Instead of Trying to Feed the World, Let’s Help it Feed Itself

By Shannon Hayes

Sooner or later the question comes up, whether it is between two friends sharing a pot of stew made from local grassfed beef and their garden harvest, livestock farmers gathered on a pasture walk, neighbors working together to tend a flock of backyard chickens, or organic vegetable producers discussing yields at a conference.

“But can we feed the world this way?”

As we try to move humanity away from dominant power regimes and thoughtless extraction of the earth’s resources, toward a way of life that honors the earth and all of her creatures, I think this is the most maddening question we can be asking ourselves.

Nevertheless, we’ve all been conditioned to reflexively turn to this question as we challenge our methods and consider new paths toward sustainability.

However, 75 or 100 years ago, such a question would never have entered into our dialogue. To ask a local farmer or homesteader how his or her production methods were going to feed the world would have been absurd. The local producer’s job was to support the family, the community, and his or her bioregion—not the world.

But following World War II, with the onset of the “Green Revolution,” feeding the world became a national mantra. It was a ubiquitous “good” that handily justified the discovery that the petrochemicals used in warfare could find postwar applications if dumped on our food supply.

“Feeding the world” consoled farmers as they incurred mountains of debt to afford the fossil-fuel-intensive machinery and expansive acreage that would enable them to crank out tons of food for which they would garner increasingly lower prices. “Feeding the world” was the elixir offered as our grandparents attempted to adjust their palates to a food supply that was suddenly tasteless as local food disappeared from the market. “Feeding the world” was the slogan tossed about as rural people the world over surrendered ties to the land, moved to cities, and trusted that the food system would take care of itself.

“Feeding the world” was the background tune playing in the bank, on the car radio of the seed salesman, in the office of the accountant as farmers were counseled to “get big or get out,” to expand their production and change their growing methods.

A New Course on the Connections Between Peace, Social Justice & Sustainability

This article by Shannon Hayes questions what food sustainability really looks like, asking how we can better help the world to feed itself. Shannon’s questions about our food system offer a profound critique of social justice and global conflicts—how can we create a food system that is good for the planet and promotes a more just and peaceful society?

While many of us probably agree that peace, social justice and environmental sustainability are inextricably linked, those connections are rarely made for us in news stories, advertising, or in the most publicized initiatives to fight hunger or end war.

NWEI is pleased to announce that, in partnership with the Jubitz Family Foundation, we will be launching a new course that helps people make the important connections between peace and sustainability. The new course will be available in April of 2014. We’re very excited about this collaboration and hope you will join us in our shared goal of accelerating the rate of change toward a more peaceful, more sustainable world.

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“When asked if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren’t pessimistic, you don’t understand data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren’t optimistic, you haven’t got a pulse.” Paul Hawken, Blessed Unrest

I often reference this quote when asked about whether I am hopeful about the future, as Hawken’s words speak to the regular emotional ebbs and flows I experience in this line of work. While helpful in one sense, hope alone feels rather passive for me, as hope alone doesn’t foster the set of actions we need to take to support the type of future we aspire to.

In Jim Collins’s book, “Good to Great” and Viktor Frankl’s, “Man’s Search for Meaning”, we find hope bound to intention and action rather than expectation. Frankl and Admiral Jim Stockdale find themselves captive in a German concentration camp and North Vietnamese POW camp, respectively. Each endured unspeakable conditions prior to being released from captivity. Many of their fellow prisoners not killed through physical means died of what appeared to be a “broken heart.” Frankl and Stockdale surmised these individuals died following a series of unmet expectations related to their grave and repeated disappointment at not being released on or before some random self-selected deadline.

After telling themselves “We’ll be out by Christmas,” or “We’ll be rescued by Spring” they were heart-broken anew when Christmas and Spring came and they went without freedom. Their hope was based on what they wished for, rather than accepting their current circumstance and then working toward their intention for freedom. Frankl and Stockdale practiced active hope.

A week ago, I attended NWEI’s Biannual Conference. I met many hopeful and dedicated people and I want to tell you about two of them today. Ellen Baumgartner is from Worthington, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus. Ellen is 83 years old and clearly understands the predicament environmental trends the world over suggest. She drove 12 hours to the retreat, I saw her dance with more energy than folks half her age, she rides her bike 50-100 miles for errands weekly, and she bought a house with three other people, saving money and creating a community that looks out for one another. Ellen also engages others in her community by promoting NWEI courses and other forms of activism. In spite of her biggest fears, Ellen chooses to make the most of what she has been given and lives life to the fullest, reducing her impact and increasing her happiness.

I also met Jeff Thomas, the CEO of Gunderson Health Systems. Gunderson’s operations are on track to achieve 100% energy independence by the end of 2014. Gunderson realized that their major energy source, coal, was expensive, sent money out of state and led to illness for the surrounding community. Their investments in waste management and their own renewable energy infrastructure have led to annual energy savings of nearly $2 million and helps ensure that their services uphold the Hippocratic oath of “do no harm.”

What leaves me feeling hopeful are the solutions for a sustainable future, as seen in the preceding examples, which stem from a wide range of values: desire for community, good mental and physical health, good business with a goal of doing no harm, strong local economies and having fun. How will you and I express our hope for a thriving future today?

Warm regards,

Mike Mercer
“Feeding the world” was the motto that let Americans turn their heads and not notice the polluted waters, the increasing severity of floods, soil loss, or the fact that the little farm next door had suddenly disappeared.

But those petrochemicals and farming practices that feed the world are washing away our topsoil and leaving what remains nutritionally deficient. Ironically, the goal to feed the world has led to a form of agriculture that has made it increasingly difficult for the people of the world to feed themselves. And the fact that fossil fuels are not quite as abundant as they once were, nor as cheap, means that even if we could generate yields of global proportions in perpetuity, we wouldn't be able to deliver the goods in any cost-effective manner.

Can the local, sustainable food movement in the United States feed the world? Hell, no. Nor can the industrial agricultural paradigm. No one can feed the world. One country cannot do it, nor can any specific model of production. The earth must be allowed to reclaim its natural productivity. That's why we need local and regional food systems, designed to work harmoniously with local ecosystems. While certain ecological lessons may apply, it would be absurd to think what works for us here in upstate New York for producing food is going to necessarily work in Africa. Heck, many of the methods that work on farms 10 miles from our house won't work on our steep hillside farm. There is no such thing as a universally applicable production practice nor a universally acceptable diet.

This is not to say that we shouldn't be concerned about global starvation. But if enabling everybody to have access to good, nutritious food is really our goal, we need to look deeper than crop yields and feed conversion ratios. In addition to the complicated politics involved, we need to examine our individual actions.

How are our daily habits impacting humanity’s access to a nutritious food supply? Our daily sustenance should not require that other people in the world go without nourishment. Our daily sustenance should not demand excessive fossil fuels for growing, processing, and transporting the food to our tables. Beyond that, our consumption habits ideally should not be requiring people in foreign lands to destroy their own access to clean water and fertile soils for the sake of dying our clothing, building our electronics, or making our children’s toys.

Feeding the world starts with individual accountability. It needs to be considered in every home, in every business. But the question must be reframed. Rather than asking farmers if the methods they use can feed the world, we need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, “Do my choices help enable the world to feed itself?” If the answer is no, then it is time to make different choices.

Feeding the world starts with individual accountability. It needs to be considered in every home, in every business. But the question must be reframed. Rather than asking farmers if the methods they use can feed the world, we need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, “Do my choices help enable the world to feed itself?” If the answer is no, then it is time to make different choices.

There is not one of us who is blameless when the question is reframed (myself included). But it is not solely up to the farmers to feed the world. It is up to each and every one of us to strive to live a life of personal accountability that will enable this earth to heal, and enable this world to feed itself.

And, just as no single agricultural practice will be universally applicable, nor will any single life path. There are many routes to a healed planet. What matters is that we keep asking ourselves to be accountable, and that we keep making the changes that are direly needed.

Thus, I leave you with one question: What can you do today that will enable the world to feed itself?

Change for Good
Phase 2:
Increasing Participation and Impact

This piece was contributed by Rod MacDow, an Encore Fellow who is working with NWEI in 2013-2014.

Over the last year, NWEI has put a tremendous amount of effort into our Change for Good program. The first phase centered on developing our new web-based platform that makes it easier for organizers to start a discussion course and for participants to share learnings, stories and actions.

Now we’re beginning the second phase, which is just as exciting in many ways. A priority for this year is making it easier for corporations and large organizations to use our discussion courses in the work environment. We have a number of companies, like Intel and HP, who have successfully led many courses. But there are many more who have yet to find out just how effective and rewarding they can be. Phase 2 of Change for Good includes developing a new partnership model with businesses, which begins with efforts to establish contact and encouraging them to become a part of the NWEI community.

There are three benefits that companies tell us are important to them. The first is that the courses generate new ideas for sustainability programs in their company and create higher compliance. Second, some groups actually create innovative product ideas out of the discussion. And finally, the group cohesion results in higher employee engagement and job satisfaction. So companies really do benefit from using our courses.

I joined NWEI in March of this year to help lead the second phase of NWEI’s Change for Good effort. I was in the high-tech industry for 42 years, working for a number of companies in a highly competitive and fast-moving industry. Most recently I worked for Intel right here in Oregon, and retired at the beginning of this year. These days, the word “retirement” is not really the most accurate term for many people. It’s more about redirecting one’s energy away from making money and toward giving something back to the community. More than nine million people in the U.S. have taken this step.

Intel has a relationship with Encore (www.encore.org), a non-profit organization that matches the skills of people coming from a corporate background with the needs of local non-profit groups. Working with Encore and Social Venture Partners (www.svpportland.org), I found my way to NWEI, and I’m delighted to help make this Phase 2 effort a success.

If you know of a company or organization that might want to join the NWEI community, or if you’d like to know more, contact me at rodney@nwei.org.

Rod MacDow was part of the high-tech industry for 42 years, most recently working for Intel Corporation. His primary contributions have been in strategic planning and business development. He is excited to use that experience to help improve the balance of human activity and nature.

NWEI Honors Longtime Volunteers and Intel Corporation with Leadership Awards

On May 16, 2013 NWEI celebrated its 20th Anniversary. The 250 attendees of the Celebration enjoyed local food and drink, live music and recognized the leadership of two long-time NWEI volunteers and an NWEI business partner.

NWEI honored volunteers Betty Shelley of Portland, Oregon and Barbara Duncan of Fairlee, Vermont with the Founders Earth Leadership Award. Both recipients have demonstrated ongoing leadership to create individual and community change through shared learning, shared stories and shared action.

“To say I am honored to receive this award is a great understatement. I treasure the impact NWEI has had on my life,” said Shelley. “Because of NWEI, I have been offered enlightening conversations, a connection with a community of inspiring and good-hearted individuals, and a means to help the Earth.”

The Founders Earth Leadership Award was last presented to NWEI founders Dick and Jeanne Roy in 2003 on NWEI’s 10th Anniversary. NWEI also honored Intel Corporation as the first recipient of the Change for Good Award. More than 400 Intel employees around the world have participated in NWEI discussion courses.

“We are honored to be the first recipient of the Change for Good award,” said Michael Jacobson, Intel’s Director of Corporate Responsibility. “Our relationship with NWEI has informed our strategies to address sustainability issues within our operations and the communities in which we live and work.”
EcoChallenge 2013:

Change your life for good.

Pause right here and consider this question: what is one thing you’ve been meaning to do to reduce your personal impact on our planet? Most of us have a few eco actions rolling around the hopper — things that we either meant to do long ago or have been waiting for the right time to take on.

We have the perfect opportunity for you to turn your intention into action, and it will benefit you, NWEI and the planet!

We invite you to join NWEI’s board, staff, volunteers and 2,000 members of the NWEI network this October 15-30 for the EcoChallenge. You choose your personal EcoChallenge (perhaps that action you thought of a minute ago!) related to energy efficiency, water conservation, sustainable food choices, alternative transportation or waste reduction, and we provide a fun two week opportunity to take positive action, win prizes and connect with other EcoChallengers while we collectively prove that small actions add up to real change.

We urge you to reach out to your broader community and encourage your business, center of faith, college, family or neighborhood to participate with you. You can create a team and invite your network using the EcoChallenge.org website. Change is easier, more fun and more impactful when it happens as a community.

Sign up at www.ecochallenge.org.

Our Model for Change

There’s no shortage of information about the serious challenges facing our planet — and although most people say they would like to do more, they don’t know where to start.

That’s where we come in. For 20 years, NWEI has helped make change more possible, more social, and yes, more fun, by helping people connect with their communities and take action, together.

Our new website and discussion course platform are live, and if you haven’t already, we urge you to visit www.nwei.org and see our new videos, tools, and EcoForum. This is a preview of our infographic, we encourage you to see Our Model for Change in its entirety at http://www.nwei.org/our-model-for-change.

Visit the website to find out how NWEI is closing the “Say-Do Gap.”
By Story Boyle

Moving is weird. I’ve done it often enough, hopping across town, even jumping states. Flying from one end of the universe to the other. I’ve travelled often enough, too. You get handed odd opportunities. You do things you never thought you would. That’s life.

So I’ve moved to Tallahassee. I liked it, when I visited, but it felt small and cramped. It’s smaller than Tampa in population, by just over half. It kind of sprawls languidly over sinkholes and the south, its 180,000 people dotted around here and there, tucked into hills.

There are no high rises here. It’s not dense enough for that. Can I tell you a secret? High rises make me feel safe. High rises, skyscrapers, buildings that loom: they make me feel like a city is real. They set people to meandering about their bases like ants. Ants are an appropriate analogue for people. High rises give us a glimpse of our tininess, since we don’t realize it often enough by looking out at the sea, or up at the stars.

So moving here gave me doubts. But I’ve learned a neat trick to get to know a place. I’ve used it to become a Floridian in a way that other transplants never do. I wander backwoods. I traipse through wilderness on the days that no one wants to be out there. I stop and watch wildlife. I break in a place by letting it break in my shoes.

That’s how I came to love Miami and Fort Lauderdale: I cycled over 90 miles from there to the middle of the Keys, planting myself in Islamorada (though I have to admit, loving cities as I do, it wasn’t hard to fall in love with them). This is how I came to know Sarasota in my college years: hike the backwoods of Myakka, and fall in love with the Florida prairie.

Here, I drove only a short way south to the Apalachicola National Forest. Shortest drive out to wilderness I have ever taken. I could cycle there. The Leon Sinks Geological Area had caught my fancy. So I slung my bag over my shoulder, and wandered out into the forest.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. It had been raining for days, and much of the area was dotted with pines. It was not the pine flat woods I’d come to know on Florida’s west coast, all slash pine and palmetto, with its hot dry pine smell, and the needles crackling faintly under every step. These could be longleaf pine, or even loblollies. I wasn’t sure. But the scent was a rich loamy pine smell, earthy and sharp, and the needles were damp and giving. I took the low trail, the long way around. I wanted to see the sinkholes, yes, but the real treat was to come to know the land.

I have said before that the wilderness is a city busier than we can comprehend. I discovered in the woods here a city of splendid death, its morticians draped in red and gold. That’s what many fungi are in a forest: corpse consumers, feasting on dead trees. There are other kinds, who live in symbiosis, but I’m a foreigner here; I do not speak the language, so I could not ask to know whether their dance was one of life or death or both. They were everywhere, ruffles and lace, exhaling the breath of the wild.

In the lowlands, swamp bottom lands, the boggy ground was dotted with tupelo gums and cypress. You could follow the dark line of the bright high forest and the murky edge of the swampland. The air hummed with mosquitoes. In the shadows of the wide-bottomed swamp trees, I felt at ease. This was somehow more familiar. This is was something I knew.

And it was enough. Wandering through the forest, I could see the gradual change from the south Florida land I knew, could see aspects of the soil that were familiar to me from my travels in Georgia, could see the way the landscape flowed into what I’d seen in Tennessee. It was a link, a connection. Suddenly, my picture of the landscape made sense. That’s enough for me to feel easy with a place.

Story Boyle is a graduate of New College of Florida, a lifelong hiker, a gardener, and an author of short fiction. Her website can be found at www.storyboyle.com.
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