

‘Have you eaten today?’

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It may be an urban myth – that there are children who’ve never seen a cow and who think that hamburger is manufactured in a back room of Kowalski’s, wrapped in cellophane, bar-coded and ready to go.

It’s no myth, sadly true, that in all my life I’ve only stayed overnight once on a working farm. Both the child and I illustrate how estranged we urbanites have become – from the land that produces what we eat, from farmers and ranchers (endangered species!).

Even what we eat seems remote from what is raised and grown, as in the words of farmer-poet Wendell Berry, “processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravied, blended, prettified, and sanitized beyond any resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived.” Industrial eating, he calls it. Indeed, a handful of multinational conglomerate corporations seem to have taken over and monopolized the ancient and honorable industry of feeding the human race – from seed to feed, pesticide to fertilizer, production to distribution. But then, how else to provide food to nearly 7 billion people?

Reverend Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) the early 19th C. British economist and demographer, predicted that human population would fast outpace the human ability to grow enough food. He was sure that catastrophic famines and epidemics would annihilate millions. How horrible to recollect what happened in those great (although man-made) famines of the past – in Ireland, the Soviet Ukraine, Bengal, China – with people forced to eat rats, grass, bark, stone, roots; and a breakdown of the social order marked by the sale of children, infanticide, prostitution, even cannibalism.

Up to now, however, human ingenuity has managed to avert the Malthusian trap. Chemical, nitrogen-based fertilizer and the “Green Revolution” (pioneered by the University of Minnesota graduate and Nobel laureate Norman Borlaug, who passed away just last week at 95), composed of genetics, pesticides, fertilizers and agronomic practices, give us bumper harvests around the world. We may be just playing catch-up as the easy availability of food also helped fuel the great population explosion of the past century. With the unpredictable effects of climate change and the predictable increase of population to 9 billion by 2050, Malthus may yet have the last bitter laugh. This prospect is strange to contemplate when obesity is our current worry. Even as a third of humans go to bed hungry, we in the wealthier nations now consume too much calorie-dense food; food that is grown, manufactured and sold cheaply. The nineteenth century poet William Wordsworth observed the paradox: “And homeless near a thousand homes I stood,/ And near a thousand tables pined and wanted food.”

Oddly enough, agriculture is a relatively recent invention. Out of the 200,000-year existence of Homo sapiens, only in the last five to ten thousand have we grown and domesticated our own plant and animal food on fixed ground; breeding varieties that would never have developed without our intervention. Previously, humans comprised small bands of hunter-gatherers whose societies, as best as we can tell from the few that still exist, were largely peaceful, cooperative, egalitarian.

Agriculture led to a surplus of food that sustained a new class hierarchy of humans – royalty, priesthood, soldiery, artisans, and peasants. People settled into villages, cities, kingdoms, empires. Out of this our “civilization” developed, which includes war, epidemics, slavery, tyranny, but also music, religion, literacy, technology. Now we are almost ready to settle on Mars, where, I’m confident, different kinds of farming will develop.

Whether by gathering or by growing, here on Earth or elsewhere in the cosmos, eating will continue to be a social act: food binds families, friends and communities. In many languages the greeting is, “Have you eaten today?” In this time of cheap fast foods, single-parent families, long working hours and latch-key kids, we are in danger of loosening these ties, and thereby all become diminished. Eating can also be a political act when we stop to think about where our food comes from, and at what human and ethical cost. We can counteract industrial eating by taking time to eat slowly, pleurably; consuming more “loaves and fishes” and less meat; buying locally grown foods; supporting conservation agriculture and fair trade; protesting against mass animal confinement and terrible conditions in slaughter houses, those cruelties borne by animals and workers alike: as it is written in Psalm 136 in thanksgiving to a merciful and steadfast God “who gives food to all flesh.” All flesh.

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