

Imagine a feast with your family or community. Everyone has participated in some way in creating this feast. There is conversation and laughter. Before you is a laden plate from which steam and amazing fragrances are rising. There is also a wonderful assortment of colours and textures to please your visual and oral palate. The taste of each mouthful explodes in your mouth and makes you pause with the sheer sensory pleasure of it all. You are feeding your body and soul, and even your community as you share this wonderful feast.

Food holds a critically important role in our life but in our culture we generally have little time for it, little awareness of the efforts and energy that have gone into the production of that source of nourishment, and little respect or gratitude to those who have harvested and made that food available to us. We have become dumbed down consumers and participants in perpetuating an industrial food system with disastrous repercussions. Many of these repercussions have been or will be elaborated upon by others at this conference but here is a partial list of what I perceive to be some of those disastrous repercussions:

- Pollution of our water, air and soils,
- Massive topsoil loss
- Desertification and loss of forests around the world in favour of marginal croplands
- Hunger, even in the face of bumper crops
- Loss of small family farms and the death of many rural communities
- The death of demoralized farmers through suicide – this happens around the world as farmers crumble under the weight of ongoing crises of income, exacerbated by increasing challenges from unpredictable weather
- Loss of biodiversity
- Genetic engineering of crops and livestock
- Mono-culture malnutrition and a host of related, utterly preventable diseases and conditions
- De-skilling of our populations – most of us have lost our ability to raise and process crops or livestock in addition to even knowing how to cook in our own kitchens.
- No democratic control of the food system almost anywhere in the world.

I would like to take a minute to expand on this last point. We live in this wonderful paradox of the large corporations that control the food system claiming that “the market” – as in, we the consumers – are actually in control. We, the marketplace, determine what is on our grocery store shelves – the size, the colour, availability, and shape. And that is true, but only to a very

limited degree. I remember reading a number of years ago, in a grocery industry publication, that this proverbial marketplace requires that cantaloupes be the equivalent of a B cup bra in size in order to be placed on produce shelves around the world. What a bra size has to do with the selection that a person makes based on what can be consumed in her or his household before the fruit is past its prime is beyond me.

The point I am trying to get at is that our choices and therefore supposed control of the marketplace is utterly limited by what is on offer. Because you can bet that that B cup bra size has been incorporated – undoubtedly in other language, into the requirements for international trade in cantaloupes. Those whose product is neither a C cup or an A cup win the commodity lottery and get to supply those cantaloupes to the grocery industry. We may be consumers with power in our purchasing habits, but it is mostly a passive power, if that is not too much of an oxymoron.

I could also elaborate on how companies like Cargill, which dominates world trade in grains, controls prices on every continent and in every market. But that is the subject of my friend Brewster Kneen's book and I encourage you to read it later. And it this lack of control over most of what we have access to in order to meet our food needs that wakes me up at night in a cold sweat.

Which is why I am struggling to find a concept that can move us beyond passively accepting the offerings of the transnational corporations that currently control the global food system, to proactive participants in creating a better, more just and sustainable version. And we are running out of time to undertake this undeniably mammoth task. But I believe that it is possible – mostly because I don't think we have any other option if we don't want to enter the endangered species list (though we might already be there by any reasonable criteria!).

So I am going to take a page out of Corky Evan's book and tell you a bit of a story to illustrate why I think it is possible.

I am the runt from a family of 13. Luckily I was not drowned at birth and was raised, along with my nine surviving siblings on a farm in the Okanagan. We raised all our own vegetables, fruit and most of our meat needs. And I had the luxury, through participating in a working farm, of being completely immersed in a healthy food culture. That food culture was based on some important principles:

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- We all worked, offering what was within our capacity to benefit the whole clan
- We worked in partnership with the cycle of the seasons, monitoring mother nature so that we knew when to plant the seeds, thin the apples, harvest the peas and get the cattle into the corrals.
- Water was an essential component of our farm, as was the soil
- Often things did not go as expected but by having such a numerous workforce we could adapt
- Our ability to adapt was also based on diverse crops and varieties and the fact that since we spent most of our time outside we were able to catch and respond to any ecological changes quickly.
- Our hard work – from hauling rocks and irrigation pipes to picking countless apples and processing the seemingly endless supply of harvested vegetables - paid off in the fruits of our labour: a wondrous, healthy, vibrant food supply all produced on the 8 acres surrounding our farmhouse

My experience of a food culture went beyond the farm boundaries since in the 1960's and 70's of my childhood, there still existed, locally, the elements of a food system that we need to rebuild here.

Our tree fruit went to the Vernon Fruit Union – a storage and marketing co-operative for local orchardists. Our cattle were killed humanely on farm by my father and then taken to a butcher 2 miles away to be cut and wrapped and brought back to the farm. We got eggs and chicken from my maternal grandparents and our milk was delivered to our home by the local dairy – the North Okanagan Creamery Association (NOCA). Our cheddar cheese was the best in the world, produced by a small, local company known as Armstrong Cheese, sourcing their milk from area cows.

When I was 18 I started working at Butcher Boys, the grocery and butcher store that cut and wrapped our farm beef for years. I worked in the meat department at a time when a large portion of the back end of grocery stores was still allocated to meat coolers so they could hang whole and half carcasses of various species. The butcher had the skill and the ability to cut exactly what the customer requested. And, that customer knew the difference between a chuck and a sirloin.

At the ripe old age of 46 I look back and mourn the passing of that food system and the critical knowledge shared and used by the community of people who participated in it. However, I am profoundly aware that everything I learned came from my parents and was only a portion of what they knew by necessity, for surviving the Great Depression.

Both my parents grew up on farms on the prairies in the dirty 30's; my father on a three-quarter section mixed livestock and grain farm in Saskatchewan; and my mother on a small subsistence farm in Manitoba. Both my parents survived childhoods of deprivation and hunger. Both their families had to abandon their respective farms – my father's from the economic disasters of the Great Depression, despite their amazing innovations in creating soil health on their farm; and my mother's from a genuine locust plague combined with the economic challenges of the Depression. I share their stories with you only to illustrate that enormous challenges to our food supply have existed and been overcome in our recent history – but not without loss and great sacrifice.

On the topic of the Great Depression, I am sure it will come as no surprise to anyone that the return to farmers for their hard work during that terrible period was abysmally low. What is more horrifying is that our current prairie farmers who produce commodity crops, are receiving a lower return than their counterparts in the Great Depression. According to the National Farmers Union, "a combination of government subsidies, increased debt loads (now exceeding \$52 billion), and off-farm income are the main factors that allow farming to continue despite sub-Depression level net incomes. Moreover, while the low incomes of the 1930s persisted for a decade, the current crisis is entering its 22nd year." (NFU Apr 2007)

It is genuine insanity that we have a food system that does not pay farmers even the cost of production, never mind a living – by which I mean the ability to pay their clothing and housing needs, to put some money away for an emergency or the inevitable teenage growth spurts of their children, to send their kids to college. I mean think of it, we consistently jeopardize our daily food supply by not adequately paying our most important industry – for lack of a better word – the one that ensures that we eat every day.

One could argue that low prices simply go hand in hand with commodity crops – in other words, the basic ingredients of many processed foodstuffs, from our daily bread's wheat to the high fructose corn syrup that can be found in almost any food product. However, low prices are also

the bane of small lot vegetable producers. Even if they only produce for their local marketplace, they are forced to join the billions of farmers world wide, struggling to make a living in the current global market. That market focuses almost exclusively on one characteristic, that of price. So our farmers here are in a constant price war with farmers in Chile, in China, in California. The farmers who win this war are those who accept the lowest possible price from the big corporations. Price wars may seem like a good thing for the consumer but, at best, it is only a shortsighted good. For price wars, like any war, are devastating for those involved and for their communities. So devastating, in fact, that between 1981 and 2001 we lost almost a quarter of all our farms in Canada (22%). During the same period, farmers in the global South who supply so much of our annual food supply here, were driven off the land, committing suicide, working as slave labour in massive monocultures, drinking ever-more polluted water, and losing their life-giving forests.

Part of my deep commitment to a local food system is based on an equally deep commitment to global justice. By not procuring our food from the global south, there is at least the possibility that the landless can be returned to their farms and grow food for their own communities rather than ours. By sourcing our food locally we reduce our food miles and the corresponding abuse of the limited supply of fossil fuels and increase in global warming. By knowing the hands that raised our food we can build communities of trust and respect. By having a reliable and locally available supply we foster our own food sovereignty where those of us who produce and consume the foods have the control over how it is done; we have the ability to ensure that those who produce the food receive a fair price for their goods; we can ensure that everyone in our communities is fed. Ultimately, having a locally controlled food system allows us to bring our values, be they economic, environmental, cultural or social, to that system.

So, how do we do it and what needs to be done?

There is no easy or quick solution – like all good things, especially those as complex as a diverse food system, it will take hard work, a long-term vision, and real commitment from us as individuals, as a community and ideally with the collaboration of our governments. This is not a job for the faint-hearted but ultimately I think it is a job that must be taken on by anyone who eats.

Over the past year or so there has been great interest in our province in food and its source. It is hard to imagine anyone who has not heard of the 100 mile diet. There have been eat local food challenges in all corners of British Columbia – generally held at the height of the local harvest season to encourage participation. Having been involved in the effort to foster local production for going on 15 years now, I can't help but be heartened by all this activity and attention. However, we have to get serious about more than local fruits and vegetables, which are pretty accessible and downright tempting in the heat of July, August and September.

We have to take a hard look at what really makes up our diet and for most of us, that includes grains, dairy and meat on pretty much a daily basis, in addition to all those lovely fruits and veggies.

I would like to take a look at some of the issues surrounding grain production. The only commercial grain producers in this foodshed are over in Creston. I heard from Don Low last night that one grower has a silo full of hard red wheat for which he cannot find a market. Think of all that good bread! We are fortunate to have grain farmers so close by. However, with the ever-increasing price of land in the Kootenays, combined with the scarcity of flat land here and ever-decreasing price for grains, it is very difficult to grow grains at the current market price and hang on to the farm. And as much as I want to see a resurgence of wheat and other grains in the Creston Valley and anywhere else here that has a large enough land base and the climate to grow them, it is unlikely that we will be able to produce enough for the grain needs of all the West Kootenay residents.

So, we look further afield. Canada's prairies are famous around the world for producing very high quality grains. However, in the past 40 years we have gone from a nation with 9.8% of the population in farming to less than 2%. This is not by accident. There was a federal task force commissioned in 1967 that made a recommendation that two-thirds of family farms should be forced out of agriculture. Agricultural policy over the past forty years has ensured that this has indeed happened.

This year, for the first time in many years, the price of grain that the farmers are getting is relatively high. This is due, in part, to the mad rush into the so-called bio-fuels that governments around the world have aggressively encouraged. The resulting loss of land that produced crops for in people or animals in favour of crops for cars to consume, has meant that there is less

grain available for the food system, and so the price has gone up. You can be sure that the transnational corporations will see most of that economic benefit. And if the high price for wheat is adjusted for inflation, that price loses its rosy glow as one realizes that it is \$1.50 less per bushel than the farmers were getting in 1988.

I don't know enough about grain farming but I do know that my personal main food group has to be bread so I am highly motivated to keep Canadian grain farmers on the land. One of the battles that has been raging, generally far from the notice of the average Canadian resident, is the fight to save the Canadian Wheat Board. I would encourage other bread lovers to read the National Farmers Union documents on the situation with the Wheat Board and consider donating funds to help their fight. Or even join the National Farmers Union.

In the foreword to Peter Rosset's recent book, *Food is Different*, George Naylor, the President of the National Family Farm Coalition in the USA proposes some revolutionary but really only logical proposals around national agricultural policy. One of them pertains primarily to grains and that is to "help create food reserves so that bountiful crops create food security rather than depressing prices". Imagine how wonderful it would be to have such a visionary government that it created policy that genuinely supported our communal food security – both by creating food reserves for the hard times, and by ensuring that the farmers are properly compensated for their work. This kind of vision was actually held by the government of India until international trade agreements forced them to get rid of their food reserves.

George Naylor's other proposals include the following to: "create a fair price floor so that corporate buyers pay for commodities, rather than taxpayers". The big corporations benefit greatly from the heavy subsidy program that exists in the USA and ultimately benefit from the support programs that exist for Canadian farmers as well. "In 2004, when average realized net farm income from the marketplace was negative \$10,000, forty-one of Canada's largest agribusiness companies posted the largest profits in their history." (NFU, Apr 2007) Food is vital to our existence and we need to pay enough for it so that we keep each and every farmer on the land. And we need to make sure that they are getting their fair share of each food dollar.

Moving on to meat.

We all need protein, and the many vegetarians and meat eaters who love tofu are fortunate to have Jeff Mock at the helm of SilverKing Tofu here in Nelson. But many of us want and perhaps even need to have meat in our diets. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization produced a report last year rather dauntingly entitled "Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options". Mass production meat is full of problems and I won't go into them here – there is a wealth of resources out there for anyone who is interested.

Here in the Kootenays, we have a history of sustainable livestock production, using land that may not really be able to produce any other food stuffs. With the flooding of many of our valleys, hillsides can be more conducive to grazing than to cropping.

But meat doesn't just happen because one has animals in the area. The reality, whether all meat eaters are willing to accept it or not, is that those animals have to be killed in order to produce the meat. As most everyone knows, our government brought in changes to the Meat Inspection Regulation in 2004 that have had a huge impact on traditional meat production systems across this province. These regulations are proposed as a food safety measure. Some feel that they are equally driven by international trade agreements. Whatever the case, we have seen a fairly dramatic decrease in the numbers of animals on the land and in the availability of locally produced meat. This has had all sorts of repercussions – from increased weed pressure because they are no longer being grazed down by the animals, to the loss of an important fertility source for soils from the manure, to loss of farm tax status and increases in taxes.

I personally have become intimately familiar with this Regulation and its interpretation and enforcement over the past 15 months. I have been working with abattoir operators and proponents across southern BC who wish to pursue licensing. I am on contract with the BC Food Processors Association through the Meat Industry Enhancement Strategy to assist abattoir operators to understand and meet the many and diverse regulations and requirements that are required of them in order to obtain a license to run a legal abattoir or slaughterhouse. As some of the speakers mentioned last night, the regulations are many and even sometimes contradictory or else just vague. Licensing is not for the faint of heart.

However, I am happy to be able to report that we have two abattoirs, both new builds, who are pursuing licensing in our region: Tom Tarzwell in Creston, and the Slovan Valley Abattoir Co-

operative, with the plant to be based near the Village of Slocan. I am telling you about this because this is a long-held dream of mine coming true to actually have commercially available meat in this foodshed. But I am also soliciting your very real support of these hard-working people. If we want to eat meat, and meat we know is not loaded with hormones or chemicals, from animals that had good lives and were well handled right through their death, then we need to have abattoirs in our home region. We need to educate ourselves about how a modern day plant is run and to help to allay worries about noise, smell and, frankly, killing. We need to encourage our local governments to support the abattoirs through policy on issues like waste disposal and land zoning. And we need to be prepared to pay a fair price for the resulting meat.

Tom Tarzwell's plant will be a private business serving the many farmers in the Creston Valley and beyond. The Slocan Valley Abattoir Co-operative is just that, a co-operative seeking members to help steer this project through the building stage and onwards as it goes into production next fall. Members in the Co-op can also invest in this essential part of our local food system. If you are interested there are information sheets on the Slocan Valley Abattoir Co-operative at the back.

I know that I need to wrap up but in answer to the first question posed last night – “how do we get them to do something” (I'm paraphrasing) I would like to suggest that we don't get “them” to do anything. We get ourselves to take on a specific part of rebuilding the food system that interests us and that we have or want to acquire the skills for.

Here is a partial list of suggestions – far ranging since we need to rebuild the knowledge base, expand the area of land under production, address policy at all levels of government, and rebuild the physical infrastructure.

- Join a few select area farmers and backyard gardeners who are working to secure a bio-diverse gene-bank for our annual and perennial crops and our livestock. I am a firm believer that locally adapted varieties have the best chance of surviving climate change.
- Find a way to re-establish local distribution for farm product – some of you may remember the locally owned food distributor that served this area for 40 or 50 years before going under with the pressure from the large corporate distributors
- build long-term produce storage facilities so those crops can be available to us all winter long.

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- Work on creating a food or agricultural policy or charter for your local government – municipal or regional. This policy can create the framework and vision to foster agricultural activities and increase our communal food security.
- Wrap your head around international trade agreements and how and why they impact our food and agricultural policies and then write something so that the rest of us can understand them and what we must do to counter their destructive interventions in our food systems. And once you have mastered that, educate us about supply management.
- Support Alex Atamenenko's Terminator Campaign, kicking into high gear in December.
- Grow your own food.
- And never eat without truly appreciating and celebrating the gift of that food.

Food is about so much more than just fueling our bodies. It is about the cycle of life, as other beings give their lives to nourish ours. Food is also fundamental to our cultural identities and to our survival as communities. And just food is about a global community that is properly and well fed. In the name of longterm communal food security, to combat global warming, and to eat in solidarity with our brothers and sisters around the world, we have to rebuild our local food system.