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Eating Closer to Home: On Being Neighborly (Chapter Four of To the Table)

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Eating Closer to Home

On Being Neighborly



Our life and death depend upon our relationship with our neighbor. If we gain our neighbor, we have gained God. If we offend our neighbor, we have sinned against Christ.

—Abba Anthony¹

The dandelions awoke on a sunny day near the end of March, following on the heels of a month's worth of rain that fell in three days' time. Bright yellow flowers opened to the sun, welcoming bees and other insects looking for pollen and nectar, and welcoming a giant forager eager for blossoms to make dandelion wine. "Pick me!" they seemed to say. So I did, knowing more would come. Aware of my fellow harvesters, I waited to pick a blossom until a hardworking bee took off for another blossom or for home, hind legs heavily laden with yellow pollen.

Kim and Sarah came to pick up our surplus strawberry plants, a nice by-product of pruning baby strawberry plants, which multiply like rabbits. They were the last of the community supported agriculture (CSA) members, friends, and family who came to pick up plants to start or embellish their own strawberry patches. While Kim was there, I committed to her that I would take the step (sigh) to welcome my new neighbors before starting to brew any dandelion nectar. Committing gave me a deadline and a witness. Elsewise, I knew that I might never make it up to my neighbor's front door, in spite of my best intentions. (Do you find it odd, dear reader, that it is so much easier for me to write a book for an unknown audience than to go meet a neighbor I might have to look in the eye?)

With bolstered courage and a belief that gracious hospitality can still happen in this part of the world (inspired as I was by Kim and Sarah), I walked up our neighbors' long driveway on a Sunday afternoon carrying a purple paper bag that held a quart of jalapeño dilly beans, a pint of pickled beets, five yellow Cortland onions still firm and succulent from the last

summer's harvest, and a note welcoming our neighbors to the neighborhood. On my way up the driveway I second-guessed myself. Home-canned goods are a risky gift, after all. They may not like their pickles hot or beets in any form. They may throw it all away once I'm gone, not knowing me well enough to know whether or not my food would make them sick.

Their driveway weaves between a dappled forest with enough sun breaking through to sustain a floor of ferns, and I felt welcome in it, even if unsure of what awaited me at the end of the driveway. As I walked, I reminded myself that these neighbors are my local folk, and I want to be neighborly. Obediently neighborly.

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

For most of my life, being neighborly has felt optional—nice, but not necessary.

That notion was dispelled while visiting a HNGR (Human Needs Global Resources) intern in Malawi as part of a program I participated in as a professor at Wheaton College. As an adviser I'd spend five or six days with my students halfway through their six-month internship, which involved living and working in a majority world (what used to be called the developing world) country—far-off places like Indonesia, Bolivia, Peru, and Uganda. Advisers went to advise but also to help students work through snags related to the internship, their living arrangements, or emotional/spiritual/interpersonal needs. During these one-on-one visits, the students became the guides, and the advisers became the students as the interns led us around their extraordinary lives. Gracious hospitality abounded everywhere I went; it poured out from internship supervisors, hosting families, and my students.

During my visit to Malawi I sat in on the morning devotions led by Sandress Msiska, a theologian and the country director of World Relief. He talked about Jesus's response to the question, "What is the greatest commandment?"

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matt. 22:37–40 NIV)

Loving our neighbor is how we love God, said Msiska. The second commandment is equally important as the first; it is the flesh and blood of loving God. We love an intangible God by loving our tangible neighbor. We extend compassion, justice, and mercy to anyone in need because, as Jesus affirms with the story of the Good Samaritan, everyone and anyone is our neighbor.

So much for neighborliness being optional.

Astronaut Russell Schweickart, in an essay published in 1983, tries to use words to capture his experience as the lunar module pilot of the Apollo 9 mission. Every ninety minutes he orbited the Earth and later described how precious the whole of it became, how he came to identify with the Middle East and Africa and Asia. He wanted the warring factions to see what he saw—that visible boundaries don't exist from the vantage point of space, how the whole of the Earth hangs in an immense space that, from the distance of the moon, can be blotted out with a thumb. Schweickart ends the essay this way:

You realize that on that small spot, that little blue and white thing, is everything that means anything to you—all love, tears, joy, games, all of it on that little spot out there. . . . It's a feeling that says you have a responsibility. . . . There's a difference in that relationship between you and that planet, and all those other forms of life on that planet, because you've had that kind of experience. It's a difference and it's so precious.²

Our neighborhoods are both immense and small. We experience the smallness with neighbors who sleep, eat, fight, and play next door. They are the messiest to love because we share fences and blowing weed seeds, obnoxious noises drifting from garages and backyards late in the night, and unfamiliar—or *too* familiar—smells wafting through high-rise apartment complexes. But sometimes we exchange extra apples from the apple tree, car rides, help in time of trouble, or the proverbial cup of sugar.

Being the social creatures that we are, we tend to cluster with people like us. We find it easiest to be neighborly toward people who share our religious beliefs or social and ethnic class, people who do similar kinds of work and recreation, or those who hold similar political views. Sometimes we are neighborly beyond this "sameness." In the context of church families or extended families replete with difference, we remain in relationship in spite of (sometimes because of) that difference. The common denominator

of worshiping together can transcend differences just as familial bonds can help us seek out ways to be gracious to one another in spite of sometimes significant dissimilarities.

We also manage to be neighborly toward people we do not know through the taxes we pay and donations we choose to make. In my less-hospitable moments, I'd like to imagine that my obligation to be neighborly gets met in all these ways so that I don't have to be particularly mindful toward any *particular* neighbors.

Still, I wonder whether Schweickart's words are a nudge for us to expand our neighborhood, allowing relationships with other members of this planet to become, as he says, deeply precious. As Abba Anthony puts it, "Our life and death depend upon our relationship with our neighbor. If we gain our neighbor, we have gained God. If we offend our neighbor, we have sinned against Christ." This is not unlike what Msiska said and is perhaps mirrored in the reflections of Schweickart from space: we love God by loving our neighbors—and *all* members of creation qualify as our neighbor to some degree.

The truth is, living into neighborly commitments is in our best interest. As my neighbors flourish, so will I. We are inextricably linked in an interdependent relationship. I sometimes act as though this reality does not exist, as though I can flourish if the ecosystems that feed me become crippled and die, as though I may not be called on to share my spot on earth with people whose homes are being overtaken by expanding deserts or rising seas. My neighborhood is, after all, rather large, and being neighborly can feel overwhelming.

It helps me to recognize that eating gives me daily opportunities to love my neighbors. That seems doable enough. But still, it takes intention to eat in neighborly ways; it used to be less complicated. Allow me to join others in making an audacious claim: the green revolution, which I referred to earlier as the *so-called* green revolution, is the biggest single cause of our food woes and contributes greatly to global injustices and misery.

Is calling out a revolution that helped feed a billion people who might have otherwise starved grossly insensitive? Perhaps. But seventy-five years later, we are witnessing the unintended consequences of a revolution that morphed into a global agribusiness that puts profit before people. In the process of pushing more corn, wheat, soy, and rice out of every field, we justified or overlooked the fact that we were also wreaking havoc on

the planet and its inhabitants. Might this global industrial food system alienate us from our relationship to God's verdant garden and from our neighbors in ways that not only allow invisible injustices to abound but also devastate the ecosystems that feed us?

A fairly well-accepted idea is that the only way to feed the masses is through a global food industry (even if it is unfortunately marked by injustice and misery) that alienates us from each other and our places and leads to confusion about what is healthy for our bodies, our communities, and our world.

Vandana Shiva, a physicist and international environmental activist, addressed a group of 1,200 people who were gathered for a Cultivate Kansas City conference.³ Shiva says, "For a short time the mechanistic mind has projected onto the world the false idea that food production is and must be of necessity an industrial activity. That's a world view that is in profound error." She unpacks her thoughts on this matter before embracing the hopeful change provided by the local food movement, which is based on making good, wholesome food available to one's local community rather than based on acquiring wealth at the expense of the well-being of individuals, local communities, and, particularly for Shiva, our planet. Shiva says, "It's all about love, about bestowing attention, fostering, cherishing, honoring, tending, guarding, and loving the Earth which provides our food."⁴

The Brown Tinge of the Green Revolution

Shiva joins Wendell Berry, Michael Pollan, and other prominent voices heralding the need to bring affection, or love, back into the conversation about how we grow our food. Norman Wirzba sees our distorted relationship with our food system as a result of being a people in exile:

To be in exile marks an inability to live peaceably, sustainably, and joyfully in one's place. Not knowing or loving *where* we are and *who* we are with, we don't know *how* to live in ways that foster mutual flourishing and delight. More specifically, we don't know how *through our eating* to live sympathetically into the memberships that make creation a life-giving home.⁵

Wirzba blames our exile on the green revolution. But to be fair, the green revolution was born out of a desire and hope to find a way to feed

a population on the cusp of exploding. Initially, that goal was accomplished. Through a combination of modern agricultural practices that went global—the adoption of tractors, irrigation systems, hybridized seeds that produced heftier crops, synthetic fertilizers that pushed soil fertility, and pesticides and herbicides that combated pests and weeds—we grew more food.

Norman Borlaug won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 and is credited both with saving the lives of those billion starving people and bringing world peace by increasing the global food supply (though the world peace was rather short-lived). While the hopes and intentions that he represented were noble, the costs and natural limits of industrial agriculture weren't adequately considered.

We built a global food system dependent on fossil fuel to run tractors, to transport food, and to make pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers. Even if burning fossil fuel had no negative effect on the atmosphere, petroleum is a limited resource. It comes from fossils, after all, which aren't made in a year—or even a lifetime or millennia.

An unanticipated cost of industrialized food (and more broadly, industrialization) is our global climate-change crises. All that CO₂ (carbon dioxide) held secure in fossils and forests for all those years is being released into and then trapped by the atmosphere. Agricultural practice and deforestation are the two single biggest causes for increased heat-trapping gases. We chop down forests not only for lumber and paper but also to clear space for planting grains and palm trees, or for banana, cocoa, or coffee plantations. It's like turning up the heat of an electric blanket in order to keep warm, even though turning up the temperature causes an assortment of overheating problems.⁶ We have caused expanding dead zones in oceans where no fish, coral reefs, or other ocean life exists or can exist; growing areas of eroding and depleted soil around the globe; water depletion and expanding deserts; the flooding of coastal areas and islands; and the pollution of rivers and lakes from the toxic runoff of industry and agribusiness.

This certainly sounds like a dreary and hopeless tale. Skeptics call it “far-fetched,” but most geologists, climatologists, and other earth scientists who have looked into the matter agree that a global food system dependent on fossil fuel is unsustainable. A groundswell of folks manifest their hope that a local food movement can be a way forward—like the seven hundred

small-scale farmers that come to Oregon State's Small Farms Conference every year, or the 1,200 who showed up for Cultivate Kansas City, or the thousands involved in food webs in counties across the nation, and the tens of thousands more who belong to CSAs and community gardens and shop at farmers markets. Add to that the politicians and pastors, county commissioners, and city planners working toward healthier people, healthier communities, and a healthier world, and we've born ourselves a movement.

There is always hope. The sustaining presence of God ensures it. Hope bubbles forth in corporate boardrooms, state capitals, and international assemblies. But it's also simmering in homes, neighborhoods, and communities. Hope-filled change can start with anyone who chooses to eat food grown and raised closer to home.

Global Eating: Home Kitchen Considerations

Imagine drawing up a shopping list for a summer party, keeping in mind the complication of trying to be a good global neighbor. Let's have a hypothetical conversation in which I'll anticipate and then answer some questions related to planning the party. Then I'll offer some simple suggestions for ways to eat more neighborly.

I want to be extravagant with my food plans for this party. Is that irresponsible?

Perhaps we ought to consider the question beneath this question: “Is there enough food for everyone, and does my extravagance matter?” Yes. And yes.

Even before the 1970s' global food crisis, people in wealthy countries have been asking this question—*Is there enough food for everyone?* That's what motivated the green revolution. Yes, there *could* be enough food, but those of us in wealthy countries need to eat a bit differently than we do to lower the demand we place on the world for our food. Lowering our demand gives others more breathing space to grow food for their own communities and farming sovereignty to people in the Global South,⁷ where the vast majority of humanity lives.

The Earth Policy Institute, a nonprofit environmental organization, studies and analyzes environmental factors. They make policy and lifestyle recommendations to promote health for the planet and people in

economically sustainable ways. In an effort to spread the word, the Earth Policy Institute makes all their research and recommendations available free online and in books and reports,⁸ which seems pretty neighborly to me. In one report, Lester Brown summarizes global diets and food availability and concludes that if everyone ate like we do in the United States, the world could sustain 2.5 billion people well. If we all ate like they do in Italy (more vegetables and grains, less meat), the world could sustain 5 billion people well. If we all ate like they do in India (a plant-based diet), the earth could feed 10 billion people well. The world population is about 7.3 billion.

The explanation is more complicated, and Brown goes into that. It's based on how much grain is needed for good nutrition and whether or not that grain is eaten directly or first fed to animals that people then eat.

A second part of the question about whether or not there's enough food has to do with food waste, the amount of which suggests that plenty of food is being grown but a lot of it never makes it to anyone's table. Wealthy nations tend to waste a lot of food.

In the United Kingdom, 40 percent of fresh fish purchased at supermarkets is thrown away before it is eaten, along with 23 percent of eggs, and 20 percent of milk.⁹ We throw so much away in part because we pay attention to conservative use-by or best-used-by dates, as though we will get sick or die if we do not. If the date stamped on the box, carton, or bag has passed (or is within a day or two of passing), those of us who can afford to do so tend to toss it rather than "risk it." Unless we are talking about sliced meats (which I'd toss rather than risk), most of that food is fine beyond the use-by date. Some types of food will lose flavor and texture, but even that can be repurposed.

I imagine my grandma pulled milk from the fridge that had been there a while, looked at it, smelled it, tasted it, and *then* decided whether to serve it to her family or bake it up in a cake. Most use-by and best-used-by dates are determined at the discretion of manufacturers. They help avoid litigation or a bad reputation over something like soured milk, and they encourage consumers to buy more because they toss more.

Smell is a good way to determine whether milk has curdled in the refrigerator and soured. One could, like Grandma, use soured milk in place of buttermilk for pancakes or cornbread. Eggs will keep in the refrigerator between four and six months, in spite of dates to the contrary. Wilted

vegetables can be tossed in soups and stir-fries, and wrinkled apples are delicious baked into crumbles or crisps or made into applesauce.

People in wealthy nations can afford to throw food away because we spend only about 10 percent of our income on food, unlike people in India, who spend a quarter of their income on food. And since we pay less for it, we value it less.

But a lot of food, particularly produce, never even makes it from the field to the supermarket. The market's standards of produce perfection mean that imperfect apples, cucumbers, carrots, and potatoes are tossed. A lot of what we harvest at Fern Creek wouldn't meet the industry standards of perfection required today. All farmers have this problem. The solution? Overplant to ensure enough near-perfect produce to sell. The rest can be composted, which isn't a *bad* thing, but it's not particularly a good thing either, especially when we are looking at food shortages. In the European Union, close to 50 percent of crops grown never make it to the supermarkets. Pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers (where they are used) are also wasted, along with water that irrigates crops that never make it to market.

So yes, feast away on special days, but do so in responsible ways. In *Eat with Joy*, Rachel Marie Stone talks about the difference between ferial (ordinary) and festal (feast) eating. When our ordinary days always include what used to be reserved for celebrations, then we really have to go over the top to create a feast. Stone says of her family:

We don't eat desserts most days, which heightens the uniqueness and specialness of birthdays, when we eat cake. Because we eat a lot of simple foods—beans and rice, vegetarian stews, soup and bread—a nice beef stew can be a celebration meal. It's actually freeing to orient yourself toward a festal-ferial approach to food. It frees you from feeling that every eating occasion must be celebration-worthy, and it frees you to exercise your culinary creativity for days of true celebration.¹⁰

While you ponder that, I'll propose another hypothetical question:

I was thinking of hosting a surf-and-turf sort of barbecue, which we hardly ever do. But I hear that seafood costs a lot to ship, and shipping food long distances is bad for the environment. So, unless I'm visiting a coastline, is a surf-and-turf barbeque irresponsible? Should I never eat seafood if I live somewhere like Nebraska?

I'm an hour away from the Pacific Ocean, and local fish is fairly easy to come by (though not free of controversy), so it's easy for me to say save the surf feasting for when you are visiting a coast and otherwise experiment with local trout, catfish, and bass. Lest that sound too austere for lobster lovers, go ahead and host a surf-and-turf celebration on a special occasion and enjoy the extravagance. But know that it *is* an extravagance and celebrate mindfully—and infrequently.

As a fan of the backstory, allow me to enumerate some of those hidden costs that follow us into our kitchens, pantries, and grills.

I mentioned earlier that since the Industrial Revolution we have increasingly shuffled food around the world. We import cocoa from Ghana, coffee from Guatemala, and rice from China. Some of this makes sense. It can be neighborly to buy each other's produce, especially when we can't grow it ourselves. We grow most of the rice consumed in the United States in Louisiana, California, Texas, and Arkansas, but it takes a lot of water to grow rice—and water is increasingly hard to come by in those southern states. Getting rice from countries where water abounds makes sense. It is neighborly; though theoretically, if we don't have a good relationship with our neighbors, they might stop selling rice to us. This fear motivates countries to secure a local food supply, prompting them to grow their own rice.

But cocoa, coffee, pineapple, mangoes, and bananas only grow near the equator. No matter how much we plead with the soil and sun, we can't get them to grow in North America. So if we want chocolate and bananas to be part of our diet, we have to buy them from our neighbors, which we can do in neighborly ways.

We also move a lot of food around that grows in our backyards, just not year-round. We've come to like fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, strawberries, and bell peppers *all the time*. If it grows in July we want it available in January. That means produce has to be put on a truck, boat, or plane to get from warmer central and southern climates to cooler northern ones.

Sometimes the reasons why we move food to and fro make even less sense than simply wanting cantaloupe in February. Corn grown in South America gets shipped to feed cows raised in Europe that will be consumed by people in the United States and Canada. Europe could grow its own corn, but it costs more to grow it in Europe than to buy it from South America. Nearly half of the fresh fruit we eat in the United States is imported, even though we grow a lot of fruit here. For instance, we are second only to

China in apple production. Speaking of apples, in 2012 the United States exported nearly two billion pounds of them to places like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and India. But at the same time we import nearly half a billion pounds from places like Chili and New Zealand.¹¹

Isn't that crazy? The left hand (exports) does not know what the right hand (imports) is doing and, frankly, doesn't give a rip. It makes sense economically or it wouldn't happen. But it wouldn't make sense if the environmental costs of burning all that fossil fuel were factored into the spreadsheet.

So maybe it's not surprising that the average plate of food in the United States travels between 1,200 and 1,500 miles to get from farm to table, although I still find that rather shocking, mostly because a good chunk of Mark's and my food comes from our backyard. An Iowa State University study tracked the origins of food arriving at the Chicago Terminal in 1981, 1990, and 1998. By 1998, food coming into Chicago had traveled approximately 1,500 miles, an increase of 250 miles since 1981. During the same year an average plate of local food traveled 44.5 miles.¹² All those miles make enough cents to offset how little sense it makes otherwise.

Meat has hidden costs, too. Grain is grown one place and transported to another place to feed steers, which are transported from wherever they were born to a feedlot somewhere and then sold and transported to where they will be slaughtered and processed and then trucked or shipped to wherever the beef will be sold.

Unsurprisingly, the human activity that contributes the most to climate change involves food. Growing food for people, growing food for animals we plan to eat, raising those animals,¹³ processing the food, and moving it around the globe generates about a third of the heat-trapping gases that are released into the atmosphere.

We ask all living things on the planet to pay for that cost. Animals (like elephants and polar bears) risk extinction because they can't migrate to new habitats when their current water holes dry up or hunting grounds melt. People pay that cost as well, like islanders who become refugees as rising sea levels from melting ice caps flood their homeland and desert dwellers whose homes become drought-destroyed arid places.

I've wondered how it can be so much cheaper to import food than to buy local food. Again, the answer lies in invisible costs. Some costs are borne by field and factory laborers at home and especially abroad, and others

by cows, hens, and sows kept in overcrowded and inhumane conditions so as to keep our milk, eggs, and bacon cheap.

We spend only 10 percent of our income on food because we don't pay our faraway and nearby neighbors who harvest our crops and butcher our beef a wage that covers their own food, shelter, and clothing. We also spend a smaller percentage of our income on food than we used to because gestating sows spend their lives in pens where they can only lie down on their chests (an unnatural position) or stand. A pregnant sow cannot even turn around. This intelligent sun-, mud-, and forest-loving animal (that can weigh up to nine hundred pounds) spends most of her life in a six-and-a-half-foot crate that is two feet wide with a slatted concrete floor that allows excrement to fall through. Before giving birth she is moved to a farrowing crate, which is slightly wider so that she can lie on her side to allow her babies (in a crate beside her) to reach through to nurse.¹⁴ This is called "intensive pig farming," and it allows ranchers to turn a bigger profit than raising pigs in anything resembling their natural habitats or even something akin to Wilbur's pigpen in Uncle Homer's barn.

The public outcry concerning gestational crates has resulted in a ban in some states, similar to the banning of battery cages for laying hens. I'll talk about animals more in the next chapter, but learning the truth about these industries helps lift a veil that keeps us from seeing why our food is so cheap.

This is all very depressing. Is there any good news? If I buy fair-trade coffee to serve and pasture-raised pork, does that make any difference?

Yes, there is good news. And yes, it really does make a difference.

This spring Mark and I made the four-hour drive north for a speaking engagement at Seattle Pacific University. We went up a day early to enjoy Seattle, a break from tilling and planting before the onset of spring. At Pike's Place Market I bought a bottle of Indi's chocolate orange lotion, a favorite of mine since discovering it a year ago. Indi Chocolate is a small company whose owner sources chocolate directly from a farmers co-op. She pays better than fair-trade wages. Later we picked up our order of chocolate bars for the Fern Creek Market from Theo Chocolate and took a tour of Theo's plant, wanting to learn what we could about a company we'd be supporting.

We left inspired.

Theo (named after the theobroma cacao tree) also buys cocoa beans directly from farmers and ensures that workers are paid a fair wage and that they work in safe conditions in which no slave labor or trafficked children are used in the fields—where no synthetic pesticides, herbicides, or genetically modified seeds are used. Theo is committed to supporting farming practices that do not harm the earth, workers, or people who will eat the cocoa. So yes, people pay more for every bar of chocolate, but they are paying *a more accurate price* for what chocolate costs to make.

That makes them neighborly.

That good story can be retold with coffee, which can be sourced in similar ways, and with bananas, sugar, pineapple, mangoes, teas, and other foods grown only around the equator. Fair Trade Federation sets standards for wages, health and safety, and community investment and offers customers the assurance that they are supporting companies with integrity, which makes us good neighbors. Direct trade means coffee roasters and cacao bean buyers meet with farmers and farmer co-ops and arrange to buy from them directly, usually paying more than fair trade. Direct trade buyers prefer to know their farmers and the farming communities rather than to work through a third party.

Yes, there is potential for abusing the system—perhaps more so when it comes to the efforts of intensive farming operations that claim they are making the lives of chickens, pigs, and cows a little less miserable (does adding a few inches to a crate make life substantially better for a sow or a chicken?). If you have access to beef or pork or chicken or lamb from a source in your local neighborhood, you can go see where and how the animals live, and you can learn how they are raised and slaughtered.

If that's not possible (for most of us it's not), then I will trust a certifying body, imperfect as it may be, to be my witness concerning whether or not laborers are treated fairly and animals humanely. Besides, once I start being neighborly by considering the story behind chocolate or coffee, I'm inspired to look for other ways I can use my grocery dollars to be fair, just, and appreciative of the labor that others do so that I can enjoy the luxury of foods grown by neighbors near or far.

I planned to get some of my groceries at Walmart, but I keep hearing that Walmart has some unethical practices, and I suspect that you will say the same. But Walmart makes food less expensive for everyone, especially for people with low incomes, so why do they get so much bad press?

Here's my best effort at a short(ish) answer to a complex question. Although Walmart makes food and everything else it sells less expensive for consumers, it does so by passing on costs to taxpayers, to Walmart employees, to farm and factory workers abroad, to animals, and to the entire neighborhood—the ecosystems we all depend on. When understood from this perspective, it's not much of a savings for anyone.

Consider the people who work in places like Walmart (which is just one example, but a frequently cited one because they are our nation's largest corporate employer). While Walmart pays its employees at or slightly above minimum wage, Walmart has reduced the number of full-time employees it hires to avoid having to meet the requirements of the Affordable Health Care Act. However, Walmart does staff a full-time person who helps employees sign up for Medicaid and SNAP (Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program)—government assistance programs for people who don't receive medical benefits from their jobs or whose income qualifies them for food stamps.¹⁵ According to an article in *Forbes*, late in 2013 Walmart announced that they would transition a number of part-time jobs back to full-time—a decision that was motivated by the dramatic drop in sales that followed their decision to staff stores with temporary and part-time help.¹⁶ I'd like to think the change was also motivated by a concern for employees, but in October of 2014, Walmart decided to eliminate health care benefits for its 30,000 employees working less than thirty hours a week. Under the Affordable Health Care Act, companies aren't required to provide health care to employees working fewer than thirty hours per week, and Walmart executives (like other large companies) are passing on the cost of their employees' medical care to taxpayers.¹⁷

Workers overseas also carry the cost of the cheaper prices we pay. Many products that fill the shelves are made in factories where laborers can be paid far less than minimum wage (generally something like a couple of dollars a day) and who work in conditions so unsafe that they wouldn't be tolerated in the United States.

Walmart can undersell whatever the local bakery, general store, or nursery is offering, so the typical pattern is to outcompete and close down the local competition. And while competition is supposed to work that way, maybe that sort of competition doesn't represent the highest virtue. When competition changes the character of a community by forcing out local family businesses that have neighborly connections and concerns, maybe

the competitive edge should be questioned. When a multinational company takes over business, money that used to move around and stimulate the local economy is sent to Walmart headquarters and distributed to upper-level executives, Walton family members, and stockholders, undermining the economic stability of local communities.

So long as I'm offering up a critique of Walmart, a final reason it is often criticized is the repeated disregard it shows for the environment. In 2013, it was sued for \$82 million for improperly dumping hazardous waste in California and Missouri. Ignacia S. Moreno, the assistant attorney general for the Justice Department's Environment and Natural Resources Division, said that Walmart "put the public and the environment at risk and gained an unfair economic advantage over other companies."¹⁸ Walmart (and other offending corporations) pays its fines and continues business mostly as usual, sometimes offering a plan to improve. However, in the last ten years Walmart has been sued multiple times for breaking environmental laws, which suggests that the improvement plans aren't much of an improvement. In the last few years it has been sued for more than \$110 million, but with an annual intake of \$128 billion, a Walmart spokesperson said that the payments don't negatively affect their business.¹⁹

In contrast, food at Whole Foods is more expensive in part because employees earn, on average, fifteen dollars an hour and have a good benefit package, which the employees vote on every year. Still, Whole Foods is not above reproach. They, along with some cosmetic companies, were sued by the state of California in 2009 for deceptive labeling of cosmetics and household cleaners that tested positive for a carcinogenic that is required by law to be labeled in California. And while Whole Foods is mostly a transparent company, in 2014 it was hit with a lawsuit for unauthorized background screening of prospective employees in violation of the Fair Credit Reporting Act. Even "good and ethical" companies can find themselves on the other side of the law.

On the upside, Whole Foods company policy caps the CEO salary to not more than nineteen times what other employees earn (in terms of ratio, that's 19:1), which means Walter Robb, the current co-CEO, makes quite a bit less than other corporate CEOs.²⁰ As a comparison, the pay ratio for the CEO of Walmart to the average employee is 1,034:1.²¹

Whole Foods benefits include vacation time, education assistance, a good medical plan, and healthy-living incentives. For sixteen years it has

been on *Fortune*'s list of "100 Best Companies to Work For." Food also costs more at places like Whole Foods (and similar markets) because they offer more fair-trade products, organic foods, sustainably and ethically grown foods, and eggs and meat from humanely raised animals. Shoppers are asked to pay a more accurate price for the real cost of food.

That being said, both Whole Foods and Walmart are big box stores. In neither case do they represent food that is primarily grown close to home.

Many of us have alternatives to buying our food from either Walmart or Whole Foods. By doing so, we are able to keep money in the community where it directly supports local farmers, ranchers, bakers, and other food, goods, and service providers, indirectly enriching the whole neighborhood.

The Alternative: From Farm to Fork

Every Monday and Thursday afternoon from the end of May through the beginning of November, Fern Creek Farm opens for pickup day. A dozen cars come, and anywhere from one to five people spill out and make their way to the market to fill wooden crates with whatever the fields offered up that week. All told, our CSA members take home food that feeds about one hundred people every week.

During the first weeks members choose between large heads of lettuce with names like Lovelock, Sylvesta, and Red Fire. They select between collards, rainbow chard, and a variety of kales kept fresh in large navy-blue canners speckled with white; they weigh out a pound or two of early red potatoes. Over the course of the season, members will weigh more potatoes and peas, beans, broccoli, and tomatoes on an antique scale that hangs in a corner of the market. We found it on eBay, and Mark and I bought it for each other for a Valentine's Day gift, an affirmation to each other that gifts of love don't have to include flowers and Hershey's chocolate.

At any rate, we don't start the season until the sun and soil have made the strawberries sweet and red, so each member picks up a couple of pint cartons, which we still call hallocks—a bygone term from the strawberry-picking days of our youth. Eggs from our hens, green onions, radishes, snow and snap peas, chives, and mint finish out those early crates, along with something extra, like a tomato or basil plant left over from planting and eager to get into some dirt.

By early July the food doesn't fit in the crate anymore. It hardly fits in our market. Summer and winter squash spill over their boxes, along with tomatoes, corn, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, beets, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, onions, apples, peaches, oregano, basil, lavender, and thyme. The market fills with fragrances of summer and colors born in the sun.

Introverts that we are, we still manage to host an ice-cream social at the beginning of the season. Homemade ice cream, fresh strawberries, and toppings brought by our members grace the tables. People sit on blankets and chairs, toss beanbags, visit the hens, follow the paths through the forest, and play on the swing hanging under the giant maple tree.

Somewhere a sense of community takes root in the middle of eating ice cream, meeting new babies, feeding the hens wheat berries, and sitting on the saddle of the Giraffe Tree (picture a tree in the shape of a giraffe with a really long neck—a tree that should have died in whatever storm bent its trunk, but instead turned toward the sky and lived). We share a common place and common weather—cool rain in June and the dry heat of August. Our stories weave together through the shared histories of schools and churches attended, outdoor local concerts where we bump into each other, or the new bakery in town that a number of folks helped get off the ground. In some not-easily-understood way, we belong to each other and to this place, which can seem as intangible as belonging to God.

"We need to cultivate freedom, to cultivate hope, to cultivate diversity," Shiva told the Kansas City audience. "We need to build the direct relationship between those who grow the food and those who eat it. Care for people has to be the guiding force for how we produce, process, and distribute our food."²² That's the hope and dream of the local food movement.

Fern Creek represents only one farm-to-fork alternative to buying produce grown God knows where by unknown others under unknown conditions. Local food alternatives edge forward, making agribusiness nervous enough to lobby for legislation that would limit what small farms and farmers can offer.

Cities across North America and Western Europe are doing again what the majority world never stopped doing—selling goods between neighbors. This primarily takes place at farmers markets, where fruits and vegetables, eggs and cheese, honey and maple syrup, meat and fish, flowers and crafts, Tibetan dumplings, and Indian satay are bought and sold. In rural communities, small towns, and large cities, people are gaining access to eggs

from hens that feel rain and sunshine on their backs, honey from bees pollinating local fruit orchards and gardens, and meat and dairy from animals grown and raised in the county fields. Between vibrant farmers markets, community gardens, CSAs, and a renewed interest in local farm stands and U-Pick opportunities, most of us can get a fair amount of our food close to home.

Farmers and local communities are returning home from exile and finding ways to live peaceably, sustainably, and joyfully. These flourishing communities foster delight by eating in neighborly ways that acknowledge various memberships and obligations.

Of Bakeries, Cafés, Bookstores, and Other Local Establishments

This morning I'm writing at Newberg Bakery, which has been open nearly two months. The initial blush of infatuation has settled, and lines don't form outside the door so much anymore. It is possible to get a table and feel okay about staying awhile. Beside my computer sits a half-eaten marionberry-filled cinnamon roll and a cup of coffee. Both will be gone before I leave. Meanwhile, I'm working hard to concentrate on the gloom of the industrialized global food system as I sit in this light- and life-filled space.

Emily comes over to say hi and tells me she is enjoying getting to know my daughter Megan Anna as well as Kim on Monday nights. I'm feeling happy about that and imagining the ebb and flow of women in their early thirties talking about personal aspirations, motherhood, marriage, and being single.

I'm sure they don't talk about their mothers.

Jeff stops by to say hi too; he talks about Ed and Liz, our Fern Creek apprentices, who are good friends of his daughter. Who knew?

I wave and smile at Caitlin, one of our CSA members, and Brandon, the stay-at-home dad who loves to cook. John is grading at a corner table and nods as our eyes meet. Mark and I go to George Fox University plays and Newberg community plays with John and his wife, Cindy.

It seems like half the people I've talked about in this book meandered into the bakery this morning, either in person or in one conversation or another. People come and go; I recognize nearly half of them, which is

not surprising since the people supporting this start-up bakery are people I run into at other local food gatherings.

A long beautiful table sits a bit to the side of the dining area—the community table, it's called. Mismatched plates, mugs, and silverware complement assorted chairs and tables. The walls are made of wood off an old barn, making it seem like I've walked into the eating space of a dear friend—a down-to-earth sort of friend likely to have flour on her cheeks, twinkly eyes, and a welcome smile. I feel at home here. This is my community, and it is simply lovely.

Brenda co-owns Newberg Bakery with Bruce. She's the pastry and cookie maker, and he's the bread baker. Brenda lets me in on a Monday a week later; they are closed to the public on Mondays, but it's certainly not a day "off."

Bruce and Brenda have dreamed about opening a bakery together for the last thirteen years, driven by a passion and desire to bake for their community. Prior to quitting her job to start the bakery, Brenda worked at George Fox University, where she regularly graced colleagues and students with scones she'd make at four thirty in the morning. She wanted students to find a place at school that felt like home, and Brenda and Bruce hold that hope for the bakery. They have created a community-minded space characterized by simplicity, both in ambiance and in the breads they bake.

Both of them left paying jobs with benefits for a local start-up business that pays little (they've yet to pay themselves) and requires them to work long hours on their feet, doing what most professionals would consider manual labor. "We choose it because it's a passion," she said, shrugging her shoulders. "For both of us. I can do it because my husband has a job with benefits. It's harder for Bruce. But we both, and Bruce especially, are content to live simply."

We talked about what would make it sustainable. Newberg Bakery is open Tuesday through Saturday, from 6:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Brenda and Bruce arrive by four o'clock in the morning and don't get home until six thirty or seven o'clock in the evening. They have three employees but will need to hire more to make this life sustainable, no matter how much passion they have for it.

I asked her how they would know whether they have succeeded, and Brenda said, "We're successful already, depending on how you define it, because Newberg has embraced us so fully, so incredibly." Her only

disappointment seems to be disappointing people. In the hour we talked, four clusters of people tried the door and found it locked. Brenda avoided eye contact with them, waiting for them to go away. The first few weeks they were open from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and weren't getting home before ten o'clock at night; now that they close at four, she feels like she is disappointing people, but we agreed that the new hours help make the endeavor sustainable.

For the local food movement to work, we will have to accept limits, like not expecting tomatoes in February and fresh bread whenever we want it. We'll have to plan ahead, as our grandparents did, and get our bread for Sunday on Saturday; we will need to can tomatoes in September if we want them in February. The variety and convenience of our food will diminish to an extent, but the quality will be better. In the case of Newberg residents looking for baked goods, it will be literally infused with grace. As a Quaker, Brenda infuses her baking with prayer.

When I bake I pray for people. That is a huge part of bread baking for me. I will probably get teary as I say this, but every morning when I baked for students I would pray my scone prayer over them and weep. I've trained myself not to weep here; but the early morning hours are quiet, and I still pray my scone prayer and pray for the people that will come through our doors that day. I pray that they will sense God and that they will know this place is safe and find it a comforting place, a community space that they can call home.²³

Brenda captures my hope for the local food movement. Motivated by affection, by a passion to create and to nourish those in her community, she welcomes people into her space and treats them with kindness and warmth. For this to be sustainable, she and Bruce will have to figure out how to take time off. Maybe we will have to be willing to pay more for our bread so they can hire more help. It will require us as their community to recognize that they close on Sundays and Mondays—even though they know it is bad for business and disappointing to customers—because it is essential for their well-being. It is in our interest for this to be a sustainable enterprise. Already they've talked about closing for a week now and then. Bruce has an out-of-the-country wedding to attend in a few months, and they both will need time off to rest, to go places they can't otherwise visit. Meanwhile, we will be given a chance to remember what Newberg was like before we had a bakery; hopefully, their absence will cause us to be extra thankful.

✧ *Brenda's Scone Prayer* ✧

Jesus, your creative presence inspires me to create by baking.

As I gather my ingredients, gather people close to your heart. With flour, sugar, baking powder, and salt being blended together, cause us to become inseparable from you, as we are nothing on our own.

As the butter is cut into the flour, please bring richness to our lives. Cause each person to be a delight to you and to each other.

As I add these chocolate chips, guide our footsteps that we will not stumble over things in our path nor cause others to stumble and fall.

As the milk is poured in, pour your fullness into us. Soften our hearts to hear you. Bind us together as your followers and as community. As the flour becomes dough, shape us and mold us after you. Cause us to be all that you have created us to be.

With the egg wash brushed over the top, cover us with your love, grace, and mercy.

May the heat of the oven transform us and make us new. May each of us know your love and filling presence. Satisfy the inward longings and desires that you've placed within us.

We are your new creation and you delight in us. Cause us to be a delight to you.

Aggressive Lovingkindness

The local food movement is a global one, and I'm in good company when I claim that it can heal a planet in trouble. The movement is an aggressive form of lovingkindness that lessens the negative impact of conventional agricultural practices and relies on a guiding principle of neighborliness over profit. The movement will thrive or fail based on the links forged between local food providers and their communities. Farmers, bakers, ranchers, and dairies are ready to provide the alternative but depend on people willing to support their efforts by paying something closer to the real cost of food. Such support requires aggressive lovingkindness—a desire to pursue justice, integrity, good stewardship, and sacrifice. Below are four practices for making a beginning.

First, experiment with eating more locally and seasonally. This is a straightforward way to be neighborly—both directly to local farmers and indirectly to distant neighbors sharing the planet. Buy bread from a local bakery and eggs, if you can, from a neighbor or a local farmer. Choose one item that you buy regularly and decide to buy it locally and seasonally—perhaps apples or broccoli or bread. Once that seems easy, add another item, building new habits gradually, step by step and choice by choice. Enjoy strawberries in June, and then make jam and freeze the extra for strawberry smoothies in September and strawberry dumplings in January. *Simply in Season* by Mary Beth Lind and Cathleen Hockman-Wert and *From Asparagus to Zucchini* by the FairShare CSA Coalition are two of many cookbooks that help people figure out how to prepare vegetables like bok choy, fennel, and kohlrabi—new, old foods showing up at farmers markets and CSAs.

Second, for luxury items that require land and people near the equator to grow them, make the choice to buy fair trade and direct trade or to go without—or at least go with less. If you choose to enjoy the luxury of chocolate, coffee, and bananas, begin with one and decide to buy only fair or direct trade, to pay a price that better reflects what it costs the land and the people who grow and harvest it. Once you've succeeded with one of these choices, take another step. Practice aggressive lovingkindness.

I fail to practice this consistently. I still drink mochas—and not always from places that only source fair-trade coffee and chocolate. But I'm working on it, and bit by bit I'm building habits that will eventually become the only imaginable option. We try to make it easier for our CSA members by carrying organic and fair-trade baking cocoa and chocolate bars in the Fern Creek Market, as well as organic local butter from pasture-based cows. Changing a pattern starts with taking an initial step in a different direction.

Third, avoid food tainted with animal misery. I'll talk about this more in the next chapter, but consider how aggressive lovingkindness can extend to the hens that lay our eggs, the pigs that supply us with ham and bacon and sausage, and the cows whose newborn babies are taken from them year after year so that we can have milk, butter, and cheese. What does it look like to have compassion and affection for creatures on which we have come to depend?

Finally, experiment with eating lower on the food chain, which means meals without animal protein. Go meatless on Mondays. Then add to those meatless days as your repertoire of options and desire for variety

grows. *More-with-Less*, a Mennonite cookbook by Doris Longacre, came out in response to the 1970s global food crisis, encouraging people to eat less meat or eat lower on the food chain to lessen our demand for food sourced from around an increasingly hungry world. Since then, plant-based diets have gained popularity. *The China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted and the Startling Implications for Diet, Weight Loss, and Long-term Health* by Thomas Campbell and T. Colin Campbell looks at eating from a personal-health perspective, exploring the link between eating animal proteins and an assortment of chronic illnesses including heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers. *The China Study* came out in 2005 and by 2013 had sold more than a million copies, making it one of the best-selling nutrition books in the United States. The authors—one a professor of nutritional biochemistry and the other a physician—based the book on a twenty-year study, and enough people have been compelled by their findings that plant-based or vegan cookbooks have shifted from the fringe to mainstream.

My favorite vegan cookbook is a twice-loved duct-taped copy of *Vegan Planet* by Robin Robertson. My daughter Sarah gave me her old copy after she received the newly revised edition to review on her blog, *My Darling Vegan*.²⁴ Teff and quinoa, tofu and tempeh, black beans and sweet potatoes, almonds and peanuts, and kale and mushrooms are just a few of the good-for-you foods that have prominent places in the pages of this hefty cookbook. Eating without meat is compassionate and opens the door to a world of delicious alternatives that are good for our bodies, our neighbors, and our planet.

A Final Word

We ask for feedback from our Fern Creek members every year. One question on our anonymous survey asks why they joined a CSA, since they could more easily go to the grocery store for their produce and have more freedom to select what they want. The following statements are some of their responses:

We really enjoyed coming to the farm every week and being able to see where the food was grown and getting to know our farmers and their farming philosophies. The kids *loved* feeding the chickens and exploring the woods.

I appreciate the personal touch and consistency, and the variety that I wouldn't likely choose on my own. I also like the recipe suggestions!

We wanted to try the CSA since we eat local organic produce, and this was a good value. We felt that it would be good for the boys to see how food is grown as we work hard to educate them on healthy eating.

I like the relationship developed with the food and the farmer.

This captures the heart of the local food movement. Frances Lappé is best known for her book *A Diet for a Small Planet*, which came out in the early 1970s. Since then she has founded three national organizations that consider hunger, poverty, and the environmental crises as well as solutions to these problems. In an article she wrote for *The Nation*, she argues that global hunger is about having access to abundance rather than a lack of food. Of the local food movement she says:

This rising global food movement taps universal human sensibilities—expressed in Hindu farmers in India saving seeds, Muslim farmers in Niger turning back the desert and Christian farmers in the United States practicing biblically inspired Creation Care. In these movements lies the revolutionary power of the food movement: its capacity to upend a life-destroying belief system that has brought us power-concentrating corporatism. . . .

At its best, this movement encourages us to “think like an ecosystem,” enabling us to see a place for ourselves connected to all others, for in ecological systems “there are no parts, only participants,” German physicist Hans Peter Duerr reminds us. . . . As the food movement stirs, as well as meets, deep human needs for connection, power, and fairness, let's shed any notion that it's simply “nice” and seize its potential to break the spell of our disempowerment.²⁵

Last week I visited my friend Allison in Tennessee. Wendell Berry was in Nashville, talking about what makes a healthy community, and Allison and I went to hear him. A lot of Berry's words struck a chord, given what I've been writing and thinking about recently. He said that conviviality, or neighborliness, brings healing to communities and that we had to get beyond *wishing* our neighbors well and actually *doing* something neighborly for them. Conviviality can be brought to distant neighbors too, he said, by holding ourselves to account when we use products that we don't know enough about to have a full accounting for what they cost.

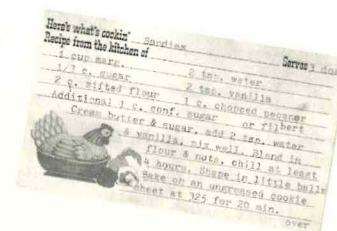
Berry brought a grounded practicality to lofty ideas of community.

About a week after walking up my new neighbors' driveway, we found a note from them in our mailbox. Patsy wrote, “We are so sorry we missed you Sunday and wanted to thank you for the veggies. Your kindness is very much appreciated and we look forward to meeting you both in person. We've been in Oregon a very short time, and are glad to know we have some great neighbors.”

I'm not, in fact, a great neighbor, not even a good one if I'm honest with how often I stumble to get beyond well-wishing. But I'm taking steps toward being a better neighbor to those both near and far.

• Brenda Burg's Scones with Love and Prayers •

- 2 c. flour
- 3 tbsp. sugar
- 2 tsp. baking powder
- ½ tsp. salt
- 6 tbsp. unsalted butter (if you use salted butter, cut salt to ¼ tsp.)
- ½ c. milk (more as needed, a little at a time)
- 1 egg beaten thoroughly, to brush on top of scones



Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Mix dry ingredients together. Cut in butter. Add chocolate chips, nuts, and/or dried fruit if desired (see variations below). Stir in milk. Dough should be fairly dry, not sticky. Place on lightly floured counter and pat into an 8-inch circle about ½ to ⅝ inches. Cut into 8–10 equal parts (or make smaller scones by cutting the dough in half and patting each half into a 6- to 7-inch circle, cutting each into 8–10 equal parts). Place on a cookie sheet lined with parchment paper (ideal, but not necessary). Brush egg on the top and sides of each scone. Bake for 15–18 minutes and cool on wire racks.

Variations: Starter Ideas

• Cranberry / Orange Cornmeal

Substitute 1 cup corn meal for 1 cup flour; add 1 cup cranberries (fresh, dried, or frozen—baker's choice). Use ¼ cup orange juice, ¼ cup milk, and add orange zest to taste.

Oatmeal/Raisin (or Date)

Substitute 1 cup crushed oatmeal for 1 cup flour (place dry ingredients in a food processor, add the butter and pulse until sand-like); add $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 cup raisins or chopped dates just before the milk. Add chopped nuts (optional).

Lemon Poppy Seed

Add 2 tablespoons poppy seeds; use $\frac{1}{4}$ cup lemon juice with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup milk, and add lemon zest. Omit egg on top. After baking, brush on a mixture of 1 cup powdered sugar, 1–2 tablespoons lemon juice, and lemon zest.

Reflections and Questions

1. Can you name the neighbors who live closest to you? What do you know about them? Have you ever helped each other out? In general, how do you feel about your neighbors' sense of neighborliness? How about your own sense of neighborliness toward them?
2. Do you see neighborliness as nice, but optional? Reflect on how it feels to consider neighborliness as an expression of your faith rather than "nice, but optional."
3. In what ways does embracing a global neighborhood seem overwhelming? To make any challenge manageable it's helpful to take one step at a time. What one step could you take toward being a better global neighbor? Do you have a small group or some friends with whom you could talk about this and take a step together?
4. After reading the chapter, what sticks with you more, the hopeless picture of industrialized food or the hopeful resurgence of local and just food? Why do you think you gravitate toward either hopelessness or hopefulness? Either way, what would it take to strengthen hopefulness?
5. Think about how you already participate in the resurgence of local and just food. Then think about what next step you could take toward supporting local and just food.
6. Do you have a farmers market in your area? If yes, do you shop there? What motivates you, and what do you find satisfying about it? If you've never been or if you went once and haven't been back, what keeps you away?

7. The chapter offers four practices that move us toward local and just eating. Consider choosing one practice to experiment with this week. Afterward, reflect on how it felt to be intentional in regard to food and how being neighborly is affecting how you see God, your place in the world, and your relationship with God.