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Integrity and the Real World

Mike Mitchell

Mitchell's Homemade Ice Cream

It's been a year since I spoke to students at Case Western Reserve University's integrity week. Now I can't quite remember what I said. This forgetting represents an intentional striving in my life as a whole person and as a small ice cream business-owner: To grow ever further upward and outward (mentally!), as if rising and traveling slowly but steadily in a hot air balloon. Since I can't quite remember what the scenery and thoughts were from a year ago, I'll have to say a little about where I am now.

The world right now is crazy—fiercely, absurdly, horrifyingly so. In some places people want to cut the heads off of other people whom they know nothing about. In some places children die by the tens of thousands simply because they lack clean water. In some places those who wish to be leaders of the world say things like they want to drop so many bombs onto the helpless people of a poor country that the ground will glow. In some places material goods are ample but loneliness and depression afflict large swaths of the population like a medieval plague. What can I do about these kinds of things? Not a whole lot. Inexorable interplaying forces that are no smaller or weaker than enormous cloud formations as seen from weather satellites are conspiring to bring these sad human storms about, and a mere person such as I cannot halt them. The world is not what it should be. It never will be. An observant and sensitive person needs to make her mind up to this fact or risk going sadly crazy herself.

But here is what I *can* do: I can take my little piece of the world and make it right. I can make myself right. This way I can selfishly occupy an oasis of decency and therapeutically exercise some measure of clear control. I can even hope to be that piercing air current in the atmosphere that, seen in isolation, seems to part the storm clouds and make room for the sun to shine. Here, I will discuss the piece of my little world that is my job: cofounder and co-owner, along with my brother, Pete, of Mitchell's Ice Cream.

Mitchell's was begun by us in 1999, when I was a twenty-two-year-old recent graduate of Ohio State with a degree in philosophy. Seventeen years later, Mitchell's has eight ice cream shops and sells its ice creams through

about 45 grocery stores and 65 restaurants, all in the Cleveland area. Each year Mitchells' 200 or so employees and I float higher and further out in our hot air balloon, at a speed usually imperceptibly slow, until we look out and notice scenery that somehow is newly satisfying. Yet we never arrive at a destination. We don't even know what a destination would be.

Here we will look at two of the handful of primary activities we do at Mitchell's: 1) buying ingredients, and 2) selling and serving ice cream to the general public. We will look at some examples of what it means to do each of them rightly, judging the rightness of each activity by the desirability of its consequences, as measured by overall human feeling over time. These consequences, good or bad, reach as far into the future and in as many directions as one has the courage to see.

It can be overwhelmingly easy to choose not to notice the effects of what we do, and thereby to carry on as if those consequences don't exist. As Plato quotes Hesiod:

Vice in abundance is easy to get;
The road is smooth and begins beside you,
But the gods have put sweat between us and virtue,
And a road that is long, rough, and steep. [Last line by Plato.]

Consequences are especially easy to not see when they are borne out slowly or on a scale too large to see with our normal eyesight. In not noticing, alarm bells don't sound; police officers don't knock on one's door. But the consequences of our activities absolutely do exist, regardless of whether we care to see them or whether we commit the time and effort to search them out. Here we will keep this exercise rather short, but however much further we might choose to go in searching out consequences, we cannot expect to ever be done. In my own case, this exercise with no end is a cornerstone of happiness—it is the lifelong act of making my little piece of the world and my self right.

So, what does it mean to buy ingredients rightly? On the most obvious level, it can mean to buy those that taste the best. We diligently work to do that at Mitchell's, every day. We are guided by the belief that when a few ingredients, each of which is exquisite by itself, are artfully combined into a single taste phenomenon, the combination will also be exquisite. So we work to source ingredients that taste like they live in Plato's heaven—instantiations of the Platonic idea of vanilla beans or pecans or cocoa powder or strawberries—and to discover the combinations, proportions,

and processes that lift them even higher as finely orchestrated harmonies of flavor. (With flavors, as with virtually all the denizens of my little world, I forage and farm for beautiful harmonies.)

But buying food ingredients rightly also means understanding the consequences of each purchase apart from taste. To look to see these consequences, we can start by seeing that eating is an agricultural act, as Wendell Berry has said. In looking at the connection between eating and agriculture, we can see that with every food purchase we make we are not only deciding what we will eat that day; we are also helping to determine the future decisions of farmers. We vote with our dollars for the kinds of items we purchase and against the kinds we pass over. At Mitchell's, due to the quantity of our purchases, the effect we can have is thousands of times greater than that of a single ordinary person.

Many questions present themselves. First, are our ingredients farmed nearby, so that they do not require oil to transport them to Cleveland from afar? Oil is largely fungible on the world market, so whether the oil we consume was pumped from a well in the Gulf of Mexico or Iran or Nigeria or Russia, our purchase is a tiny tug of demand that pulls oil from the ground beneath any and all countries and oceans around the globe. Through our oil consumption we effectively fund Russian aggression in Ukraine, Iranian terrorism, egregious corruption in Nigeria, and many other unfortunate activities around the world. Factor in our oil consumption's share of all the occasional major and ongoing minor oil spills, from the Exxon Valdez and the BP Gulf of Mexico to leaked or illegally dumped fracking waste. And factor in the carbon emissions from the burning of that fuel, and the consequences those emissions have, including making the hot and dry parts of the world even hotter and drier, acidifying the oceans, and raising sea level everywhere. Then consider the immense human toll of the drought, famine, and civil unrest that follow. These are some of the consequences of extracting and burning oil.

Over the years, we at Mitchell's have diligently worked to source all of the ingredients that can be grown or raised in our Ohio climate from farms nearby. This includes milk from pasture-based cows; eggs from small organic farms; produce (mostly organic) such as blueberries, apples, peaches, rhubarb, and strawberries; organic grains such as wheat and oats; organic herbs such as peppermint, lavender, and lemon verbena; maple syrup and honey. In the most perfect example of oil conservation, we pick up delicious but imperfectly packaged beer (low-fills, crooked labels, etc.) that our

friends at Great Lakes Brewing Company save for us, a block away from our production kitchen, using only a dolly and the burning of a few calories to get them into our building. Almost as petro-carbon-lessly, we pick up our specially roasted nuts from Hillson Nut Company on Cleveland's west side, just another stop along our ice cream delivery route around town. Of course, getting all these ingredients from nearby doesn't just eliminate or minimize their oil use and carbon footprint. It also gets us nuts roasted that morning and just-picked fruit still warm from the sun in the fields, with no fungicide used to inhibit mold on their journey to us.

Next we can ask of the ingredients we purchase: Are they raised with concern for human health and the environment on which our health depends? Do growers spray poisons on the food and the soil they farm? Insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides have health consequences for many: the farmer; our employees and customers who eat the sprayed foods; our neighbors with wells who drink from the nearby groundwater; the ecosystems of the streams, rivers, lakes and oceans in which we fish and recreate; and all of us Clevelanders who drink and bathe in agricultural runoff in Lake Erie, from which we source our municipal water. We don't see the pesticides being sprayed onto our conventionally grown food, or the agricultural chemicals running off into our streams, rivers, and lakes. But those are merely gaps in our perception. They are there. So, for example, all Americans have agricultural pesticides in their bodies. Most rain in the U.S. contains glyphosate (Roundup). And agricultural runoff into Lake Erie in recent summers has been so severe that toxic algae blooms have turned large swaths of the lake into green swamp that the EPA declared unsafe to drink from even after being treated. In thinking about insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides, it would be surprising if chemicals engineered to kill living organisms were without effect on us. The law of unintended consequences reigns supreme in this as in all human endeavors.

We at Mitchell's have worked diligently over the years to purchase ingredients grown organically both here in Ohio and around the world. From afar we get organic sugar, cocoa, and vanilla beans. Nearby, we can see that the votes we have cast with our dollars in favor of organic farming and against chemical farming are changing the decisions some farmers make. And while we've never put a pencil to paper to quantify this, we know that enormous quantities of chemical insecticides, fungicides, herbicides, and fertilizers have been saved from use by our ongoing purchases of organic ingredients and pasture-based milk, and have thereby been kept out of the

bodies of farmers, out of the water we drink and bathe and recreate in, and off of the food we eat. The health consequences of this are hard to specify, but I have no doubt they are significant.

Humankind can be thought of as divisible into those who make messes and those who try to clean them up. In looking at messes that have been created over the last few decades in agriculture, we can see that powerful commercial interests, operating within the laws that they have largely shaped, have greased the decision-path that farmers tread in the direction of chemical-based agriculture. For the farmers, chemical-based farming is tempting. Weeding is hard and constant work, soil enrichment is necessary to get yields year after year, and the damage that can be done by insects or disease puts their livelihoods at risk every year. For the rest of us consumers, we are all very busy, and studying agriculture can clearly be less desirable than many other activities available to us in our spare time (watching football, say). I think about my own childhood, and observe that if today's issues concerning food and agriculture had been around then, my working single mother of three would not have had the time to understand which kinds of foods she should have chosen for her family, and why, or which positions concerning agriculture she should have supported in political elections. So, we believe that in addition to effecting change through Mitchells' purchases of organic ingredients, we can also help matters by voicing to our customers and employees the kinds of simple facts that we are outlining here. We at Mitchell's are well-positioned to do this because we have both daily experience with these farming issues and a customer-facing position in the popular food community. We continually find that people are interested in hearing from us about this. We will work to expand our efforts, envisioning the day when "organic" as an adjective for the kind of food people grow and eat will be as superfluous as the adjective "color" is today for the kind of TVs people buy and watch.

Next we can ask: Are the farmers who raise or grow our ingredients treated with dignity? In the extreme negative, we can see that people who grow our everyday foods that originate in tropical climates are often only marginally better off than were slaves in ancient Egypt or Greece or serfs in medieval Europe or slaves in pre-civil war America. We generally assume such indisputably inhumane treatment of laborers was ended in the nineteenth century. Yet today, if we look we can see similar living conditions among people in equatorial countries who grow chocolate, coffee, sugar, coconut, and other staples of our neighborhood gas station food

counters and our ingredient shelves at Mitchell's. In less extreme examples, we can ask, concerning those in our own region and those whom we fly over between the American coasts: Do we have respect for the traditions and virtues of family farming? We can ask, for example, do our eggs and milk come from animals on farms or in factories? What percentage of the profit from each dollar we spend on a pound of flour ends up with the wheat farmer, compared to the seed and agricultural chemicals companies, the commodities traders, the corporate grain processor, and the corporate distributors and marketers?

We at Mitchell's have worked diligently to purchase fairly traded sugar, cocoa, chocolate, coffee, and vanilla. In the lives of millions of farmers in the world's poorest countries, fair trade means decent working conditions, protection of basic workers' rights as human beings, and life-changing better pay. Closer to Cleveland, we have worked diligently to direct our purchases to nearby farmers and producers themselves, thereby putting virtually all of the money we spend for these ingredients into the pockets of people, rather than into the earnings statements of large corporations.

Next we can ask: Is there joy in the relationship between our farmers, our Mitchell's customers, and the employees of Mitchell's? Food and farming have long been one of the most romantic and beautiful subjects of our lives. Stroll the galleries of the world's great art museums and you'll see still life paintings featuring fruits and meats, wheat fields, summer picnics. For us city folk, a drive out to the country amid pastures, fields, and farmhouses feels somehow deeply good. We at Mitchell's have worked diligently for years to connect our farmers, employees, and customers to one another. Our farmers are our friends. They eat our ice creams themselves, and they hear first-hand from other customers and our employees the admiration that many thousands of people have for the artful, important work that they do.

With each passing year, we at Mitchell's have made strides toward making each and all of our ingredient purchases rightly. We take pleasure in our many hard-won successes. But we have much more work to do. On the gliding path of our hot air balloon, we have promises to ourselves and to others to keep, and miles to go before we sleep.

Next let us move to the second primary activity at Mitchell's that we set out to consider: What does it mean to serve and sell ice cream to the general public rightly?

First, it means to offer our ice creams with all members of our community in mind. Specifically, we price our ice creams so that they are

affordable to most people—single parents, families, seniors, and the many others for whom it is not easy to afford the simple pleasure of an ice cream cone. This does not mean we set out to be the least expensive ice cream on the market; for then we would be unable to offer Platonically delicious ingredients sourced with a guiding conscience for all of their consequences, and to afford to go about other important activities rightly, as we wish to do. But it does mean to care more about product and people than about profit. To us it is self-evidently right that all of our neighbors, regardless of their financial means, should eat food that does not contain insecticides, herbicides, or fungicides, and is not made from ingredients supporting slave labor. Such foods should not be considered a luxury reserved for the financially prosperous any more than should be the rights of free speech, police protection, or clean air. While it's an acceptable fact of life that some Americans can afford more expensive shoes than others, and some can afford cars and others cannot, all Americans should be guaranteed that the food they consume is not adulterated with chemical poisons, and without having to opt to pay extra.

Next, we believe that to sell and serve our ice cream to the public rightly means to keep a humble focus on our Northeast Ohio community, and to resist the allure of becoming the biggest company the world will allow us to be. This is at the core of what makes everything we do work rightly, from the way our ice creams taste to the way we employ people to the many other long chains of consequences our activities entail. For example, ice cream is a perishable product that must be transported at a constant sub-zero temperature. To truck it around the country would be to undercut the benefits of sourcing ingredients from nearby; and to pack it in a Styrofoam cooler with dry ice and buy it a spot on an airplane would use even more fuel and release even more carbon. Such long-distance transactions would undercut the meaningful connections we work to cultivate among our customers, our employees, and our farmers. And if we were to triple the quantity of ice cream we need to make, our production kitchen would go from looking like that of the Keebler elves to a Nabisco factory.

Further, we believe that the world is more interesting if it's filled with special places that are unique to each region. We are drawn to the vision of America as a hand-stitched quilt, rather than as a Snuggie with a repeating pattern. Every day we take joy in being a small part of the reason Clevelanders feel exuberantly proud of Cleveland, our little square on the quilt. No Clevelanders feel that pride because of Starbucks or The Cheesecake

Factory or The Gap. Those are polyester fibers in the Snuggie. (Although don't get me wrong—the Snuggie is definitely comfortable.) We encourage people from everywhere to visit Cleveland and enjoy our treasure of restaurants, breweries, coffee shops, ice creams; hear our orchestra; check out our museums and our architecture and our parks. Likewise, we believe the world is better off with other cities having their own unique treasures without Mitchells' interloping.

Over-arching and infusing the decisions I make as a leader of the activities in the Mitchell's hot air balloon is a basic question: Why do this job, or any job, at all? To make the most amount of money that I can? In the words of Joseph Conrad, to increase my share of the world's respect, envy, and applause? I can answer with confidence that in my case, at least, those goals are only a diversion from the path that is personal happiness, and would instead render my life part and parcel of the fiercely, absurdly, horrifyingly crazy world. The reason I do my job is to make my self and my little piece of the world right.