

Buying, Eating, and Acting Locally

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conversations to think out loud, to test assumptions, to reflect on what we have tried and contemplate new efforts, to laugh at ourselves, to celebrate life.

The activities that have preoccupied us for the past few years—challenging racism, encouraging sustainable development, helping workplaces and governments become more responsive to the people they employ and serve, imagining and planning for different kinds of social systems—require and depend on solidarity and strategy as well as hope. In the rush to act, we remind ourselves to pause and reflect. This does not come easily to most of us. The magnitude of injustice and the urgency of remedies threaten to overtake even the most committed, reflective practitioners.

Civic action, citizen engagement, social change activism—whatever we call it—sustaining the struggle for the long haul is a challenge. We’ve learned to make time and space for reflection as well as action. This is the lesson of 20 years of kitchen table conversations.

Nina Gregg met Steve Fisher in 1980 at a Highlander workshop for the Appalachian Land Ownership Study. She has been a summer camp dishwasher, campus postal worker, bookstore manager, technical editor, co-director of a non-profit organization, and university professor. She is a co-facilitator of the Blount County (TN) Anti-Racism Task Force, coordinator of U.S. activities for the international Charter of Human Responsibilities and consults with community based and non-profit organizations. She is trying to introduce more stillness into her life.

Doug Gamble met Steve Fisher in a bar during the 1980 Appalachian Studies Association conference in Johnson City. Doug has been a university history professor and worked for the Highlander Research and Education Center, the Tennessee Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, and the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE). He lives on a small farm in Blount County, Tennessee, and is active in too many non-profit organizations.

**CHAD BERRY**

## Buying, Eating, and Acting Locally

Life is a series of connections. One evening I tuned in to an unusual documentary on my local PBS station titled *The Natural History of the Chicken*.<sup>1</sup> The piece was captivating, juxtaposing the ways that chickens are viewed in our society. Billions are produced throughout the country in industrial-like death camps, while perhaps several hundred thousand—like the dozen or so my nine-year-old son Nat tends—are nurtured on farms and given freedom to contribute to a cycle of life.

Shortly after, I picked up an essay by Wendell Berry titled “The Pleasures of Eating.” If you haven’t already read it, do so. Let me just give you a taste of Berry’s essay:

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The food industrialists have by now persuaded millions of consumers to prefer food that is already prepared. They will grow, deliver, and cook your food for you and (just like your mother) beg you to eat it. That they do not yet offer to insert it, prechewed, into your mouth is only because they have found no profitable way to do so. We may rest assured that they would be glad to find such a way. The ideal industrial food consumer would be strapped to a table with a tube running from the food factory directly into his or her stomach.<sup>2</sup>

It is startling to consider just how quickly Americans (and increasing numbers of people in many other places around the globe) have become removed from farming and rural life. Ask yourself: how far back in your family do you need to go to a time when much of your food was grown by members of your own family? In my family, it was two generations; my Tennessee grandparents grew just about all they ate—from eggs to hogs (even though they were too poor to keep the hams) to vegetables. Serendipitously, my institution offered a senior seminar course designed to be an interdisciplinary, liberal arts approach to a topic of global import. Food was the perfect subject, since one could approach it from 360 degrees: culture, science, art, humanities. Together, a film on chickens and an essay on eating convinced me to teach a course exploring the politics of food.

That course in the spring of 2005 was enlightening. The students and I embarked on an experience that evoked the famous words, attributed I believe to Otto von Bismarck, about law and sausage: if you like either one, it is best not to see them being made. Throughout the semester, I challenged the students: what could be done about the many problems associated with food in this country? We considered obesity and health risks associated with food, environmental damage from industrial farming and genetic modification, fossil-fuel-based agriculture, the disconnect between producers and consumers, gendered and racialized and cultural meanings attached to food, the passivity associated with food choices, the rise of the fast-food and continued reliance on eating out (and these are really only a few examples). The same answer came over and over again, and on the last day of class, a student charged me with a challenge: “Dr. Berry, we need a farmers’ market.”

Food became my activist cause, and I thought it was wonderful that it came from teaching and from engaging with students, a trait I know Steve Fisher modeled as well as anyone. I set out determined to start a farmers’ market, from scratch, with no particular model, in a region whose local foodshed was virtually wiped out by eating trends in the last two decades. I naively thought in April 2005 that we could simply put out some flyers and select a venue, and that farmers and consumers would come. Life is more complicated, I quickly learned, especially in our litigious age, and these complications affect and challenge the activist cause. Gone were the days, it seemed, when a truck farmer dropped the tailgate and began selling fresh bounty.

Several things helped get us to the goal. One was that a new local weekly newspaper decided to scoop other local media by announcing that a farmers’

market was in the works. I wasn't quite prepared for the number of phone calls I received eagerly wondering where and when. Some of these folks, as it turned out, became board members, and the diversity of their approach to food helped us immensely. We had a restaurateur, a local business person, a director of a wellness center, representatives from a local non-profit and from the city, several farmers, an artist with farmers' market experience, an agriculture agent, and others. So the genuine local interest was an important factor. A third factor was patience and planning. I had little of the former, but great respect for the latter. We soon realized that we would not be able to get a local market up and running in 2005, and in August we began meeting regularly toward a goal of opening in May 2006. That fall and winter, we planned, developing a mission statement, bylaws, and a website. Highlights during the dreary winter months, when seed catalogs can be a salvation, were two meetings we held with local farmers to explain what we were thinking and to get their feedback. Attendance at these meetings was beyond our expectations. We were also fortunate to raise quite a lot of money designed to publicize the market in local newspapers and on radio. Most importantly, this money allowed us to hire a market manager to coordinate all the efforts. We even found the time to apply for a USDA farm-to-school grant to support local educational programming.

At every one of those farmers' market meetings, I would arrive just a little preoccupied by my other pressing demands—work, family, other service commitments to the community, etc.—but I would leave these meetings hopeful and inspired about the power of community. We would all comment in our meetings about how everything fell into place, even though we all knew it was because of the energy we all gave the cause. I'm sure that other contributors will echo this point: activism involves a great deal of work and perhaps some sleepless nights, but the endeavor is empowering and incredibly satisfying.

As May 6, 2006, dawned, we believed we were ready. We had brainstormed the day through an event-planner's imagination, paid our liability insurance, bought signs, alerted media; we printed t-shirts and tote bags; we had built it, and now we were hoping *they* would come. We had hoped for three to five vendors—and we were shocked when we had more than a dozen and perhaps a thousand (yes, 1000) visitors at that first market day. We had traditional music, native plants, flowers, honey, and a good amount of spring vegetables, with plenty of organic offerings. And all of it was practically gone in what seemed to be 30 minutes, proving that local demand was there. Vendors sold almost \$3000 on that early spring day, and farmers' market t-shirts and canvas bags sold briskly. Since that date, the market has grown, becoming institutionalized among increasing numbers of people in the community—not just among yuppie foodies, but among people with marginal incomes and plenty of young and old alike who care to know where their food comes from. It was enhanced by a plethora of foods, from catfish to organic chevon to orange beets and wild mushrooms. And oh, the tomatoes and melons and corn! A local foodshed grew like seeds in a desert after a thunderstorm.

From this incredibly gratifying experience, the power of activism was reaffirmed to me. Ironically, I was teaching the politics of food class again in

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May and June 2006, just as the market was beginning, and I watched with delight as students from my class at the market looked askance at swiss chard, only to take some home, follow the advice of the grower, and report back how good it was.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned Wendell Berry. I'll challenge you to learn more about food—and this is a crucial time to do so. I'd recommend anything by Marion Nestle, or Michael Pollan's book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, or Barbara Kingsolver's new book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, ironically a bestseller for describing her family's challenges and rewards in vowing to produce and consume the way so many people in Appalachia once did.<sup>3</sup> In my politics of food class, I thought I'd be clever by requiring students to participate in a local-foods potluck, and I intentionally scheduled it in February to make the point how reliant we are on distant food networks. I expected the potluck would be meager. I was surprised, however, as students brought corn on the cob, venison, green beans, fried pies, and other treats. When I asked them where they got these things, the consensus was, "I went to Mamaw's house." There is a lesson here. An often elderly generation's foodways are quickly giving way to younger generations who are removed from local food, and we must connect younger with older to nurture these traditions, as Bill Best has so admirably done in Berea.<sup>4</sup>

I'll close by referring to an essay by Barbara Kingsolver titled "Lily's Chickens," from her book of essays *Small Wonder*, and an essay in *Fighting Back in Appalachia* on the Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky. Both of these pieces can get you down the road of doing something about food in today's society (in the U.S. the poor are being killed not from starvation but from obesity—and these numbers are acute throughout much of Appalachia. I recently saw a map of farmers' markets in Kentucky, where I now live, and was dismayed by how very, very few were located in eastern Kentucky). Food and agriculture have been plagued with issues and problems for a long time; thankfully, Steve Fisher considered agriculture in Appalachia (some activists don't readily do so) by including the article on the Community Farm Alliance.<sup>5</sup> Kingsolver reminds us that "Somewhere near you, I'm sure, is a farmer who desperately needs your support, for one of a thousand reasons that are pulling the wool out of the proud but unraveling traditions of family farming."<sup>6</sup> Go and find that farmer.

## NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank Phil Obermiller, Genevieve Reynolds, and Lisa Berry for their helpful comments. *The Natural History of the Chicken*, VHS, directed by Mark Lewis (New York: PBS Home Video, 2000).

2. Wendell Berry, "The Pleasures of Eating," in *What are People For? Essays* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 146.

3. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Barbara Kingsolver, with Steven L. Hopp and Camille Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

4. See his Sustainable Mountain Agriculture Center website at <http://www.heirlooms.org/index.html>

5. Hal Hamilton and Ellen Ryan, "The Community Farm Alliance in Kentucky: The Growth, Mistakes, and Lessons of the Farm Movement of the 1980s," in Steve Fisher's *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1993), 123-47.

6. Barbara Kingsolver, "Lily's Chickens," in *Small Wonder: Essays* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 116.

Chad Berry is director of the Appalachian Center and Goode Professor of Appalachian Studies at Berea College and the 2006-2007 president of the Appalachian Studies Association. He is editing a collection of articles on the *National Barn Dance*.

**SUSAN AMBLER AND KATHIE SHIBA**

## Separate Paths Lead to *Just Connections*

Since Ernest Boyer wrote *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (1990), academics have been discussing and questioning the role of scholarship in society. In this book, Boyer analyzed the transformation of the meaning and practice of scholarship in American higher education during the 20th century, stating that "... scholarship in earlier times referred to a variety of creative work carried on in a variety of places, and its integrity was measured by the ability to think, communicate, and learn" (15). However, during World War II, this view of scholarship changed, reinforced by federal financial support of scientific research. Since then, the academic community has focused on research as the dominant agenda with teaching and service assuming lesser importance, especially in the reward system in higher education. This model of academic scholarship has been taught in graduate schools since World War II, including the graduate training of both of us. Boyer suggested, though, that what he called "the scholarship of discovery," was based on too limited a view of scholarship, and did not "meet today's urgent academic and social mandates" (13). He identified three other types: the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching, which together with the scholarship of discovery provided "a more comprehensive, more dynamic understanding of scholarship" (16).

This analysis also has relevance to the relationship between academics and activism. The academic research that emerges from the needs of a community, often done in collaboration with activists, is referred to as community based research, action research, or participatory research, with