don't *want* it to "depend." We want it to *just be*. We want clear ethical choices—and clean moral hands. To use another metaphor, we would like a moral litmus test; a foolproof criterion we can apply to determine the moral worth of a course of action. The locavores seem to have all of this sewn up in a cloth shopping bag; clear dichotomy, clear choice.

But wait. Not long after local foods began to boom, other voices began predicting—or plotting—its bust. "Put that heirloom tomato down and rush to the nearest supermarket," one article in an online journal jokingly began.⁶ Another, more recent piece on the topic bore the scoffing title "Local, Schmocal."⁷ Researchers and writers in New Zealand, Britain, and Canada weighed in. Among their criticisms: using only distance traveled to calculate the environmental impact of the foods one eats is far too crude a measure. It doesn't take into account the efficiency of the method of production (pastured meat? Corn-fed? Commercial pesticide and fertilizer on those tomatoes or organically grown?). Nor does it consider the means of transportation (boat? train? semi? mini-van?). Nor does it take into account considerations *other* than carbon footprint: the economic impact upon, say, small-scale organic farmers in Africa, when Brits switch to locally-grown foods; or the fact that a commitment to locally-grown food does not automatically translate into a commitment to fair labor practices for employees, or even

to preservation of family-size farms. The upshot? Maybe local *isn't* automatically better. Maybe we need a few more layers of complexity.

Of course some of the most vocal critics of the local foods movement have not contented themselves with trying to *complicate* the picture by showing why and how other factors might come into play. Instead, they simply flipped the dichotomy on its head, arguing that the answer to the question “Local or imported?” is, absolutely without question, “imported.” At least if you’re talking about, say, pastured lamb from New Zealand, or lettuce from Chile, or.... And yes, you guessed it, sometimes the proponents of these arguments are representatives of, say, the New Zealand lamb board, or the Chilean lettuce export guild. And they often use their *own* reductionistic, paper-or-plastic measures to make their case.

But the truth is, they don’t really have to work that hard to make that case. Because we, as *consumers*, are often altogether too happy to see things in straightforward, either/or dichotomies—or we’re too busy, overwhelmed, depressed or angry to do otherwise. Paper-or-plastic thinking serves us pretty well. Either local food is better environmentally, or it isn’t; don’t tell me “it depends,” because then I’m going to have to keep thinking about it and it’s going to frustrate me too much. I want to walk into the grocery store and, without having to think about it, pick up the foods that constitute The Best environmental choices.⁸ We need Grab ‘n Go ethics.

But of course we don’t. What we need is a reprieve from the notion that moral choices *come* in neatly dichotomous pairs. We need a reprieve from the sense that we individual eaters carry the moral weight of the world on our shoulders, from the sense that we *can* change the world as we shop, one locally-grown purchase at a time. It’s not that the concrete choices we make *don't* matter. But far more significant than our purchases is the fabric of relationships within which these individual choices are simply pinholes. Paying attention to the pinholes, rather than to the fabric itself—that thick felted mat of relations—leads us to believe that it’s possible to take clear, distinct, criticism-proof moral action—right action that will leave us with clean hands. But criticism from others—and questioning, curiosity, and confusion—are inevitable, given the thick interwoven nature of that fabric. And when it turns out that our choices aren’t impervious to challenge, we feel our well-meaning choices scorched by the white hot lights of criticism.

The simple fact is that the all-or-nothing evangelistic zeal with which many local foods *publicists*⁹ tended to describe the virtues of the local foods movement was an engraved invitation to criticism. That criticism, in turn, was all but guaranteed to rest on its *own* oversimplification—and so the spiral began.

Paper or plastic. Local or long distance. Either or. What’s a consumer to do? Several participants in the debate have proposed solutions to this dilemma that attempt to split the difference or nuance the choices—“fair miles,” for instance, or regional food systems.¹⁰ I think these more subtle and fine-grained proposals for action can be

enormously useful. But they too set us up for a fall, if we mistakenly take them for clear, unambiguous principles that can make us into Good People, rather than as helpful ways for us to see *some* of the relationships in which we are entangled. (Does the regional food system alternative enable us to consider consumer relations to African organic farmers? Probably not.)

My own philosopher's answer to the question "what's a consumer to do?" is this: remember always the fabric of relations, and operate from within it. *Talk* about choices. *Think* about them with others. In particular, think and talk with others—all sorts of others—about whether and how you believe we ought to rate the relative importance of various, often competing, pulls on our moral compass. How ought we understand the construction of the fabric, if we attempt to hold in our minds all these issues at once: environmental sustainability, economic justice, human dignity, animal welfare, social respect, cultural solidarity, aesthetic value? The *answer*, in any given case, is *anything* but obvious. The value of the *question* is enormous.

Asking questions, struggling together with others to formulate problems and challenges, clearly is one way of actually *making* that fabric stronger and more useful. Indeed, as the philosopher Jane Addams suggests, talking with each other is one of the most important elements of democracy; democracy, for Addams, *is* the conversation in the grocery store aisle or coffee shop, or at the dinner table. Democracy requires that we thrust ourselves into the current of diverse human experience, and confront there the perplexities that arise when our moral truisms encounter resistance or challenge. Our perplexity and frustration are not states to be avoided, but rather opportunities for deeper understanding. As she puts it, "those who self-confidently avoid perplexity by implementing what they already know fail to grasp the principle of growth. They fail, that is, to arrive at knowledge that is the result of inquiry into a problematic situation" (quoted in Seigfried, xxix). On the other hand, "contact with the larger experience, not only increases [one's] sense of social obligation but at the same time recasts [one's] social ideals. ... [B]enefits accrue not merely from good intentions but because '[one] has socialized [one's] virtues not only through a social aim but by a social process'" (Seigfried, quoting Addams, xxix-xxx). Paper or plastic? Let's *talk* about it!

Scary organic spinach: The local foods movement could have taken a leaf from the organic movement that emerged in the sixties. Organic foods advocates have already been through several wars, and know firsthand the cost of understanding food choices as simple dichotomies. Consider: At the dawn of the organic movement, advocates saw organic food not simply as a description for food that had been grown without the aid of industrial pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers, but as the term for ways of farming that emphasized an entire environmental, social, and spiritual approach to farming, food, and life. When mainstream America stopped mocking organic food as hippie food, they began to admire it for both its positive environmental impacts and its health benefits.¹¹

I'll admit I rather willfully remained ignorant about the ways that the organic movement had changed from its hippie days. The packages I was buying all bore images of small-and-beautiful farms populated by happy people and contented animals. I wanted to believe that organic spinach was not only better for me, but *better*, plain and simple. I wanted to believe that its pesticide-free purity meant it laid down a smaller carbon footprint and contributed to the enrichment of the soil. It was in my interest to frame the issue in a paper-or-plastic way; here, the dichotomy became "organic or conventional." And the answer, I knew, was organic. No question. Had to be. Dip our moral litmus paper into organic foods, and it will come up green.

Now, truth be told, my belief in the unambiguous virtue of organic food had already suffered a few setbacks over the years; I remembered the brutal USDA certification process, which resulted in an organic label that didn't exactly live up to the promise of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*.¹²

Then there was the very fact of the success of the movement; the spike in demand for organic spinach *was being* met somehow; but *how*, exactly? I knew—but chose not to know—that the answer wasn't "on hundreds of small, locally owned and operated diversified farms spread throughout the country."

During the summer and fall of 2006, I was given two golden opportunities to lay to rest forever my illusion that there's anything like a clear, unambiguous, morally pure answer to the question "organic, or conventional?" First, there was Michael Pollan, and then there was the "spinach scare." Pollan, in his book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, informed me that, well, actually, the organic spinach I consumed so virtuously yesterday used almost as many calories of fossil fuel—including the calories needed to haul in the tons of manure used to grow it—as did the conventional stuff. And that, surprise, surprise, shipping even organic spinach more than halfway across the nation is not an energy efficient idea.¹³ Yes, it turns out that growing, chilling, washing, packaging and transporting organic lettuce uses 57 calories of fossil fuel energy for every calorie of food energy produced, while conventionally grown lettuce uses just four percent more. (If we could get our bodies to work this way, think how delighted we'd be, at least for a while! I'd convert, say, every 57 calories of hot fudge sundae into a single calorie of exercise. Too bad it's not such good news with fossil fuel.)

Furthermore, Pollan pointed out to me that the spinach I was eating was not in fact grown on cozy little plots lovingly tended by women wearing Birkenstock sandals and taking tea breaks to talk about the latest issue of *Mother Earth News*. "Big Organic" is just that—big. Earthbound Farms, one major producer of prewashed organic greens, controls 25,000 acres of land, on 135 farms. That's a lot of big farms. Throw in some dairy feedlots milking 4000-5000 head, and some chicken barns filled with 20,000 birds, and you've described the conditions under which most food labeled organic is produced in this country. And, because the USDA expressly declined to establish any labor guidelines in the organic standards, the conditions for workers on a large scale organic

farm may, by law, be every bit as brutal and unpleasant as they are on the worst of the conventional factory farms.¹⁴ Minus the toxic pesticides of course—which are certainly not *inconsequential*.

You may recall my other “golden opportunity”—the fall, 2006 spinach scare, during which the nation’s spinach supply was shut down far more effectively than the flow of booze during Prohibition. The shutdown was the result of an outbreak of *e coli* that eventually affected nearly three hundred people. It was apparently linked to organic spinach grown in California, a fact that led people to wonder whether in fact organic food was even “good” for our health.¹⁵ Critics pointed out the fact that there was something tremendously creepy about *e coli*—a bacterium found in the lower intestines of mammals—infesting our lettuce. Was raw manure, rather than well-composted stuff, being used on plants? Was this about hand washing? Water pollution from a feedlot? Other critics pointed out that this event was evidence of the fact that Big Organic was no better than Big Conventional in a number of ways; a system in which roughly half of the nation’s supply of a given foodstuff is coming from a single valley in a single state means that, when there is a problem with that supply, that problem is rapidly going to spread all over the country.

Paper or plastic? Conventional or organic? Here, as with the local/long distance issue, working participants in the debate are moving the matter past this simple either/or. Many growers, responding to the dramatic erosion of the meaning of organic, have stopped using the word, and stopped seeking the (expensive) certification. They’ve developed new terms—like “beyond organic,” “sustainably grown,” and so on—to signal to consumers the kinds of farming to which they are committed; farming rooted in robust conceptions of organic agriculture that often add commitments to fair labor practices, economically sustainable communities, and other, broader justice issues.

For those of us approaching the organic conundrum as consumers, my philosopher’s proposal is the same as before: *think about it with others*. Understand the fabric of relations into which we are woven—a fabric in which every relation is shaped by every other relation. When I eat organic foods today, those foods quite literally mean something entirely different from what they meant a generation ago, because they are now embedded in a fabric that is dramatically different from what it was—and from what it will be. There’s nothing all that obvious about the answer to the question “organic or conventional?” The question doesn’t even capture our choices. As Jane Addams might say, welcome the perplexities as opportunities.

If we think that our work as moral agents is to identify and make morally unambiguous choices, we’re going to be disappointed in ourselves. Focusing all our ethical attention on “doing the right thing”—searching for ethical choices that are unquestionably right—puts our ethical energies in the wrong place. Of course we have to make choices—daily—but the importance of those choices lies not with the choices themselves, but with the relationships in which they are located. Let us instead put the

moral focus on building communities—communities of humans, but also of soil, water and air. Addams argued that we need to move from an individual and familial ethic to a social ethic, rooted in the realization that we, as individuals, come to be who we are through our relations with others.¹⁶ We cannot be moral agents all by ourselves. We can't have clean hands all alone.

More stories: I could fill a dozen hours with stories that illustrate the limits of “paper or plastic” thinking. For instance, there's the story of the health-related changes that many school cafeterias have undertaken in the last few years, changes that, surprise, surprise, are not always popular with student consumers, and that have all the subtlety of a slab of liver on your plate. Many food and health advocates have adopted a kind of boot-camp, tough-love approach to child nutrition, arguing for carrots instead of cupcakes at the Halloween party, and preaching the need to “tough it out” with young eaters. Such an approach, while obviously well intentioned, nevertheless threatens to create its own monsters. When carrots become sticks, neither health nor taste is served. Cupcakes or carrots? If we really want children to choose carrots sometimes, we're all gonna have to talk about this a whole lot more!¹⁷

I could tell a story about another aspect of food culture—cuisine—and could describe the way in which the explosion of interest in ethnic cuisines in the United States has been accompanied, all too often, by a purist's obsession with finding the “true, authentic” version of a cuisine—an obsession as fierce as it is impossible to satisfy, resting as it does, on a notion of cultural purity that is to be found nowhere. This is an aesthetic issue that may seem far from the realm of morality, but it shades quickly into ethical and social issues, when you consider that these judgments of “authenticity” are being made against real people's living cultures. When cuisines are declared either “authentic” or “inauthentic” in isolation from any other factors affecting that culture—migration, for instance, or imperialism—the effects on that culture are real. Paper or plastic? Authentic or inauthentic?

You get the idea. Paper or plastic thinking limits our capacity to see complexity, encourages us to search for pure solutions, and renders us uncomfortable with ambiguity. It encourages us to focus on our actions as individuals, and our own moral purity. It also can foster in us a bizarre kind of moral competitiveness that leads us to inspect the contents of each other's cafeteria trays and shopping carts and silently cluck our tongues at the choices displayed there. We define the moral high ground as a set of consumer choices that only those with considerable economic privilege can make—and then wring our hands over the fact that we've made poor people second class moral citizens.

Food and meaning

Food is one of the most concentrated sources of meaning and value in human life. Food carries this weight because it unavoidably connects us to a wide swath of beings, sentient and non-sentient, living and nonliving. Our eating inevitably intertwines our destinies with those of other people, animals, plants, and the very soil. We cannot opt out

of this connectedness, nor can we exercise full control over all these connections. Rather than seeing this state of affairs as a burden that prevents us from ever being able to engage in “pure, simple, good and right” actions, I invite you to see it as one of the most significant opportunities with which we are presented as humans. It’s an amazing opportunity we have—to connect, day after day, meal after meal, with everything and everyone, from the dirt under our feet, to the woman living thousands of miles from here who harvested the tomatoes in our salad; from the still-living leaves of spinach on our plate, to the server who just brought us this beautiful salad. Add to all this the fact that these connections are served up to us in dishes that rival the most elaborate lasagna, in the number of layers of meaning they possess: aesthetic as well as ethical meaning; socio-cultural and also economic; racial-ethnic alongside political. What an opportunity to connect!

We actualize this opportunity every time we eat, whether or not we *choose* to do so; and we actualize it whether or not we give *thought* to the connections in which we are entangled. We *are* always already connected to it all—to the sun and the soil, the tomato worker and the restaurant server, the global corporation and the local farm—with every forkful we take in, whatever that forkful contains (even a tomato lovingly grown in our own backyard). We are connected no matter how assiduously we might *avoid* contemplating some strands of connection.

For a long stretch of the recent past, many Americans have honed our skills at *not* giving much thought to our connectedness—honed them for reasons that include the explosive growth of an industrialized food system specializing in rock-bottom, farm-busting prices for many goods, and constant, luxurious, budget-busting availability for many others.¹⁸ *Not* thinking about our food seems like a reasonable self-defense measure against losing our appetite, as we confront everything from tasteless strawberries and restaurant food waste, to deadly food-borne illnesses and brutal, deadly working conditions for farm and factory workers. Who wants to think about this—while we’re trying to eat?¹⁹

The alternatives to industrial agriculture I’ve mentioned are exciting, important, and rich with the potential to promote a more ethical, sustainable and delicious food system. I am also pretty sure that we can do more, as participants in or supporters of these movements, to realize the complexity of all those connections. We can do so in part by gently inviting ourselves to stop beginning from certain problematic assumptions. *Monovision*—the kind of thinking that makes us believe there’s always an answer to the “paper or plastic” question, that leads us to focus, myopically, on the cleanliness of our own hands—such thinking sets us up for disaster, or at least severe disappointment. *All-or-nothingism*—the belief that, unless we can follow some given moral precept 100 percent of the time in 100 percent of contexts, it’s worthless even to try—that way of thinking leaves us feeling defeated when we fail to achieve 100 percent, and also leads us to point fingers at others who are “failing to be pure.”

I propose that we think of food as providing us with opportunities to reflect, connect, and imagine more democratically organized communities in the future, rather than as a substance with which we can advertise our already-formed moral beliefs. This is food-as-process, rather than food-as-litmus test—or what I like to call “wearing our celery hearts on our sleeve.”

I tended to be a “litmus test” person twenty years ago. Now, I find myself inclined to think that seeing into the complexity of our interactions, the perplexity of our options, is the important thing—that talking with others about choices we might make is a more valuable moral activity than checking my behavior against some fixed list of criteria and finding myself either virtuous or vicious. Relatedly, I find myself thinking more contextually and systemically—and making my choices by locating myself in a set of relationships with everything from soil micronutrients to the global industrial food system. Instead of running, screaming, from the complexity of those relationships, I try, in the spirit of Jane Addams, to set myself the project of living with the complexity, always realizing that my efforts are not, and should not be, aimed at giving myself “clean hands,” or scoring a perfect one hundred on the moral litmus test.

How do we avail ourselves of the opportunities for connection with which food presents us? How do we live with messiness, “it depends”-ness, incompleteness, dirty hands-ness, and ambiguity—including often-painful moral ambiguity? My answer—which is just one of many—is this: we can reconceive of ourselves and of our work in two specific ways: first, by ceasing to understand ourselves as food consumers,²⁰ and instead thinking of ourselves as food citizens; and second, by abandoning our search for morally pure choices and shifting our efforts toward the task of cultivating relationships, using food as a medium of communication. This latter task I describe as the work of food democracy; it goes hand in hand with the practice of food citizenship.

Food Citizenship: The Citizen of the Refrigerator: A few years ago, my partner and I started using the term “citizen of the refrigerator.” It began as a joke, the sort of idea that arises when one person in the relationship looks in the refrigerator and says “there’s nothing to eat,” to which the other person quietly responds by producing a meal. It drove Peg nuts that I could make dinner out of the contents of what seemed to her to be an empty refrigerator. On the other hand, it drove *me* nuts that it always fell to me to open the lid on containers in the refrigerator, to see which contents had gone moldy, to figure out what needed to be used up, and—most irritating of all to me—to feel obliged to eat the unappealing leftovers that neither of us wanted, but that neither of us could bear to throw away. The refrigerator, it turns out, doesn’t just hold food; it can also store guilt and resentment! Tongue in cheek though our name was, it proved remarkably illuminating; identifying the role actually helped us think about the work involved! Refrigerator citizenship *named*, and therefore *honored*, the kinds of responsibilities we have to each other, to the food and to all that the food represents—responsibilities I felt had fallen unequally onto my shoulders. It *also* forced me to get off my moral high horse,

and recognize that, as a citizen, my job was not to make the other citizen notice how wonderful I was; citizenship is not a competitive sport. A citizen of a democracy (and of course our refrigerator would be a democracy!) has responsibilities and rights. A citizen doesn't take the last milk and leave the container in the refrigerator empty. Or fill the refrigerator with things that require a herd of garbage collectors to haul away the packaging. *Nor* does she wear her own work on behalf of the refrigerator like some cool cloak of righteousness!

A citizen of the refrigerator, as I conceive of it, takes her relationships—to other citizens, to the world around her—seriously, and works to make those relationships thrive and flourish. What relationships am I cultivating with dairy animals—and with their herdsman—through the cheese, butter and milk I've purchased? What relationships to soil, and to sun, lie embedded in this block of frozen spinach? Which relationships embodied in these foods am I unable to consider without pain? Which give me pleasure? Which are complete mysteries to me, because I cannot even imagine them? For my citizen, the refrigerator stops being a container full of finished products and becomes a kind of gathering place (town meeting!) for relationships between and among people, animals, plants and the soil. As a citizen of that fridge, I want to maintain good “community relations,” starting, of course, with Peg, but continuing as far out as I can understand, or even imagine.

Others theorists, working seriously on these issues, have developed a concept they call *food* citizenship; it has entered the vocabulary of people working in both community food security and sustainable food systems.²¹ Ordinarily, we define our relationship to food as “consumer,” a term that tends to reduce the relationship to its economic component.²² “Consumer” also tends to connote a somewhat passive relationship; if I am only a consumer, I can't do much beyond select or refuse a given product. When we begin to think of ourselves as food citizens, on the other hand, the very terms of our participation in the food system change fundamentally. Jennifer Wilkins defines food citizenship “as the practice of engaging in food-related behaviors that support, rather than threaten, the development of a democratic, socially and economically just, and environmentally sustainable food system.”²³ The Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project defines the term this way: “Food citizens are eaters who take an interest in food beyond its affordability and availability. Food citizens are concerned about environmental sustainability, the health of farmers and consumers, issues of justice for farm workers and the poor, and democratic participation in determining where our food system is heading.”²⁴ Citizens also work to develop cultural connections and to cultivate our capacity to experience deep pleasure in eating (a pleasure that doesn't require us to avert our gaze from the way that food was grown). We work to promote the capacity of food to contribute to the health of all “food citizens.”

Food citizens are not simply “concerned” with these relationships. As citizens, we seek to enact—and to transform—our relations with others in our world—through our

purchasing and eating choices, yes, but also through our collective work in organizations that promote healthy, just, fair, safe, and delicious food systems for all people; through our work as literal citizens, to advocate for just food policy; and so on. We might say that the goal of a food citizen is to be able to look deeply into their own refrigerator, to follow every relationship that is embodied in those foods, and to smile with pleasure at the thought of those relations. But that goal is a little too static for my taste—and also too far in the future. We need to fortify ourselves for the slow work of food democracy building. This is not the work of a day, nor is it the work of a monovisionary; it requires the labors of many, many citizens, all willing to deal realistically with the fact that no choices are pretty, clean, or unambiguous, and all choices link us deeply to others. The food citizen is not content with the shape of her food world; she recognizes her responsibilities as a citizen to make real change. She is not surprised that that work is not labeled “paper or plastic.”

Messy democracy: The work of making change is the work of food democracy; to examine it, I turn again to Jane Addams. Addams, the turn-of-the-century social theorist/activist who founded Hull House, the first settlement in the United States, wrote that “the cure for the ills of democracy is *more* democracy”²⁵ Translation: the only thing to do in the face of our incompletely democratic society is to try to use democracy to haul itself up by its own bootstraps—to use the tools of democracy to penetrate more corners of our society, in the hopes that this greater penetration will promote stronger democracy overall. Addams believed that the only thing we can do is start where we are; she rejects moral absolutes, perfect worlds, ultimate goals, and uncomplicated starting points. We must undertake the task of democracy building in *our* world, full of choices that range from half-decent to indecent to unconscionable. In the face of such choices, we can do just what Addams did; start *wherever we are* to cultivate democracy, knowing that this means working with others to make choices that work to advance all members of our communities. Addams called this idea “lateral progress.”²⁶

Our choices of action as food citizens are indeed half-decent to unconscionable; as consumers, we may well feel like we have very little power to do the right thing in the existing food system. Neva Hassanein defines food democracy as “the idea that people can and should actively participate in shaping the food system, rather than remain passive consumers on the sidelines,” and suggests that there are three important elements to this work: knowledge of the food system, meaningful participation in the food system, and collaborative action in the food system.²⁷ Echoing Addams, I would observe that, central to all of the work she describes is the need to think, talk, and listen with others—the more diverse and wide-ranging those others, the better. The purpose of our conversations is not to get the “right answer” to all the various paper-or-plastic questions that lie out there. Food democrats know that the search for neat and tidy solutions, clear cut, plain and simple answers to questions like “what should I eat?” will not lead anywhere very promising.

Instead, those of us interested in making more democracy through food need to keep trying to see our way further into the complexity—to understand the fabric of the relations in which we find ourselves—even as we seek to imagine the ways to reknit that fabric. We strive to remember that the work of food democracy is the work of everyone. Addams puts it this way:

The man who insists upon consent, who moves with the people, is ...often obliged to attain only Mr. Lincoln's "best possible," and often ha[s] the sickening sense of compromising with his best convictions. He has to move along with those whom he rules toward a goal that neither he nor they see very clearly till they come to it. He has to discover what people really want, and then "provide the channels in which the growing moral force of their lives shall flow." What he does attain, however, is not the result of his individual striving, as a solitary mountain climber beyond the sight of the valley multitude, but it is underpinned and upheld by the sentiments and aspirations of many others. Progress has been slower perpendicularly, but incomparably greater because lateral.²⁸

You can't be a food democrat all alone.²⁹

Concluding strategies

Would-be ethical food *consumers* approach every alternative food campaign as a kind of moral-social-ecological litmus test. "To be a good person, you must eat vegetarian/eat vegan/eat organic/eat local/eat biodynamic/eat fair trade/eat authentic/eat..." I applaud these individual efforts to challenge the industrial agro-food system; I do not applaud their tendency to reduce moral life to a set of rigid choices that, if made correctly, can "make one good."

Food *citizens* working to deepen food democracies, focus on the fact that food affords us enormous opportunities to connect—opportunities that go begging most of the time. The potential of food as a source of meaning and value can never be overstated. It is a locus for moral, ethical, and political; aesthetic, socio-cultural and racial-ethnic reflection. Food is nothing less than all of life's burning questions, arranged on a plate.

Michael Pollan speaks of eating as the vote we cast several times a day; I'd like to suggest that food presents us with daily opportunities to practice a far *more* robust form of democracy, and that it enables us to do so with everything and everyone in the cosmos. Food can be the vehicle with which we as citizens work collectively and individually to understand our food system, to envision alternatives to it, and to work with others to make those visions bear fruit. Our consumer choices are an important, albeit limited piece of this democracy work.

I end by describing a few simple tools for democracy building. Hammers and screwdrivers—no power tools. I'm hoping they fall into the category of "incredibly obvious, but nonetheless useful." And like hammers and screwdrivers, they aren't single-application tools; they don't apply only to our food relations.

1. Attention to food is good: Thinking and talking with others about our food is vital. Attention and talk aren't sufficient, of course, but anyone who's really talking and thinking isn't likely to stop there anyway. Let's relish the value of careful attention and thoughtful conversation, in which we both listen to, and are listened to by, a host of others.

2. Contextity is natural: Contextity isn't a word, but it should be. The context in which we make our decisions about food matters enormously. "It depends" is just the right answer, because *everything* depends—on everything else. This is not some kind of wishy-washy relativism; it's actually a very stern-minded demand to pay attention to the layers of meaning embodied in our food relationships. How do you reconcile a commitment to vegetarianism when a goat is slaughtered in your honor? How do you reconcile your commitments to the environment with the economic realities of American working class consumer life?

3. Find a thread and follow it. Pick an issue that you care about, and learn all you can about it. Realize that this issue is in the middle of a very big blanket; don't lose sight of the fact that there are other threads, weaving in and out at other places and in other directions. Remember that you can't make your own hands clean, all by your lonesome. While individual value choices matter, they cannot, in and of themselves, change the world. We need to think, talk, and work in concert with others, as food citizens. Your choice of organization or movement doesn't so much matter to me—so long as your work in it doesn't obscure for you the fact that you're part of that blanket, and that your work makes its *best* sense only in the context of the work of others. Make no mistake; this is very hard!

4. Next time, try "yes-and" thinking.³⁰ Given how hard it is, it might be wise if we sometimes give ourselves permission to try what improvisational actors call "yes-and" thinking; that is, thinking in which the idea is to build upon the ideas of the person next to you, rather than to show the limits of that person's views. Yes-and thinking invites us to be creative, to use our best selves, to try things that might not work, in the spirit of learning what we can from them.

5. If it doesn't taste good, I don't want to come to your revolutionary potluck. I've not said much about the aesthetic dimensions of food, but they cannot go unmentioned. Among all the other things it is, food is an enormous potential source of aesthetic pleasure and understanding; to paraphrase Pollan, eating a meal is *also* like going to an art museum or a concert three times a day! To neglect the aesthetic dimension of food, because we think we don't have time for it, or because we think it's in poor taste to focus on taste when the ethical issues involved are so enormous, or because the food we're eating simply doesn't taste very good, is to miss a tremendously important layer of the meaning and value food possesses.³¹

The 13th century Japanese Zen master Dogen wrote two works that focus on the role of food in Buddhist practice. One, "Instructions for the Tenzo," explains the duties

assigned to the Tenzo, or temple cook. The other, “Mealtime Regulations,” details the rituals of eating together. Both works devote significant attention to the matter of the spirit, or mind, with which one should enter into either activity. I close today with a very short passage from “Mealtime Regulations,” which I leave with you as my invitation: When one is identified with the food one eats, one is identified with the whole universe; when we are one with the whole universe we are one with the food we eat. This comes from the Vimalakirti Scripture. The whole universe and a meal are identical in quality.³²

Notes

¹ Where’s Nobleboro? I don’t know, but if I wanted to find out, I could go online to Mapquest right here under this apple tree. Despite its nineteenth-century touches, this island has very twenty-first-century electronic connections to the world. Wireless internet, free with your stay, for instance.

² “Wheat Letter, May 18, 2006,” U.S. Wheat Associates (<http://www.uswheat.org/wheatLetter/doc/F1502AB8DB0AD03C85257172004F06B8?OpenDocument>)

³ How can we/should we calculate the environmental cost of hauling orange juice around? This question has been given fresh energy recently, thanks to debates over food miles and fair miles. But the question is hardly a new one. Sustainability theorists have long been exploring the matter of which costs to include in a calculation of the “true cost” of producing products, and economists have used the notion of “externalities” since at least 1912, when A.C. Pigou explored the concept of costs to others not taken into account by the person producing a good, in his books *Wealth and Welfare* and *The Economics of Welfare*. For a recent discussion of the costs of land and water travel, in the context of environmental costs, see Specter

⁴ Another example frequently invoked lately is the dramatic rise in meat consumption in places like China—an increase that connects to a rise in the demand for corn and other feed grains. Economists argue that China’s increased demand—not the rise in ethanol production—is the cause of the dizzying rise in grain prices. See, e.g., the editorial “The High Costs of Ethanol.”

⁵ “Locally Grown Foods Niche Cooks Up at \$5 Billion as America Chows Down on Fresh!” Of course it’s also worth noting that, between 1999 and 2006, the actual dollar amount of foods imported to the U.S. *doubled*.

⁶ Philpott.

⁷ See Cuthbert.

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- ⁸ In fact, one British food store chain plans to do just that. Tesco's hopes to start labeling all foods with their carbon footprint. See Finch and Vidal. See also Specter.
- ⁹ I would underscore that the publicists (and "groupies") of local foods activists do not at all necessarily represent the views of actual advocates of local foods. My point, in part, is that movements have a tough time *being* subtle, because movement joiners (and also movement refusers) want to reduce a movement's theory to a simple either/or choice.
- ¹⁰ Rich Pirog at Iowa State's Leopold Center has proposed a regional food system, for instance. See "Do Food Miles Make a Difference?"
- ¹¹ For a superb exploration of the mainstreaming of the organic movement, see Belasco.
- ¹² One infamous example: a chicken can meet the organic certification requirement that the animal "have access to the outdoors" if it can somehow *see* a patch of grass outside of its barn during some fraction of its seven weeks of life—never mind whether it can make its way *to* that patch. See Pollan, p.172.
- ¹³ A recent article in Foodnavigator.com reports that the Soil Association in Britain, the organization responsible for certifying 80% of Britain's organic food, is considering a proposal to eliminate any food which is shipped by air from the category of organic. See Halliday.
- ¹⁴ See Department of Agriculture.
- ¹⁵ "2006 North American E. coli outbreak."
- ¹⁶ See, in particular *Democracy and Social Ethics*, where this claim constitutes the spine of the book.
- ¹⁷ I could tell a story of America's emergency food system, an industrial system in many ways so efficient and so effective that it creates the illusion of being a "solution" to the problem of food insecurity. The emergency food system involves the expenditure of so much well-meaning (volunteer) labor that there's no time left over to, say, lobby for living wages or affordable housing, or any of the other things that would make it possible for vast numbers of the working poor not to depend on "emergency" food providers once every month for years at a time. "Hunger," in the U.S., isn't best thought of as a situation in which calories are needed immediately and any system that brings those calories to hungry people will do. Food insecurity—being uncertain about the source of your next meal—is, in this country, a kind of canary in the mine, signaling all sorts of insecurity and instability in the nation's economic structures. The fact that it can be "solved" by food banks and soup kitchens is not good news.
- ¹⁸ And yes, I realize that while, on the one hand, many people living in this country spent many years paying no particular attention to our food, there is another way in which many of us same folks have been paying obsessive attention to it. I don't want to explore that attention here, but I don't think it's irrelevant at all. I think the fact that we Americans are known worldwide as the people who eat in our cars is a cause for some serious introspection also. But another day.

¹⁹ See Berry.

²⁰ Whether or not we are also producers, we are all consumers—and we are encouraged, in the present context, to see ourselves as such.

²¹ See Welsh and MacRae, Wilkins.

²² Even though we literally consume food, I think when we use the word “consumer,” we tend to have in mind not the act of eating, but the act of buying.

²³ Wilkins.

²⁴ Wisconsin Foodshed Research Project.

²⁵ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, p.9

²⁶ Addams, “A Modern Lear”

²⁷ Hassanein, p. 1

²⁸ Addams, “A Modern Lear,” p. 175.

²⁹ Thanks to Andi Twiton for reminding me of the centrality of the social aspect of democracy.

³⁰ Thanks to Andi Twiton for this idea.

³¹ At Gustavus, I’m trying to build a culture in which the notion that cultivating our palates is a study that is worthy of the liberal arts—a study on par with the cultivation of our other aesthetic senses.

³² In Curtin and Heldke, p.152.

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