

COMMON SENSE FOR GLOBAL CRISES • A PAMPHLET SERIES

Local Food, More Hope

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There are some days when I find myself up against so many different, evil, inhumane, human-built structures that I want to give up. I am not alone, I know. Many people find themselves living with and facing wrong ideas and actions, such as an industrialized chemical system that sells poor quality but cheap food, that have long been habits. But their longevity does not ensure correctness.

So it is with our own well-being and that of our soils and waterways. The consequences of some of our wrong ideas and habits are clear: ill-health, obesity, anxiety, rivers running brown with soil that should be nurturing terrestrial life, soils depleted of nutrients, and the Earth depleted of topsoil.

Our growth, vitality, and longevity are directly tied to the vitality of our soils and waters, for we are made of food and drink, and we must eat and drink to live. If we are fortunate, we eat often—multiple times a day. And a meal can be the high point of our day, a gathering, or a holiday.

Yet, how often—whether by necessity or habit—do we cede our answer to hunger’s call to the large-scale industrial-food complex (which impacts us in deeply uneven and unjust ways), ignoring the profound need to nurture our healthy bodies, our soil, water, and community? Even when we try to buy organic or local food, we are likely to learn on closer examination that we are contributing to practices we do not value.

This industrial complex has many first and last names, and many beating and loving hearts: farmers who want to care as much for their soils and waters as for their children find themselves caught by decades of consolidation and decades of legislation and government support that prop up a system favoring quantity and efficiency over longevity and health. As consumers, how can we help farmers exit from this system so they may nurture themselves and the Earth and send signals to lawmakers

and their corporate colleagues about the kind of food, water, and healthy communities we all want?

Farmers everywhere try to be better stewards of the land, and many of us try to support their efforts with our purchases and social activism. While some changes occur here and there, the larger systems are entrenched. They are fed by massive five-year farm bills; seed, machinery, and banking institutions; and economic inequalities that limit food choices. And, just as important, our connection to where we live, how it can sustain us and provide a sense of belonging and purpose has waned, if not disappeared. The same is true of our health, which has waned as well—glowing skin, good digestion, and robust energy are rare traits these days.

Food Interdependence Is Common Sense

In the early '70s—the 1770s—American colonists, subjects of the British Crown, debated what to do about similar large-scale systems that they found oppressive, unjust, and debilitating. There were two camps: reconciliation and compromise with Britain, and full independence from the Mother Country. Most colonists favored reconciliation, and even those who supported independence could hardly imagine how it would come about.

In January of 1776, Thomas Paine published his famous pamphlet *Common Sense*. That simple title said it all. What were the colonists waiting for? It was past time for reconciliation. Only independence and a new start would work. But Paine understood the hesitancy, and his words still resonate today when we think of our food system and how we might declare our independence from it:

“These proceedings may at first appear strange and difficult; but, like all other steps which we have already passed over, will in a little time become familiar and agreeable; and, until an independence is declared, the continent will feel itself like a person who continues putting off some unpleasant business from day to day, yet knows it must be done, hates to set about it, wishes it over, and is continually haunted with the thoughts of its necessity.”

In the revolutionary spirit of Paine, let us proclaim that the time has come to declare independence from a global agricultural system that robs us of our food sovereignty and treats consumers and farmers as mere colonial subjects. It treats the living Earth as an inexhaustible resource rather than the exquisite complex of life that has slowly accumulated over millennia. And it relegates human bodies to make do with whatever fossil-fuel farming can produce most cheaply.

Independence will come when we throw our whole effort into local-food networks. These networks are diverse, flexible, and life affirming. They put us in touch with people who know how to grow food and to provide for themselves. They allow us to develop a sense of place—our place, with its temperamental seasonality, whether too much rain or not enough, or winds that snap trees or farmers’ market tents. Local food networks allow us to see our community members coming together to help each other and find workarounds. They remind us that there are a lot of people out there who care very deeply about the future of our planet, who are willing to risk themselves physically, emotionally, and financially in order to heal it. They are willing to work hard to ensure that soil fertility is replenished and to ensure cleaner water and healthier food. Local-food networks provide life-giving sustenance that comes from rich, nutrient-dense soil, reducing the need for nutritional supplements, medical care, and health insurance.

Local-food networks embrace myriad activities and people. For example, they can include gleaning and foraging, which require deep awareness of abandoned orchards and publicly accessible nut and fruit trees, mushrooms, and wild edibles. Home gardeners and farmers who live close by are part of the network, too. They might grow dozens of crops or just a few. They might use what they grow at home or sell some in local markets. Farm market managers who help to organize weekly markets for local producers and artisans are also in the network, as are chefs, families, and restaurant goers who choose to select in-season, local produce and products. There are many others.

Relying on others for our food is a long-standing habit, several generations old now. Our lives have taken on a shape and rhythm that permits little but consumption. So, of course, taking the time and effort to grow, procure, and prepare our own food can seem overwhelming. But the good news is, a local-food network does not require everyone to do all the

work; it does require everyone to do some small part. After a short amount of time, however, that small part will likely feel indispensable to a healthy, flourishing lifestyle. It will require many hands, and the labor will become loving and lighthearted in time, while producing a bounty beyond calories.

Digging (pun intended) into a local food organization and becoming a part of it is essential to our collective future. When you combine learning a subsistence skill with a rootedness in place and when you realize that a lot of people around you care about the foundation of our lives, it is almost impossible to stay in despair for too long. You know that there is work to do, that you know how to do some of it, and that there are others to do it with, where you live. You know that you are healthier as a result.

Local-Food Networks Are Common Sense

The advantages of a local-food network are anchored largely in the non-economic realm (at least as modern economics is conceived) and so require more elaboration than a simple computation.

A community can be nurtured by the audacity of a few and the hunger of many. Take Moriah Pie in Norwood, Ohio. For seven years, it was a pay-as-you-can pizza parlor in a deindustrialized neighborhood that had suffered from job and tax loss for decades. Members of the small community ran the enterprise, farming on local land—both city park land and neighbors' properties. They also harvested fruit from neglected trees in the neighborhood. One woman made the dough for the pizza every week. Others helped to turn the locally grown vegetables into sauce, soups, salads, and pizza toppings. And still others pitched in on Friday evenings to serve the community that came there to eat. Children came for a warm, nutritious meal; families came to eat out when they could not afford it elsewhere; and others paid far more for their meal to ensure that those without as much could dine there.

Moriah Pie was a spiritual practice and a practical one. Spiritual because it required faith in the weather, the soil, one's body, and one's community. Practical because community partners had access to small pieces of land on which something could grow. They grew food in their yards and in their neighbors' yards. They acquired land in the city park and developed garden beds and started tending tomatoes and other vegetables. They also located abandoned fruit trees, mostly pear and apple, but also naturally occurring

pawpaw and mulberry, to harvest fruit. In this way, their livelihood was interdependent with the community that frequented Moriah Pie every week. It was an act of trust, of faith, much like agriculture.

The sense of community that developed was very strong. Inside, the atmosphere was casual, and many of the patrons knew others who were dining there as well. It was common to see someone squatting beside a table sharing conversation or a chair pulled up to a table to accommodate one more person. Some stayed for three or four hours, as others rotated in and out.

Crucially, there was a palpable sense that these efforts were far greater than any one person. Foundations were being built for everyone's collective future. They were building soil, building community, building their souls and faith. They were rebuilding their health and reminding one another other what is possible when guided by courage and vision, rather than by profit.

You, Too, Can Be A Farmer

Anyone can be a farmer! Some Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives allow you to be a farmer for an hour or two a week. You work whether it is seventy degrees or ninety degrees, whether the humidity is low or high. You learn that some years tomatoes do very well and others they do not; some years there is a bumper crop of corn, other years hardly any.

You also learn about where you live in a practical, hands-on way: some crops can be put in the ground while it is still quite cold (such as peas and radishes), others can only be put in after the soil has warmed up considerably (green beans), and still others go in long after summer has arrived, such as pumpkins or squash. And then there are the discoveries: for example, farms generally have few mosquitoes because there are enough other creatures to eat them, which keeps the population in check.

A local-food network reminds us that the labor of community members is essential to our well-being and getting tasks done. This is an incredibly important aspect of many experiences in the local-food network. Instead of the work being divided into small parts and each person only doing his or her small part, as often happens in a factory or large company, each person in a CSA does a small piece of the work, but certainly not the same small piece every day and certainly not without understanding what others are

doing and why. All those who work in the CSA must have the bigger picture in mind in order to make sense of the work they are responsible for that day (either on their own or with a small group), as well as the day before and the days to come.

One can see how the field that pastured chickens and cows last year is now full of life and vitality thanks to that animal waste. The beans and radishes sowed and harvested there, and hopefully eaten, will be of that health.

A farmer's market is an even more accessible local-food network because purpose and community are on display. Go and buy your food there; even better, volunteer there. The weekly markets need your labor: market stall spaces to be marked, streets to be closed off, signs to be placed at all entrances, no-parking signs pushed into the ground nearby, tents to be erected and weights attached to keep them from blowing away in the wind, tables and chairs set up underneath the tents, and the site for the acoustic musician to set up.

After all that labor, the magic happens. The vendors have a complex arrangement of barter-trade: eggs for scones, hamburger for kimchi, fresh peaches for homemade granola. The combinations are endless. And vendors give discounts to market volunteers. A small discount says, "we value and recognize the work that you do." As a farm market volunteer, one shares a commitment to labor outside, to buy food from a farmer whose name and story one knows—a commitment to build nourishing communities.

Think about where you live: Is there another medical clinic, or more than one, that was not there ten years ago? Likely, the answer is yes. The proliferation of so-called health-care institutions is in direct proportion to the depletion of our soils and their nutrients. Human bodies cannot be sustained on the food that comes out of dead soil: soils that must be amended annually to produce food, soils that are mostly there to hold the crops up, as one grass rancher in North Dakota phrased it. Locally grown food is usually produced on a smaller scale and with greater diversity, and it is usually grown by paying attention to the whole ecosystem, including the humans it supports.

Local-food networks are the only bonds that are able to restore health to humans and soils and water. Join one now.

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RESOURCES

Edible Communities, Eighty locally produced publications available.
www.ediblecommunities.com

Farm to Table Info: Discover Your Local Farms
www.farmtotable.info

Local Food Directories: Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) Directory
www.ams.usda.gov/local-food-directories/csas

Local Harvest: Real Food, Real Farmers, Real Community
www.localharvest.org

National Farmers Market Directory
www.nfmd.org

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