

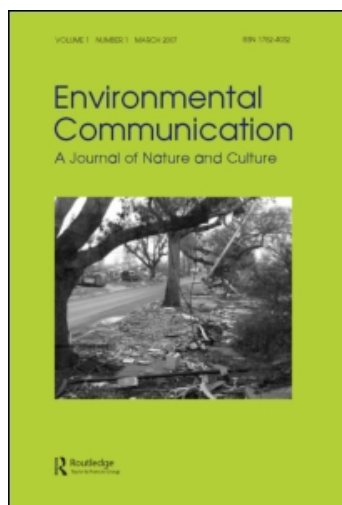
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PRAXIS

You Are What You Environmentally, Politically, Socially, and Economically Eat: Delivering the Sustainable Farm and Food Message

Ruth Katz

The old term “you are what you eat” used to mean that if you ate too much cake, you would *become* the cake: with extra layers. Now “you are what you eat” has come to mean all the environmental, political, social justice, economic, and finally nutritional layers represented by any given piece of food.

The issue of what winds up on our plate has become so complex, that it’s hard to deliver in digestible sound bites. But it also represents opportunities for appealing to just about any interest area. Over a couple of decades, as farm and food justice advocates, my colleagues, and I have had our share of both opportunities and challenges trying to deliver our messages to a wide range of audiences.

My involvement is as a co-founder and former executive director of *Just Food*, a farm and food justice organization in New York City; a former grant-writer for the environmental health group *Mothers & Others for a Livable Planet*; an assistant in the Agricultural Sciences Division of the *Rockefeller Foundation*; and currently as a government relations staff member for *Stone Barns Center for Food & Agriculture*, a working farm, educational, and farmer training center in Pocantico Hills, NY. Each of these positions has posed fascinating messaging challenges. One of my first, at the root of Just Food’s beginnings (1994/1995) was: *How do we get New York City people to think and care about farmers?*

It seemed far-fetched at the time. You live in *New York City* and you’re working on *farm* issues? *Why?* Indeed. Why did *I* care about farmers, farming, and all the complex tangential topics? I grew up in inner-city Chicago; for a long time I only saw farms from the car window, on the way to camp in Wisconsin. A bike ride across the state of Wisconsin during college days, from Milwaukee to Northfield, Minnesota led me to the first farm visit I can recall. We bought delicious cheese from a generous, young

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dairy farmer who then gave us a tour of his cheese-making operation. I noticed that his teeth were rotted; he seemed poor and I wondered about that. Around the same time, I took courses with the late Senator (then Professor) Paul Wellstone, who provided my classmates and me with plenty of inspirational fodder on civil rights—including abuses experienced by local Minnesotan farmers. Chunks of their acres had been seized against their will to serve the needs of power companies. Straight out of college I joined Peace Corps-Gabon, Central Africa, where 80% of the population farmed, yet farming was not respected. I was to be part of the corps of teachers that would lead young students to the Office Job Career Path, no matter what that entailed. I wondered where everyone would get their astoundingly delicious avocados, tomatoes, eggs, peanuts, and plantains—if everyone had an Office Job. So from then on, throughout my Peace Corps stint, a subsequent graduate program in *International Development and Social Change*, and then searches for non-existing jobs (until we created our own), the questions and explorations continued. The questions, the trying to make sense of it all, meant that I cared. So, how to get others to see what I was seeing?

Can dedication and sense of urgency that have been cultivated over years, be delivered in short sound bites? My colleagues and I and the inspirational others before us have been trying to deliver our farm and food messages to people urban, rural, suburban, rich, poor, donor, bureaucrat, politician, Republican, Democrat, farmer, non-farmer, gourmet chef, nutritionist, economist, and so on. I wanted to share a select few of our experiences in hopes that a focused, analytical audience would help us further frame our messages and deliver them more effectively.

Since this is an environmental journal, a very brief summary of some of the environmental food messages include:

- It is best (and possible) to consume food that is grown in a way that does not harm the environment, and in a way that even helps to protect and improve the natural environment. Crops should be organically or ecologically grown, avoiding and reducing the use of polluting, toxic pesticides, and petroleum-based fertilizers. Proper multi-cropping, crop rotation, erosion control, and other measures that suit the local soils and microclimates reduce pests and disease while building the *soil*, ultimately our most important crop.
- Land must be protected for food production. Working lands devoted to agro-ecological food production protect the environment, provide birds and other species with habitats, and provide us all with both productive and open space.
- Food crop biodiversity is critical for human survival, as general biodiversity is critical for other species' survival. That means that genetically modified crops and other production methods that promote monocultures put us at risk.
- We need to support the local/regional food movement, as the current centralized, long-distance food infrastructure—by the very nature of its long distance—pollutes substantially. There is also ample opportunity to further green local trucking and other transport infrastructure.
- We need to reduce meat consumption and produce fewer animals. Those that we raise for food should be raised in an environmentally sustainable manner, unlike the

current dominant structure of factory farming, which contributes substantially to the nation's greenhouse gas emissions. Further research is needed to determine the most ecologically sound way to raise animals—methods that reduce greenhouse gas accumulation, reduce water pollution, and restore the biological health of our soils.

Connected to these basic environmental messages are a host of social justice and food security messages. *Community food security* "... is a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally appropriate, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice."¹ This definition, noted by the *Community Food Security Coalition*, is further described by tying in critical concerns over disappearing farmland. If we do not have access to farmland, then we do not have access to food, or the decisions on how we produce our food. The concept of "food sovereignty" goes a bit further in speaking not of a "condition" but of a "right." It is the "right of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food, and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically, and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food..."² The social justice issues are completely intertwined with the environmental ones, because natural resources provide the base upon which our food supply and access to it, depend.

With those basics as background, the following words and phrases are a select few (from a much longer list) that play a special role in confusing or clarifying our sustainable farm and food messages. Here are some linguistic challenges from the trenches.

Community Development

In various non-profit organizational roles I developed a sense of urgency over fundraising. One foundation priority area that seemed like an obvious place to explore was "community development."

It is a struggle to make the case for sustainable agriculture as a community development program. In the 1990s and early 2000s it was even more of a challenge; "sustainable agriculture" was not on the nation's radar screen then like it is today. How would donors understand our issues if our alleged constituents barely understood them? At Mothers & Others for a Livable Planet, we were trying to explain the meaning of *Integrated Pest Management*! At Just Food, we were attempting equally daunting explanations of *Community Supported Agriculture* and *urban farming*.

Since there are so few funders that actually list sustainable agriculture, food justice, consumer education, or other obviously fitting programs as grant-making priorities, it is up to us to find the overlap between their interests and our work.

Since we were trying to actually change the food system or farm-food infrastructure, we thought "community development" as a grant priority should be a good fit. A number of foundations were looking for "innovative programs" in

“community development” but then went on to define “community development” in narrow terms: access to jobs, housing, and health care. I wondered, “How can it be an ‘innovative program’ if it is already imagined within these narrow parameters?”

Although we need food to survive and good food to thrive, food infrastructure development was rarely viewed as important in this funding context. To get my message across, I had to try to convince foundation program officers that the definition of community development must be expanded. I needed to show how a healthy food infrastructure is connected to the issues they already care about. Without decent jobs, people cannot afford housing; if people are not healthy it is difficult to hold a good job. Health care after one is sick is more costly and traumatic than good health maintenance in the first place, and one of the most effective means of health maintenance is good nutrition. Many people in low-resource neighborhoods find it difficult to maintain proper diets because they have no convenient supermarkets or otherwise lack a good selection of quality, healthful food. The dominant food system infrastructure is not meeting their needs.

At the same time, farmers who are growing good food are suffering because they are having a hard time gaining access to profitable markets. Wholesale market middlemen, advertisers, and others often leave farmers with too small a cut of the profits. If farmers could find more direct markets in low-income neighborhoods, we might be able to better meet the needs of two critical populations.

That is not exactly an elevator speech!

Thankfully, some foundation officers listened.³ Gradually our funding base grew among foundations that had no official grant priorities or program language that could easily be matched to our work.

Charity vs. Change

Also on the subject of communicating to philanthropists, there is a strong and long tradition among institutional and individual donors of giving to food banks and soup kitchens. While I would never deny the importance of such emergency programs, it is clear that if only the emergency infrastructure is supported, then only the emergency infrastructure will thrive.

Charitable giving may always seem like a good thing, but if it is essentially keeping status quo power structures in place and lacking a component to empower, strengthen, and uplift the poor, then much more must be done. Structures must be changed, to obliterate the obstacles that keep people poor. What if the unemployed,⁴ instead of standing in soup kitchen lines, had the opportunity to grow their own food, and then start their own food production, processing, and distribution businesses?

But it is much easier to deliver a message about *charity* (Hungry people need food; we serve X # of meals a day) than a message about *change* (Hungry people need access to food. Access means the food must be affordable, geographically convenient, and—we must have the know-how to store and prepare it properly. If we grow the food instead of purchase it, we must have the geographic access and right to use land and water, and have the know-how to grow it . . .).

If we want positive social change then we have to fund it. This means supporting groups that are expanding opportunities for farmers to farm sustainably and developing local markets where they are needed. If every critical emergency dollar to *charity* were matched by two dollars for *change*, perhaps we would begin to reduce our need for emergency food.

Environment vs. Economic Development

The false argument pitting the environment against economic development has been around for a long time, since the spotted owl and timber industry came to loggerheads. The false choice continues today in the food world. Recently,⁵ Gary Toenniessen (a former colleague), representing the Rockefeller Foundation, spoke elegantly on the passing of Norman Borlaug, known as the Father of the Green Revolution. Dr. Toenniessen was questioned about the common environmental critique that the Green Revolution promoted agricultural technologies that pollute. He responded that the “primary objective was always to feed hungry people.” This response suggests that it is not possible to feed hungry people and be environmentally sustainable at the same time. There is no proof of this; it is a false choice that one must be *either* environmentally sustainable *or* responsive to the needs of the hungry. Recent publications by the United Nations (McIntyre, Herren, Wakhungu, & Watson, 2009), Rodale (LaSalle, Hepperly, & Diop, 2008), and *Agriculture and Human Values* (Chappel & LaValle, 2009) demonstrate that crop yields using organic and sustainable methods are competitive with yields derived from Green Revolution technologies. (We also know that hunger is often a function of access to markets, rather than a problem of crop yields.)

The Rockefeller Foundation, Gates Foundation, and others continue today to support the Green Revolution, now through AGRA, the Alliance to bring the Green Revolution to Africa. AGRA continues a focus on high-input, crop-based technologies among its approaches. To improve the direction of their funding and impact, AGRA partners need to start with more careful and honest use of language. It is not a question of *either* feeding the hungry *or* practicing ecological agriculture. Environmentally sustainable, ecological, low-input systems that are not dependent upon agro-chemical and biotech companies, may also be the most effective systems to feed hungry people.

Sustainable, Locavore, and . . . Afford-avore?

New language has emerged from our environmental and food movements. Throughout the 1990s academics and practitioners struggled over the word *sustainable* and gradually shifted its accepted meaning from an exclusively environmental focus, to one that includes both environmental and economic resilience. That made sense to most advocates.

More recently, however, the agro-chemical and seed company Monsanto has adopted the term “sustainable” to describe its own practices. Most long-time sustainable agriculture advocates do not approve of Monsanto’s use of the unregulated

term “sustainable.” The track record to date of genetically modified organism (GMO) seed varieties would be better characterized as *opposite* of “sustainable.” GMOs may increase, rather than reduce pesticide use; GMOs pose threats to biodiversity and they pose threats to farmers’ rights to both plant their own seed and be free from the genetic pollution of patented seed varieties.

The word *locavore* became an official new word in 2007 in the New Oxford American Dictionary, evolving around the time of Michael Pollan’s *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, and after organizations and individuals across the country started emphasizing that it is valuable and possible to eat locally produced food.

But connotations of *locavore*, like *organic*, similar to the issue above, raise a false choice between environmental food and affordable food. To eat local and organic or sustainably raised food is pronounced time and again as an elitist endeavor, barely attainable by the middle class and only comfortably attainable by people of wealth.

But people around the country have demonstrated that local, organic, and sustainably raised food can be affordable for all. Working with and gathering ideas from communities all around New York City, Just Food helped develop Community Supported Agriculture programs with discounted shares (discounted CSA programs are available in Madison, Wisconsin, and other places throughout the country as well). We also collaborated with community gardens to develop farmers’ markets with affordable prices in the South Bronx and other lower income neighborhoods. And of course, people with home gardens or community gardens are able to grow their own food for “dirt cheap.”

One of the community groups Just Food collaborated with in its early days, *Make the Road by Walking*, developed CSA outreach materials to appeal to the economically struggling Bushwick, Brooklyn population. Make the Road’s brochure, titled *Healthy Food vs. Fast Food* calculated the cost of dinner for a family of four, comparing a CSA share to a fast food restaurant. The cost of a fast food dinner for a family of four for *one night* was slightly more than the cost of a CSA share for *one week* of dinners.

To be sure, affordability is just one aspect of gaining access to locally grown and organic or sustainably raised food. As mentioned above, the concept of *access* also encompasses geographic proximity to food purchasing or growing sources, and knowledge about how to store, process, and prepare (or grow) food. With the appropriate availability and knowledge base, we can demonstrate that organic/sustainable and local food is affordable too. I propose a new term: *afford-avore*. *Afford-avores* nationwide can demonstrate that local and organic food is affordable on a shoestring budget.

We are what we eat. If we eat food that is produced in a manner that pollutes and creates social and economic havoc, then we embody that state of affairs. Food shapes much more than hips and beer bellies; it shapes our world.

In order to build a more just and sustainable food system, we must do a better job of getting our points across to a multitude of audiences. In so doing, we must continue to challenge how words are used, and in some cases protect their very existence.

Notes

- [1] *Community Food Security Coalition*. Retrieved April 27, 2010, from <http://www.foodsecurity.org>
- [2] *Food First—The Institute for Food and Development Policy*. Retrieved April 27, 2010, from <http://www.foodfirst.org>. See also Political Statement of the NGO/CSO Forum on Food Sovereignty, June 14, 2002.
- [3] Some of the pioneering foundations in this work also contributed to educating their peers at other foundations. In particular, the Jessie Smith Noyes and Lawson Valentine Foundations were especially critical, forward-thinking partners. In late 2009 the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, another long-time funder in the food world, launched “Food and Community,” its program to address food systems related issues.
- [4] This does not deny the fact that there are employed people who are not earning enough and must obtain emergency food even though they have full-time jobs. This is obviously a more complex issue; I am merely trying to illustrate one point about *charity vs. change*.
- [5] Judy Woodruff interviewed Gary Toenniessen on *The News Hour*, 14 September, 2009.

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