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Farming Practices (Chapter Two of Walking Gently on the Earth)

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FARMING PRACTICES

At they was not exactly, or not only, what is called a "landowner."

He was the farm's farmer, but also its creature and belonging.

He lived its life, and it lived his; he knew that, of the two lives,

his was meant to be the smaller and the shorter.

—WENDELL BERRY, JAYBER CROW

My mother and her siblings grew up raising sugar beets in Fort Morgan, Colorado—on one of the six million family farms that provided food for the rest of the nation. Grandma sold eggs from their chickens and cream from the dairy cow to buy fabric to make school dresses for Mom and her sisters. Grandma also tended the large vegetable garden that fed her family along with the chickens and cows they raised.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 1930 about one out of every four people in the United States lived on a farm. Now less than two out of every one hundred live on farms, and three-fourths of our food comes from about 157,000 large farms.

We've grown from communities that bought each other's eggs, tomatoes and beef to communities that import beef raised in Bra-

zils and tomatoes grown in Mexico and buy eggs laid in factory farms in Iowa. Our ideas about food and values shifted, accommodating to changes in how we went about the business of growing and raising our food. This chapter explores the backstory and implications of those cultural shifts, especially around the push for and support of all kinds of growth, as well as some things we can do today to slow it down. The next chapter offers practical ways to make our food choices compassionate ones in our current food culture.

THE AGRICULTURAL GROWTH SPURT

As we transitioned away from family farms to agribusiness we grew in just about every way feasible. Oil discovered during and just following World War II motivated innovation and industry. After the war, science labs built to develop weapons found another focus—creating uses for petroleum. Petroleum-based fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides grew the farming industry, and carpets and hoses, hair dryers and cosmetics, cleaning supplies and paints, toys and hot tubs, recycling containers and trash bags, and the credit cards we used to purchase it all expanded markets, exploding out of innovation and the abundance of petroleum. Cars and trucks became a significant consumer of surplus oil. President Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1956, and now our roads are all grown up. We have an Interstate Highway System that allows us to get up and move whenever we get a hankering to do so, and permits trucks to haul oranges from Florida to Maine and strawberries from California to New York.

Our farms grew up too, with the average size (in acres) more than doubling between 1950 and 2000. Farmers in the 1960s and 1970s had to get big or get out. Small family farms went the way of the horse and buggy, and large-scale agribusiness came of age. While family farms like my mother's grew and raised a variety of foods (now referred to as *polyculture*), with consolidation farming

transitioned into monoculture industries, and pastures, pens and barnyards were plowed under to make room for one specialized crop. The cows, pigs and chickens went to factory farms that specialized in raising only one kind of animal, saving both time and money over raising them on family farms.

Corn became a crop of choice. Food companies found new ways to feed us the extra corn—corn chips, corn cereals and, most notably, high fructose corn syrup, which replaced sugar as a less expensive sweetener for manufactured drinks and foods. Most vending machines could be called “corn vending machines,” though usually the corn is repackaged in a way that disguises it.

Growth in agribusiness distanced us from the raising, harvesting and preparing of our own food. By the turn of the twenty-first century, food growing and tending processes had become largely invisible to most of us, and a cultural value associated with participating in one's food gathering, canning, drying and preparing had shifted toward a cultural value of efficiency.

The shift from small family farms to large agribusiness changed how food was grown as well as what we ate, how we prepared food and how we thought about it. We were snookered by the food industry that convinced women that to be liberated they needed to be free from the dreary task of cooking. We agreed with the makers of such products as Duncan Hines cake mixes and Chef Boyardee spaghetti that making our own food “from scratch” wasted creative energy that could be better spent making money. Buying boxed mixes and canned dinners became a measure of our economic success, placing us securely in America's middle class. Almost without noticing we came to depend on the convenience of Captain Crunch, Swanson dinners and SpaghettiOs.

CONNECTING TO THE HARVEST

I buy a bag of brown rice and don't know anything about where it is grown, much less the women, men and children involved in

growing and harvesting it. The same was true when I bought boneless, skinless chicken breasts packaged in yellow Styrofoam trays wrapped in cellophane. Not having to work around claws and feathers, gizzards and beaks used to seem like a definite plus—and, at the time, so did the fact that my children had no idea that our dinner once bore any resemblance to Chicken Little. I'm fairly sure our daughters thought *chicken*, as in the animal that clucks, was an entirely different thing than *chicken*, as in McNuggets. I'm not proud of this.

That any of us still purchase Thanksgiving turkeys that actually look something like the bird we're eating surprises me a bit, though I do recall hearing a few "eeew" and "yuck" expletives along the holiday dinner prep path as my daughters helped me dress the turkey. For our family, disgust has turned to awareness of animals—their lives and sacrifice that we might eat meat. The last time we cooked a turkey for Thanksgiving, Megan Anna reminded us that Native Americans approached an animal they had hunted and shot, and thanked it, recognizing the animal died so that they might be nourished. So in our thanksgiving prayer we thanked God for the turkey, acknowledging the sacrifice of the turkey for our Thanksgiving feast.

Since I've never had to grow my own food, I don't tend to be particularly mindful of farm workers' labor that brings the sweet potatoes, peas, cranberries and olives to the store so I can serve them at my Thanksgiving table. A Thanksgiving experience had greater significance when families gathered with thankfulness for the bounty they had worked for, celebrating the end of the harvesting, canning, drying and storing of meats, vegetables, grains and fruits that would carry their families through the winter months. The labors of people and the sacrifice of animals became inconsequential as we became increasingly removed from agricultural processes.

The summer my parents moved us all back to our roots in Ore-

gon I experienced firsthand the hard work and fun of farm life. Oregon's youth harvested summer crops before child labor laws prohibited it, and schools finished up in early June so farmers could count on pickers when the strawberries ripened. My siblings and I picked strawberries for Mr. and Mrs. Love, packing our lunch the night before and then rising early to catch an old school bus pulled out of retirement for the weeks of summer harvest. We'd bend over our rows, picking berries as we moved down the mounds of green laden with red, fragrant berries, sometimes visiting with whoever was picking the next row over (or, in the case of the rebellious few, chucking rotten strawberries at whoever was in range when no one was looking). More often each of us stayed captivated by our own thoughts and the stories we made up in our heads as we filled our flats. We could eat what we wanted but only got paid for what we turned in, and so after the first day or two, eating fresh strawberries took a distant second place to productivity.

I learned something about food during those summer weeks. But over the years I forgot things I knew and appreciated back then—especially the labor-intensive process of harvesting fragile berries, and how the perfectly ripe strawberry bursts in your mouth with a flavor reserved for warm berries right off the bush.

My siblings and I also helped harvest hazelnuts and walnuts on the orchard of my eventual in-laws during Octobers through high school. They hired the church youth group kids to come rake the hazelnut crop into piles and pick up the walnuts that had fallen, ready for harvesting. We were given Snickers or Mars candy bars for a morning snack, Coke or Dr Pepper in the afternoon, and we'd break for lunch and sit around chatting and flirting until we headed back to the orchard. I treasure my few forays into the communal ritual of harvesting.

Mark and I could have done more to expose our children to harvesting. We could have driven to U-Pick farms and picked apples, peaches or berries. These days Mark and I go down the road

a couple of miles to the Smiths to pick our blueberries. We take just an hour on two July summer mornings to get what we'll freeze and use for the year. The Smiths use an honor system for payment, so we weigh our berries on the scale when we're done and drop our money in the metal box attached to the shed. We pay about half of what we would if we bought blueberries at Ray's Produce Stand, and one could argue that our time is worth more than that. But for us, connecting to harvesting is not about saving money but about staying mindful of the laborers that provide us with most of our food, and of God's scheme to bless earth's inhabitants with new food every year from dirt, sun, water, plants and maybe a bee or two. Besides, Mark and I find it peaceful to spend an hour picking berries in the cool of a summer morning. We think simple thoughts as we listen to the birds, and only partly hear the cars zipping by on Highway 240.

THE PLUS SIDE OF EFFICIENCY

Lest you think otherwise, I do acknowledge advantages that came with the efficiency of agribusiness. Food got less expensive, and we could produce a lot of it to feed our growing population.

The free enterprise system works because competition for your dollars and mine keeps business owners motivated to improve their products and to produce them more efficiently—for less cost. The competition for food dollars led to a race to lower costs of producing food and, subsequently, the price of food for us. The Brown farm can sell their eggs for less than the Green farm and still stay in business if they can find ways to cut the costs of producing eggs. Efficiency won the day.

Most farmers in Yamhill and Washington counties now use machines to rake and gather hazelnuts and walnuts. It's noisy, and fills the orchard with the smell of gasoline and machinery—but it's efficient. Keeping laying hens in cages off the ground, rather than in barnyards, meant one could manage a lot of hens. Feeding,

poop clean-up and egg collection is managed easily with conveyer belts and set feeding and watering systems, eliminating three time-consuming jobs and allowing egg producers to sell a lot of eggs at low cost. Bringing cows (and pigs) into feedlots and fattening them up fast with corn is far more efficient than being limited by the number of cows one could feed by pasturing and waiting four years for them to put on enough weight to take them to market. Once the industrial engines took hold of the food production business, ample food could be grown, processed and distributed with less human labor, and at less cost to you and me.

The story typically gets told positively—and what's not to like about it? Fewer people had to perform tedious toil simply to survive. People were freed to expand their creative potential because they could pursue other occupational interests. Instead of everyone being a jack-of-all trades like my grandparents—who grew sugar beets, milked cows, made their own butter, shod their horse, gathered eggs, canned fruit, slaughtered their chickens, and made their own egg noodles and clothes—people could specialize. Some managed or worked in canneries, others owned or worked in slaughterhouses and meat packaging plants, but most turned to nonrelated food jobs. Some worked as seamstresses in the garment industry, or in the ever-expanding assembly lines where all kinds of products were being developed and made for mass distribution. Eventually most of those jobs went overseas, so more of us now work in service industries. We are teachers, therapists, nurses, sales representatives, hair stylists, personal trainers, consultants, marketers, financial advisers, social workers and civil servants. The human ingenuity that ushered us into the industrial revolution with the steam engine carried us into the information age with computer and wireless technology.

Our food comes to us efficiently. We have many choices and much convenience, and spend less on food than our grandparents and great-grandparents did before and just after World War II.

More of our monthly budget can go for drinking mochas with friends, updating our wardrobe or wireless technology, and maybe even springing for tickets to a concert or basketball game. This is not a bad thing. But progress and growth did bring some consequences that were *not* so good.

THE HIDDEN COSTS OF LOW-COST FOOD

The efficiency and growth of the food industry also meant that in every decade from 1920 through the end of the century the number of family farms in the United States declined. This was especially noticeable by 1970, when the growth and efficiency of large farms out-competed families who were trying to make a living off small farms and who saw the price of their crops sink beneath what it cost to grow them.

Large-scale agribusiness expanded into farming communities by buying up small-scale family farms and creating consolidated businesses. Most farmers sold their farms and migrated to cities, joining the expanding urban and suburban American population. Farms that made it into the twenty-first century largely valued growth, progress, efficiency and technological innovation, and the most viable farms today are part of large businesses that employ managers, supervisors and farm laborers. Because so much low-cost food is produced, agribusinesses can transport it across the continent, or oceans, at what seem to be reasonable prices to people pushing carts up and down the aisles of Piggly Wiggly or Safeway. We've become used to having pineapples, oranges and fresh beef year round, to shopping for specials on milk and canned corn, and to getting Thanksgiving turkeys for thirty-nine cents a pound. We value lots of choices and competitive bargains, and have come to expect them from our grocers.

As the distance grew between the steer raised on the farm and the ground beef wrapped in cellophane and stacked with other meat products in the grocery store, we didn't feel like we had lost

anything worth keeping. Besides, the lower prices made us happy meat consumers. We bought the goods that came with progress and felt proud of our country's good fortune.

But some hidden costs of low-cost food have been exposed, raising questions that won't go away. Maybe the questions are troubling because they bump up against what it means to be God's compassionate and merciful representatives on earth.

Animal misery. Mark didn't used to believe a chicken could be "unhappy." He didn't think chickens had the brainpower necessary to compute either happiness or misery. Maybe they don't in the way that humans do, but Mark now knows a happy hen when he sees one, as well as one he would describe as living in misery. We acquired our first brood of chicks during the writing of this book, and shortly after that, while driving through our hometown of Newberg we came alongside a truck carrying hens packed into cages. Patches of bare skin showed through where feathers had been worn away, one visible sign to car passengers of a stressed life in a crowded wire cage absent of bedding, dirt or perches. Chickens usually have beady lively eyes; these lacked any spark of life. They fell into each other as the truck stopped and started, looking apathetic, dull, unresponsive. We were witnessing misery or, at the very least, the absence of life beyond the most biological definition. The image haunts us still.

One uncomfortable question arising from unintended consequences of growth in the food industry is the treatment of animals. For a long time I turned away from stories about Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs). I liked animals well enough, but believed God gave them to us to use responsibly and well—which included eating some of them. Animal rights folks were raving radicals, I thought, and I'd change the channel or turn the page or round the corner to avoid them. It took me a while to be willing to sit with and sift through information honestly. I hoped to conclude the tales were mostly an exaggeration since the

tendency to multiply woes abounds in all controversial areas. And some exaggeration is here as well. But after reading a variety of perspectives I could not deny that CAFOs and egg-producing factory farms are unhappy places for animals.

For instance, we call hens in the egg industry "laying hens," and hens and roosters in the meat industry "broilers," and in doing so render all their other creaturely activities irrelevant. Yet God gave a hen a natural desire to care for her young. She builds a nest in preparation of them, and is a patient "nester." She rotates her eggs up to five times a day as they gestate, and then watches over her hatched chicks, feeding them and gathering them under her wings for protection and warmth. In her spare time she dust-bathes, perches and forages, exploring the world through her beak. This nurturing animal is the most mistreated in factory farming.

Between half and two-thirds of her beak will be cut off, causing physical pain as bone, cartilage, soft tissue and nerve endings are cut through. Clipping, or debeaking, is done to keep her from pecking her neighbors out of the crazed madness that comes from being bored and crowded with a bunch of unhappy hens. She can't spread her wings; she can hardly turn around in a circle, and of course there is no nesting, dust-bathing or foraging. The space allotted to her to live out her life as a laying hen is smaller than a piece of paper. She never hatches and cares for her young, but the instinct to reproduce is so strong that it drives her to keep laying eggs, which is, after all, to our benefit. She experiences misery her whole life. Which at least is rather short compared to hens in barnyards. Near the end of it (about a year), when her production drops off, her caretakers (I use this word very loosely) stop feeding and watering her, which stimulates her body to put forth one final wave of egg-laying before she is removed from the production line and sent to slaughter for stews and pot pies.

I won't go into such detail again, but neither will I apologize for it here. The value in removing the veil of ignorance that protects

consumers from animal misery is making the invisible visible. When we see what is, we can make more intentional choices about what we will or will not support.

I became willing to look at the reality of how animals in the food industry are treated after our daughter Sarah became a vegan. She invited Mark and me to understand why—not pushing information on us, but making resources available to us when we asked for them. After doing some reading and thinking, we challenged cultural values we had adopted that made it acceptable to treat animals as simple commodities. Now I assume greater responsibility to figure out what it means to respect and care well for animals, particularly those from whom I plan to take something—whether honey, eggs or a life. One thing is sure: meat, eggs and dairy will cost more, because efficiency is traded in for respectful care of animals, which requires more time and more space.

Unsound agricultural practices. That CAFOs are environmentally unsound and unsustainable is another hidden cost of growth. For instance, that single pound of beef I brown before adding it to spaghetti took about 2,500 gallons of water to produce. Moreover, the groundwater pollution that comes from poop held in "lagoons," or open-air holding tanks for animal waste, siphons off into water systems, creating health hazards for humans and animals living in the area.

As corporate farms moved away from the model of growing multiple crops and animals together, unique farming challenges emerged. Plants needed more fertilization, more pest control and better weed control. Petro-products provided the answer. Specially formalized petro-chemicals replaced the natural fertilizer from cows and pigs living on the integrated farms. It took a lot of the new-fangled fertilizer to feed depleted soil since crops were no longer rotated—another plus of the old model. The trees and shrubs that small farmers tended to keep as a buffer between fields were plowed under to make use of every bit of land for crops. This

loss of buffer meant more pesticides were needed to control unwanted bugs, because the birds and farmer-friendly insects that ate the crop-eating insects lived in the buffering bushes. The birds left to find foraging and shelter elsewhere, and the farmer-friendly insects died from the pesticides along with the crop-eating ones. As a result, our food, as Michael Pollan notes in *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, is raised in a sea of petroleum. How can *that* be good for us? Pesticides keep the now-free-to-enlarge populations of crop-eating insects at bay, fertilizers push the soil to keep producing, and herbicides control the weeds. But monoculture industrial farms mean efficiency, and efficiency makes food cheap.

Obesity. Every decade since the 1970s the United States has witnessed a significant increase in the number of overweight and obese children and adults. We became rather attached to the new food, or foodlike products, as Pollan calls them in *In Defense of Food*. New foods are developed by innovative companies every year, and our waistlines reflect that we rather like them. Monoculture agribusiness made an extra five hundred calories of cheap food, mostly corn, available to us each day, of which we each eat about two hundred. In the 1960s 13 percent of the population was obese, and now, according to the Center for Disease Control, 34 percent of Americans over twenty are obese, and 60 percent are overweight. One in three children today has a chance of developing type 2 diabetes, and all the associated ailments of obesity.

High fructose corn syrup is one of the culprits. It shows up in our soft drinks (just think about how much corn syrup is in the Big Gulp, or the Super Big Gulp!), fruit and sport drinks, Oreos, Twizzlers, even in our granola bars and breads. We started sweetening everything with corn syrup and eating more of it. While we can't blame obesity simply on corn syrup, obesity rates did rise as we acquired a taste for the high-fructose-corn-syrup foods that became available for snacks and meals.

That's some of the bad news. The silver lining is that we are

capable of learning from our mistakes and are quick learners. If we choose, we can exchange cultural values of efficiency, choice and convenience for historic values rooted in connections with land and animals. People are remembering and reclaiming these values. Urban and community gardens and backyard chicken-keeping are flourishing. We are remembering other ways, besides petroleum-based fertilizers, to nurture soil, and other places, besides factory farms, to find eggs for our families. We are slowing down the process.

FAST FOOD AND SLOW FOOD— A REVOLUTION IN EATING

Two competing social trends are vying for our loyalty. A simple barbecue joint started by Dick and Mac McDonald in 1940 became the starting place for one of them. With the unspoken motto "The Pursuit of More for Less," fast food brings us cheap, predictable and convenient food. McDonald's feeds the masses in over one hundred countries. The successful chain has been the target of books like Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* and documentaries like Morgan Spurlock's *Super Size Me* that look at the destructive, and often invisible, side of the fast-food industry. We love McDonald's, and we hate McDonald's.

Fast food is cheap and efficient, and we eat it even though we *know* that it is unhealthy. Fast food undermines values like eating dinner at home with our families, supporting our local communities, and being fair to the farm laborers and humane to the animals that provide that food for us. So while most of us still value convenience, availability, predictability, efficiency, low cost and high-volume production, we are increasingly unsettled by the unintended consequences of it all. On the other side opposing fast food is slow food, captured most literally in the Slow Food Movement.

Italy—the land of vineyards made golden in the autumn sun, and romance in the canals of Venice—is the birthplace of the Slow

Food Movement. It began in 1986 by a group of Italians affronted by the world's love affair with fast food eaten alone or while on the run. Eating a broad assortment of locally grown foods with friends while noticing and thinking about what's being eaten, where it comes from and who makes it exemplify slow food. Slow food protects historically held values about food at risk of being lost in the efficiency and growth of fast food that provides cheap, fatty, monoculture food products.

Ordinary folks wanting to take a stand against a fast-food market don't have to belong to one of the 850 worldwide Slow Food Movement chapters, or *convivium*, to create ways to celebrate food with friends. Anyone can become countercultural and may, after all, find themselves closer to a Christian view of hospitality that values relationships over efficiency. All we need is to see the goodness of slowness.

For instance, Mark and I have gathered regularly with two other families to eat shared meals in each other's homes and talk about our lives and what God is doing in them. The other two families have children in school, so negotiating schedules has been challenging at times, but we all value it enough to keep working at making it regular. Monthly we gather with another group of friends to share hearty soup-and-bread suppers in the winter, and seasonal salad suppers in the summer, as we talk about a book (usually a novel) that we've chosen to read together. We also celebrate the coming of new seasons by gathering an assortment of coworkers and friends to share food, poetry, readings and music inspired by whatever season we are leaving or heading toward. Nearly all of us have ways we can slow down and share food and friendship with others. Creating welcoming homes helps us take a breath, broaden our friendship circles and be intentional about eating.

Increasingly people taking a stand against fast food are doing so by growing some of their own food, or buying what they can from local farmers, or become small-scale farmers themselves.

THE RETURN OF THE SMALL FAMILY FARM

Although most of the small farmers were out of business by the 1970s, their values linger still in our memories. Classics like Aldo Leopold's 1945 *Sand County Almanac* and contemporary essays of philosopher-farmer Wendell Berry have kept the ideals of the small family farm alive, along with notions of living gently and walking along in creation, rather than trampling over it. The United States is witnessing a resurgence of small family farms catering to families and communities that want to return to something local, more communal, and once again richly connected to the processes of growing, harvesting and preparing food.

These days Mark and I collect eggs from our own small flock of hens and sell the extras to my colleagues. Backyard "farming" is a growing trend across the country and we've jumped in. Last summer we built a portable coop and bought eight little chicks.

Cities across the country are responding to pressure from local residents to allow for backyard chicken-keeping. Revised ordinances spell out what will be allowed (number of hens) and what is prohibited (crowing roosters, backyard slaughtering). Many cities still prohibit backyard chickens altogether, though if neighbors don't complain some committed (or rebellious) residents raise them anyway.

Before acquiring our own brood of hens we bought our eggs from the Higgins. Mary Etta and Ed have a small family farm. Mary Etta is the primary farmer; Ed is a colleague who teaches literature and writes poetry. On Tuesdays he brings eggs to faculty lunch and I became one of his faithful buyers. I bought their eggs because I prefer to eat eggs laid by happy chickens: hens that wandered around outside eating bugs and pecking at grass, that are warmed by the sun and whose sounds comingle with neighboring birds, cows and goats. I also bought them because it was more personal than buying eggs at Thriftway. It created a social bond of sorts—I helped Ed and Mary Etta in their small farming endeavor.

ors and they gave me eggs produced locally, with minimal harm to the environment and to the hens that lay them.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). CSAs take the sort of relationship we had with the Higgins and make it more formal. They foster relationships between local farmers and the people in their communities. Individuals sign up with a local farmer and pay for a share of the harvest at the beginning of the season, and get a bag or box of produce every week throughout the growing season. We picked ours up directly from our farmers, Mike and Jill Paine, who live about seven miles away. Most subscribers pick up produce at one of a couple central drop sites arranged at the beginning of the season. We support local farmers, and they supply us with a variety of produce from early June through the end of October. Meanwhile, we support the values of the Slow Food Movement by taking the time to prepare and eat a diverse array of locally grown food. We ate our first kohlrabi, celeriac, delicata squash and fennel that summer.

Community gardens. By planting, tending and harvesting communal areas, neighbors are coming together to create community gardens, making their neighborhoods more beautiful and producing good food that reduces family food budgets. Community gardens get neighbors talking, laughing and working side-by-side, reflecting a form of local agriculture that has become a catalyst for neighborhood and community development. A number of New York's 744 community gardens are planted in schools where children learn the basics of gardening and eat produce they have grown. Tucson, desert town that it is, has five nationally registered community gardens and welcomes individuals and neighborhoods to start others.

A few years ago, Corey Beals, a philosophy professor at George Fox University, spearheaded an effort to get a community garden planted on our university campus. The college administrators graciously handed over an unused plot of land for the season, and a

few students, staff and faculty joined Corey in creating a garden. A small concrete wading pool surrounded by sand became a central focal point, offering a play space for children while parents worked in the beds that spiraled outward and were planted with tomatoes, lavender, squash, beans, peppers, onions, mums, broccoli, basil and sunflowers. In the fall Corey and friends hosted a campuswide harvest celebration where people gathered in a tiki torch-lit garden to eat grilled food from the garden, sing and listen to local farmers talk about farming in Yamhill County. Corey expanded the garden the second year and, given the first year's success, was given more room to grow. The garden is a gift to our university community—especially to those who accept the invitation to play in the dirt and eat sun-ripened tomatoes off the vine. People who don't have space, knowledge, time or desire to manage a garden alone, but who want to busy their hands in rich, dark dirt and eat from earth's rewards later are those likely to organize or join a community garden.

Backyard gardens, CSAs and community gardens are exploding nationwide, and the values of the Slow Food Movement permeate them all. Even the White House now oversees a big vegetable garden. The first spring the Obama family took up residence in the White House, Michelle Obama brought a couple dozen children from Bancroft Elementary School to help her break ground for a garden in the South Lawn. Obama kept school children involved in the garden, which produced food for both the White House kitchen and for Miriam's Kitchen, which feeds homeless people living in D.C.

CSAs, farmers' markets and community gardens are forms of civic agriculture that take food sovereignty from global agribusinesses and return it back to local communities and farmers. But here's the rub. The takeover by agribusiness happened subtly, and mostly brought with it more choices and less expensive food. Inspiring enough people to think there is something worth taking

back can be challenging. We need convincing if supporting local farmers means having fewer choices, *especially* if it might cost us a bit more.

In spite of the skepticism, a civic agricultural movement is blooming, strengthening social ties between farmers and food eaters, and boosting local economies by keeping money in our communities to be spent again. Local agriculture provides a place for civic engagement; by supporting it, people step into their community and act neighborly.

FOOD AND JUSTICE

During the Great Depression the government started a program to guarantee farmers a set price for crops, helping them stay in the food-growing business. For the sake of our country's food supply we needed federal farm subsidies to help farmers on farms produce food. Farm subsidies are a well-established and now controversial part of today's farming industry. With new subsidy transparency laws we've learned that billions of subsidy dollars go primarily to large farming operations instead of to the farmers trying to make a living on small and medium-sized farms. John Peck, executive director of Family Farm Defenders, says the subsidies hurt small farmers in the United States because the rich food corporations get big subsidies that allow them to push small farmers out of business by selling their food for less than it costs to grow it.

One of the Obama administration's early decisions in 2009 was to cap gross farm sales at \$500,000 for a farm to be eligible to receive subsidies (down from \$750,000). While this across-the-board cap may not be the best way to determine if the farmers who most need the subsidies receive them, it is a step toward acknowledging that our distribution of subsidies has not benefited the community of small farmers, both in the United States and abroad.

The subsidy controversy raised questions about our ethics of global trade. The United States chose not to conform to World Trade Organization regulations that seek to make global trade fair for all countries. To conform would require eliminating our farm subsidies. Mexico offers one example for why the subsidy issue raises questions about food justice.

Mexican farmers can grow corn for less than U.S. farmers can, but federal subsidies allow large corporate farms to sell their corn on the world market (including in Mexico) for much less than it costs U.S. farmers to grow it, underselling the Mexican farmers. Since the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, 1.3 million Mexican farmers have lost their livelihood. These farmers can no longer make a living for their families on their farms so they move to cities to work in factories, or become migrant laborers.

When is food "just food"? What does it mean to extend justice in matters of farming? Do we have a responsibility to be global citizens and to extend fairness beyond our borders? These questions are being raised in national and international conversations. We are more able to be agents of God's desire for justice in the world if we reflect on these questions in light of our faith. If the prophet Isaiah were here, he might pull out his message to Israel as recorded in Isaiah 58. The Israelites were fasting and praying, seeking healing and forgiveness, and wondering why God did not seem to notice. God says:

I will tell you why! . . .

It's because you are fasting to please yourselves.

Even while you fast,

you keep oppressing your workers. . . .

No, this is the kind of fasting I want:

Free those who are wrongly imprisoned;

lighten the burden of those who work for you.

Let the oppressed go free,
 and remove the chains that bind people.
 Share your food with the hungry,
 and give shelter to the homeless.
 Give clothes to those who need them,
 and do not hide from relatives who need your help.
 Then your salvation will come like the dawn,
 and your wounds will quickly heal.
 Your godliness will lead you forward,
 and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind.
 Then when you call, the LORD will answer.
 "Yes, I am here," he will quickly reply. (Isaiah 58:3, 6-9)

First, to extend justice I have to acknowledge that I *have* neighbors—men, women and children whose work, after all, supplies me with food. My neighbors include the field laborers, ranchers, and dairy, cannery, factory and slaughterhouse workers who grow or process my food. Acknowledging that real people spend their lives being sure I get fed removes the veil that allows all those people, animals and unsavory processes to stay comfortably invisible.

Invisibility encourages me to purchase inexpensive, highly subsidized food and feel like I am being a *responsible* shopper because I'm getting the most for my money. But when I truly see my neighbors—the Honduran farmer trying to get a fair price for his bananas; the small U.S. family trying to make a living farming in sustainable ways that are good for the soil, the insects, the critters sharing the land and the people consuming the food; subsistence farmers in South America who lose access to land they have lived off for generations, land taken away and planted in corn sent to feedlots to fatten cows I'll eat—I become a responsible shopper by eating in ways that reflect justice, fairness and ecological health for all God's creation.

To extend justice to our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, our fellow humans, is to protect their livelihoods and to stop contributing to their oppression through our desire for inexpensive chocolate, beef and corn. Food justice cannot happen if my inexpensive food undermines another's ability to feed, clothe and educate their children.

Therefore, loving my neighbor means examining my food habits, including my assumption that being a responsible shopper means stretching our family's food dollar as far as possible. This is the focus of the next chapter—what it looks like to eat with intention and to dine at tables of compassion. For some of us, loving our neighbor will include learning about these bigger pieces, perhaps researching farm subsidies, and encouraging senators and representatives to support farm bills that come before Congress every few years in an attempt to reform subsidy laws that give the advantage to the special interests of agribusiness.

A QUESTION OF CLASS

Before I could address what a compassionate table might look like, I had to wrestle with a question related to social class. I want to walk gently in my food choices, but a complex piece of the conversation is related to issues of politics, privilege and class. Can lower-class families afford to be mindful of neighbors here and abroad who provide them with less expensive food?

At some point it dawned on me, a sociologist who is concerned about social inequality, that buying fair-trade coffee and cocoa, hormone-free and antibiotic-free milk, and eggs from Ed and Mary Etta's "happy" chickens is possible because I'm comfortably situated in the upper-middle class. When Mark and I first married we were both still in college and therefore qualified as members of the lower class, although we had good potential for moving up. During Mark's graduate-school days we went grocery shopping holding a daughter with one hand and clipped coupons with the other.

We couldn't afford grapes or broccoli and shopped for bargains. My focus in those days was stretching our dollars to feed our growing family. Working-class and lower-class families today confront the same challenges we did thirty years ago.

Several significant issues are wrapped into the question, can the lower class eat with intention toward issues of fairness and justice? One is the availability and affordability of just food for people in the lower class. If I live in an urban city's low-income housing and am dependent on public transportation, my closest grocer will supply me with my food. Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't have options to buy eggs from "happy" chickens, or fairly traded coffee and cocoa. If I live on a low income, Walmart allows my household budget dollars to go further than they would go at Whole Foods. Convenient, inexpensive food is an asset in my life, and in a life without many assets, I take what I can get.

This question of food justice is part of a larger conversation about social justice. It can be seen in the difference between the annual income of large winery owners in Yamhill County and the hourly pay of the Hispanic laborers working in their vineyards, or between the net worth of the owners of Walmart and the wages received by employees of any given Walmart. Fighting for food justice is part of a larger fight for change in social, economic and political structures that contribute to the widening gap between the wealthy and the poor. It means asking hard questions like: What does it say about us as a country when citizens that work full time still fall below the poverty line, earning less than what the government computes is necessary to stay out of poverty? What is my responsibility to work for change in a system that requires some citizens to choose between going to the doctor and paying their electric bill?

But yes, there are ways that lower-class families can attend to issues of justice in their food choices. The summer of 2009 saw an explosion of urban community gardens in response to an uncer-

tain economy. Vacant lots in low-income metropolitan areas are now full of fruits and vegetables, making it possible for residents to stretch their grocery dollars with free fresh produce. My hope is that after the economy recovers, the gardens will stay.

Mike and Jill Paine donate 10 percent of their CSA shares to "food insecure families," low-income families who couldn't otherwise afford to receive the bounty we get from an Oregon harvest. Other shareholders can make a donation as well, but whether or not we do, Mike and Jill are committed to being sure some of their bounty goes to low-income families in our community. In some cities and towns in the United States, community food banks open to low-income citizens receive fresh produce donations from CSAs and other community gardens.

If low-income families are supported by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, they can use the assistance they receive at grocers that carry whole foods, organic, hormone- and antibiotic-free products, and fairly traded products and produce. The support will not go as far, so families will have to be more selective in their food choices, but it does give them some degree of freedom to select just food.

Food justice for those of us in the middle class is more a matter of *will* than of *means*. It's getting beyond an entrenched virtue of frugality that says we are *more* responsible as a shopper when we shop for bargains. We feel, as Barbara Kingsolver notes in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, a compulsion to economize on food. Yet this compulsion rarely spills over into other places in our lives. Kingsolver says,

The majority of Americans buy bottled drinking water, for example, even though water runs from the faucets at home for a fraction of the cost, and government quality standards are stricter for tap water than for bottled. At any income level, we can be relied upon for categorically unnecessary

purchases . . . name-brand clothing instead of plainer gear. “Economizing,” as applied to clothing, generally means looking for discount name brands instead of wearing last year’s clothes again. The dread of rearing unfashionable children is understandable. But as a priority, “makes me look cool” has passed up “keeps arteries functional” and left the kids huffing and puffing (fashionably) in the dust.

Spending more on food for the health of our children motivates a lot of us. Spending more on food for the health and well-being of others could motivate us as well, reflecting our Christian call for compassion and justice. Instead of thinking that paying ninety-nine cents a pound for fairly traded bananas, or three to four dollars for a dozen eggs from hens free to scratch in a barnyard and hunt for bugs and sunshine, is a scandalous extravagance, we could begin to think it scandalous *not* to consider the well-being and lives of people and animals who provide us with food. We make multiple food choices every week; perhaps we would be more inclined to make “just” decisions over frugal ones if we saw it as a Christian value to do so.

Sometimes the middle class turns ethical eating into a class issue because we feel paralyzed by what we don’t know about food. The night the class that met at my home talked about food, students said they had neither money nor time to eat “organic,” which for them meant eating just about any whole food—a potato, for instance, or a green bean. Their only perceived option was to buy frozen pizza or boxed macaroni and cheese. I don’t fault them. They are a product of a brand of entrepreneurial agribusiness that promised to give us cheap food, and already prepared. They can hardly imagine anything different.

But the conversation is turning, and imaginative ideas about food offer pathways out of feeling stuck. George Fox University hosted “Food Meet 2010” and invited local farmers, food producers and

food activists to meet with interested folks in the community to talk about food, including how to make eating simply and locally affordable and practical for low-income families. We had standing-room only in the auditorium where we watched and discussed a few clips from the documentary *Food, Inc.*, and a high-energy bustle around the vendor tables suggested inspiring change is underway.

CONCLUSION

Except for a few staples, and the bushels of apples, pears and peaches that Grandpa would drive over to eastern Colorado to buy each fall, the food Grandma fed my mother and her siblings in the 1930s and 1940s mostly came from the family garden and the farm. Aunt Geri and Uncle Bill took over the farm eventually, and my cousin Bill and his wife, Sharon, farmed it after them. They hung on to it longer than many family farmers in their generation, yet sold it in 2001 to someone who bought up a number of farms in the area.

In two generations we arrived at a place where most people in the United States didn’t think much about locally produced food, and would have struggled to find it if they did. But family farms are making a comeback, and CSAs, urban gardens and community gardens are giving people opportunities to support local farmers and to be minifarmers themselves. Besides that inspiring change, small businesses have begun partnering with local farmers around the world, offering farmers in the Global South fair prices for coffee, cocoa, teas and tropical fruits.

In this global food economy how you eat impacts families in Uganda and Guatemala and farmers in Illinois and California. How you eat impacts land, water, bugs and birds. To walk gently means eating compassionately and justly—in ways that are sustainable for the land—and fostering the well-being of God’s people and creation.

RESOURCES

Where can I learn about U-Pick places near me?

- www.pickyourown.org/index.htm

This site has all kinds of information about finding farms near you, planting, harvesting, food storage tips. The site is a community effort as individuals keep the information updated for the site.

How can I learn more about farm subsidies?

- International Debate Education Association (IDEA) develops, organizes and promotes debate and debate-related activities in communities throughout the world. The following link offers a good pro/con summary of farm subsidies: www.idebate.org/debatebase/topic_details.php?topicID=613.

400 West 59th Street

New York, NY 10019

Where can I learn about the chocolate and coffee trades?

- The International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) is an advocacy organization dedicated to achieving just and humane treatment for workers worldwide. The ILRF follows a number of industries with labor abuses. See the link for a specific look at the cocoa trade: www.laborrights.org/stop-child-labor/cocoa-campaign.

2001 S. St. NW #420

Washington, D.C. 20009

Phone: (202) 347-4100

- Off, Carol. *Bitter Chocolate: Investigating the Dark Side of the World's Most Seductive Sweet*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2006. This book sounds an alarm about the cocoa industry and raises awareness.
- *UN Chronicle Online* is the magazine for the United Nations, covering issues being taken up by the UN. The following link is specific

to the coffee trade and its Millennium Development Goals ramifications: www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2007/webArticles/111407_coffee_trade.html.

DCI 900A, United Nations

New York, NY 10017

- The documentary *Black Gold* (prod. and dir. Marc Francis and Nick Francis, 78 min., Fulcrum Productions, 2007) is an exposé of the multibillion-dollar coffee industry and the fight for a fair price for farmers. See <www.blackgoldmovie.com> for more information.

How can I learn more about animal rights issues and legislation?

- For ongoing updates on legislation: http://sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=U.S._animal_rights_legislation.
- Not One Sparrow offers a Christian perspective on animal rights and animal care: <http://notonesparrow.com>.
- The Humane Society of the United States. Their extensive website offers background information on an assortment of animal-related issues plus updates on legislation and ways to act. The following link below is specific to farm animals: www.hsus.org/farm/.

2100 L Street, NW

Washington, D.C. 20037

Phone: (202) 452-1100

FURTHER READING AND
DOCUMENTARY SUGGESTIONS*Where can I go to find out about older food cultures and regional U.S. food cultures?*

- D'Aluisio, Faith, and Peter Menzel. *What the World Eats*. Berkeley, Calif.: Tricycle Press, 2008. A great exploration of the variety of

foods around the world through photo journalism, tables and charts. Great for any age.

- Klindienst, Patricia. *The Earth Knows My Name: Food, Culture, and Sustainability in the Gardens of Ethnic America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2007.
- For Indian food: www.food-india.com/.
- For African food: www.africaguide.com/cooking.htm.
- For U.S. food culture check out Linda Stradley's website What's Cooking America: www.whatscookingamerica.net.
- For an overview of the "New American Food Culture," read John Ikerd's article. Ikerd is Professor Emeritus of Agricultural Economics at the University of Missouri: www.kerrcenter.com/nwsltr/2005/spring2005/food_culture.htm.
- *Food, Inc.* (prod. and dir. Robert Kenner and Eric Schollosser, 93 min., Magnolia Pictures, 2009). Filmmaker Robert Kenner pulls back the curtain that keeps our food industry largely invisible and shows viewers what they need to see to be more informed food consumers.
- *King Corn* (dir. Aaron Wolf, 88 min., Mosaic Films, 2007). Director Aaron Wolf follows two college friends on an eleven-month journey to track the story of corn—how it is grown and where it goes. Author Michael Pollan assists them along the way.