What's for dinner? Food and justice: Food and justice

by Nancy Bedford in the December 25, 2007 issue

My family tries to eat healthy, organic, fairly traded, locally and sustainably grown food. This is the case even for the family bunny, whose diet of Timothy hay and salads is fairly easy to provide.

But eating this way is not easy. Illinois imports more than 90 percent of its food, so chances are high that the bunny's lettuce comes from outside the state and that it took trucks, powered by gasoline, to deliver it. Furthermore, the lettuce was probably picked by seasonal migrant workers from Mexico. This means that the leaves of lettuce we give the bunny each day or pop into our own mouths are imprinted with the realities of fossil fuel consumption, globalization, immigration policies and economic injustice.

We are also aware that organic, fairly traded or locally grown foods are often not an option for our lower-income neighbors. When a woman in our church was without a job and was helping us out with baby-sitting, our six-year-old twins opened up the refrigerator, pulled out a gallon of milk and asked her if she also drank organic milk. When she said she did not, they chided her: "But the other kind is bad for you; it has pesticides and hormones!" The woman answered, "But I cannot afford organic."

In this country, eating a healthy diet with many fresh vegetables, fruits and whole grains is a class-based privilege. Junk food is cheaper and more readily available, particularly in urban settings.

The community of faith to which we belong has responded to this situation in several ways. One is the sponsorship of a food coop called The Harvest. On Saturday mornings, the coop provides organic eggs, cheese and bulk goods, and because it is a nonprofit enterprise based on volunteer work, its prices are considerably lower than those at stores such as Whole Foods or Trader Joe's. Our church is located in a densely populated area with public transportation available, so people who do not have cars can walk or take the train to buy their groceries.

Our church also participates in community-supported agriculture. About 50 families related to the church or the neighborhood pay a yearly fee to CSA farmers and receive a weekly share of organic produce from late May to late October. Any produce not picked up is distributed, along with other donated food items, to those in need. The cost of a CSA share is not particularly cheap, but the farm does offer the option of exchanging work for a part of the share.

One young couple who recently had their wedding at the church used biodegradable plates and utensils and asked people to bring, instead of gifts, vegan and vegetarian food to share in a big potluck with all the guests. A group of young people is devoted to composting and has volunteered to pick up people's food scraps weekly, thereby reducing our neighborhood's production of garbage.

Our monthly church potlucks that coincide with the Lord's Supper reflect a growing commitment to food and justice. Vegetarians like me find more options at the potluck dinner than we once did. The old Mennonite virtues of thrift and simplicity are being cultivated in new ways (the cookbook *More with Less* is a standard in many kitchens).

Those of us who live in apartment buildings without space to garden can rent small community plots from the city. I have been on the list for several months and hope to receive a plot to tend next spring. Some people who tend these plots share much of what they grow with the soup kitchens that operate in our neighborhood. A new organization in the city is working to start a nonprofit urban farm on municipal land that is currently a parking lot. These initiatives may not seem like much, but they do serve to cultivate more than food: they cultivate hope.

My oldest daughter, a sixth-grader, recently shared with me a book she had encountered at school: *Seedfolks*, by Paul Fleischman. The chapters are written in different voices, representing people from different cultures and backgrounds. Inspired by a little girl who plants some beans in a vacant lot full of garbage, these diverse people come together to plant a community garden in Cleveland. Wendel, one of the characters, says:

> I walked back there that evening and checked on the beans. They'd picked themselves up and were looking fine. I saw that she'd made a circle of dirt around the other three plants. Out of nowhere the words from the Bible came into my head: "And a little child shall lead them." I didn't know why

> at first. Then I did. There's plenty about my life I can't change. Can't bring the dead back to life on this earth. Can't make the world loving and kind. Can't change myself into a millionaire. But a patch of ground in this trashy lot—I can change that. Can change it big.

Wendel's words inspire me to take small steps toward a world where food is eaten and grown with justice. But food with justice requires structural changes as well.

When I returned home to Argentina recently I enjoyed the colors, textures, aromas and flavor of the food, particularly the fruits and vegetables. The displays at the greengrocers' stand were colorful and enticing—more beautiful than all the treasures of Aladdin's cave. I noticed, however, that the array of tomatoes was minimal: instead of seeing row upon row of wooden boxes with all sorts of tomatoes to choose from, I saw only one smallish crate almost hidden off in a corner.

When I turned on the radio that day, I realized why: a consumer organization called the League of Housewives had organized a tomato boycott in the face of what they considered unjust prices. Immediately, consumption fell by 40 percent in Buenos Aires—and very soon so did the prices.

I was struck by how women were able to use their roles as the principal managers of the domestic sphere to raise their voices and collectively exert economic and political power. Perhaps they have not yet made permanent structural changes, but they have shown that, when united, homemakers have considerable power, even as consumers of the humble tomato, which in Argentina is a staple, part of almost every meal.

During that same week I participated in an academic symposium. For several days we worshiped, debated, listened and sang. Every so often, somebody would ask: "Did you hear about the question of the tomatoes?" We drank the herbal drink maté together and we ate together in anticipation of the fullness of God's eschatological banquet—but we ate no tomatoes. Eating tomatoes in the context of the boycott would have been a violent act. The absence of the tomatoes was a powerful sign of something beyond ourselves and even beyond the churches and groups we represented. We might paraphrase Jacques Derrida to say that the absent tomatoes imposed their trace upon our gathering in an unexpected and suggestive way.

Both food and theology bring me much joy and are related in my life to concrete ways of living out friendship with the triune God, with other humans and with

nonhuman beings. Both food and theology have to do with sharing, with specific acts of love. Both have to do with bringing together the smallest daily acts and structural and cosmological dimensions of life.

I have described how lettuce is part of the everyday practices of our family (though it is more than that) and also described the role of tomatoes in practices of societal resistance and transformation. It seems to me that they work best together, as in the *ensalada mixta*, the humble salad that we eat most days at our house: lettuce and tomato as a basis, with whatever else is on hand tossed in. Theology, at its best, is likewise capable of paying attention to small things without losing its focus on the wider picture—while still being open to the unexpected. It knows, or should know, about the place of lettuce and tomatoes in the work for justice and for the integrity of creation.