

Eating in ignorance

Reconciliation requires relocation. To see the effects of our food choices, we have to get close to the land.

by [Norman Wirzba](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue

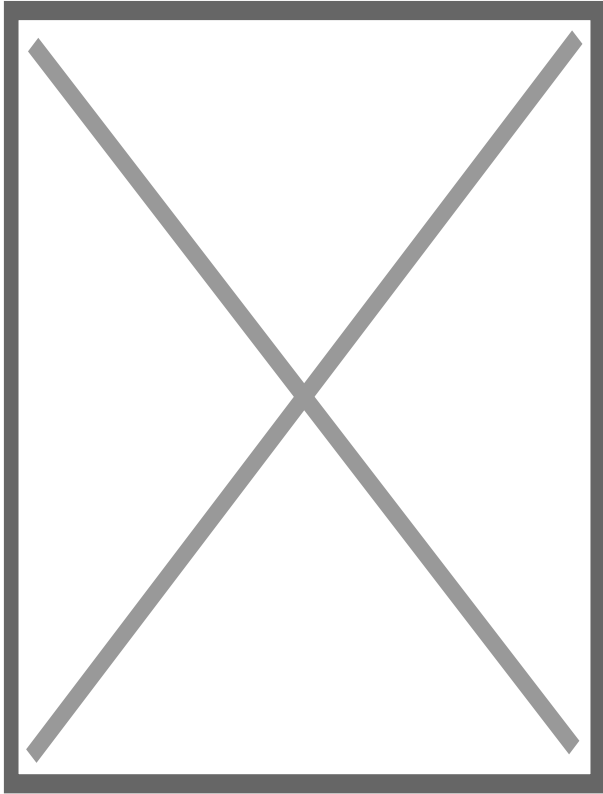


PHOTO BY LYZA DANGER GARDNER (VIA FLICKR), LICENSED UNDER CREATIVE COMMONS

It had been another tough day. When Matthew arrived at his office he opened an e-mail that turned his day upside down. Thinking he was going to put the finishing touches on an overdue report, he instead discovered that a branch office was in crisis mode. He spent the day putting out fires he didn't start.

Matthew was supposed to be home by four so he could prepare dinner for the kids before the night's soccer practice. That didn't happen. Running late, he entered the drive-thru restaurant and picked up an order of chicken nuggets, fries, chocolate milk and apple wedges. They all ate in the car on the way to the practice field. His wife was not happy to see the fast food bags—again. But she is really busy too. In his defense, Matthew showed her the uneaten apples as a sign that he was trying to make the best of the situation.

This scenario is hardly atypical. America has been dubbed the “fast food nation” because relatively few of us have the time to make good eating a priority. The drive-thru lanes at fast food chains have a steady stream of vehicles. Grocery store managers who order the tens of thousands of different food products know that convenience is a high priority for consumers, so they stock multiple kinds of prepared and processed items—“foods” that can be prepared quickly with the push of a microwave button.

Time isn't the only major factor shaping the way our nation eats. The other is cost. Though we expect serving sizes to be large, we also expect the price to be cheap. Owing to the distortions of our industrial food system, it is often cheaper to buy a hamburger than a head of broccoli, cheaper to get a bottle of soda than a bottle of water.

All of our cheap food, however, comes at a very high cost. The sticker price at the store does not reflect the costs associated with eroded and chemically laden soils, poisoned and depleted waters, the burning of vast quantities of fossil fuels, abused animals, abused farmworkers, poorly treated and poorly compensated food-service providers, and the myriad number of diet-related diseases that are causing health-care costs to skyrocket. Our demand for cheap food is slowly degrading and destroying all life on our planet. It is a demand made by a generation of people that is spending the smallest percentage of income on food we have ever known.

A lot of this convenient, cheap food tastes pretty good. Sodium, sugars, fats and artificial flavorings have been generously added to give us a (temporarily) satisfied feeling. But if we could get behind the slick packaging and enticing presentation, we would discover that we have much to be ashamed about. To be ashamed means that we know we have done wrong before one another. It means that we have not treated others in a way that honors and respects their integrity.

But many of us are not ashamed about our eating. The reason? We are not in a position, nor do we take the time, to appreciate how our desire for convenience and cheapness is so destructive of the sources of life. Today's average eater is likely the most ignorant eater in history. How many of us grow any food at all? Relatively few people know where their food comes from or understand the conditions necessary for it to be safely, sustainably and nutritiously produced. Our food industry doesn't want you to know.

I teach a class on eating and the life of faith, and at the opening of each class a different student reports on a favorite food. I've asked them to research where the food comes from and how it is produced and marketed and to assess its nutritional value. Almost without fail they begin their presentation by saying, "Well, I won't be eating this anymore!"

They also report on how difficult it was for them to learn about the food. When food companies are contacted, they rarely give straight or helpful answers. Websites are full of misinformation. The companies don't want you to understand the food. They want you to think their products are fun or sexy or performance enhancing.

The shame of our eating becomes clearer when we consider the chicken nuggets that millions of children like to eat. To be placed on a kid's menu this food item has to be cheap.

To make it cheap the chicken producer has to be paid the smallest amount possible. To raise chickens most efficiently, the producer has to find ways to get more chickens into his or her barns and then get them to butcher weight as quickly as possible. To do that it is best to genetically alter chickens so that their breasts become huge (Americans crave white meat) really fast.

Today's engineered, confined chicken reaches full size in nearly half the time when compared to traditional breeds. The enlarged breasts of these birds become so burdensome that many chickens' legs break under their own crushing weight. It is also important that their diets be supplemented by antibiotics because cramped chicken houses are breeding grounds for disease. It isn't important that chickens have room to roam, because their breasts are so large that walking is difficult. It also makes it easier for them to be caught by the poorly paid (often undocumented) migrant workers who cram them into the cages that will deliver them to a slaughterhouse where they will be disassembled on a factory line.

Very little, if anything, in this process honors or treats these chickens as gifts of God. Industrial methods of chicken production require that they fall within a business logos or logic and production system that stresses

efficiency, uniformity and profitability. If we had the mind of Christ, however, we would have to be thinking about what we can do to make sure that our relationships with chickens contribute to their nurture, health and even delight. Why? Because if Christ is the eternal Logos, the one through whom and for whom the whole world is created (Col. 1:16), and if God's good news has been "proclaimed to every creature under heaven" (1:23), then chickens no less than people are part of his renewing ministry that leads all creatures into the fullness of life. Inspired and shaped by Christ's reconciling life, we must concern ourselves with the well-being of animals, endeavoring to make sure that they are enabled to live the life God intends for them. When we treat chickens the way God expects, which means that we devote ourselves to their care, shame disappears to make room for celebration.

Just as Jesus was known as the one who "welcomes sinners and eats with them," the early Christian community that formed together in faithfulness to him was known for its glad and generous eating. Speaking of the Christian followers formed at Pentecost, Luke records that "day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people" (Acts 2:46–47). We could say that Jesus' eating with them inspired them to eat in ways that bore witness to God's continuing presence in their midst.

Distinctly Christian forms of eating occur when Christ is present within us, enabling us to see, engage and taste the world in ways that are pleasing to him and bear witness to his continuing Spirit-inspired presence among us. As the apostle Paul put it, we should no longer consider others from our own, often self-serving point of view. Instead we should be so attuned to Jesus' way of being with others that we can say, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

One of the central places where intimacy with Christ can develop is around the table Christians call the Eucharist or Lord's Supper. Here Christians eat the body and drink the blood of Jesus so that he can nurture us into the life that bears witness to him. If we are what we eat, then eating Jesus should make us like him.

John's Gospel describes this inner transformation in graphic terms. After describing himself as the "bread of life," Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. . . . for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:53–56). To eat and drink Jesus is to coabide with him. It is to live because of him. When Christ abides in us—by our eating of him—our relationships with others are inspired and directed to take on his characteristics of attention, care, nurture, healing and reconciliation because these are the defining characteristics of Christ's life. The Logos through whom the world is created and made fully alive now enters into us so that we can participate in the ways of genuine life.

For much of the Christian tradition the Eucharist has been understood as a sacrificial meal. This is important because the high point of Jesus' ministry is his offering of himself to the point of death on a cross. The cross is not only an emblem of our violence and shame. It is also where God reveals definitively that true and abundant life consists in the complete and costly giving of oneself to another. The form of life that succeeds by grasping or hoarding or profiteering—all forms abundantly on display in today's food production system and in fast food eating patterns—is precisely the kind of life that Jesus came to correct through his own example. There is no resurrection life without the self-giving that the cross reveals.

The Eucharist, in other words, is not an occasional nibbling session at which Christians recall the violence done to their Lord. It is the table where we go to die ourselves. It is the regular time when we learn to put to death all the self-serving impulses that distort and degrade the world around us. Here we learn to live the baptism in which we die and are buried with Christ so that we can also be raised with him into the newness of life that glorifies God rather than ourselves (Rom. 6:3–11). We die to sin so that we can be alive to God.

John's Gospel describes this sacrificial movement using a metaphor well known to farmers and gardeners: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Jesus is not simply talking about seed. He is talking about the movement and fertility of life itself. God creates a world in which life fully becomes itself only insofar as each creature is a giving member to the whole. There is no life in isolation, fragmentation, alienation or self-withdrawal. This is why Jesus continued by saying, "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25). For us to live in a way that witnesses to Christ's transforming presence within us and that gives glory to God means that we must learn to give ourselves away by offering ourselves to the nurture of others. Put succinctly, at the Lord's Supper we are nourished by Jesus so that we can nourish the world around us.

It is tempting to confine eucharistic eating to a ritual realm. When this happens, the table around which Christians gather stays in a sanctuary and does not translate to our kitchen tables at home or to the dining tables in restaurants and cafeterias. This is a serious error. The life and ministry of Jesus is not a pious idea. It is an economic revolution that has multiple practical effects. Recall that the members of the early Christian community that gladly and generously ate together were also known to sell their possessions, give to those who had need and hold things in common. In a line that ought to astound us, Luke says, "There was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34.) To eat in such a way that we abide in Christ and Christ abides in us means that we will give ourselves—our attention, our skills, our energy and our possessions—to others so that we all flourish together. Eucharistic table manners result in sacrificial forms of living in which the meeting of the needs of others is the defining concern.

We become agents of the gospel "good news" when we become the kinds of eaters the Eucharist makes possible. Eucharistic eating does not only transform the eating we do with people that happens at a particular table, as when we learn to become more attentive and hospitable to each other. It also transforms the entire act of eating, which means it changes the way we go about growing, harvesting, processing, distributing, preparing and then sharing the food we daily eat.

What would self-offering look like if we tried to realize it in today's industrial food system? To answer this question we need to make an important distinction between self-offering and self-imposition. Out of a well-meaning desire to do good or simply get by, it is all too easy to impose a plan on others that we think will be to our mutual benefit. So a farmer may, for instance, look at a field and determine that he or she should grow a lot of potatoes. Growing a lot of potatoes is good because then there is more food to feed the world. To maximize yield the farmer will also use synthetic fertilizers and a regular cocktail of poisons to deal with potato plant pests. This scenario follows the logic of industrial potato production.

What is missing in this logic is the desire first and always to attend to the land. In an industrial system land is simply viewed as a resource to be used to satisfy aims that may or may not be good for the land itself. Here land is reduced to the place where human ambition is imposed upon it. Little thought is given to how the imposition may result in considerable harm to the soil and water and to the health of the plants, animals and humans that nourish themselves in this toxic site. To attend to the land means that a variety of questions need to be kept in mind: How much soil is being eroded or degraded with this agricultural technique? What is the quality of the groundwater in the area owing to the use of a steady stream of fertilizers and herbicides? Are the microorganisms in the soil healthy and thriving, and so daily contributing to the fertility of the soil? What is the nutrient quality of the potato that is grown in industrial conditions? Are the workers in the fields safe and fairly treated and compensated? Answering these questions requires clear and detailed vision. You have to get close and stay there to determine what is really going on.

During the civil rights movement it became apparent that genuine reconciliation between people simply is not possible unless whites and blacks physically relocate so as to be in close and sustained proximity with each other. People need to dwell together in ways that allow them to see and learn each other's pains and joys, their limits and potential. Though legal integration of school districts is possible through the efforts of people who may not deeply know or care about each other, the reconciliation that leads to a beloved community is not possible from a distance or via a bureaucratic logos. Community presupposes people who are ready to offer themselves to each other so that personal desire is overtaken by a desire for the other. It is, following the apostle Paul's formulation, to have the needs, desires and joys of others in me in such a way that my needs, desires and enjoyments in life make no sense apart from the fellowship of the life we live together. Only then can people become the sort of community that functions like an organic body—no member or part alone, but all working together to be a healthy whole.

Reconciliation with the land requires a similar kind of relocation. It presupposes that we get close to the land so that we can see in precise ways both the good and the harmful effects of our decisions and action and thus be in a position to correct the harm and celebrate the good. For too much of human history we have not really attended to or known the land upon which we dwell and from which we nourish our life. In our hubris and neglect we have thus exhausted, degraded and destroyed much of it. In our ambition we have ruined where we are and then moved on to "virgin territory" or "greener pastures." We have not settled our land in ways that indicate our respect and care for other creatures, nor have we given due consideration to the ecosystem limits and potential latent within every habitat. The history of American settlement witnesses to a logos of exploitation in which the machinery of bulldozers, guns, dynamite, dams and poison have been used to impose our will upon the world.

Put in more theological terms, we have failed to appreciate that creation forms a vast and indescribably complex, organic membership. We are only one member within this creation. It does not exist for our exclusive benefit. As God reminded Job, the earth is full of creatures that are of no use to us but are of intimate concern to God: "Who provides for the raven its prey, when its young ones cry to God, and wander about for lack of food?" (Job 38:41). It contains creatures like the mighty Leviathan that can kill us but are a particular delight to God: "I will not keep silence concerning its limbs, or its mighty strength, or its splendid frame" (41:12).

Creation exists for our health and nurture, but it is not made for our exclusive enjoyment. When we become attentive we quickly learn that there is much within it that can harm us, even kill us. Not everything that looks good is edible. We have to be careful, knowledgeable and respectful. We have to learn that sometimes the best thing for us to do is leave some creatures and their places alone. Above all, we need to be willing to make ourselves students of the places where we are so that we can be instructed in the ways of faithful living there. That is where self-offering begins.

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