

# GLOBAL ISSUES MOBILE



## Readings on Sustainability

A Presentation on Food Security, Urban Sustainability  
& Horticulture Enterprise Zones

Compiled for **I-Open Civic Forums** by

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## Table of Contents

1. <a href="#">The Oil We Eat</a> by Robert Manning	3
2. <a href="#">It's Capitalism or a Habitable Planet</a> by Robert Newman	14
3. <a href="#">An Eyewitness to Sustainability &amp; Its Lost</a> by Betty Quick	17
4. <a href="#">Not Enough to Save the World</a> by Natasha Walter	23
5. <a href="#">Upchuck Rebellion</a> by Jim Hightower	26
6. <a href="#">White on Black</a> by Carol Estes	32
7. <a href="#">Black on White</a> by Robert Jeffrey	35

# The Oil We Eat

## Following the food chain back to Iraq

*The secret of great wealth with no obvious source is some forgotten crime, forgotten because it was done neatly. —Balzac*

The journalist's rule says: follow the money. This rule, however, is not really axiomatic but derivative, in that money, as even our vice president will tell you, is really a way of tracking energy. We'll follow the energy.

We learn as children that there is no free lunch, that you don't get something from nothing, that what goes up must come down, and so on. The scientific version of these verities is only slightly more complex. As James Prescott Joule discovered in the nineteenth century, there is only so much energy. You can change it from motion to heat, from heat to light, but there will never be more of it and there will never be less of it. The conservation of energy is not an option, it is a fact. This is the first law of thermodynamics.

Special as we humans are, we get no exemptions from the rules. All animals eat plants or eat animals that eat plants. This is the food chain, and pulling it is the unique ability of plants to turn sunlight into stored energy in the form of carbohydrates, the basic fuel of all animals. Solar-powered photosynthesis is the only way to make this fuel. There is no alternative to plant energy, just as there is no alternative to oxygen. The results of taking away our plant energy may not be as sudden as cutting off oxygen, but they are as sure.

Scientists have a name for the total amount of plant mass created by Earth in a given year, the total budget for life. They call it the planet's "primary productivity." There have been two efforts to figure out how that productivity is spent, one by a group at Stanford University, the other an independent accounting by the biologist Stuart Pimm. Both conclude that we humans, a single species among millions, consume about 40 percent of Earth's primary productivity, 40 percent of all there is. This simple number may explain why the current extinction rate is 1,000 times that which existed before human domination of the planet. We 6 billion have simply stolen the food, the rich among us a lot more than others.

Energy cannot be created or canceled, but it can be concentrated. This is the larger and profoundly explanatory context of a national-security memo George Kennan wrote in 1948 as the head of a State Department planning committee, ostensibly about Asian policy but really about how the United States was to deal with its newfound role as the dominant force on Earth. "We have about 50 percent of the world's wealth but only 6.3 percent of its population," Kennan wrote, "In this situation, we cannot fail to be the object of envy and resentment. Our real task in the coming period is to devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security. To do so, we will have to dispense with all sentimentality and day-

dreaming; and our attention will have to be concentrated everywhere on our immediate national objectives. We need not deceive ourselves that we can afford today the luxury of altruism and world-benefaction.”“The day is not far off,” Kennan concluded, “when we are going to have to deal in straight power concepts.”

If you follow the energy, eventually you will end up in a field somewhere. Humans engage in a dizzying array of artifice and industry. Nonetheless, more than two thirds of humanity’s cut of primary productivity results from agriculture, two thirds of which in turn consists of three plants: rice, wheat, and corn. In the 10,000 years since humans domesticated these grains, their status has remained undiminished, most likely because they are able to store solar energy in uniquely dense, transportable bundles of carbohydrates. They are to the plant world what a barrel of refined oil is to the hydrocarbon world. Indeed, aside from hydrocarbons they are the most concentrated form of true wealth—sun energy—to be found on the planet.

As Kennan recognized, however, the maintenance of such a concentration of wealth often requires violent action. Agriculture is a recent human experiment. For most of human history, we lived by gathering or killing a broad variety of nature’s offerings. Why humans might have traded this approach for the complexities of agriculture is an interesting and long-debated question, especially because the skeletal evidence clearly indicates that early farmers were more poorly nourished, more disease-ridden and deformed, than their hunter-gatherer contemporaries. Farming did not improve most lives. The evidence that best points to the answer, I think, lies in the difference between early agricultural villages and their pre-agricultural counterparts—the presence not just of grain but of granaries and, more tellingly, of just a few houses significantly larger and more ornate than all the others attached to those granaries. Agriculture was not so much about food as it was about the accumulation of wealth. It benefited some humans, and those people have been in charge ever since.

Domestication was also a radical change in the distribution of wealth within the plant world. Plants can spend their solar income in several ways. The dominant and prudent strategy is to allocate most of it to building roots, stem, bark—a conservative portfolio of investments that allows the plant to better gather energy and survive the downturn years. Further, by living in diverse stands (a given chunk of native prairie contains maybe 200 species of plants), these perennials provide services for one another, such as retaining water, protecting one another from wind, and fixing free nitrogen from the air to use as fertilizer. Diversity allows a system to “sponsor its own fertility,” to use visionary agronomist Wes Jackson’s phrase. This is the plant world’s norm.

There is a very narrow group of annuals, however, that grow in patches of a single species and store almost all of their income as seed, a tight bundle of carbohydrates easily exploited by seed eaters such as ourselves. Under normal circumstances, this eggs-in-one-basket strategy is a dumb idea for a plant. But not during catastrophes such as floods, fires, and volcanic eruptions. Such catastrophes strip established plant communities and create opportunities for wind-scattered entrepreneurial seed bearers. It is no accident that no matter

where agriculture sprouted on the globe, it always happened near rivers. You might assume, as many have, that this is because the plants needed the water or nutrients. Mostly this is not true. They needed the power of flooding, which scoured landscapes and stripped out competitors. Nor is it an accident, I think, that agriculture arose independently and simultaneously around the globe just as the last ice age ended, a time of enormous upheaval when glacial melt let loose sea-size lakes to create tidal waves of erosion. It was a time of catastrophe.

Corn, rice, and wheat are especially adapted to catastrophe. It is their niche. In the natural scheme of things, a catastrophe would create a blank slate, bare soil, that was good for them. Then, under normal circumstances, succession would quickly close that niche. The annuals would colonize. Their roots would stabilize the soil, accumulate organic matter, provide cover. Eventually the catastrophic niche would close. Farming is the process of ripping that niche open again and again. It is an annual artificial catastrophe, and it requires the equivalent of three or four tons of TNT per acre for a modern American farm. Iowa's fields require the energy of 4,000 Nagasaki bombs every year.

Iowa is almost all fields now. Little prairie remains, and if you can find what Iowans call a "postage stamp" remnant of some, it most likely will be a cornfield. This allows an observation. Walk from the prairie to the field, and you probably will step down about six feet, as if the land had been stolen from beneath you. Settlers' accounts of the prairie conquest mention a sound, a series of pops, like pistol shots, the sound of stout grass roots breaking before a moldboard plow. A robbery was in progress.

When we say the soil is rich, it is not a metaphor. It is as rich in energy as an oil well. A prairie converts that energy to flowers and roots and stems, which in turn pass back into the ground as dead organic matter. The layers of topsoil build up into a rich repository of energy, a bank. A farm field appropriates that energy, puts it into seeds we can eat. Much of the energy moves from the earth to the rings of fat around our necks and waists. And much of the energy is simply wasted, a trail of dollars billowing from the burglar's satchel.

I've already mentioned that we humans take 40 percent of the globe's primary productivity every year. You might have assumed we and our livestock eat our way through that volume, but this is not the case. Part of that total—almost a third of it—is the potential plant mass lost when forests are cleared for farming or when tropical rain forests are cut for grazing or when plows destroy the deep mat of prairie roots that held the whole business together, triggering erosion. The Dust Bowl was no accident of nature. A functioning grassland prairie produces more biomass each year than does even the most technologically advanced wheat field. The problem is, it's mostly a form of grass and grass roots that humans can't eat. So we replace the prairie with our own preferred grass, wheat. Never mind that we feed most of our grain to livestock, and that livestock is perfectly content to eat native grass. And never mind that there likely were more bison produced naturally on the Great Plains before farming than all of beef farming raises in the same area today. Our ancestors found it preferable to pluck the energy from the ground and when it ran out move on.

Today, we do the same, only now when the vault is empty we fill it again with new energy in the form of oil-rich fertilizers. Oil is annual primary productivity stored as hydrocarbons, a trust fund of sorts, built up over many thousands of years. On average, it takes 5.5 gallons of fossil energy to restore a year's worth of lost fertility to an acre of eroded land—in 1997 we burned through more than 400 years' worth of ancient fossilized productivity, most of it from someplace else. Even as the earth beneath Iowa shrinks, it is being globalized.

Six thousand years before sodbusters broke up Iowa, their Caucasian blood ancestors broke up the Hungarian plain, an area just northwest of the Caucasus Mountains. Archaeologists call this tribe the LBK, short for linearbandkeramik, the German word that describes the distinctive pottery remnants that mark their occupation of Europe. Anthropologists call them the wheat-beef people, a name that better connects those ancients along the Danube to my fellow Montanans on the Upper Missouri River. These proto-Europeans had a full set of domesticated plants and animals, but wheat and beef dominated. All the domesticates came from an area along what is now the Iraq-Syria-Turkey border at the edges of the Zagros Mountains. This is the center of domestication for the Western world's main crops and livestock, ground zero of catastrophic agriculture.

Two other types of catastrophic agriculture evolved at roughly the same time, one centered on rice in what is now China and India and one centered on corn and potatoes in Central and South America. Rice, though, is tropical and its expansion depends on water, so it developed only in floodplains, estuaries, and swamps. Corn agriculture was every bit as voracious as wheat; the Aztecs could be as brutal and imperialistic as Romans or Brits, but the corn cultures collapsed with the onslaught of Spanish conquest. Corn itself simply joined the wheat-beef people's coalition. Wheat was the empire builder; its bare botanical facts dictated the motion and violence that we know as imperialism.

The wheat-beef people swept across the western European plains in less than 300 years, a conquest some archaeologists refer to as a "blitzkrieg." A different race of humans, the Cro-Magnons—hunter-gatherers, not farmers—lived on those plains at the time. Their cave art at places such as Lascaux testifies to their sophistication and profound connection to wildlife. They probably did most of their hunting and gathering in uplands and river bottoms, places the wheat farmers didn't need, suggesting the possibility of coexistence. That's not what happened, however. Both genetic and linguistic evidence say that the farmers killed the hunters. The Basque people are probably the lone remnant descendants of Cro-Magnons, the only trace.

Hunter-gatherer archaeological sites of the period contain spear points that originally belonged to the farmers, and we can guess they weren't trade goods. One group of anthropologists concludes, "The evidence from the western extension of the LBK leaves little room for any other conclusion but that LBK-Mesolithic interactions were at best chilly and at worst hostile." The world's surviving Blackfeet, Assiniboine Sioux, Inca, and Maori probably have the best idea of the nature of these interactions.

Wheat is temperate and prefers plowed-up grasslands. The globe has a limited stock of temperate grasslands, just as it has a limited stock of all other biomes. On average, about 10 percent of all other biomes remain in something like their native state today. Only 1 percent of temperate grasslands remains undestroyed. Wheat takes what it needs.

The supply of temperate grasslands lies in what are today the United States, Canada, the South American pampas, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Europe, and the Asiatic extension of the European plain into the sub-Siberian steppes. This area largely describes the First World, the developed world. Temperate grasslands make up not only the habitat of wheat and beef but also the globe's islands of Caucasians, of European surnames and languages. In 2000 the countries of the temperate grasslands, the neo-Europes, accounted for about 80 percent of all wheat exports in the world, and about 86 percent of all corn. That is to say, the neo-Europes drive the world's agriculture. The dominance does not stop with grain. These countries, plus the mothership—Europe—accounted for three fourths of all agricultural exports of all crops in the world in 1999.

Plato wrote of his country's farmlands:

*What now remains of the formerly rich land is like the skeleton of a sick man.... Formerly, many of the mountains were arable. The plains that were full of rich soil are now marshes. Hills that were once covered with forests and produced abundant pasture now produce only food for bees. Once the land was enriched by yearly rains, which were not lost, as they are now, by flowing from the bare land into the sea. The soil was deep, it absorbed and kept the water in loamy soil, and the water that soaked into the hills fed springs and running streams everywhere. Now the abandoned shrines at spots where formerly there were springs attest that our description of the land is true.*

Plato's lament is rooted in wheat agriculture, which depleted his country's soil and subsequently caused the series of declines that pushed centers of civilization to Rome, Turkey, and western Europe. By the fifth century, though, wheat's strategy of depleting and moving on ran up against the Atlantic Ocean. Fenced-in wheat agriculture is like rice agriculture. It balances its equations with famine. In the millennium between 500 and 1500, Britain suffered a major "corrective" famine about every ten years; there were seventy-five in France during the same period. The incidence, however, dropped sharply when colonization brought an influx of new food to Europe.

The new lands had an even greater effect on the colonists themselves. Thomas Jefferson, after enduring a lecture on the rustic nature by his hosts at a dinner party in Paris, pointed out that all of the Americans present were a good head taller than all of the French. Indeed, colonists in all of the neo-Europes enjoyed greater stature and longevity, as well as a lower infant-mortality rate—all indicators of the better nutrition afforded by the onetime spend down of the accumulated capital of virgin soil.

The precolonial famines of Europe raised the question: What would happen when the planet's supply of arable land ran out? We have a clear answer. In about 1960 expansion hit its limits and the supply of unfarmed, arable lands came to an end. There was nothing left to plow. What happened was grain yields tripled.

The accepted term for this strange turn of events is the green revolution, though it would be more properly labeled the amber revolution, because it applied exclusively to grain—wheat, rice, and corn. Plant breeders tinkered with the architecture of these three grains so that they could be hyper-charged with irrigation water and chemical fertilizers, especially nitrogen. This innovation meshed nicely with the increased “efficiency” of the industrialized factory-farm system. With the possible exception of the domestication of wheat, the green revolution is the worst thing that has ever happened to the planet.

For openers, it disrupted long-standing patterns of rural life worldwide, moving a lot of no-longer-needed people off the land and into the world's most severe poverty. The experience in population control in the developing world is by now clear: It is not that people make more people so much as it is that they make more poor people. In the forty-year period beginning about 1960, the world's population doubled, adding virtually the entire increase of 3 billion to the world's poorest classes, the most fecund classes. The way in which the green revolution raised that grain contributed hugely to the population boom, and it is the weight of the population that leaves humanity in its present untenable position.

Discussion of these, the most poor, however, is largely irrelevant to the American situation. We say we have poor people here, but almost no one in this country lives on less than one dollar a day, the global benchmark for poverty. It marks off a class of about 1.3 billion people, the hard core of the larger group of 2 billion chronically malnourished people—that is, one third of humanity. We may forget about them, as most Americans do.

More relevant here are the methods of the green revolution, which added orders of magnitude to the devastation. By mining the iron for tractors, drilling the new oil to fuel them and to make nitrogen fertilizers, and by taking the water that rain and rivers had meant for other lands, farming had extended its boundaries, its dominion, to lands that were not farmable. At the same time, it extended its boundaries across time, tapping fossil energy, stripping past assets.

The common assumption these days is that we muster our weapons to secure oil, not food. There's a little joke in this. Ever since we ran out of arable land, food is oil. Every single calorie we eat is backed by at least a calorie of oil, more like ten. In 1940 the average farm in the United States produced 2.3 calories of food energy for every calorie of fossil energy it used. By 1974 (the last year in which anyone looked closely at this issue), that ratio was 1:1. And this understates the problem, because at the same time that there is more oil in our food there is less oil in our oil. A couple of generations ago we spent a lot less energy drilling, pumping, and distributing than we do now. In the 1940s we got about 100 barrels of oil back



for every barrel of oil we spent getting it. Today each barrel invested in the process returns only ten, a calculation that no doubt fails to include the fuel burned by the Hummers and Blackhawks we use to maintain access to the oil in Iraq.

David Pimentel, an expert on food and energy at Cornell University, has estimated that if all of the world ate the way the United States eats, humanity would exhaust all known global fossil-fuel reserves in just over seven years. Pimentel has his detractors. Some have accused him of being off on other calculations by as much as 30 percent. Fine. Make it ten years. Fertilizer makes a pretty fine bomb right off the shelf, a chemistry lesson Timothy McVeigh taught at Oklahoma City's Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995—not a small matter, in that the green revolution has made nitrogen fertilizers ubiquitous in some of the more violent and desperate corners of the world. Still, there is more to contemplate in nitrogen's less sensational chemistry.

The chemophobia of modern times excludes fear of the simple elements of chemistry's periodic table. We circulate petitions, hold hearings, launch websites, and buy and sell legislators in regard to polysyllabic organic compounds—polychlorinated biphenyls, polyvinyls, DDT, 2-4d, that sort of thing—not simple carbon or nitrogen. Not that agriculture's use of the more ornate chemistry is benign—an infant born in a rural, wheat-producing county in the United States has about twice the chance of suffering birth defects as one born in a rural place that doesn't produce wheat, an effect researchers blame on chlorophenoxy herbicides. Focusing on pesticide pollution, though, misses the worst of the pollutants. Forget the polysyllabic organics. It is nitrogen—the wellspring of fertility relied upon by every Eden-obsessed backyard gardener and suburban groundskeeper—that we should fear most.

Those who model our planet as an organism do so on the basis that the earth appears to breathe—it thrives by converting a short list of basic elements from one compound into the next, just as our own bodies cycle oxygen into carbon dioxide and plants cycle carbon dioxide into oxygen. In fact, two of the planet's most fundamental humors are oxygen and carbon dioxide. Another is nitrogen.

Nitrogen can be released from its “fixed” state as a solid in the soil by natural processes that allow it to circulate freely in the atmosphere. This also can be done artificially. Indeed, humans now contribute more nitrogen to the nitrogen cycle than the planet itself does. That is, humans have doubled the amount of nitrogen in play.

This has led to an imbalance. It is easier to create nitrogen fertilizer than it is to apply it evenly to fields. When farmers dump nitrogen on a crop, much is wasted. It runs into the water and soil, where it either reacts chemically with its surroundings to form new compounds or flows off to fertilize something else, somewhere else.

That chemical reaction, called acidification, is noxious and contributes significantly to acid rain. One of the compounds produced by acidification is nitrous oxide, which aggravates the

greenhouse effect. Green growing things normally offset global warming by sucking up carbon dioxide, but nitrogen on farm fields plus methane from decomposing vegetation make every farmed acre, like every acre of Los Angeles freeway, a net contributor to global warming. Fertilization is equally worrisome. Rainfall and irrigation water inevitably washes the nitrogen from fields to creeks and streams, which flows into rivers, which floods into the ocean. This explains why the Mississippi River, which drains the nation's Corn Belt, is an environmental catastrophe. The nitrogen fertilizes artificially large blooms of algae that in growing suck all the oxygen from the water, a condition biologists call anoxia, which means "oxygen-depleted." Here there's no need to calculate long-term effects, because life in such places has no long term: everything dies immediately. The Mississippi River's heavily fertilized effluvia has created a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico the size of New Jersey.

America's biggest crop, grain corn, is completely unpalatable. It is raw material for an industry that manufactures food substitutes. Likewise, you can't eat unprocessed wheat. You certainly can't eat hay. You can eat unprocessed soybeans, but mostly we don't. These four crops cover 82 percent of American cropland. Agriculture in this country is not about food; it's about commodities that require the outlay of still more energy to become food.

About two thirds of U.S. grain corn is labeled "processed," meaning it is milled and otherwise refined for food or industrial uses. More than 45 percent of that becomes sugar, especially high-fructose corn sweeteners, the keystone ingredient in three quarters of all processed foods, especially soft drinks, the food of America's poor and working classes. It is not a coincidence that the American pandemic of obesity tracks rather nicely with the fivefold increase in corn-syrup production since Archer Daniels Midland developed a high-fructose version of the stuff in the early seventies. Nor is it a coincidence that the plague selects the poor, who eat the most processed food.

It began with the industrialization of Victorian England. The empire was then flush with sugar from plantations in the colonies. Meantime the cities were flush with factory workers. There was no good way to feed them. And thus was born the afternoon tea break, the tea consisting primarily of warm water and sugar. If the workers were well off, they could also afford bread with heavily sugared jam—sugar-powered industrialization. There was a 500 percent increase in per capita sugar consumption in Britain between 1860 and 1890, around the time when the life expectancy of a male factory worker was seventeen years. By the end of the century the average Brit was getting about one sixth of his total nutrition from sugar, exactly the same percentage Americans get today—double what nutritionists recommend.

There is another energy matter to consider here, though. The grinding, milling, wetting, drying, and baking of a breakfast cereal requires about four calories of energy for every calorie of food energy it produces. A two-pound bag of breakfast cereal burns the energy of a half-gallon of gasoline in its making. All together the food-processing industry in the United States uses about ten calories of fossil-fuel energy for every calorie of food energy it produces.

That number does not include the fuel used in transporting the food from the factory to a store near you, or the fuel used by millions of people driving to thousands of super discount stores on the edge of town, where the land is cheap. It appears, however, that the corn cycle is about to come full circle. If a bipartisan coalition of farm-state lawmakers has their way—and it appears they will—we will soon buy gasoline containing twice as much fuel alcohol as it does now. Fuel alcohol already ranks second as a use for processed corn in the United States, just behind corn sweeteners. According to one set of calculations, we spend more calories of fossil-fuel energy making ethanol than we gain from it. The Department of Agriculture says the ratio is closer to a gallon and a quart of ethanol for every gallon of fossil fuel we invest. The USDA calls this a bargain, because gasohol is a “clean fuel.” This claim to cleanness is in dispute at the tailpipe level, and it certainly ignores the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, pesticide pollution, and the haze of global gases gathering over every farm field. Nor does this claim cover clean conscience; some still might be unsettled knowing that our SUVs’ demands for fuel compete with the poor’s demand for grain.

Green eaters, especially vegetarians, advocate eating low on the food chain, a simple matter of energy flow. Eating a carrot gives the diner all that carrot’s energy, but feeding carrots to a chicken, then eating the chicken, reduces the energy by a factor of ten. The chicken wastes some energy, stores some as feathers, bones, and other inedibles, and uses most of it just to live long enough to be eaten. As a rough rule of thumb, that factor of ten applies to each level up the food chain, which is why some fish, such as tuna, can be a horror in all of this. Tuna is a secondary predator, meaning it not only doesn’t eat plants but eats other fish that themselves eat other fish, adding a zero to the multiplier each notch up, easily a hundred times, more like a thousand times less efficient than eating a plant.

This is fine as far as it goes, but the vegetarian’s case can break down on some details. On the moral issues, vegetarians claim their habits are kinder to animals, though it is difficult to see how wiping out 99 percent of wildlife’s habitat, as farming has done in Iowa, is a kindness. In rural Michigan, for example, the potato farmers have a peculiar tactic for dealing with the predations of whitetail deer. They gut-shoot them with small-bore rifles, in hopes the deer will limp off to the woods and die where they won’t stink up the potato fields.

Animal rights aside, vegetarians can lose the edge in the energy argument by eating processed food, with its ten calories of fossil energy for every calorie of food energy produced. The question, then, is: Does eating processed food such as soy burger or soy milk cancel the energy benefits of vegetarianism, which is to say, can I eat my lamb chops in peace? Maybe. If I’ve done my due diligence, I will have found out that the particular lamb I am eating was both local and grass-fed, two factors that of course greatly reduce the embedded energy in a meal. I know of ranches here in Montana, for instance, where sheep eat native grass under closely controlled circumstances—no farming, no plows, no corn, no nitrogen. Assets have not been stripped. I can’t eat the grass directly. This can go on. There are little niches like this in the system. Each person’s individual charge is to find such niches.

Chances are, though, any meat eater will come out on the short end of this argument, especially in the United States. Take the case of beef. Cattle are grazers, so in theory could live like the grass-fed lamb. Some cattle cultures—those of South America and Mexico, for example—have perfected wonderful cuisines based on grass-fed beef. This is not our habit in the United States, and it is simply a matter of habit. Eighty percent of the grain the United States produces goes to livestock. Seventy-eight percent of all of our beef comes from feed lots, where the cattle eat grain, mostly corn and wheat. So do most of our hogs and chickens. The cattle spend their adult lives packed shoulder to shoulder in a space not much bigger than their bodies, up to their knees in shit, being stuffed with grain and a constant stream of antibiotics to prevent the disease this sort of confinement invariably engenders. The manure is rich in nitrogen and once provided a farm's fertilizer. The feedlots, however, are now far removed from farm fields, so it is simply not "efficient" to haul it to cornfields. It is waste. It exhales methane, a global-warming gas. It pollutes streams. It takes thirty-five calories of fossil fuel to make a calorie of beef this way; sixty-eight to make one calorie of pork.

Still, these livestock do something we can't. They convert grain's carbohydrates to high-quality protein. All well and good, except that per capita protein production in the United States is about double what an average adult needs per day. Excess cannot be stored as protein in the human body but is simply converted to fat. This is the end result of a factory-farm system that appears as a living, continental-scale monument to Rube Goldberg, a black-mass remake of the loaves-and-fishes miracle. Prairie's productivity is lost for grain, grain's productivity is lost in livestock, livestock's protein is lost to human fat—all federally subsidized for about \$15 billion a year, two thirds of which goes directly to only two crops, corn and wheat.

This explains why the energy expert David Pimentel is so worried that the rest of the world will adopt America's methods. He should be, because the rest of the world is. Mexico now feeds 45 percent of its grain to livestock, up from 5 percent in 1960. Egypt went from 3 percent to 31 percent in the same period, and China, with a sixth of the world's population, has gone from 8 percent to 26 percent. All of these places have poor people who could use the grain, but they can't afford it.

I live among elk and have learned to respect them. One moonlit night during the dead of last winter, I looked out my bedroom window to see about twenty of them grazing a plot of grass the size of a living room. Just that small patch among acres of other species of native prairie grass. Why that species and only that species of grass that night in the worst of winter when the threat to their survival was the greatest? What magic nutrient did this species alone contain? What does a wild animal know that we don't? I think we need this knowledge.

Food is politics. That being the case, I voted twice in 2002. The day after Election Day, in a truly dismal mood, I climbed the mountain behind my house and found a small herd of elk grazing native grasses in the morning sunlight. My respect for these creatures over the years has become great enough that on that morning I did not hesitate but went straight to my job, which was to rack a shell and drop one cow elk, my household's annual protein supply. I voted with my weapon of choice—an act not all that uncommon in this world, largely, I think, as a result of the way we grow food. I can see why it is catching on. Such a vote has a certain satisfying heft and finality about it. My particular bit of violence, though, is more satisfying, I think, than the rest of the globe's ordinary political mayhem. I used a rifle to opt out of an insane system. I killed, but then so did you when you bought that package of burger, even when you bought that package of tofu burger. I killed, then the rest of those elk went on, as did the grasses, the birds, the trees, the coyotes, mountain lions, and bugs, the fundamental productivity of an intact natural system, all of it went on.

### **About the Author**

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# It's Capitalism or a Habitable Planet: You Can't Have Both

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Our economic system is unsustainable by its very nature. The only response to climate chaos and peak oil is major social change

There is no meaningful response to climate change without massive social change. A cap on this and a quota on the other won't do it. Tinker at the edges as we may, we cannot sustain earth's life-support systems within the present economic system.

Capitalism is not sustainable by its very nature. It is predicated on infinitely expanding markets, faster consumption and bigger production in a finite planet. And yet this ideological model remains the central organising principle of our lives, and as long as it continues to be so it will automatically undo (with its invisible hand) every single green initiative anybody cares to come up with.

**Capitalism**  
is not sustainable  
by its very nature.

Much discussion of energy, with never a word about power, leads to the fallacy of a low-impact, green capitalism somehow put at the service of environmentalism. In reality, power concentrates around wealth. Private ownership of trade and industry means that the decisive political force in the world is private power. The corporation will outflank every puny law and regulation that seeks to constrain its profitability. It therefore stands in the way of the functioning democracy needed to tackle climate change. Only by breaking up corporate power and bringing it under social control will we be able to overcome the global environmental crisis.

On these pages we have been called on to admire capital's ability to take robust action while governments dither. All hail [Wal-Mart](#) for imposing a 20% reduction in its own carbon emissions. But the point is that supermarkets are over. We cannot have such long supply lines between us and our food. Not any more. The very model of the supermarket is unsustainable, what with the packaging, food miles and destruction of British farming. Small, independent suppliers, processors and retailers or community-owned shops selling locally produced food provide a social glue and reduce carbon emissions. The same is true of food co-ops such as Manchester's bulk-distribution scheme serving former "food deserts".

All hail BP and Shell for having got beyond petroleum to become non-profit eco-networks supplying green energy. But fail to cheer the Fortune 500 corporations that will save us all and ecologists are denounced as anti-business. Many career environmentalists fear that an anti-capitalist position is what's alienating the mainstream from their irresistible arguments. But is it not more likely that people are stunned into inaction by the bizarre discrepancy

between how extreme the crisis described and how insipid the solutions proposed? Go on a march to the House of Commons. Write a letter to your MP. And what system does your MP hold with? Name one that isn't pro-capitalist. Oh, all right then, smartarse. But name five.

We are caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of climate change and peak oil. Once we pass the planetary oil production spike (when oil begins rapidly to deplete and demand outstrips supply), there will be less and less net energy available to humankind. Petroleum geologists reckon we will pass the world oil spike sometime between 2006 and 2010. It will take, argues peak-oil expert Richard Heinberg, a second world war effort if many of us are to come through this epoch. Not least because modern agribusiness puts hundreds of calories of fossil-fuel energy into the fields for each calorie of food energy produced.

Catch-22, of course, is that the very worst fate that could befall our species is the discovery of huge new reserves of oil, or even the burning into the sky of all the oil that's already known about, because the climate chaos that would unleash would make the mere collapse of industrial society a sideshow bagatelle. Therefore, since we've got to make the switch from oil anyway, why not do it now?

Solutions need to come from people themselves. But once set up, local autonomous groups need to be supported by technology transfers from state to community level. Otherwise it's too expensive to get solar panels on your roof, let alone set up a local energy grid. Far from utopian, this has a precedent: back in the 1920s the London boroughs of Wandsworth and Battersea had their own electricity-generating grid for their residents. So long as energy corporations exist, however, they will fight tooth and nail to stop whole postal districts seceding from the national grid. Nor will the banks and the CBI be neutral bystanders, happy to observe the inroads participatory democracy makes in reducing carbon emissions, or a trade union striking for carbon quotas.

There are many organisational projects we can learn from. The [Just Transition Alliance](#), for example, was set up by black and Latino groups in the US working with labour unions to negotiate alliances between "frontline workers and fenceline communities", that is to say between union members who work in polluting industries and stand to lose their jobs if the plant is shut down, and those who live next to the same plant and stand to lose their health if it's not.

We have to start planning seriously not just a system of personal carbon rationing but at what limit to set our national carbon ration. Given a fixed UK carbon allowance, what do we spend it on? What kinds of infrastructure do we wish to build, retool or demolish? What kinds of organisational structures will work as climate change makes pretty much all communities more or less "fenceline" and almost all jobs more or less "frontline"? (Most of our carbon emissions come when we're at work).

To get from here to there we must talk about climate chaos in terms of what needs to be done for the survival of the species rather than where the debate is at now or what people are likely to countenance tomorrow morning.

If we are all still in denial about the radical changes coming — and all of us still are — there

are sound geological reasons for our denial. We have lived in an era of cheap, abundant energy. There never has and never will again be consumption like we have known. The petroleum interval, this one-off historical blip, this freakish bonanza, has led us to believe that the impossible is possible, that people in northern industrial cities can have suntans in winter and eat apples in summer. But much as the petroleum bubble has got us out of the habit of accepting the existence of zero-sum physical realities, it's wise to remember that they never went away. You can either have capitalism or a habitable planet. One or the other, not both.

*Robert Newman's History of Oil will be broadcast on More4 next month*  
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# **An Eyewitness to Sustainability & Its Lost**

**By Betty Quick**

This is my memory of a lost community.

Our neighbor, Sam Bailey, had a woodworking factory in this town of a thousand people where I grew up. During the Great Depression another neighbor, Arlo Davenport, worked in the factory for 28 cents an hour. Arlo and his family lived across the street from Sam and his family. Both wives stayed home. Neither had domestic help. Their houses were comparable although Sam's was a little bigger and had room for an apartment for his elderly mother-in-law. Sam's son had gone to the same school, on foot, that Arlo's son attended later. They walked to the same church. They drank the same water – from Bailey's spring. All of us in the neighborhood drank water from Sam Bailey's spring because it was better than the town water which smelled of chlorine and was sometimes muddy. Usually it was the children who walked down the stone steps to the spring in Bailey's back yard carrying gallon metal "milk" pails to fill. There was no fence and no permission required.

In the mid thirties a union organizer came to town. He failed because he was an outsider and because his portrayal of the factory owner exploiting his workers didn't fit people's perceptions. Sam was part of the community and was not living high off the hog. I don't know if Sam could have paid his workers more. I do know that Arlo's family, though short on cash, had the material necessities plus friends and neighbors, a place in the community and music – Arlo played the guitar

Arlo always had a big garden and his wife, Blanche, canned for the winter filling hundreds of glass jars with the bounty from their garden. They probably ate better than the majority of people do today because the food was grown on living soil without chemical fertilizers or chemical pesticides and it didn't travel hundreds or thousands of miles from farm to table. Most of the wives in town put food by for the winter.

People could buy vegetables fresh from Harley Cornell's large garden. He peddled his vegetables from door to door in his wheelbarrow.

My father had a meat market/grocery store and frequently bought from local farmers, for example strawberries, sweet corn, potatoes and apples. The strawberries often came from Blanche Davenport's father who had a large strawberry patch. Many people saved money by going to the strawberry patch and picking their own. Sometimes my father would buy a side of beef from a local farmer. If a customer asked for a free bone for her dog, he would leave extra meat on the bone because he knew the bone was going into the soup pot. My mother baked pies and cream puffs, which my dad sold. In the fall my father would buy local cabbage and make a barrel of sauerkraut for the store. The manual cabbage shredder had been made by my grandfather Quick.

Grandfather Quick was handy. He made all the concrete blocks for the foundation of our house. He made concrete fence posts. He made screen doors and window screens for us and for many other people in town. They had wood frames and steel screens – this was long

before there were aluminum storms and screens. When FM radio was still in the future, he invented a device to eliminate static from his radio.

Grandfather Quick worked for the Delaware, Lackawanna and Western (DL&W) Railroad. At one time he was in charge of culverts in the area but when I knew him he worked in the DL&W machine shop in Scranton, Pennsylvania. He commuted to and from work every day of his working life, about 44 miles round trip. Each morning he walked three-quarters of a mile up the hill to the station and took the train to work. He carried his lunch in a black metal lunch bucket, which had space for a thermos. His lunch was wrapped in waxed paper bread wrappers that my grandmother saved.

Milk was produced locally because the town was in the midst of dairy country. Farmers brought their milk to one of two local creameries where it was processed, including pasteurizing and bottling – in glass bottles, which were reused. One local farmer pasteurized and bottled his own milk and delivered to customers in town. My dad bought a part interest in a cow, which enabled us to get raw milk, which tasted better and, I learned much later, is better for you. The creameries provided work, as did the feed stores, the farm equipment store, the lumber yard/hardware store and icehouse. Ice was cut in the winter and stored in sawdust in the large icehouse for delivery to home iceboxes the rest of the year. There were active stone quarries. Every sidewalk in town was made of local flagstone.

There was a dump but no garbage collection. We had a garbage can, which we filled with care, because a local farmer came to our house and other houses 2 or 3 times a week to take the contents to feed to his pigs. People with chickens had a homegrown kitchen scrap disposal system. Much biodegradable garbage was composted. Unlike today's aluminum, tin cans rusted away. We had a paper burner in the driveway and every week or two burned the scrap paper. The amount was small because there was virtually no junk mail and only a fraction of the packaging we are burdened with today. There was no plastic.

Most food was processed and prepared at home. No TV, no TV dinners. My mother made her own mayonnaise, cottage cheese, soups, cakes, cookies and pies. In the winter when my dad butchered a pig he had raised, my mother made pig souse. Home-canned food meant that the same glass jars were used year after year. Beer and soft drinks came in glass bottles that were not recycled; they were *reused*. The main beverage in our home was water. I must have tasted a soft drink because I knew that I didn't like it (except for the root beer made by my friend Naomi's mother). If Coca Cola depended on people like me, they'd quickly go bust. The local Italians drank wine, most (all?) of which they made. Each of my grandfathers had a cider barrel. When the hard cider froze in the winter, the remaining liquid was a potent alcoholic beverage. I remember the men drinking some in my grandmother Strickland's kitchen. I tried it. It tasted awful.

Most homes had coal furnaces and cast iron cook stoves that burned coal or wood. Anthracite "hard" coal came from the Scranton area twenty some miles away. When I was still young, my mother replaced her coal stove with an electric stove and her icebox with an electric refrigerator.

My grandmother and grandfather Strickland had a dairy farm. They had a telephone but no electricity, no central heating, no indoor plumbing and no motor vehicles.

When I was in seventh grade our class was taught about the American standard of living, which was the highest and best in the world. By that measure, my grandparents had a low standard of living. Among the things they didn't have were a flush toilet, bathtub, refrigerator, radio, vacuum cleaner, electric lights or a tractor. Although the phrase "quality of life" was unfamiliar to me, I realized that my grandparents had a very good life. Food was more than adequate: it was plentiful and delicious and mostly homegrown. My grandmother's principal food purchases were sugar, salt and 50-pound sacks of flour. In addition to making the things my mother made, my grandmother churned butter, baked all her bread, made ketchup and, of course, put up hundreds of jars of food from the garden she tended and the wild berries she picked. After the morning and evening chores she cleaned the milking equipment. During haying season and when filling silo there would be extra men to feed at midday because the farmers took turns helping each other. She mended, sewed, knitted and crocheted.

Farming was labor intensive rather than energy and resource intensive. There were no combines that did the work of many men although some farm families had tractors rather than horses. Corn was cultivated. Today atrazine, a petro-chemical herbicide, has replaced the work of cultivating. Atrazine contaminates ground water and causes birth defects. Cultivating is benign.

Years later I wondered why my grandmother had more time for her grandchildren than I, with all my modern conveniences, had for my grandchildren. She worked much harder than I did, however she didn't have to commute 3 ½ to 4 hours a day on a stinking (literally) bus.

Many people, including my grandparents, had no motor vehicles, but the lack did not keep people from doing what they needed to do and going where they wanted to go. Grandfather Strickland took his milk to the creamery by horse and wagon. People walked. And almost everything one needed was within walking distance – 2 or 3 grocery stores, bank, post office, 2 doctors, dentist, piano teacher, 2 insurance agents, 2 drugstores, lumber yard/hardware store, greenhouse, Sam Schwartz' clothing store, variety store, 2 barber shops, beauty parlor, funeral parlor, 3 churches, school, movie-theater. There was even a millinery shop run by the Coyle sisters who would make a hat to order. What wasn't available in town one could order from the Sears Roebuck catalog or buy in Scranton, which served 8 hundred square miles or more. Scranton could be reached by train, trolley (light rail) or car. All the stores were locally owned. Heavy items could be delivered.

Trains carried people and goods everywhere – even from the town of 1000 people where I grew up to the smaller town where I was born, 15 miles away. Trains carried the mail, milk, lumber, coal and the products of Sam Bailey's factory. My grandmother's sister, Nan, had married a Manhattan obstetrician. The sisters visited each other by train.

Years later I learned that my grandmother had delivered many babies. If the new mother was in need, grandmother Strickland would take a bundle packed with items for the new

baby. In relation to her wherewithal, my grandmother was much more generous than the Ford Foundation.

Like mayonnaise and maple syrup, recreation and entertainment were largely homemade. My parents loved to dance and once when I was very little they took me along to a local dance hall. The music was live. My father loved fishing, especially fly-fishing. I enjoyed watching him tie his own flies. I helped get live bait for pond fishing. Barefoot and with a flashlight I would sneak up on a night walker (over sized earth worm) that was out of its hole and make a quick grab I remember early morning walks to a wooded area (no more than ¼ mile away) where I would sit and listen to the chorus of birds and try to identify them. There were Sunday school picnics, family gatherings, ice-skating in winter, swimming in summer. Olive Stephens next door played the piano and her husband Jack had a nice tenor voice. I and other neighbors of all ages would gather round and sing. I learned to harmonize. The school was a center of activities: competitive sports, school dances, the yearly operetta, class picnics, the senior play. The local movie theater was open Friday and Saturday nights to any child with 20 cents or adult with 35 cents.

As a teenager I enjoyed square dances – in a barn on the Tiffany farm, in a new chicken house before the chickens took over, round and square on Saturday nights at a nearby Grange Hall, always with live music and a caller.

My father loved sports, especially baseball, and played on a town team for many years. On Sundays they played teams from other towns. Other organized adult activities in this tiny town included a Masonic Lodge, a Rotary Club, bridge clubs, the History Club, Eastern Star, PTA and a garden club. The Grange was an active farmers' organization. There were church related groups.

My parents were not unique in having a sense of civic responsibility. My father was on the school board when the school was expanded and he insisted that the new auditorium/gymnasium accommodate a regulation size basketball court. Rotary, of which he was a founding member, promoted the health of the local business community. My mother volunteered to help with what was called relief. Funds (federal?) were made available and once a month, in our living room, she dispensed checks to those hardest hit by the depression. She was Republican county chairwoman when Gifford Pinchot, who was running for Governor, stopped by our house. "Get the farmer out of the mud" was a campaign promise. When he was elected, he honored his promise!

A sense of civic responsibility did not extend far beyond our area, mainly because of what was and was not covered by radio and the printed word. I'm certain that my parents did not know about the oppression and death caused by U.S. foreign policy in Latin America because it was never mentioned during the frequent political discussions at the dinner table. We did know that Communism and Socialism were bad and that J. Edgar Hoover was a hero and that it was important to bring Christianity and civilization to the less fortunate, most of whom lived in Africa. I knew about leprosy in Africa but not about lynching in the South

From my perspective as a child, the town's greatest shortcoming was the lack of a library. Not only did the town have no library; the school had no library unless a small room with an

uncatalogued assortment of donated books qualifies. Also the school, which had grades one through twelve, did not have a single encyclopedia.

The time was out of joint. Even though our small rural community did not feel the full impact of the Great Depression, it still affected us. Hopes were deferred. Arlo wanted to be a railroad man but during the depression there were no openings. When the depression ended he was 12 years older and he never did realize his goal. Mr. Ayres was a painter. With money tight, people weren't having their houses painted. Mr. Ayres spent his time doing jigsaw puzzles and drinking.

Another reminder of the depression was the hobos who came through town. My father's store was visited more frequently than our home but at whichever place a hobo stopped, he left well fed.

A local currency would have been helpful because so many things, especially food, were produced locally. Was local currency a reality in the thirties?

As indicated above, what the town *did* have was a local community bank, family businesses, organic gardens all over the place, local organic farms, a local supply of milk and milk products, fruits, vegetables, chickens, eggs, beef, pork, lumber, stone, firewood, wood furniture, locally owned businesses, a full array of trades and services, access to an excellent public transportation system and home-grown entertainment and recreation. And people helped each other. It sounds like the basis for a living economy for a living planet.

It's time to reinvent the wheel. This time, when local living economies are achieved, it is important to honor the chalice not the blade not just locally but also on the national level with an economy based on peace and cooperation not war and domination.

### **Postscript:**

Yes, this was all taking place during the Great Depression (and before) but I don't think anyone in Nicholson knew that it "represented a popular defense against the corruption of the financial system". That was part of the problem. We didn't realize what we had and we didn't realize that the financial system was corrupt. My father, who was honest and fair in all his dealings, thought that he and General Motors were alike except that GM was bigger. Had he still been alive he might not have believed the revelation that GM was involved in a self-serving conspiracy to eliminate trolley cars throughout the country.

Another part of the problem was the belief in a certain kind of progress. Progress was having a car so that you didn't have to walk or take the train or trolley.

Progress was television. No need to sing or dance or play ball when you could sit and be entertained by the Lucky Strike Hit Parade and learn to see the U. S. A. in your Chevrolet.

Progress was being able to buy a tomato in winter from some far away place where they had learned to cross a tomato with a rubber ball so that it looked perfect, traveled well and had a long shelf life.

Progress was the bulk milk tank and milk tanker truck, which eliminated local creameries and half the dairy farmers and put more money in the truck driver's pocket than the farmer's pocket.

Even if we had realized that we had a living economy and even if we had defined progress differently (as creating a local library, for example) our local economy and self-sufficiency would have evaporated. Our town of 1000 people could not, by itself, sustain the excellent system of public transportation or influence the economics of milk production. A critical mass of towns, cities and rural areas was needed.

A government that put the well-being of its people above the profits of corporations could have helped.

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# All the Organic Broccoli in the World Won't Be Enough to Save the Planet

*Adopting an ethical lifestyle is meaningless unless we carry its principles outside our own homes and gardens*

**NATASHA WALTER / Guardian (UK) 4mar2006**

When Newsnight launched its "ethical man" experiment a couple of weeks ago, with the aim of transforming the life of one of its journalists, Justin Rowlett, we all knew immediately what "ethical" meant in the phrase. Just as with other ethical makeovers we have seen over the last few years, from the hilariously casual Christa d'Souza in *Vogue* to the impressively thorough Leo Hickman in this very newspaper, there is a clear set of "ethical" goals to be met.

Switch to a sustainable power supply. Get your organic vegetables delivered. Cycle. Recycle. I am as keen as the next Newsnight viewer to go along with those goals, and happily tick the boxes in my own life. I too get a nice warm glow from putting scraps in the compost bin or going to the farmers' market. I too resolve to do even more and be even better next month and next year. And I can see and admire where the most committed proponents of this kind of ethical living want us to go — all the way to a thoroughly Thoreauvian life lived close to the land that would eventually be embraced by everyone in society. In the ideal progression, as you buy your fair-trade coffee and plant your carrot seeds in your wildlife friendly garden, you would become part of a widespread revolution in the way people relate to the land and the market, and seamlessly move on towards a society in which we would live lightly on the land and gently with one another.

I can see that ideal shining out of the writing and lives of a few people, and admire those who live by it in their carbon-neutral homes with their compost loos. Those few have turned their backs on the lifestyle sold to us in travel magazines and fashion catwalks — a lifestyle that looks so brilliantly bright with its transatlantic flights to glittering beaches and endlessly renewed clothes, but is in fact so dirty and leaves a snail's trail of filth across the world. Instead, they are embracing a lifestyle that may look a bit grubbier but is in fact a whole lot cleaner, and that decision is an example for



us all to ponder. But it's important to be honest right now, and say that the way that ethical consumerism seeps into most people's lives is nothing like that, and does not seem to be taking society as a whole any closer to that ideal. Why is that? For a start, for most of us the ethical label is still a brand among other brands, one you can sport now and again.

This pick'n'mix ethical lifestyle is hardly going to start a revolution. You can drink Innocent smoothies while standing in the queue for your transatlantic flight; you can eat locally grown broccoli but be unable to resist the imported blueberries beside it; you can buy a Topshop fair-trade T-shirt alongside a couple of dresses that are so amazingly cheap you just can't imagine how little the women were paid who stitched them. Is it simply a way of taking our minds off the heaps of disposable rubbish that we are buying if we pay for them with our new Bono-endorsed Red Amex card?

While I'm not saying one should junk those shopping decisions, it's possible to be more honest about their limitations. Because it's pretty depressing that so often the personal choices of ethical consumerism, however good in themselves, are seen as all you need in order to get political change going. Of course it is comforting, in this world in which many people have lost faith in collective action and in the response of political parties, to believe that simply by picking something different off the supermarket shelf we have paid our political dues.

The other kind of political action, the kind that involves trying to push other people and governments into making the same choices, is a whole lot harder and more risky. Politicians are clearly responding to this narrowing of the political remit. A politician such as David Cameron totally understands the modern desire to believe that easy, pleasant choices in our homes and shops are all that's needed to create all the change we want.

On the Today programme earlier this week he said there was no need for government coercion of individuals or businesses. "We've all got our roles to play, in terms of the choices we make as individuals, as businesses, as families, but it's not for the government to tell everyone ... we have to travel less, that would be a mistake."

He is the perfect spokesman for this kind of personally oriented ethical living: a figure who cares enough to plan solar panels and a wind turbine on his own Notting Hill house, but doesn't care enough to impinge on the freedoms of others to drive gas guzzlers past the house and fly filthy jets above it. It may be good to believe we can detoxify our own homes and gardens, but it doesn't mean much if we leave the rest of the world choking.

There's also the problem that in much of this debate ethical behaviour is defined by such very narrow parameters. It is very telling that Newsnight's "ethical man" set his goal from the outset as "reducing his impact on the environment". But is this the sum total of ethical living? When I think of the people who have literally made me stop and think about their moral example in the past few months, I know nothing about their impact on the environment. I'm thinking of a man I met a few weeks ago at a friend's house, who had given up a prestigious career in the media for retraining as a primary school teacher in Tower Hamlets. I was struck by what seemed like his absolute integrity in deciding not to keep his own life separate from the people around him. I am thinking of a woman I spoke to



who has taken an asylum-seeker and her baby into her house because the refugee is at risk of deportation and has absolutely no means of support from the government. That's a truly risky ethical action, one that impacts completely on her life. She took it because she felt it was impossible for her to turn her back on a woman in need, while the rest of us would rather hide our heads in the sand when we see such neediness.

It's so hard to confront that kind of ethical living, because dealing with the desperate human needs and the glaring inequalities on our very doorsteps is so much messier and more risky than buying something fair-trade for the sake of the needy far away. And just as there are aspects of personal living that the usual "ethical" remit doesn't speak to, there are pressing political issues that are never going to be affected by ethical consumerism and that therefore risk losing out in a world in which political activity shrinks to shopping. How can our consumer choices speak to issues of how our government tolerates torture of terrorist suspects by its allies, or civilian deaths in its wars, or the poor treatment of refugees?

While this generation may remember Thoreau's poetic and joyful relationship with the land, we tend to forget his night in prison for refusing to pay taxes to a government that was pursuing an unjust war. There are other kinds of ethical action that it is absolutely vital to celebrate, alongside the altogether laudable longlife lightbulbs and reusable nappies.

*Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,,329426569-103677,00.html>  
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# The Upchuck Rebellion

By Jim Hightower, Hightower Lowdown  
Posted on April 6, 2006, Printed on April 6, 2006  
<http://www.alternet.org/story/33950/>

Even though winter is just beginning to release its frigid grip on most of the land, I'm already thinking out of season, looking ahead to one special thing: fresh, ripe, right-out-of-the-soil, good-and-good-for-you summer tomatoes. Oh, I can taste them now! And eggplant, too. And peppers. And all kinds of other edible wonders.

I'm a food guy. I've got a small but richly composted garden plot in my backyard, I'm a regular at several farmers' markets, and I frequent a number of great restaurants here in Austin, Texas. I love poking around food stores of any variety, I like to browse through seed catalogs and cooking magazines, and I always try to sample the local specialties as I travel around the country. I enjoy friendships with quite a few chefs and restaurateurs, and I love visiting with farmers and food artisans who are doing creative things. Though it still pisses off the corporate establishment, I was once the agricultural commissioner of Texas.

I know firsthand about the phenomenal cornucopia of good, fresh, nutritious and delicious food that our country is capable of producing. That's why it knocks me whopperjawed to see the stuff that dominates too many American diets -- an array of industrialized, conglomeratized, globalized products that have lost any connection to our good earth. This stuff is saturated with fats, sugars, artificial flavorings, chemical additives, pesticide residues, bacterial contaminants, genetically altered organisms and who knows what else? Plus, the major factor driving prices is not the cost of any actual food that might still be in these products, but the cost of packaging, advertising and long-distance shipping.

What has caused us to stray so far from the farm, so far from the essential and wonderful sustenance provided by nature itself? The answer, of course, is that the brute force of corporate power has been applied both in politics and the marketplace to pervert our food economy. During the past half century, control over our nation's food policies has shifted from farmers and consumers to corporate lawyers, lobbyists and economists. These are people who could not run a watermelon stand if we gave them the melons and had the highway patrol flag down customers for them! Yet they're in charge, saddling us with a food system that enriches corporate middlemen while driving good farmers off the land, poisoning our productive soil and water supplies, and literally sickening those who consume these adulterated foodstuffs.

## **Revolt!**

Do we have to swallow this? Of course not -- we're Americans, rebellious mavericks -- and the revolt is on! For the past few years, a grassroots movement has quietly but rapidly been spreading throughout the country. I call it The Upchuck Rebellion: a growing number of people fed up with the destructive power of industrialized food are declaring that they're not going to take it anymore.

More than declaring ... they're taking action. Part of this effort is political, trying to get the industrializers and globalizers to clean up their act. At another level, however, America's food rebels are taking on the idea of industrialization itself by creating their own alternative food economies. These are based on local farmers, seasonal consumption, organic and sustainable production, local food processors and artisans, and local markets. The goals are (1) to build a system that delivers tastier, healthier food; (2) to keep a community's food dollars in the local economy; and (3) to treat food not as a corporate commodity, but as a centerpiece of our culture.

Naturally, the Powers That Be have howled in derision at these efforts, sneering that local farmers, consumers, entrepreneurs, chefs, marketers, gardeners, environmentalists, workers, churches, co-ops, community organizers and just plain citizens simply don't have the savvy to create and run any kind of significant food system. However, my friend John Dromgoole, who runs a successful natural gardening and composting center in Austin, has a snappy retort to these elites: "Those who say it can't be done should not interrupt those who are doing it."

This is a movement that has antecedents going back generations -- both J.H. Kellogg and C.W. Post, for example, were health-food visionaries more than a century ago (and both would be appalled by the products now bearing their names) -- but the modern-day movement is barely 20 years old. In this short time, however, these innovative doers have made astonishing gains. Just in terms of raw numbers, today's "Good Food" movement is impressive:

- Organic food topped \$15 billion in sales in 2004 -- triple what they were only seven years earlier. Sales are increasing by roughly 20 percent a year (compared to only about 2 percent for all other foods) and are expected to reach \$30 billion four years from now.
- Nearly two thirds of American shoppers bought some organic foods last year -- up from about half the year before. About 40 percent of consumers now say that they regularly buy some organic foods.
- There are now more than 8,000 organic farmers, with thousands more trying to make the transition from industrialized production to organic (a rigorous and costly process that should be assisted and funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which instead remains either indifferent or hostile).
- From white tablecloth restaurants to barbecue joints, chefs have been in the lead in introducing organic food to the public and in creating the fast-growing market for locally produced seasonal foods.
- The growth and popularity of farmers' markets has mushroomed in recent years, popping up in practically every city and most towns. Some 4,000 of these bustling, vibrant markets now exist, bringing local farmers and artisans together with customers at all economic levels. Likewise, the community-supported agriculture

movement is fast spreading. These CSAs allow consumers to buy "shares" in the production of a local farm or group of farms, giving the farmers a defined and reliable cash market and the consumers a weekly share of the crops. In addition, the food co-op movement (once the rather funky domain of hippies) is thriving. About 300 of them are in cities across the country, doing some \$750 million a year in business and providing local producers another way around the corporate distribution system.

- The demand for organic and locally produced food has become so mainstream that major supermarket chains and such national food wholesalers as SYSCO have had to alter their once-rigid procurement practices to make some of their purchases from organic and local producers.

By eliminating the corporate middlemen (with their voracious profit demands, bloated executive salaries, advertising budgets, bureaucracies, lobbyists, lawyers and so forth), this localized marketing system links farms directly to forks. The results are salutary -- small farmers get a fair price that lets them and their families keep going, and we consumers get food that is what it's supposed to be: tasty and nutritious. In the bargain, our food dollars stay at home, generating more economic activity in our communities.

Yes, say opponents, but the food is extravagantly expensive. No, it's not. In season, organic tomatoes from a local farm can be cheaper than the industrial tomato at the supermarket. And as organic production has increased, overall prices are coming in line with nonorganic. In Portland, Ore., for example, a small chain of grocery stores called New Seasons features locally produced foods, and about 75 percent of its stock is organic. A monthly price survey of Portland area supermarkets shows that prices at New Seasons do not vary more than 3 percent either way from those at the national chains.

But even when organic food costs more, it's important to consider what you get for your money. Price is not the same as value. As one farmer says, "You can get a day's worth of calories for 99 cents at a 7-Eleven, but not a day's worth of nutrition." Or of flavor.

Plus, Washington spends billions of our tax dollars to subsidize corporate-produced food, and the food industrialists also are allowed to escape paying for the extensive pollution, soaring health costs and ecological damage that are direct results of their methods. Rather than paying for these enormous costs when we buy corporate food at Wal-Mart or Burger King, we pay for them in our tax bills or by suffering illnesses.

Another strong force propelling the good-food movement is cultural connection. People are realizing that our corporatized world is out of control -- empty, vapid, phony, valueless. One place where folks sense that they might be able to get a grip again is food. By linking directly with small farmers, cheesemakers and other homegrown producers, we reclaim our place, our cultural identities, our values, our humanness. Food, after all, is not merely fuel, but culture. It's in our art, songs and literature. It's in our memories -- tastes, smells, sounds,

visuals and feelings. It's in our souls, giving us shared experiences with family, friends, co-workers and community. By taking charge of what goes on our plates and how it gets there, we begin taking charge of our lives.

### **What's for lunch?**

It's a cliché to say that our children are our society's future, but it happens to be true. So, what are we teaching them about food? In class, they get lessons on the five components of a good nutritional lunch.

Then the bell rings and they go face the reality of their school lunch. Very few lyric poems have ever been written in praise of the "mystery meat" and blah veggies of school lunch, but lately this midday repast has gone from merely being bad to being bad for you. In today's schools, the idea of lunch has been reduced to corporate-delivered sugars, fats and calories, helping produce a growing epidemic of childhood obesity and gross ignorance of what food should be.

School cafeterias are eliminating cooks and even kitchens, for their "meals" come prepackaged from food-service corporations or are contracted out to McDonald's, Domino's and other fast-food chains. Two-thirds of America's middle schools and high schools sell sodas and junk-food snacks, usually under exclusive contracts that bring big corporate money to the school system. Rather than viewing school "food" as a natural resource for nurturing and educating kids, administrators have turned it into a money-making, corporate-branded commodity.

But a big change is coming. With little fanfare, a grassroots "farm-to-cafeteria" movement has been spreading from school to school. More than 400 school districts and 200 university cafeterias are now building their menus (and, in many places, their educational curricula) around fresh, local ingredients, much of which is organic. In nearly every case, the change has come because some parent, farmer, nutritionist, or other individual rose up to ask, "What the hell is going on here?"

Vanessa Ruddy was one of them. In 2002, her son, Grant, enrolled at Lincoln Elementary School in Olympia, Wash., and when she took a look at the lunch menu, she did not like what she saw. While this school had long shown an interest in good food (it had an organic garden, a children's activity kitchen, and a harvest festival in the fall), the lunch program at Lincoln was definitely old school.

At the bottom of the menu was the name of Paul Flock, the school district's child-nutrition supervisor, and Ruddy decided to call him. She put it off for a month, however, assuming he'd be a typical bureaucrat, and she dreaded having to make a big fuss and wrestle with the bureaucracy. Lo and behold, though, Flock welcomed her call and was open to improving the menu.

Ruddy enlisted other parents to join her for a meeting in Flock's office, and he asked what she wanted. "Organic Food" was her response. Thus began an organizing process to get teachers, cafeteria staff, the kids, farmers and other relevant parties involved and working together. Sure enough, in October 2002, Lincoln Elementary opened its "Organic Choices" salad bar, with a colorful and flavorful array of fresh, organic, locally produced fruits and veggies. Ruddy said that the school's cook told her, "You would have thought it was Christmas! You should have seen the kids' eyes light up."

The chief concern was cost. For example, while the romaine, arugula, and mustard leaf have far superior nutrient content, this mix of organic greens costs four times more than iceberg lettuce's price tag of 72 cents a pound. But the team of parents and others overseeing the development of Organic Choices found savings elsewhere, primarily by one simple act: eliminating desserts from the lunch offerings (a move enthusiastically applauded by teachers and parents). Lincoln actually has cut its per-meal lunch cost by 2 cents, and the lunch program has even started making money, due to teachers and parents eating lunch at the school.

Since 2002 the salad bar has become a full-meal option, with cheeses, beans, eggs, whole-grain breads, etc. Today all elementary schools in Olympia have some version of Organic Choice in their cafeterias. "It's all about a long-term investment in the health of our children," says Lincoln Elementary's principal. "We are the responsible adults. We can do this." Meanwhile, Ruddy has become a Johnny Appleseed for the farm-to-cafeteria movement, speaking to others around the country about bringing it to their schools. She offers two major tips: Get active. Don't feel powerless.

### **The power of the table**

This grassroots movement is not out simply to change some cafeterias, but to change the corporate culture of food. And where better to start than with our children? Why shouldn't every school have an Organic Choices program, a school garden and a kitchen to give them the hands-on experience of growing and preparing the food they eat, regular trips to farms and farmers' markets, and a curriculum that connects them both to nature and to their local community?

As school after school is finding, it's an awakening for kids to learn that they have a relationship with food that is deeper, richer and far more exciting than a Happy Meal at McDonald's. Alice Waters, the wonderful pioneer of America's good-food movement who has created her own "edible schoolyard" and "edible classroom" programs, is a tireless promoter of this educational awakening. She says, "Students can learn fundamental truths about where food comes from, about actions and consequences, about the importance of stewardship of the land, and the civilizing and socializing effect of the table." The farm-to-cafeteria movement has now had an abundance of experience in all sorts of school systems and is willing to assist others who want to give it a go. They have learned a few universal keys to success:

- It takes a great deal of effort to break through the entrenched food-procurement system.
- Start with the right school, where parents, administrators and food-service personnel are open to the idea.
- Begin small, proceed slowly and build on success.
- Reach out -- be inclusive and transparent.
- Be understanding of the realities faced by both the food-service staff and your local farming community.
- Contact everyone who has expertise, funds, connections and other resources to assist you.
- Involve students in all phases of the process.
- Build a strong curriculum component into the project from the start.
- Make it fun -- have community tastings, festivals, food art projects, etc.

It's not easy to recapture power from an entrenched corporate culture, but it is doable -- and the prize most definitely is worth the effort.

*From [The Hightower Lowdown](#), edited by Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer, March 2006.*

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## **White on Black, Black on White**

*by Carol Estes and Robert Jeffrey*

In May, the Positive Futures Network hosted the second in a series of gatherings called the State of the Possible. Each gathering brings together a diverse group of activists and visionaries to talk about building coalitions and to consider the long-term, strategic questions about social change. These pieces were written by two participants who both drew inspiration from the gathering, YES! associate editor Carol Estes and Robert Jeffrey, pastor of the New Hope Baptist Church in Seattle.

### **White on Black**

*by Carol Estes*

The excruciating 10-hour Talking Circle was not supposed to happen. It was not on the agenda, not in the plan. Maybe that explains its power.

What was supposed to happen that Thursday morning was a sunny strategy session on creating post-WTO social change. After all, we had plenty of reason to celebrate – we were winning!

The night before, when we gathered for the first time in the dining hall, the atmosphere was heady. We stand at the brink of profound social change, we told ourselves, and we – the 35 of us present in that room along with the thousands in the groups we represent – are in a position to influence its direction. Sure, we had our separate concerns, our haggles over terminology and tactics. But when we came together again the next morning, we were, it seemed to me, ready to roll up our collective sleeves, stake out a little patch of common ground, and start hammering out a plan for a new society that works for us all.

I was wrong.

We had skipped a step, forgotten something fundamentally important. We had failed to acknowledge or address racism, within and outside the movement. The people of color in the room – about a third of the group – brought the rest of us up short.

Belvie Rooks, an African-American writer and educator, pointed out what she called the fundamental “disconnect” between minority communities and the dominant culture. “Most of my passionate conversations with people in the African-American community are not about saving the planet,” she said. “They’re about saving our children.”

Priscilla Settee, a Cree Indian from Saskatchewan, pointed out that even within the movement, racism has prevented minority participation. The First Nation had been “disinvited” from its spot at the head of one of the WTO demonstrations, she told us. Even though they led a later demonstration, the incident left bitter resentment.

“How do we heal the foundation of a thousand years of oppression and hurt?” asked Brahm Ahmadi, an Iranian American and gang-member-turned-youth-activist. “I think about my



personal relationship to people on the street. That's what I want to change. Unless I can meet somebody and look them in the eyes and know their story and have the time for them to know my story, I'm not sure what we're fighting for."

At Ahmadi's suggestion, and with the unanimous approval of the group, we jettisoned the agenda and set out on a different path. We called it, in accordance with Native tradition, a Talking Circle. Each of us in turn shared our perceptions and pain, and did a great deal of listening. We began mid-afternoon on Thursday, talked late into the night, and finally brought the circle to a close on Friday at noon.

Many people spoke movingly of painful experiences. Grace Wicks, a young white activist, spoke of the conflict between her love of her country, the US, and her disgust at some of its actions. Rosa Martha Zarate Mac'as, a Mexican-American musician and activist, reminded us of the people, usually nonwhite, we learn not to see – the people cleaning our rooms and serving our meals.

But it was Robert Jeffrey, pastor of an inner-city church in Seattle, who changed the way I see the world. He was sick of conducting funerals for kids killed in shootings, tired of being angry.

"I've been angry all my life," Jeffrey said. "What pisses me off is that white people don't understand racism." His anger was particularly unsettling, because he was not talking about some distant bigots. He was talking about me and the other white people in the room – smart people, kind people. The good guys.

But he was right. I, for one, don't understand racism. Are we are a racist society? Sure. But what does that mean today, when there are no more back-of-the-bus rules, no forced segregation, no lynchings? When black professionals, black film stars and sports heroes, and black co-workers are commonplace? I thought we were talking fine points now. I thought that the subtler racism that remains today was less lethal to the human spirit.

I hadn't been paying attention.

"I don't think any white person ever hated me because I'm black," Jeffrey told us. "They were just indifferent. And I honestly don't know which is worse."

Indifference. Invisibility. These are feelings a white woman can understand. I thought of Virginia Woolf, saying that women have no voice with which to join the public discourse. To be rendered voiceless, unheard and unnoticed, is to be made less than fully human.

"We live in a sewer." Jeffrey said. "It's not a sewer we made. It's not a sewer we want to live in. It exists because of you and your grandfathers and great-grandfathers." He pointed to the white people in the room. "Because of your indifference, because of your unwillingness to accept responsibility for the sins of your fathers."

I thought of recent discussions with my college English students. I asked them, "What do we owe Native Americans for the land our ancestors took, where your family's house is built, and mine? What do we owe the descendants of the Africans we kidnapped, used as slaves?"

Their answer was always the same: “Nothing! We didn’t do anything. That was then, this is now.”

What I learned from Robert Jeffrey is that then is now, and then is far from over.

And I thought, too, of what I was learning as I worked on this issue of the magazine. That on any given day, one in three young black men is in prison, on probation, or on parole. That about 1.4 million black men, have lost the right to vote because of felony convictions. Why have so many of us failed to notice?

What I have come to believe, in thinking about the Talking Circle, is this: We white people have not earned the right to be partners in planning a new society in the name of “everyone” until we have done what Jeffrey and the others seemed to be asking us to do – understand that the problem is not “theirs” but ours, all of ours. Widen the circle, not just by race, but by class. Get out in the streets. Pay attention. Alongside academic expertise, value equally the hard-won knowledge that comes from looking at the machinery of society from the bottom, because book knowledge – even the expensive Ivy League kind – is cheap compared to the knowledge that’s earned by living in the street, or by burying your children.

The first step is clear. It lies in seeing and in acknowledging what we see. Jeffrey put it bluntly: “I guess all I want you to do is say, 'There is a sewer. We made it.'”

After Jeffrey, Judy Wicks spoke. A white restaurant owner, Wicks described driving by the local high school, the school her daughter would have attended if Wicks hadn’t sent her to private school. Wicks had driven past the school many times before. But that day, for some reason, she saw it. African-American kids were streaming out the door, all of them strangers to her. That day she saw clearly that even though this was not her daughter’s school, it was her neighborhood high school and she desperately needed to know these kids. So she established scholarship and mentoring programs and began to get acquainted.

Several years later, she told the assembled parents and graduates of her programs, “I finally figured out who those kids were coming out that high school door. They’re our children.”

Two days have passed, and we are already at the end of our time together, standing in another circle, knowing now that many of the assumptions we had about each other were wrong. We’ve wept together, laughed together, felt, to some extent, each other’s pain and expressed our own. We’ve reached across spaces that are seldom bridged in our culture.

I happen to stand facing Robert Jeffrey as we sing a silly, sentimental closing song. “You have given me such treasure” I sing to him, embarrassed, until I realize that for me, the words of the song are deeply true. He has given me a treasure: the awareness of being blind. It’s a harsh gift, nothing I would have wished for. But it is the first lesson in how to see.

## **Black on White**

*by Robert Jeffrey*

*As I reflected on it later, this is what I wanted to tell the people in the Talking Circle at the State of the Possible gathering about what it is to be a black man.*

I am an African-American man, 52 years of age. For most of my adult life I have been angry. It is an anger that I have diligently learned to control in order to maintain my sanity as well as my freedom.

I have seen in my lifetime how anger such as mine has led many to sedate themselves with drugs or lobotomize themselves with religion. Many others have been driven by this anger to lives of crime and violence.

I consider myself and others like me to be survivors, controlled sufferers of a rage that swirls inside the mind and spirit like a never-ending storm. It's a storm that can be ignited by the slightest provocation, a misguided glance, a misspoken word.

My anger grows out of my despair over the sewer that I must walk through each day. It's a sewer filled with the waste, the unfulfilled potential of countless brilliant men and women. Their decomposed lives litter the alleyways and roadsides that I must travel as I walk between the two worlds I live in.

It's a world where brilliant people that you know personally are hopelessly strung out on drugs, a world where most of your high school friends are already dead or in prison. It's a world where you daily see teenage children spread-eagled face down in the street because the country is at war with them. A world where you bank with institutions that launder the money of corporate criminals that provide the drugs to your children and then refuse to give loans to the community-based businesses that could create the jobs they so desperately crave.

Life in the sewer is life lived in full knowledge of statistics. You learn early to know how many are in jail, how many have good jobs, how many are on drugs, how many drop out of school. It is a world filled with memories of civil rights struggles, of men hanging, or preachers in jail, or Klan sheets blowing in the wind.

In my life I have met very few white people who fit the old stereotype of race haters. Most white people I've met have been decent, respectful, and sincere. But my anger towards them is on most occasions without compromise.

What do I want from them?

I want them to do what any decent human being would do when confronted by a tragic situation: I want them to jump in and try to make it better. Instead, they usually respond with defensive expressions of regret, prefaced by abdication of any personal responsibility. Sometimes they blame those who live in the squalor for its existence.

It is their indifference to my things, the horrors of my life, that angers me. For unlike my white brothers and sisters, I am forced to care about the things of their lives. Just to survive,

I must care about their fashions, their political processes, the threats to their survival. I must care about the threat of communism, or the threat posed by Iraq. I must care about their industrial pollution of the planet. I must work in their companies and care about their government, their police, their clean streets. I must care about their children on drugs, and about protecting their banks – the ones that won't give me a loan. I must care about their mass murderers that kill only their kind, while they ignore the murderous effects of drugs and ignorance on my people.

I must care about their things. I must also be prepared to intelligently discuss them and even to offer solutions for them or be deemed ignorant, regardless of my educational qualifications.

It is impossible for me to understand what I must do each day, and then do it without feeling angry. It is an anger that comes from the absence of real freedom, a freedom to be a person without bearing the pain of a group I did not choose.

I am assigned to the group by those who stand outside and require me to mark a racial box on every registration form from the cradle to the grave. They do this while accepting no responsibility for either their present indifference or the past racist actions of their fathers. They do this oblivious to the fact that although racism has in a moment become as extinct as the dinosaur, its racial waste, like nuclear waste, remains resistant to their failed attempt to clean it up.

And so I am left alone to live with my anger in the midst of this waste, alone to grieve over and over again, alone to hope that one day they will get it, and my anger will subside.

*I found as the weeks passed, that the Talking Circle had touched me, that I no longer felt so alone or so angry. I learned that white people genuinely do not understand racism, while all along I had thought, "How could they not understand?" More important, I learned that some of them are willing to struggle with understanding. That knowledge has been life-changing for me. It has given me hope.*

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