

April 19, 2009

Menu for Now

This morning we dedicated ourselves to the care of children...to Greta, Sharon and Simone in our ceremony today- and to all children. We know that we are all connected and our children will not grow up to lead happy, healthy and fulfilling lives if other children don't. We want them to have friends and chose partners who were also nurtured well. We want them to live in a world where all people are treated fairly, kindly so that violence becomes obsolete. We dedicated ourselves to helping children thrive as happy, healthy human beings- nurturing their spiritual, emotional, ethical and physical well being.

Of course, one of the ways that we nurture our children is to feed them regularly. We don't list it as one of the promises that parents make as they dedicate themselves to the care of their children... because of course, it goes without saying. We will feed our children. It is the bare minimum requirement.

Those of you currently raising children or who have raised children know that this "bare minimum requirement" actually is a major chore of child rearing. A chore made easier by ready made foods and mixes from the grocery store and fast food drive through windows. My Aunt Grace used to say- having helped raise her 4 younger brothers... and raising 5 children of her own- if a child is fussy- just feed them. A friend modified that maxim for me- see if they are thirsty first. My Aunt Grace was born in 1908 and raised on farms in Vermont and Maine. They ate what they produced or traded with their neighbors during the short growing season, or what they could put up for the winter in jars, root cellar and attic. They experienced a direct link to the landscape in which they lived and the animals they shared it with.¹

Although my Aunt lived a full life until she died at 86, she attributed her health problems of the last 10 years to poor nutrition as a child. On that farm, they had no imported oranges, broccoli, spinach or bananas during cold winters in mid-Maine. But even during her childhood there were those who were wealthy and used their financial resources to bring them fancy food delicacies from far away.²

Author, farmer, and cook, Tom Philpott who is the food editor for the online magazine called Grist, writes: "Sustenance...has always been humanity's most persistent and direct link to the landscape. But ...since the rise of agriculture 10,000 years ago, class relations have had the power to obscure that link. It's doubtful, for example, that Queen Victoria knew very much about what it took to supply her table, which... included delicacies from all over Britain's massive empire. Even Victorian-era Britain's notoriously exploited workers enjoyed class privilege of a sort. They received a huge portion of their calories from sugar—grown and processed under dire conditions by out-of-sight, out-of-mind black workers all the way in the West Indies."

A few years ago, my family spent a week's vacation camping on St John's Island in the US Virgin Islands. We visited the ruins of the sugar plantations that were hacked out of dense tropical forest by Africans sold or kidnapped from their native lands. The average life expectancy of a slave at that brutal work was just a couple of years and their sleeping quarters were low shelters that they had to crawl into at night. We hope that workers who provide our food don't suffer such grizzly working conditions- but there are reports of virtual slavery as

migrant workers live in substandard housing for poverty wages. They often can't afford to buy the very food they are helping to provide for the rest of us.

Farming had changed by the time my Aunt Grace was raising her children in the 40's and 50's. Combining her teacher's salary with that of her Baptist minister husband, she could provide her children with fresh fruits and vegetables. Her brother, my Uncle Robert, returned to the family farm after studying agriculture at the University of Maine. He was grateful for petro-based fertilizers, pesticides and hormones to increase the productivity of his dairy farm- beyond subsistence. When I visited him from college during the early 70's – informed by the early environmental movement- he chuckled when I suggested he use something other than Tide for his laundry. He just wasn't convinced that any biodegradable laundry soap would get his overalls clean. Besides the farm sits on a hill overlooking a lake and rolling hills- it was hard to see any environmental degradation going on. Years later, after his death, and as part of our efforts to keep the farm for a family gathering place, we had the well water tested. The contamination levels were unsafe for infants and young children. We started to bring our own drinking water when visiting the farm.

My uncle sold his herd of Jersey cows when he had no heir to continue the farm. The operation already had its challenges with 30 milkers- such a small operation compared to the agribusinesses in other parts of the country where milk is dehydrated- shipped to our local area and then water added again. Highly energy intensive- but apparently lucrative process- at least lucrative with farm subsidies going to the largest operators.

As a child, visiting the farm of my father's youth, I saw where milk came from – and potatoes, onions and squash and other vegetables grown for the household use. But by the time I was growing up in the 50's 60's, my grandfather was already making regular trips to the grocery store- for Pep flakes, bananas and other food items that had become staples by that time.

But back in the suburbs where I grew up, we relied less and less on what we could produce. Many of my friends had no experience with where food came from. In the early 70's taking my college friends to visit Uncle Robert on the farm was an amazing experience for them.

As Tom Philpott writes, “The rise of industrial agriculture in the 20th century dramatically expanded our distance from the processes that sustain us. In a sense, most of us now live like royalty—separated from the land, as removed as we choose to be from the drudgery of growing and cooking food, with the ability to procure food from dizzying distances with little more than a finger snap.”³

So we've arrived at a time in history that our forebears have been anxiously hoping for. Food is produced quickly and abundantly- the food industry's overriding concern is not quality and health, but quantity and price.⁴ Consequently, for many of us it takes very little effort to procure an abundance of food. As working parents, we are grateful for this ease. We work long hours- so it is great to pick our kids up after school or at daycare and stop by one of the many restaurants that is ready to serve us- or to stop by the grocery store and pick up the food on the way home. How would we manage, if we had to plant, grow, harvest and preserve it

ourselves? We don't have time for that- besides we are too worn out to have the energy for that either.

Yes, true. But this all comes at a price. Much has been written about the health issues related to our nation's high fat, salt and sugar diet. So that is certainly a price. But there are other costs to the industrialization of food and our separation from the earth that produces it:

- 1) Production and transportation of food counts as the biggest contributor to global climate change.
- 2) Our soils across the nation are dangerously depleted and now dependant on oil based fuels to grow food.
- 3) Class distinctions are perpetuated as those who grow or serve our food cannot afford to buy it themselves
- 4) We've lost democratic freedom
- 5) We've lost elements of our spiritual sustenance
- 6) We've lost generational and community connections.

Tom Philpott writes, "Historically, people of limited means have tended to scrape by on what's locally available, while the wealthy have used their resources to draw in fancy food from far away. Now, that situation has turned upside down. Micro-farms dot the areas outside metropolises, producing hand-picked, highly nutritious, and pungent microgreens to be plopped on lawyers', accountants', and high-tech professionals' plates for astronomical prices. Meanwhile, the people who staff the vast services economy get the dreck served up by [environmentally abusive companies](#) like Smithfield Foods." They suffer multiple health problems with no healthcare benefits to take care of them. We need to find ways to increase accessibility to healthy local foods for everyone.

Wendell Berry writes about the loss of freedom inherent in the industrialization of agriculture. He says, "when food, in the minds of eaters, is no longer associated with farming and the land, then the eaters are suffering a kind of cultural amnesia- they are passive and uncritical- in short a victim. There is a politics of food that like any politics, involves our freedom. We still (sometimes) remember that we cannot be free if our minds and voices are controlled by someone else. But we have neglected to understand that we cannot be free if our food and its sources are controlled by someone else. The condition of the passive consumer of food is not a democratic condition. One reason to eat responsibly is to live free."

In the last year, my husband Paul and I have explored how we can become more responsible in our eating and in the stewardship of our land. We had learned about the connection between food choices and global climate change. Between what we eat and the degradation of our planet. In the process, we discovered another dimension of our spiritual lives. Our soil is so poor that we rarely see an earthworm and other than herbs and volunteer tomatoes and squash growing in our compost heap, it is difficult to grow anything to eat. In her book *Animal Vegetable Miracle*, Barbara Kingsolver affirms that growing animals for food is often the only local solution where the soil is so depleted that it cannot successfully

grow other food. So last May, we went off to the New Hampshire Sheep and Wool Festival at the Contoocook fairgrounds. Considering we were starting from scratch... we thought we'd just go to learn a thing or two, but by the end of the morning, we'd signed up to buy three lambs at the end of May. We raised three lambs last summer; they were harvested in November and have been feeding us out of our freezer all winter. Although I had some experience with farming growing up, I never had raised animals to eat before. And I was wondering how I would feel about this. Many people suggested that we needed to be careful not to name them. But our nieces spend a week with us each summer and they named them- Misty, Smokey and Moe. We loved our sheep- they each had their own unique personalities. And on full moon nights, we watched them leap and prance under the full moon. But the day eventually came when we needed to take them to the farm where they would be slaughtered. We rose before dawn to make the trailer ready... and just as the sun was rising over our valley, we stood on our back porch and took a deep breath and offered a prayer of thanks for the time we'd had with them. And now, each time, they provide us with another meal, we give thanks. I have a deeper sense of gratitude about the life that was given so that I may eat. And I have a different understanding of my own life and death. The time will come when I will also die... and make way for something else to grow. What started off as a way to responsibly care for the land and earth which I love, has become a practice of wonder and gratitude every time I eat. As Michael Pollan writes in *Omnivore's dilemma* : we eat by grace of nature, not industry, and what we're eating is never anything more or less than the body of the world.

There's more to be said about food, the land our spirit and community than we have time for now. We already have a study group working with the curriculum, *Menu for the Future*. Plans are afoot for a community dinner – where we'll share the arts of our kitchen with the community beyond our walls- inviting our local farmers to have a closer relationship with us.... sharing meals with our neighbors whom we have yet to get to know. We can invite some of the inspiring young people who are studying and working in sustainable agriculture. We can work with Share and others to increase accessibility to food grown locally and sustainably- teaching people how to garden. Teaching each other how to thrive. This is all just part of living an aware, intentional life- a way of grounding ourselves firmly in a life of joy, beauty, health, spirit, peace and justice. This is a way for us to nourish our children, so that they will grow in healthy bodies on a planet that will sustain them and their children's children- until they die at a ripe old age after long and fulfilling lives. This is my hope. My prayer. Amen.

¹ Idea from Tom Philpott's article in *Grist*.

² Author, farmer, and cook, Tom Philpott, food editor for on-line magazine, *Grist*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *The Pleasures of Eating*. By Wendell Berry, p. 20 in *Menu for the Future* curriculum.