



◆ Our tendency to think of food only as a commodity within a global economic system may be blinding us to effective approaches to hunger and malnourishment. Restoring the food system will involve restoring it, in large part, to the gift economy.

Grace at the Table

by Molly Anderson

FOOD IS ESSENTIAL to life. But do food production and exchange deserve special treatment or protection of some kind, different from the way we treat other things we buy and sell? This question is part of a heated international debate over subsidies that support domestic agriculture in the U.S., E.U., and Japan. But more importantly, it is a vital question for the survival of our species, because food production and distribution are among the most powerful ways that humans affect the health of this planet.

To date, most of our impacts have been harmful. The modern food system takes a devastating toll on ecosystem services as well as human societies. We have disrupted the

global nitrogen cycle, poisoned fish hatcheries, stripped away fertile topsoil, overgrazed pasture, dumped toxic chemicals into the water supply, and exterminated countless other species. If acknowledged at all, these costs are written off as unavoidable side-effects of feeding the world. The rules of the global economic system dictate that food should be produced wherever it can be grown and processed most cheaply, then shipped around the world to wherever consumers are willing to pay the highest price. Although this system supposedly promotes greater well-being for all, it actually creates scarcity through the perverse logic that only people with money to buy food can have it. While the world produces more than enough food and obesity rates are soaring, the numbers of people who are starving or malnourished have increased in recent years.

Is there any alternative? Is the global market the only place to look for answers to hunger? I believe that we have other options, but we must look outside the market economy to find our way. With grace, we can find a path out of this morass—but only if we are willing to bring grace to the table by acknowledging the holiness of food and Earth itself.

FOOD AND SACRAMENT

Food is intimately connected with sacraments and religious observations in all faiths. In addition to the Lord's Supper, almost all holy days/holidays are celebrated or commemorated with fasts, feasts, and special foods such as lamb, wassail, matzoh, and horseradish. The homely ritual of "saying grace" reminds us of the holiness of every meal. But why does food have this special connection with sacraments?

Augustine defined sacraments long ago as a "visible form of invisible grace." They connect us with the mysteries of life, love, struggle, forgiveness, and death—a world that is bigger than we perceive with the senses and encompass with abstract thought. They imbue our individual lives with meaning by reminding us that a Spirit greater than our small and insignificant efforts works through us. Sacraments mark our proper place in time and space, and our proper relationship with other people and the Earth. Anthropologists have depicted the sacraments of primitive societies as rituals that serve to maintain the ecological health of a community's land and waters.

The celebration of sacraments in contemporary society functions in a similar way to maintain the ecological health of a community of faith.

Food has resonance with all of these attributes of sacrament. Harvest and slaughter, cooking and consumption frequently are social occasions that connect us with others through shared labor. Food links us with the cycle of seasons from planting to harvest, and reminds us of our relationship with the natural world. It connects us literally with specific places. The molecules we consume—nitrogen fixed by a pea plant in a particular field, sugars produced as the sun ripens a pear in a particular orchard—become part of our bodies. Eating, drinking, and breathing are the most intimate connections we have with the world around us. They are the acts by which the world is made flesh. Probably nothing else except our children connects us so physically and constantly with the rhythm and meaning of life.

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Children grace our lives with meaning in ways similar to the meaning we give sacraments and food, by connecting us into a pattern that is deeper and richer than our individual life-spans. This does not mean that we do or should worship children. Unshakeable respect for the wholeness and integrity of the child does not mean unquestioning acceptance of a child's behavior! All societies try to protect their children as they teach them to become responsible adults, setting them apart from the adult world so that they have the space they need to grow up. This protection is codified in laws and taboos against incest, child slavery, child pornography, and other violations of the child's spirit.

The quality of being "set apart" distinguishes the realm of the sacred as well. What is sacred is set apart from either the secular or the profane. While "secular" seems relatively innocuous in its current use, "profane" is more jarring. The roots of "profane" translate simply into "before the temple" and, therefore, not sacred. But this distinction goes beyond the mere recognition that different things and activities have different rightful spheres. As a verb, "to profane" means to misuse or abuse what ought to be held in reverence and respect, to violate, to defile, or to pollute. That is, profanity involves grave harm that ensues when a thing or behavior is out of the place or time where it rightfully belongs. This displacement is at the core of the ecological meltdown in our food system.

Our society regards food, by and large, as having nothing to do with the sacred. In almost all aspects of the global economy, food is merely a commodity or thing to be bought and sold. Its production, preparation, and consumption are mechanical processes we try to make as "efficient" as possible through research, technology, and government policies. Efficiency means producing the same or more food more cheaply—which usually means with less human labor. The logical outcome of this way of thinking about food is rural ghost towns and industrialized agriculture replete with factory farms and processors, where acres of land and water are converted into calories and protein. Waste products from the factory pollute the surroundings and spread downstream. Rural people become "waste products" that flood the cities or flee to other countries where they hope to find work. Modern food comes out the pipeline fast, cheap, convenient, and often laced with contaminants ranging from rodent hair to salmonella. Frequently it is consumed

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alone, while commuting to a job, at the desk, or in a tiny bubble of solitude in a crowded eatery.

Thinking of food as a commodity to be bought and sold is so common that many of us have trouble imagining any other mental framework. However, food belongs more naturally in a different economy altogether. Rather than a market transaction, eating is an ecological transaction. Like most biological processes, food production is complex and depends on myriad delicate interactions among living organisms. Modern economic efficiency is a paltry imitation of ecological efficiency, whereby the

infinite diversity and glory of life are created and perpetuated from nothing more than water, sunlight, and a few chemicals.

Although fertilizing crops with sewage sludge containing heavy metals and other toxins is economically efficient, it is ecologically disastrous because those substances have moved into places where they do not belong. Animals eating the sludge-fed crops are poisoned; and the toxins become concentrated in their bodies, to the detriment of whatever eats them. Coal-fired power plants are economically efficient ways to make electricity; but the mercury they emit is taken up by ocean fish which, when

consumed by pregnant women, cause developmental and learning problems in their children. Feeding cows waste products such as chicken litter, feces, and even the ground-up carcasses of other cows seemed to be a miracle of economic cleverness—until mad-cow disease entered the food chain in this way.

FOOD AND THE GIFT ECONOMY

The special qualities of food place it within the gift economy, a parallel economic universe alongside the world of buying, selling, and capitalist accumulation. The gift economy provides meaning—not just utility—to the

exchange of goods. Anthropologists and scholars of culture, most notably Lewis Hyde, have explored how the gift economy operates and defined its unique rules for the benefit of people who mostly see the world through market economy spectacles. The most fundamental rule of the gift economy is that the gift must be passed along, from one person to another. Wealth is equivalent to the ability to give much, and a wealthy person who hoards for himself or his own family is considered rude or pathological. If gifts are allowed to go out of circulation because someone tries to accumulate them, they lose value and the person responsible for this social breach

loses status. A person who gives to another does not necessarily receive something in return from the recipient. But the wider community provides, in the long run, because gifts—like grace—tend to flow to empty places. A curious distinction between the gift and market economies is that the former creates abundance, as goods are constantly shared and redistributed, while the latter creates scarcity, as goods pile up for some people and diminish for most others. The story of the loaves and fishes is a story of the gift economy at work.

Things that belong in the gift economy share certain characteristics. First, they tend to be priceless, in that their value cannot be captured in monetary terms alone. A frozen dinner from the grocery store cooler never tastes as good as a home-

made meal prepared with love. Second, things in the gift economy acquire value in the act of being given. A cup of tea and muffin in the home of a friend who listens to your story means far more than a soda and bag of chips from the convenience store. Third, things in the gift economy increase in value as they are used again and again, and decrease in value as they are hoarded. Food rots when it is stored away for years. Friendship deepens as it is expressed over and over in different ways, through shared meals as well as other gifts of love.

When something belongs in the gift economy yet is treated as a commodity, a sense of wrongness or incon-



Courtesy Spencer Scott, Templeman Library, University of Kent

gruity results. For example, hospitality may be proffered and accepted with pleasure, but the host is likely to be insulted by a guest who offers to pay for the favor. If a friend invites you to her house for a meal and you leave a tip on the table, she will think you are joking (if she is not offended). Putting a price on kindness or generosity coarsens and diminishes it. Sometimes the person who misinterprets a gift just seems clueless, but sometimes the mistake creates a rift in the social fabric.

By treating food as nothing but a commodity, we violate its inherent nature, thereby violating our own nature and the Earth itself. The damage to the earth is perhaps most immediately apparent: polluted water and soil, mass species extinction, global warming. These phenomena destroy the very source of life on which we all depend. They rob the next generation of the wherewithal to survive.

Treating food as merely a commodity is not in the interest of the public good or of peace. Should people continue to go hungry in countries that produce more than enough food? Should food go only to people who can buy it? "It is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (Ecclesiastes 3:13). The Protestant Reformation was triggered by outrage at profits made from the sale of grace, in the form of indulgences. Now we have giant supermarket chains and agri-businesses raking in enormous profits from the sale of food. Five members of the family that inherited the profits of Wal-Mart—now the largest food retailer in the world—rank in the world's top ten wealthiest people. Ultimately, the profanity of treating food only as a commodity and not as a gift to be shared with whoever is hungry coarsens our own souls and diminishes our humanity. Can we possibly invoke a reformation of the global food system before its grotesque inequities spark mass riots and war?

Reforming the food system will involve restoring it, in large part, to the gift economy. Food must become holy again, a gift of grace. Grace, the supreme gift of unmerited forgiveness and redemption, clearly lies in the gift economy. The tenacious link of food, holiness, and gift is rooted in the reality of food. It is a signpost that points the way into the gift economy. It shows us that the

gift economy of food does not have to be built from scratch, just reinforced where it already exists.

We strengthen the gift economy with any action that strengthens communal bonds and the bond between humans and the natural world. So grow your own food. Observe garden plants closely until you understand what they need and how they are adapted to their place. Give away the surplus to strangers. Prepare meals yourself, or with friends. Invent new menus and recipes. Teach children how to garden. Support local farmers who give priceless treasures to your community—open space, clean air, beauty, watershed protection—by using environmentally-sound practices. Buy from them directly in farmers' markets and seek out locally-grown food in your grocery. Buy organic food from your own region. Arrange to trade your time for a bag of vegetables at a food co-op or farm. Eat more food when it is in season in your region, less food that is shipped from far away. Give food away to people who need it. Share food with friends. Say grace. Act to ensure that all people in your town can enjoy their right to food. Act to ensure that children worldwide have enough to eat.

The logic of the market economy will tell you that these actions are foolish, and that others will take advantage of you if you give food away or sell it too cheaply. But perhaps this is a risk worth taking. Ralph Waldo Emerson urged, "Be a gift and a benediction." Giving of yourself and the things you possess, after all, is the most consistent and time-honored way to find real satisfaction and joy.

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