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The Unwritten Ballot

by Conner H. Toth

“A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one’s accurate consciousness of the lives and the world from which food comes.” —Wendell Berry, “The Pleasures of Eating”, 1989

Where we live has a great impact on the choices we make regarding food. Living in Porter’s Landing in North Carolina provides me a unique situation. My home there is just far enough from the city to be surrounded by farms, yet it retains the suburban environment of the surrounding area. It sits on the blurred line between urban and rural. My proximity to local farms gives me understanding of nature and the agricultural process, but nearby Charlotte still envelops me into the urban shroud surrounding food production. Enter Wendell Berry.

As a rural farmer himself, he is a strong proponent of the agrarian lifestyle. Big business and the industrial machine are the antithesis of everything he strives for. Subsistence is admired. Berry’s “The Pleasures of Eating” is a remarkable essay exploring what it truly means to *eat*. Introduced by Berry in the first paragraphs is a question concerned urban dwellers are facing about issues in the food movement: “What can city people do?” (227). People were asking this in 1989 when this essay was written. Now the food movement is in full swing, but Berry’s message remains timeless. The answer boils down to a knowledge of and relationship with our food. These values must be instilled in everyone, rural and urban, in order to make eating more pleasurable.

With all the media hype surrounding the environmental and food movements, I expected the answer to this question to involve a number of trendy solutions like donating to causes or shopping at Whole Foods. I’ve seen people unloading such grocery bags in Porter’s Landing. Some people feel like

it makes them “cool”. Is this trendy, “cool” factor really giving us pleasure out of our food? According to Berry, the answer is no. He places the pinnacle of pleasure on one thing: knowledge, stating “a significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one’s accurate consciousness of the lives and the work from which food comes” (234). His argument rests on this thought. Only once we *know* our food will we truly enjoy it.

At first, this idea of knowing where our food comes from scared me. Driving to school every day, I passed open pastures filled with grazing cattle. It was peaceful and natural. It was nice. I didn’t want to think of these animals as my next hamburger, but deep down I knew their inevitable fate. Seeing the pastures was enough. Berry’s notion of knowing where our local food comes from implies to me that I had to know the cows and put a face to what I’m eating. Would I really get pleasure eating something I saw living a week ago? At first, I questioned this, but this is not necessarily the case.

Upon further reflection, the pleasure involved with this knowledge became evident. Let’s go back to that city person. Luckily I’ve lived close enough to farms to appreciate the environment that gives birth to our food resources, but people who have never left the cities may not. Supermarkets are everywhere. Most of them are all the same. Brightly lit aisles lead to luscious looking produce sections while our minds are infiltrated with brand messaging. These are the closest images to a farm that many city folks probably receive. A young child may assume that this is the ultimate origin of food. Most adults have probably never stuck their hands into the rich dirt of an actual farm. There is no way that a supermarket could provide such an experience, and here is where Berry begins to draw his point.

Food has been commercialized. Brands and adverts appear everywhere. We tend to lose focus on what we are eating, instead only consuming what the big corporations feed us through the TV and in-store displays. We see. We buy. We eat. We do not plant the seed, or till the soil, or harvest the crop, or slaughter

the cow. We forget what the stuff we put in our mouths actually is. Berry adamantly affirms that “eating is an agricultural act” (227). It is not commercial. City people must take this to heart in order to provide the help that they yearn to provide. Understanding this notion is what leads to pleasurable eating. This consequently will result in a healthier food system, one that does not give in to the corporate demands of industrial agriculture.

Personally choosing a living cow to be slaughtered and following it through its journey to my plate, as I imagined, is an extreme. Berry does not imply such measures. Instead, he wants us to understand the hands from which the food came. It didn't magically appear in a package. It all started some time ago on a *farm*. Someone worked to make our food, and Berry reminds us to “eat with understanding and gratitude” (234). Small scale farms are disappearing, as America has less than half the number of farmers in this decade than in the 1970s (“Agrarian”). Corporate takeover spells the end of the agrarian way of life that Berry has come to love. Soon massive farms will eliminate the traditional small American farmstead. In order to have a sustainable system, everyone must acknowledge that fact, even city people. Thankfully, I was able to meet a truly agrarian farmer.

Last fall, I visited the Ohio farm of one of Berry's friends, David Kline. His Amish homestead in rural Holms County exemplifies the agrarian lifestyle Berry supports. Kline knows his land. He works the land from which he gets his food. He lives the life of a farmer. In speaking with Kline, he told me he couldn't be happier. He is the definition of what Berry wants us to understand. The introduction to one of Kline's books, *Letters from Larksong*, was in fact written by Wendell Berry.

Kline's happiness was best demonstrated for me through the fresh milk he produces on his farm. Though small scale (maybe 50 head of cattle), his dairy is his most important agricultural possession. Amish principles dictate production, and David Kline oversees the entire process, from birth to milking.

One of the great advantages of growing up on an Amish dairy is the ability to drink fresh, unpasteurized milk. Kline literally grew up on it and also swears by it. He says it is like natural ice cream that he took straight from the cow. For safety concerns, he is not even allowed to sell it. Maybe it's too good.

I was lucky enough to judge that for myself though. Kline let me sample some of the milk from his farm. It was unlike anything I had ever drunk. Whole milk usually repulses me, but this was different. I was looking at the cows from which it came. I knew who milked it. It was a pleasant experience. Upon reliving this memory, I began to understand what Berry meant. Other examples soon began flooding my mind: eating green beans from our backyard garden, sampling local produce from the farmers' market. Eating pleasure soon began to make sense.

Contrasting memories also appear. Shipley Farms is a larger scale conventional dairy. Such farms had always been a mystery to me. When I drink commercial milk, I like to picture the cows I saw at Kline's farm, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. Shipley's cows are not allowed to roam pasture. They stand in hot barns and are led to cramped milking parlors three times a day. I felt bad for those cows. The most striking thing learned at that farm, however, is that the Shipleys do not even drink their own milk. Owning hundreds of cows, I would think that they would take advantage of their livelihood by drinking their own product, but no. They get milk from the supermarket like everyone else. Why would this be? The answer was never made clear to me. A great mystery remains.

Another great mystery in my life has always been school cafeteria food. During my elementary school days, I rarely ate the school food. I didn't know who was making it. I didn't know from where it came. It too, repulsed me. The pieces of Berry's message are beginning to come together. Eating at school was always a forced act of going through the line and getting some food from who-knows-where. Even through high school, I would end up buying commercial, packaged

junk food like Pop Tarts and chips. I didn't know where the frozen foods came from, and I didn't like eating them, exemplifying Berry's ideas. Eating Pop Tarts and frozen fruit is far from an agricultural act, and I resented it. I ignored its origins, preferring not to think about it. Though homemade food is typically of higher quality, I'm sure that urban shoppers maintain a similar ignorance.

Even though high-end grocers like Whole Foods offer local food, patrons still may not be *conscious* of the people and places that generate the food. It's easy to go into a store and simply forget about the farmer. I pick out what I think will taste the best. Farmers rarely cross my mind. Foods labeled "local" still don't tell me a thing about the family farm that it came from. Quite possibly, such local food could still be coming from an unsustainable mega-farm that just so happens to be a few miles away. There is no personal contact.

Supermarkets eliminate the notion of *relationships*. The whole world is connected. Agriculture should be dictated by the intimate bond between man and nature, not supermarket demand. Michal Pollan, a writer and food activist in his own regard, expands on this relationship throughout his introduction to Berry's collection of essays, titled *Bringing It to the Table*. He mentions that Berry acknowledges that every aspect of agriculture, from soil to man, is all part of one "great subject" (xi). Of course, city dwellers cannot have a direct relationship with the soil, but perhaps another kind of relationship is eminently possible.

General Stanley McChrystal (Ret. US Army) is the former commander of America's troops in Afghanistan. Though his retirement was marred by controversy, he is still a proven leader in completing large, difficult objectives. In a recent lecture I attended, he stressed the importance of interpersonal relationships. He said the key to achieving success in a campaign is building relationships among all constituents involved. According to McChrystal, such relationships are not just applicable to military conflicts. He used the same strategy in raising a teenage son (McChrystal). I believe it can also be applied to

the food movement, and this is what Wendell Berry wants us to see. The economic bond between producer and consumer is inseparable. So too, should be the relationship between farmer and family.

Part of knowing where food comes from is knowing who makes it. So-called city people can best make this happen by getting food straight from the source: the farmer. This can be achieved in multiple ways. The first is farmers markets. Community events like these markets help to foster that relationship between the farmer and the person eating the food. Many cities have markets in town where the surrounding rural farmers can come to sell their goods. Even smaller towns like Granville and Harrisburg, North Carolina, have significant markets. In fact, one farmer at my local market in Harrisburg is also a faculty member at my high school. These farmers have deep ties in the community, and supporting them will not only provide us eating pleasure, but it will also stimulate the local economy.

Another way to easily get local food is lesser known but becoming increasingly popular (Meador). Community Supported Agriculture programs (CSAs) provide a great opportunity to build relationships with the farmer ("Community"). Most CSAs work like this: the customer chooses a participating farm, pays a seasonal fee to support the farm, and in return receives a share of produce harvested during that period. The customer gets fresh food, straight from the source, but also supports the farm and understands the risk if the harvest is not as plentiful as anticipated. Such programs usually require them to meet the farmer to pick up the food (Meador). Just by purchasing a CSA, one is already making contact with the farmer and is thus one step closer to achieving food pleasure.

A CSA is just the kind of program that I think Wendell Berry hopes for. When "The Pleasures of Eating" was published in 1989, CSAs were virtually nonexistent. In fact, the movement originated from just two New England CSAs in 1986, growing to 1700 nationwide in 2004, and more since then (McFadden).

Though CSA proliferation shows progress, Berry's message from twenty three years ago still holds true. Our choices are critical. Land Stewardship Project member-farmer Tom Frantzen resoundingly states "When people make a buying choice they are casting a ballot for the type of food system they want. That sends a tremendously powerful message back to rural America about what sort of farming is valued" ("Community"). Wendell Berry makes a very similar point regarding food politics in "The Pleasures of Eating", calling on consumers who share the dream of a better food economy to become active in dictating its direction.

Making responsible choices is the only way to escape the grasp of industrial food, and this the only way to get pleasure. He goes as far as to say that "one reason to eat responsibly is to live free" (229). In America, the epitome of happiness is freedom. After all, we have this "American Dream". Freedom and food are intrinsically tied. Being conscious of what we put on our tables liberates us from the system. Once liberated, we can enjoy pleasurable eating. Berry's words tell me that this can never be achieved unless we eat responsibly. That is a big challenge, but it exemplifies Berry's passion for the continuance of the agrarian lifestyle for posterity.

I enjoy living near farms. Farms provide us life through food. They are as important to us as water and air. The government has passed acts protecting water and air, like the Clean Water Act, but I make the argument that the agrarian lifestyle also deserves such protection. One way to do this is for each of us to do our part, as Berry would want. He lists seven steps to get this started, from preparing the food to dealing personally with farmers. No steps involve industrial farming (232). Man and nature are inextricably bonded, and that bond shall not be severed. Industrial food is not grown naturally, instead being full of chemicals and dictated by mechanical processes ("Agrarian"). Blindly purchasing industrial food only contributes to the "divorce that the industrial economy has achieved between itself and all ideals and standards

outside itself," as Berry explains in "A Defense of the Family Farm" (38). Essentially he is saying that industrial food is morally and ethically wrong. It intentionally separates humans from the food itself. It seeks to mechanize it and extract it like any other resource ("Agrarian"). No pleasure is to be expected from this. That is what Berry wants us to recognize.

Though Berry has been working towards this goal for decades, I think we are closer than ever. Thanks to his writings, I have now made the connection between food and life that he would want me to. Last summer, I wanted to join a CSA just because I thought that it would be cool. I thought I would like the food better. Now the true pleasure is evident. Natural, local food would indeed taste better, but now I know a CSA's important contributions to our global community. It is not just about looking good, or tasting good, or helping a farmer friend. Making these choices is about freedom and preserving a disappearing lifestyle. Berry knows that landless men have never had much power. Industrial agriculture seeks to make every farmer landless ("Agrarian"). Only a farmer like Berry can nurture the land. I want the land around Porter's Landing to be nourished and abundant with food that makes us happy. In order to do this we must build a knowledgeable relationship with the agrarian process. Earth is one big system, and we must not lose the love for the land that local farmers provide. Without this love, no one will be happy.

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