

Local 101. Saturday, March 13th, 2010. Politics, Economics and Local Food Systems

Good afternoon. I would like to begin today with a line from the great German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe,

“Erst in der Beschraenkung, zeigt sich der Meister.”

“It is only within limitation that a master reveals himself as such.”

Thank you for taking time from your busy lives to assemble here today to learn more about that which is the very foundation of our civilization, which is all too often cheapened, adulterated, contaminated and taken for granted, food. Food is not only that which fuels us but also that which provides the building blocks of life from which we are initially assembled and constantly renewed and, as such, its importance is obvious to any human with even the slightest awareness. As Vandana Shiva has said, **there is no such thing as a post-food society.**

I am here today to impart to you, my fellow citizens, some insight into the bigger picture of local food and local food systems, that you might leave here today a little wiser and much more motivated to do what you can to ensure that we, collectively, pursue a path of progress in regards to food which will respect and serve both this beautiful earth, which gave rise to us, and ourselves well, now and in the future.

Specifically, I wish to give you a deeper understanding of what local food is, to outline briefly the evolving economic paradigm which has resulted in a decidedly non-local approach being applied to our food systems and, finally, to offer my thoughts on how we can and, I would argue, must engage as citizens in our communities and in the democratic process if we wish to create a new economic paradigm which will result in the revitalization of a sustainable and vibrant local food system.

If we are all to be committed to this goal of creating a vibrant, local food system, we had better have an acceptable definition for local food which might guide our thought processes and our deliberate actions. So what exactly is local food? The definition which guides my own involvement in the local food system, both as a farmer and an activist, is the following: local food is the food on your plate which was produced using local resources, both in space and time, and does not negatively affect either future generations or the delicately balanced life support systems which maintain all life on earth.

Let me try to explain what exactly this means, beginning with locality of space, which is often far more complicated than it would seem on the surface. It is overly simplistic to believe that local food is local purely as a function of geography. To begin with, even though a particular product may come from a farm less than 20 kms. distant, there is the question of where the inputs used to make the product come from. Is an apparently local egg still local if the corn and soy, which makes up the largest portion of most chickens’

diets, comes from several thousand kms. away? I think it is clear that an agricultural product cannot honestly be called local unless the resources used in its production are also mostly equally local. As well, I believe ardently that to define local food exclusively in terms of geography almost completely ignores the issue of sustainability and, as such, does justice neither to our biosphere nor to future generations. Civilizations of the past, having collapsed due to their failure to create sustainable agricultural production systems, probably found little comfort in the fact that they were at least local.

In addition to recognizing this importance of locality of space, i.e. geography and the human culture which inhabits it, a full and genuine understanding of local food is also contingent upon recognizing locality of time as it relates to food production. It is in our ability to create local food systems which reflect locality of time and space that sustainability can be achieved. Ideally, what this means is that local food is produced using resources which are available to us here and now; sunlight, soil, water, the biological systems which support all of life on earth, our domesticated livestock, our diverse supply of domesticated plants, our 10000 plus years of experience as agriculturalists and our own ingenuity, energy and capacity to reason, with little or no inputs drawn from our finite and extremely valuable ancient reserves of fossil fuels.

As an aside here, I would like to point out that our industrial agricultural production systems currently use 9 or 10 calories of energy, mostly finite fossil fuels, to create one single calorie of food energy. Is this efficient? Is it sustainable? Consider as well that 150 years ago, when almost all of our food was local, in both time and space, and 100 % of it was organic, we got two calories of food energy from every calorie of human and animal energy invested in production.

Food systems which fully recognize the importance of locality of time and space do not generate wastes in the form of concentrated amounts of animal feces and urine which can contaminate surface and ground water far and wide, wastes which are often carrying pharmaceuticals, hormones and pathogens such as E. coli and have a direct impact on human health, nor do they result in fertilizer, pesticide, herbicide and fungicide run-off and thus contamination of the entire ecosystem, the damaging consequences of which, due to bioaccumulation up the food-chain, affect us more than almost any other life form.

To those who say that our regulatory authorities have permitted the use of such substances, ergo it must be safe to use the 4 billion plus pounds which are released into our environment each year, I say this: most of these dangerous substances have never been subjected to long-term studies funded by impartial scientists, instead, our governments accept the data from tests conducted by the manufacturers themselves in deciding whether to approve their product. This was the case with DDT, agent orange, Diieldren, PCBs and countless other substances which have since been proven to be too dangerous to use and the regulatory approval process has not changed significantly in 50 years.

Farms which do strive for locality in time and space focus on growing nutrient dense food, maintaining natural soil fertility, maintaining plant and animal diversity, finding an

appropriate rate of return in terms of energy invested and food energy produced and avoid any practices which will result in costs being born by the ecosphere and by future generations of humans. Let me give you two contradictory examples which will illustrate what role locality of time does or does not play in local food production.

The first example is of your typical, conventional, industrial farm, like most of the farms which surround our own out near Carstairs. They grow grain and hay to feed to their cattle, which might eventually become the steak on a local consumer's plate, or canola, which might end up as oil on the shelf in your kitchen. To begin with, farms such as these are almost entirely dependent on large, industrial machinery to produce their commodities. The manufacturing of these machines is itself dependent on the use of huge amounts of fossil fuels to mine the raw materials, smelt them into usable metals, form the metals into parts and finally, put it all together into a functioning tractor, swather or combine. On top of this, their production inputs are almost all derived from fossil fuels; diesel provides the power to operate the heavy machinery, oil provides the lubricants, the synthetic fertilizer which stands in for fertile soil is mostly derived from natural gas and the herbicides, pesticides and fungicides are all derived from natural gas. Before a crop has even been harvested on such a farm, large amounts of ancient, stored energy, non-renewable fossil fuels, have been consumed.

Now let us turn our attention to the non-local effects of such farming methods. The fuel burned by the machinery creates, amongst other emissions, greenhouse gases, which cumulatively have the potential to irrevocably alter the climate, thus endangering the ability of future generations to engage successfully in agriculture. A significant percentage of the synthetic fertilizers applied to the land do not stay on the land, but rather, they go into solution and become agricultural run-off, contributing to degradation of the integrity of our watersheds and our oceans. There is clear evidence linking the large oceanic dead zones, zones where complex life forms can no longer exist due to anoxia, or absence of oxygen, with the synthetic fertilizer run-off from industrial agriculture. Similarly, the herbicides and pesticides, whether organo-phosphates or chlorinated hydrocarbons, do not all stay on the land. There is drift of these substances in the slightest breeze and ultimately, most of them enter our watersheds and become persistent organic pollutants. Considering that most of them are known carcinogens (cancer causing) and/or mutagens (chromosome disruptors) and that many of them can persist in the environment for unspecified periods of time, effecting both human health and the health of countless other organisms far and wide, we can hardly consider their effects to be limited in a local sense, either in space or time.

I believe it is fairly clear that an agricultural operation such as the one in this example is not able to limit itself to using local resources in either space or time, nor is it able to avoid consequences which will be a burdensome cost for the entire biosphere and for future generations of humans. The point that its products might end up being used by local consumers becomes moot when we consider the far-reaching consequences of the practices of such operations.

Our second example here is one near and dear to me and I am convinced, as hard as this may be to believe in the contemporary industrial context, that it represents the future of agriculture in addition to being the past. Thompson Small Farm is run by two friends of ours, Andrea Thompson and Johnathon Wright, and except for the relatively small amount of fossil fuel used to deliver their products into the Calgary marketplace by means of a CSA, or community supported agriculture project, they use no fossil fuels or fossil fuel derived inputs whatsoever in producing local food.

This is an operation which has less than 10 acres of cultivated land devoted to herb and vegetable production and all of the field work is carried out by a team of four horses and by human hands. Other than seed, there are no external inputs invested in the production of their food. This is as close as one can get in the present moment to being truly local in both space and time. Their practices maintain soil fertility by means of manure and compost amendments and do not result in any costs, whether environmental, health or social, being passed on to other forms of life either in the present or in the future.

Our farm, Blue Mountain, operates in this same way, but with 110 acres of cultivated land and no draught horses, we are still dependent on fossil fuels to provide the power for cultivating the land and harvesting our forage and field crops. But, if it is in a real sense more efficient to grow food using human and animal power and it is only the distortion of a highly flawed market which allows industrial food, whether local or not, to evade its true costs when it comes to pricing and if it is also true that the non-renewable energy, which makes industrial, non-local agriculture possible, will, as supply and demand dictates, inevitably become increasingly expensive, to say nothing of the costly aftereffects of relying on it to produce most of our food, then I think that we all know where this is heading.

There are those who say that the future of agriculture is in nano-technology and genetic engineering, but I assure you that in the future we will be investing in some kind of draught animals and the equipment designed to be used with them.

What I have attempted to give you here is a full understanding of the factors which should be considered when we are speaking of local food, that we collectively might set goals and make policy which will take us down the path of genuine progress, and that you might yourself make very informed decisions which will directly result in a better, more sustainable food system, local in both space and time. My words are not a prescription for what I believe must happen tomorrow. I am neither foolish nor naïve enough to believe that reviving sustainable, local food systems will not be a life's work. Fortunately, we have at our disposal, should we bravely choose to employ it in an intelligent and mature fashion, that very cultural agent which has resulted in our food systems being so incredibly non-local and unsustainable. That agent is the free market.

I would like to begin this portion of my presentation by reminding everyone that markets, in the abstract sense of the word, i.e. the free market, the capital market, or market forces, are an invention of human culture. They were not foisted on us by some divine power in the way that medieval European nobility forced its subjects to accept its

exploitative and often harsh rule. Rather, they were initially established and regulated by so-called civilized states in the modern era, and have evolved over time as economic policy has changed in that area of the world which first championed abstract markets and most benefited from them, the so-called western world. Knowing this to be the case, we must always remember that as long as we live in democratic states, we have the power to bring about changes in the economic policies which are to be implemented by our elected governments. We will return to the role of democracy in building sustainable local food systems later. For now let us focus on the role which economic policy, manifesting itself as the free market and embodied in corporations, has played in destroying them.

For those of you with a grounding in economic theory, the concept of externalities will not be a new one. For the rest of you, suffice it to say that externalities are the costs which are associated with the production of any item which do NOT need to be calculated into the sticker price which will confront consumers in the marketplace.

Take, for example, the chemical industry. For years, this industry was, and to some extent, still is, allowed to dump its toxic wastes into our watersheds, and the costs which arose as a result of that dumping, real costs to human health and to the broader environment, simply did not have to be included in the price of their products. Who does bear the burden of these real costs, then? The public does, in terms of increased health expenditures and decreased quality of life, now and in the future, and the ecosphere does, in terms of degraded habitat and loss of bio-diversity, now and in the future. In other words, we all pay for it, now and in the future, while the private capital which multiplied itself several times over moves on and turns to the next most profitable undertaking it encounters.

Corporations, with the power of large pools of capital behind them and no social conscience to temper their behaviour in pursuit of return on investment, have become not only expert at investing to achieve efficiency by virtue of scale but have also become expert at externalizing as many of their costs as possible. It is for this reason that so much capital has, in the last two decades of so-called globalization, been invested in areas of the world with relatively lax labour laws and low environmental standards. Corporations are able to externalize more of their costs in these regions than in the western world, thus realizing greater returns on investment than they could in the very nations where they came into being.

In essence, our governments have, for at least the past thirty years, pursued economic policies which favoured the interests of capital over all other interests, including the public interest, and capital, using the corporation as its vehicle, has sought profits in apparent economies of scale and by externalizing costs as ruthlessly as possible, practices which could not help but be applied to agriculture and agribusiness.

In the context of food, what this means is that agricultural operations which were extremely good at being local in time and space, were gradually made less competitive as large-scale, capital intensive agricultural operations gained the ability to produce cheaper, non-local food by externalizing many of the real costs. The net result of this has been the

production of cheaper food, but this cheapness is artificial, as the costs which are externalized in industrial, non-local food systems are being born in the present time by the biosphere and by the public, in terms of negative health outcomes, the displacement of farmers, the dying out of vibrant rural communities, the loss of high quality food and loss of natural soil fertility. These externalized costs will continue to be a burden on future generations and on the biosphere for some time to come, even if we begin now to move towards models of production which strive to be local in both space and time.

The question is, then, is the current model of industrial agricultural production, which externalizes real costs to the commons in the present and in the future and achieves no degree of sustainability whatsoever, acceptable? I have a nine year old son, and for those of you with children and those who wish to have children, I think the answer is obvious. When it comes to matters of food and the production models which will serve us best in the future, the industrial, non-local model is a failure.

The conclusion which I and many other progressive thinkers draw from all of this is that we need to change the economic policies which have allowed capital, corporations and industrial farms to engage in practices which result in artificially cheap products, be they food or other consumer products, through the externalization of costs. If the same powerful and creative market forces, capital and corporations, were no longer allowed to externalize costs but were required to adopt true cost accounting principles, these market forces could create what Paul Hawken, the author of the *Ecology of Commerce*, calls the Restorative Economy. This would be an economy which does not reward waste, over-exploitation of resources, whether renewable or non-renewable, social displacement and economic insecurity, degradation of the atmospheric and ecological commons, actions which negatively effect human health and the passing on of costs to future generations. Knowing that the free market is a manifestation of economic, and thus, public policy, we also know that these policies can be changed. It is in engaging as enlightened citizens in our communities and in the democratic process that these changes can be realized, for the good of all, now, and in the future.

It is ironic that a certain attitude of economic determinism has come to be entrenched in our democratic nations. Many people, especially the ideological adherents of the theory of the free market, act as if the free market is a gift from God, something akin to the ten commandments which Moses brought down from the mountain, and, as such, these so-called free market principles are not up for debate. However, this becomes much more understandable when we recognize that the staunchest defenders of our present economic paradigm are those who have personally benefited the most from them. This is, in the end, a very small number of people, as is demonstrated by the ever growing gap in income disparity, as the very rich get richer, the middle class continues to shrink and the poor grow poorer and become more numerous.

There is, to my knowledge, no peer-reviewed academic paper published anywhere, which demonstrates that our current economic paradigm of globalized corporations and capital is resulting in development which is sustainable. At the same time, there are thousands of academic papers published each year which show evidence of the decline of all the

systems at work on earth which are necessary to support life. From the oceans to the icecaps, from coastal fisheries to tropical forests, they are all in decline as the result of human economic activity exerting pressure everywhere on the planet. It will not be enough to try to change this unsustainable system through our purchasing decisions. What is required of us is that we act as citizens, not as consumers, and that we take seriously our rights and responsibilities to engage in the democratic process.

Democracies work best when they involve an educated populace which is aware and educated. If citizens are going to engage in the democratic process then they should have at their disposal full knowledge of the factors which should be considered when it comes time to cast a ballot. It is here that we have a real weakness in our own society, as many of our fellow citizens simply are not aware of the most important challenges which we are currently facing.

There is a role for all of us, in our homes and in our communities, to engage our fellow citizens in order to spread awareness of the most important issues of the day. It is not required of us that we preach, or get angry and shout, or be self-righteous. We simply need to find the strength and courage to ask questions. Awareness begins with the asking of questions and the search for more and better information, and it leads, in the end, not only to more questions, but also to considered decisions imbued with wisdom and policies which will serve the public interest.

To me, public interest includes the best interests of the biosphere. Because our system of education, our political institutions and our media have failed to do so, we must engage our fellow citizens if we are to have any hope of using our democratic institutions to effect real change. If we really want a vibrant, sustainable, local food system, then we must take seriously our right to be involved in the democratic process and our responsibility to ensure that our fellow citizens, who are not yet aware of the issues surrounding local food, become educated enough to help us with our cause.

For those of you who are already engaged in the democratic process, and by this I mean more than just going out to vote, the issues I have addressed here today need also to be raised within our traditional political institutions. If you are a member of a political party, regardless of the political stripe, you need to raise these questions within the context of policy meetings and policy discussions. If you find that your questions are not dealt with seriously, then you need to participate in the creation of new political organs which will deal with these questions seriously.

It is a serious flaw in Canada's democracy that we do not have an electoral system which accurately reflects popular will in our legislative chambers. This is another issue which we must address if we wish to effect real change, whether in regards to huge issues such as economic policy or smaller issues such as public transportation. Our politicians often talk the talk when it comes to democratic renewal, but as of yet, no single traditional political party has made a serious commitment to altering our electoral system. Therefore, it is left up to us to move this agenda forward, so that public interest, as represented

today, in the context of this event, by the need to rejuvenate sustainable, local food systems, might yet trump individual and political self-interest.

Ladies and gentlemen, as you can see, when we speak of local food and local food systems, considered in the light of locality of time and space, we are forced to address systemic issues within our civilization, which in the minds of some have the status of sacred cows. We face myriad and highly complex problems that need to be addressed in order to secure a brighter future for generations of humans yet unborn, to say nothing of the living earth which nourishes and sustains us.

It was food and our historical development as agriculturalists, which initially gave rise to complex societies, which we now define as civilization, and I believe that we have a duty to return food and agriculture to a position of appropriate reverence and primacy in order that our civilization might have a solid and sustainable foundation going into the future. We might just find that in doing so, we will be dealing with so many of the other great challenges which now confront us, from obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure to cancer and congenital birth defects. In doing so, we might just find that we here, living on this great plain we call the prairies, will finally be able to develop a unique food culture which does justice to the soil beneath our feet and reflects this beautiful place we inhabit back to us. In so doing, we might just find ourselves on a path of genuine progress which will bring us real quality of life.

The time has now come to stop pretending that profit must take precedence over people and the planet. Let us honour ourselves and our earth and take seriously our role here on this planet, let us, to put it simply, grow up. For all of us, there should be no higher cause on this plane of existence than to actively promote sustainability and the future of humanity, which is inextricably tied to the integrity of the biosphere. I wish you courage and good spirits and joy in this. Do not be afraid to ask the difficult questions. Our children and generations hence will be grateful to you for having done so.

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