

MCC Globalization Consultation

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In the Gospels we read that Jesus told a certain parable with the punch line, “The first shall be last and the last shall be first.” As I was preparing for this presentation, noting that I was to be the last presenter, I had to think, “Well, Jesus, sometimes the last are just last.”

This seems appropriate, because compared with the other people we’ve heard in the last two days I’m not an expert on any of these issues -- globalization, economics, trade, farming, not even gardening. My training and experience is in journalism, and journalists generally don’t know much about anything in particular. My take is that at our best journalists seek to listen carefully to people who do have experience and expertise in various things, then attempt to explain what we’ve heard to people like ourselves who don’t know much either, and hope we don’t botch it up too badly. It has been my privilege to be with you as a listener.

I am here because I had a dream to help create a sequel to *More-with-Less Cookbook*. Published in 1976, *More-with-Less* was one of the first cookbooks that helped people see a connection between their food choices and the well-being of other people. The world has changed in the last 30 years, and so have the foods that we eat. I began to envision a book that would include some of those new dishes -- stir-fries, tempeh, Thai flavors -- as well as discuss contemporary food issues ranging from environmental issues to genetically modified foods, global trade, confined animal feeding operations, and so forth. It seemed important because of our growing disconnection with our food. Even people who care a great deal about peace and justice issues often do not seem to understand how those issues relate to the foods on their plates.

I brought the idea to MCC and teamed up with Mary Beth Lind of West Virginia, a nutritionist who with her husband Lester has spent the last 30 years raising most of the foods they eat. We put our heads together and pretty quickly determined that the core message of the new cookbook would be to encourage people to eat locally-produced, seasonal foods. We met many of you last year as we started to explore these ideas with MCC staff.

Simply in Season is the first MCC cookbook to be produced in the age of the Internet. With some outstanding technical support from MCC Akron a website was created this past spring and more than 1,500 recipes poured in for consideration in the book. In this one growing season they were tested by some 450 volunteer testers in North America and beyond, and Mary Beth and I are currently in the process of choosing the 300 to 350 recipes that will appear in the book. It is scheduled for release next summer.

The book will be divided into seasons, with recipes mixed with bits of information and stories on particular themes: All Seasons-overview, Spring-food and the environment, Summer-food and health, Fall-food and time, Winter-food and money. The idea is that we hope people who would not bother to read long informational essays will be preparing a recipe and while they’re sautéing the onions, say, their eye will stray to the bottom of the page and they’ll read something like this:

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A recipe for famine

Stroll through a supermarket produce department and you'll likely see labels from around the world. It isn't hard to imagine that buying these foods helps the people of those countries; exporting food must be good for their economies, right?

The sad reality is that when the best agricultural land is used to grow crops for export, local people may end up going hungry. Because of fluctuations in global markets and rules set in international trade agreements, export crops sell at widely varying prices and only a fraction of the profits trickles down from the corporations to the actual growers. Workers who once grew crops to feed their families may not be paid enough to buy the foods they need.

As a result we see countries like India, where an abundance of food is produced but millions of people are hungry because they are too poor to buy it. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, an estimated 80 percent of hungry children in the developing world live in countries that produce food surpluses.

As Anuradha Mittal, director of the Institute for Food and Development Policy, puts it in *Food & Faith*, "The minute you start eroding food self-sufficiency, it's a recipe for famine" (Earth Ministry, 2002).

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Or the person is waiting for the pasta water to come to a boil, and they read a quote like this from the National Farmers Union of Canada:

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Efficiency and the global bagel

"Would an efficient food system ship vegetables thousands of kilometers by ship, truck and plane when much of that food could be grown locally? Would an efficient system transport lamb meat from New Zealand to Toronto while it simultaneously bankrupts Ontario lamb farmers? A food system that ships wheat from Saskatoon to Montreal to make flour for bread and bagels and that makes bagels in Montreal and ships them back to Saskatoon: Could anyone call this system efficient? Wouldn't an efficient system just fax the Montreal recipe to Saskatoon and make the bagels there?" -- *National Farmers Union (Canada)*, in *"The Farm Crisis, Bigger Farms, and the Myths of 'Competition' and 'Efficiency'"* (2003).

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As you can see, these are very short bits of information. Because of the format we've chosen, we're very limited in how deep we can get into any one issue. I challenge any of you to explain the debate over GMOs in 350 words! But our hope is that this format will be a gentle way to introduce these issues to people for whom they are new.

One of the most inspiring things to me about working on this project has been hearing people's stories about their relationship to food, both from farmers and from consumers. I'd like to share a few stories from consumers with you.

This is one of the first that came in, unsolicited:

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Entitled to lettuce?

In stories of earlier times, we read of rare delights: the first greens after a long winter, the miracle of an orange. We can almost taste the pleasure of such moments – the exquisite experience of luxury.

Yet those pleasures are no longer ours. Oranges are nice but hardly an occasion to feel blessed. The idea of a winter without lettuce is unthinkable, and we'd probably turn up our noses at those dandelion leaves -- or whatever – that our forebears were so thrilled to eat.

Are we better off? In some ways I'm sure we are. Yet when abundance breeds assumptions of entitlement and an inability to appreciate, we are the losers.

I go to our little community garden in the midst of the city and pick the first few little strawberries and feel like the luckiest person in the world. Then my husband loads up on big fat transcontinental strawberries from the grocery store and my paltry handful loses its value. I'm at a loss. Do I want to impose scarcity on my family? Would it be possible if I tried? How can I help us to be thankful in the midst of so much?

We joined a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project, buying a share of the produce of a nearby farm. In July I was surprised when we stopped getting lettuce. They said it was too hot. I noticed my feeling of entitlement and how put off I felt by their inability to come up with it. What, exactly, makes me entitled to lettuce?

I think I would be happier if I didn't feel entitled to lettuce. I think my family would be happier if we didn't take California strawberries for granted.

When we move from appreciating something as a rare luxury, to taking it for granted as the norm, to feeling ill-used without it, there is more stuff but a steady loss of pleasure in it.

Overabundance leads to gluttony. It diminishes our ability to be thankful and dulls our palate for life. – *Pamela Haines, Philadelphia, Pa.*

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What was it we were saying yesterday that consumers want? Fast, processed, cheap food? Is this food that satisfies?

It's true that in the last few generations we have largely lost our connection to our food. I wonder if it's just been long enough that we're starting to realize how much we miss it.

This was another unsolicited contribution, from a fellow member of Generation X:

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Shortening the food chain

Sometimes I get tangled in the food chain.

I believe in slow food, eating locally and thinking globally and sustainable living. But I find myself occasionally in a drive-through line at a fast food chain, waiting for chicken provided by major food corporations or soda water sweetened with high fructose corn syrup and caramel coloring.

It's possible to eat intentionally and with little hypocrisy, but it's hard. The nice thing is that when we fall short, give into a craving or settle for convenience rather than true food, we get more chances. We'll need another meal soon and there are always opportunities to shorten the food chain.

When the food chain is short, the pleasure in a meal increases. When I chat with the farmer who raised the food or know the food's story, it's more enjoyable to partake.

I also garden to remind myself about what has to happen for food to get to the table. Without a garden, or at least a pot with a stalk of basil or rosemary in it, I can take for granted the meals I'm eating. I can forget that somewhere, someone had to raise the food I'm eating.

Gardening is a holy, creative blend of taking control and having to relinquish it. After planting, aside from some weeding and wondering what those bugs are, I mostly have to pray and laugh and hope. I'm not a good enough gardener yet to do much more.

When the worm compost sends forth volunteers that result in 72 butternut squash in the first year, I laugh. When the 30 or so strawberry plants turn into a patch bearing 10 quarts in their first true season, I'm even happier.

A garden gives me a chance not to trip over the food chain, but to skip with delight in it. The four Brussels sprout plants that went in the ground this spring have produced golf-ball sized miniature cabbages, delightful when eaten a half hour after picking. That's when the food chain is almost short enough to jump rope with. -- *Marshall V. King, Elkhart, Ind.*

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We'll have to put that one with a recipe for Brussels sprouts. Here's another story from a different point on the economic spectrum:

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The wealthiest man in inner-city Baltimore

As Gloria Luster worked in the neighborhood garden, Gardens of Hope in inner-city Baltimore, she was frequently visited by an alcoholic man known as Mr. Robert.

"Miss Gloria, I want a little piece of land. I know how to grow things," he'd pester her. Finally she gave in.

"I'm going to get you that land," she told him. "But if you let it grow up in weeds, you'll never come back."

That was over three years ago. And Mr. Robert has become one of the neighborhood's best gardeners. "He's taught others how to grow things," Luster says, "and he's almost stopped drinking. He takes a chair into that garden and just sits a lot of the time.

"This is the therapeutic portion of gardening. I have to explain to people, gardening is a very spiritual enterprise."

Mr. Robert now gardens two plots side by side, producing much more food than he could ever eat himself. "He grew such beautiful okra, and since many of the people in that area have southern roots he was giving it away as fast as he could cut it," Luster says. "He doesn't have any money but what he has, he's been giving. It's what I tell people: it doesn't always take money. Give of yourself, give of your time, your knowledge, and then your life becomes richer."

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These are stories more of "localization" than "globalization," I suppose, but like I said at the outset, I don't know much about globalization. I don't know how to help the world's poor.

There is only one thing that I can claim to be an expert in at this gathering: I am an expert eater. I have 35 years of experience in eating and I practice it at least three times per day.

When I eat, I am interested in the stories behind the foods I choose. I like the stories I've heard about local foods and fairly traded foods. I am not so sure about many of the stories I've heard about globalization and its impact on "the least of these."

I am not anywhere near to being a purist on these issues. On the way to the airport to come to this gathering I stopped at Arby's because I had not taken the time to plan ahead for a missed meal. The sandwich I bought tasted good and filled me up and I was grateful for it. But I was not satisfied by what little I know of that sandwich's story. Eating it was not at all like the pleasure I get from eating the beef from what we call our "happy cow," a pasture-raised animal from a local farm, that Dave and I and three other families purchased together this fall. My fast food sandwich didn't compare to the satisfaction I get from the vegetables grown at Gathering Together organic farm a couple miles from my home or the incredible bratwursts from Jodine and Dan Wood that I get at the farmers' market. That is food that satisfies me, body and soul. The difference between the two is as vast as the taste difference between a homegrown tomato and one that's picked green and ripened with ethylene gas.

I have to wonder if our attitude that food is just body-fuel is part of our dualistic worldview. When we eat, we're taking a substance into our bodies that literally becomes part of us, part of that mysterious combination of physical matter and spirit. It shouldn't be a surprise to think that food can nourish both body and soul.

Our world today is rife with evil and hopelessness, and in that world I am looking for ways that I can be part of good things, ways in which I can participate in stories of hope. Heaven knows I don't want to be a farmer; I wouldn't be a very good one. But when I hear stories like Eileen Klassen Hamm's about the good life that farming can be, I want some of that. And in my daily food choices, I can, in fact, be part of those hopeful stories.

So by advocating for local, seasonal food, is *Simply in Season* limiting itself only to the elect few with the "radical Christian vision" Dr. Rempel spoke of, not available to the average consumer?

I believe we live in a culture where people, average people, are hungry for meaning. We consume a lot of empty calories, literally and figuratively, and spend much time and money chasing the wind. I think there's desire for more meaning in our lives.

Writers are told to think about a particular person or audience as they work, and I've heard that when putting together *More-with-Less* Doris Janzen Longacre wrote to "the average North American Mennonite housewife who wants to do the right thing." I think that same general audience -- the average person of faith who wants to do the right thing -- is still out there, listening.

And what a message we have -- to choose deliciously good food! It's hardly a painful prescription! We can participate at any level: maybe I'll choose good foods today and not so good ones tomorrow, but every time I choose products that are good for my local and global neighbors as well as my own and environmental health, I benefit.

Participating in these good stories is not hard to do. Yes, it may cost a little more, but it's really not that expensive for many of us. The majority of North Americans have enough money that we are privileged with choice. God bless those without choices and give the rest of us wisdom and courage to work for a better world. But among those of us privileged with choice, I wonder if many are like me: a little suspicious of things that are free. If something is valuable, I accept that it comes with a cost. And the more I learn about these food issues, the clearer it becomes to me that the benefits of choosing good food are worth the extra money.

I grew up Mennonite and know as much as anyone how deeply we're ingrained with the frugality ethic. My husband Dave and I have a mantra that we chant sometimes: "Cheaper is not always better. Cheaper is not always better." Sometimes when I'm making a shopping decision I've found it helpful to ask myself, "Can I be bought for the savings of 39 cents per pound" or whatever.

But like many of you and many other people out there, I am increasingly finding joy in a new kind of more-with-less: Foods that offer a little more connection, and maybe a little less exploitation. More concern for all of God's creation, and a little less ecological harm. More stable rural communities, and less consolidation of wealth and power. More health for everyone. More gratitude. More joy.

I'd like to close with a last, very simple story from here in Kansas:

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The sweetness of sidewalk strawberries

We live in a small midwestern city and have chosen to live in the older downtown for the benefits of being in walking distance to almost everything, even though this gives us a smaller yard to use for gardening. But I feel that makes it even more important to do things like convert our 8 x 25-foot strip of lawn between the street and sidewalk into a strawberry bed.

City folks so easily lose touch with the earth and the seasons. Our children understand where "real" food comes from and the vital importance of aiding the life cycle of plants, being good stewards by not wasting anything. It's hard to believe that my spouse, as a forester, receives calls from people looking for some kind of spray to prevent the trees from producing seedpods since they're such a nuisance when they fall!

In my small way I can help my fellow city dwellers feel connected to God's creation by sharing a fresh strawberry that I've just picked as they were parking their car to go to work down the street.
-- *Melissa Atchison, Manhattan, Kan.*

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Imagine a person who has only tasted the kind of strawberries shipped into stores in the middle of winter. My hope is that *Simply in Season* will be a little bit like holding out to such people -- and others disconnected from their food -- a fresh, just-picked strawberry, juicy and warm from the sun. Local, seasonal food is just that good, for so many reasons. Here's a taste. There's much more where that came from.