

Nutrition – Body and Soul

by Elizabeth Simpson and Henning Sehmsdorf

These remarks were prepared for the opening of the national “Farm to Cafeteria: Healthy Farms, Healthy Students,” conference held in Seattle, Washington, on October 4, 2002. They appear here in an edited form for publication. Elizabeth and Henning are both farmers and teachers and have an insider’s perspective and strong personal views on the topics of farm health and the health of students.

The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine recently issued a school lunch report card, according to which three of ten of the nation’s largest school districts “flunked lunch.” Two districts were awarded the grade of D, three a C, one a B and none earned an A for excellence. As Kelly Brownell, director of Yale University’s Center for Eating and Weight Disorders put it, “Our public schools look more and more like a 7-Eleven with books.” We tell our students that their brains work every day only on the power of foods they have eaten that day. You have to wonder what poetry, what mathematical formulas, what dreams are engendered by a Diet Pepsi, which is what some of them have had for breakfast, with little chance of improving their brain food by eating lunch at school.

Lopez Island (in Washington State) is not a wealthy community; at least the segment of the community that has school-age children is not wealthy. Thirty-five percent of the students eat a government subsidized lunch and are, tragically, dependent on the school for the bulk of the nutrition they get during the day. In the year 2000, the school initiated a breakfast program when it became obvious many students would not otherwise eat until afternoon. Today more than 10 percent of elementary, middle and high school students get breakfast in the school cafeteria, and the number is growing.

It is frightening to think that students depend on schools for nutrition, given the existing system by which schools purchase food from commodity sources and price is the main factor determining what foods are purchased and from whom.

Rates of juvenile diabetes, obesity, heart disease, cancer and various learning disabilities are climbing steeply. These young peoples’ future social contribution will be seriously undermined by health problems that will pursue them into adulthood. Numerous press articles say Americans eat too much and exercise too little. But they don’t discuss the low quality of the food available in supermarkets, restaurants, from wholesale suppliers and in school cafeterias. Food sold to the general public is, on the whole, nutritionally deficient; poisoned with high nitrate levels, herbicides and pesticides; and travels, on average, 1,400 miles from field to plate. Large-scale food processing threatens public health with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE or mad cow disease), salmonella and *E. coli*. At least 2,000 Americans die of food poisoning each year.

The cost of poor quality food is not only poor physical health but also intellectual, emotional and spiritual starvation.

The food supply of the global food system fosters impersonality, ignorance and numbness to social responsibility.

Children come to school in order to learn. They graduate knowing about science, mathematics, literature, history and foreign language, but ignorant about the most basic human need: food. They don’t know the corn chips they enjoy are probably

Frankenfoods, created from genetically engineered corn. They don't know the poor little chicken that contributed its nuggets to their cafeteria lunch plate was probably fed arsenic to increase its appetite. They probably don't know their mid-morning cookie contains so many preservatives that its shelf life is longer than their own. They don't know which of 52 possible pesticides rides on that strawberry from California. They don't think about rainforests burning in Latin America when they bite into a hamburger. They aren't taught to calculate the fuel it takes to raise a pound of asparagus and transport it from Washington to Maine. They don't think about the dead sea, now the size of New Jersey, spreading through the Gulf of Mexico, created by runoff from pig and corn farms along the Mississippi. They ingest it with their bacon and cornflakes.

We tell our students to count the social cost of the foods they eat. We tell them as they drive through the Skagit Valley to look at the farm workers picking cucumbers, to think about the pitiful wages these people earn and the toxins they ingest from those fields every day.

Food from local sources, on the other hand, fosters intimacy, knowledge and a sense of social responsibility. Students come to our farm as interns, hired help and as members of an agricultural science class. Some of their families buy meat, vegetables and milk from us. They transplant the seedlings that, just a few weeks later, becomes the salad on their plates. They buck the hay that feeds the cows and sheep through the winter. They smell how sweet it is, and know their labor keeps the animals well fed. They pet the milk cow, feed her apples from the orchard and drink her milk, poured into their glasses only a few hours after the morning milking. They pick up the chickens, gather their eggs and know these birds were not kept in dark cages and force-fed antibiotics and arsenic.

There is an unfortunate notion in our country that organic foods, responsibly and sustainably grown, are a privilege of the rich because they cost too much for poor and middle class families and school cafeterias to buy. But the cost of health care for heart disease, cancer, diabetes and obesity must be factored in. The cost of malnourished children, whose learning ability is compromised by poor diet and whose sense of connectedness and social responsibility are dulled, is high.

We witness the despair of idealistic young people whose heritage is a degraded and poisoned environment, whose government says a patriot's duty is to consume as much as possible and not count the cost.

School lunch programs supplied by ecologically and socially responsible local farms are not a luxury but a necessity.

But there are impediments to a farm-to-school stream of nutritionally wholesome, flavorful, fresh foods produced in a manner fair to farmers and farm laborers which builds community food security, protects our groundwater from depletion and toxic poisoning and preserves the forests upon which the climate system of the whole world depends.

The first impediment is ignorance. Most people in the US, including state politicians, school board members, administrators, teachers, parents and students, have been indoctrinated by advertisers and other opinion makers to prioritize price, convenience and choice over quality, nutrition, freshness, seasonality and social responsibility. The American public believes food should not cost more than 15 percent of their budget. They shake their heads over the demise of small family farms, but they don't realize that their food dollars shape agriculture in this country and around the world. In Sweden, by

contrast, people generally expect to spend 30 percent of their budgets on food and are much more aware of the health and environmental effects of a superior diet.

Another impediment to healthy foods in school cafeterias is government policy and regulation, which requires school food purchasers to choose food on the basis of price only, without considering quality. This compromises the primary responsibility of serving the students.

There is no panacea for breaking down the economic and political barriers to local food production for children, short of a complete overhaul of fundamental cultural values. However, this isn't impossible.

Fifty years ago, this country still largely fed itself on the produce of small farms, marketed locally. The change from family farms to agribusinesses happened after the Second World War. The organic food movement, only 20 years ago regarded as a fringe phenomenon, now is the fastest growing sector in American agriculture. Even though the organic label has been co-opted by agribusinesses looking to cash in, it is quietly being redefined by growers. As author and educator Joan Dye Gussow put it, "When we said 'organic' we meant 'local.' We meant 'healthful.' We meant being true to the ecologies of our regions. We meant mutually respectful growers and eaters. We meant social justice and community."

Gene Logsdon notes that while there are only 2.2 million farms remaining in the US today, many of them are small family farms. Logsdon argues that the future of agriculture belongs to small scale food production because it is inherently more sustainable and people throughout the country are beginning to understand what quality food means. Mega-farms cannot supply it. He places hope in a growing number of specialty farmers with roots in urban, rather than traditional rural culture, who bring to the land "the traditional farmer's reverence for and stewardship of, the soil entrusted to him." He sees this as a historic shift.

Logsdon looks to homesteaders and gardeners in America (of which there are more than 30 million) who sell nothing on the commodity market but supply themselves and their communities with wholesome food, the value of which exceeds the profits in all commercial agriculture.

He also looks to the burgeoning animal rights movement to support small local farms producing meat from animals raised more humanely and naturally than large confinement factories. He predicts feedlots and large-scale processing plants will be phased out as fewer people eat what these establishments produce or want to live near them.

Finally, Logsdon also looks to the part-time family farms.

To improve not only the physical but social and spiritual health of children, legislators, county commissioners, school administrators, cafeteria personnel, teachers, parents and community members must make children's health a priority. Individuals must value food differently. All of us need to learn to think differently about food budgets, and federal and local regulations that prevent purchasing the best local food available must change. Students must be taught about the community's collective responsibility to procure food for all in a way that is healthful locally and globally.

What is needed is not only decent food in the school cafeteria but food for the mind, heart, classroom and community. We need school gardens and school farms, as much as local farms, to supply school lunches and a deep, participatory knowledge of how needs for food and fiber are met.

The three most fundamental human needs are food, shelter and love. Food is more than carbohydrates, fats, vitamins, minerals and protein to fuel body and mind but a sacrament connecting us profoundly to the soil and water in which it was grown and to the sun, wind and rain that supplied the energies to grow it. The ways we grow food should celebrate that connection.

This is possible. The responsibility lies with all of us: legislators, farmers, school administrators, teachers, parents, students: the entire community. The responsibility is ours, and it is yours.