

Fomenting A Food Revolution

by Abra Brynne

I would like to start my talk with an acknowledgement that we are on the land of the Sinixt People. They had food sovereignty and security before the arrival of the white people took so much away – including formal recognition that they continue to exist as a people. We cannot remake history but I feel it is really important to acknowledge the enormous debt we owe to the original peoples of this land.

And now a recitation from Father Gander:

“There was an old woman who lived in a shoe.
She had so many children she didn’t know what to do.
So she gave them some broth and good whole wheat bread,
And kissed them all sweetly and sent them to bed.
There is only one issue I don’t understand,
If she didn’t want so many, why didn’t she plan?”

Here in the West Kootenays, we are a lot like that woman – including some rather creative house structures sprinkled about. Another similarity is the fact that we have access to good whole foods because we are blessed with many small farms and food producers in this area. However, our local food system is dominated by large corporations whose priorities and values don’t necessarily match those of our community. And we also have those among us who are going to sleep hungry, without that broth and good whole wheat bread and perhaps even without a bed to lie down in.

It has been said that the measure of a community’s compassion and health can be found in how well they care for their disadvantaged members. In fact, I think a measure of our individual humanity can be found in how much we care about and for our fellow human beings. It is how we retain our hearts and souls and create safe, thriving communities.

As my friend and colleague Cathleen Kneen has said, it is unconscionable, unacceptable, that there are those among us who are hungry and homeless. Nelson is often painted with a rosy glow as the ideal community here in the beautiful mountains. But the truth is that here too we have those who are hungry and homeless in a climate that is unforgiving for many months of the

year. Every social service agency in the area has seen an increase in need as our various levels of government keep tearing more and more holes in our social safety net – one of the few things that has made me proud to be a Canadian. We have many among us who live in daily food insecurity and the social service agencies and faith communities cannot keep up to the need.

People are not hungry or poor because they somehow brought it upon themselves or deserve it. People are hungry because a basic human need, a daily need for food, is now almost exclusively about a monetary exchange. Yet food is as basic to our daily lives as the air we breath. I used to say it was as basic as air and water but we have now commodified water – our demented culture has normalized the exchange of money for something as basic as water, as basic as food. Heaven help us if we ever start charging for the air we breath.

Poverty and hunger exist, of course, all around the world. We don't have time to delve into all the causes of poverty so I am sticking to food today. And I want to reinforce that as much as we are, indeed, overpopulating this beautiful planet, hunger is not about an insufficient supply of food. Hunger is about a problem of access. If people do not have access to money, or to land and to farming skills, they go hungry. Despite the enormous numbers of our human family, we still are able to produce enough food for everyone. The barriers to food security for all are the corporations whose mandate it is to make money for their shareholders, combined with wrong-headed government policy that together control where, what and how most of the food we eat is accessed. All the buzz that happens when a corporation gets involved in social responsibility is because it is foreign to their whole purpose – to make money. The other priorities and values that make a community healthy – charity, compassion, health, sustainability, clean air and water – just don't factor into the plans and vision of the few transnational corporations that control most of the world's food supply.

The result of this is that fundamentally, we are all very susceptible to food insecurity. At any time war, drought, flooding, trade agreements, climate change and a host of other factors could drastically undermine the supply of food to our communities. Because lets not kids ourselves – despite all the great farmers and food processors we have in this area, and the businesses that support our access to their foods, at least 95% of the food consumed here is brought into our region. This places us in a precarious position – if you remember the winter of 96-97, it snowed non-stop and I personally spent most of it on my roof shoveling. And for about a week that

winter, all the mountain passes into Nelson were closed by avalanches and treacherous snow conditions. Given that the average grocery store has only 3 days worth of food in stock, it doesn't take long for a community to run out of food – just ask the folks in Haida Gwaii who lost their ferry service earlier this year, and thus access to the bulk of their food supply. This is called communal food insecurity.

That communal food insecurity can be addressed by something known as food sovereignty. The concept of food sovereignty has been promoted by Via Campesina, the global peasants movement. Food sovereignty is about putting the control of the food system into the hands of the community it feeds. It does not mean creating a fortress and pulling up the drawbridge over the moat – it means re-creating and supporting local production and consumption. It means feeding the family first and trading the surplus. It means realizing that we are part of a family of communities who can be mutually supportive in doing our best to feed our own people with what we can and in trading for what we cannot. So for those of you who are, like me, addicted to chocolate, coffee and avocados, you can relax – food sovereignty allows access to those foods, but in a fair and respectful manner.

But those are luxuries and we must do all that we can to support the production of the staples of our diet right here in the Kootenays – spinach, squash, potatoes, carrots, onions, beef, wheat, milk and cheese.

I have been involved in supporting local food production in this area for many years and have frequently encountered a lack of knowledge and understanding out the factors that necessitate our support for those who produce our food system. I am going to try to outline some of those factors in the remainder of my talk.

I am 45 years old but I still feel young enough to be shocked by the changes in the food system over the course of my life. To illustrate where we have come from and where we are headed unless each community takes drastic action I will tell you a bit about my life.

I come from a family of 13 – I was the 8th and the runt of the family. We had a small fruit and subsistence farm in the Okanagan. As children, my parents both worked to support the family, on and off the farm, and that is the culture I grew up in. Children were produced to help run the farm – free labour in exchange for room and board. So I and my nine surviving siblings hauled

irrigation pipes, picked rocks, dug holes for new fruit trees, weeded our enormous garden, mended fences, tracked down and corralled run-away steers, and in the autumn engaged in a frenzy of harvest and processing of the garden vegetables. Our tree fruit went to the Vernon Fruit Union – a storage and marketing co-operative for local orchardists.

Our cattle were killed humanely on farm by my father and then taken to a butcher 2 miles away to be cut and wrapped and then brought back to the farm. We got eggs and chicken from my maternal grandparents and our milk was delivered to our home by the local dairy – the North Okanagan Creamery Association (NOCA). Our cheddar cheese was the best in the world, produced by a small, local company known as Armstrong Cheese, sourcing their milk from area milking cows. My family either produced our own food or sourced it from local farmers or processors – the 100 Mile Diet is not actually a new thing.

When I was 18, in 1979, I started working at Butcher Boys, the grocery and butcher store that cut and wrapped our beef for years. I worked in the meat department at a time when a large portion of the back end of grocery stores was still allocated to meat coolers so they could hang whole and half carcasses. The butcher had the skill and the ability to cut exactly what the customer requested. And, that customer knew the difference between a chuck and a sirloin. At Butcher Boys, our produce was more or less seasonal since most of it still came from local farms. Which meant that when it was apple or cherry season you were getting the very best and freshest fruit.

NOCA was bought out by Dairyland in 1981; Dairyland also bought out Armstrong Cheese and turned it from a top quality cheese maker into a cheese factory. Dairyland later went global and became known as “Dairyworld” and has since been purchased by Saputo, which operates in Canada, the US, and Argentina. The Vernon Fruit Union is long gone – a strip mall now sits where the huge warehouse and thousands of lovely wooden apple bins sat. Butcher Boys has tripled in size since I left the area and I doubt that they are doing cut and wrap of farm-killed beef any more.

I find that few of my peers, those in their 40s and younger don't know what I took for granted as a child and treasure now as hard-won and essential skills – planting seeds, weeding, picking, plucking, shelling, husking, freezing, dehydrating, canning. They don't know what I know

instinctively – don't store your apples with your cabbage and your carrots. They don't know that there really is such a thing as green eggs – and blue eggs and brown ones.

The orchard I grew up in has been clear-cut. Like many of the orchards in the Okanagan, it had to make way for subdivisions or for the latest desperate hope of the orchardists – grapes for wine.

And speaking of orchardists, they are among the millions of farmers world wide, struggling to make a living in the current global market. That market focuses almost exclusively on one characteristic, that of price. So our farmers here are in a constant price war with farmers in Chile, in China, in California. Price wars may seem like a good thing for the consumer but, at best, it is only a shortsighted good. For price wars, like any war, are devastating for those involved and for their communities. So devastating, in fact, that between 1981 and 2001 we lost almost a quarter of all our farms in Canada (22%). The net farm income across Canada is currently lower than it was during the Great Depression of the 1930s. I am guessing that this may have something to do with the loss of our farmers.

Another factor that makes it hard for Canadian farmers to compete in this global price war is climate. In case any of you haven't noticed, we live in the great white north – at least 4 or 5 months of the year. That means that our farmers are producing crops only 6 or 7 months of the year unless they are very creative with season extension techniques. It is hard to compete on the price of tomatoes when you are only able to harvest them 4 weeks of the year while they are producing them year round south of the border.

Then there is the wage factor. While many of our farmers themselves don't, sadly, expect a living wage, their workers here do. Vegetable and fruit production in many parts of the world is heavily subsidized by basically slave labourers on the land. The farmer has to charge enough for their product to be able to pay their labourers – when the wages are 3 and 4, even 10 times higher here, but the so-called market place won't accept the logical increase in the cost of the crops, the farmer ends up subsidizing our food.

What a great system, farmers subsidizing our food! Unfortunately, farmers represent less than 2% of the population and in Canada currently carry a collective debt load 11 times that of their net income. Obviously there are not enough of them and they are just too darn poor to keep

subsidizing our cheap food. And don't make the mistake of thinking that our food is not cheap – the average Canadian spends 9.3% of their disposable income on food. That remaining 90.7% leaves a lot of wiggle room for an increase in the price of food – as long as that extra money goes back to the farmers I am all for it. The fact that we have poor among us who cannot afford food is a failure of our social policy, not a failure of the farmers to work their hearts out. After years of drought, farmers in Australia are so desperate that every four days one of them commits suicide. The situation here is not so very much better.

The many urban refugees who join us here in the beautiful Kootenays are inevitably having an impact on the cost of land. The higher the overhead of the farmer (land, equipment, inputs, fuel, staff wages), the more he or she gets squeezed between the cost of production and what they receive for their product.

Water is another critical factor in food production. California has been famous for producing something in the range of 80% of the fresh produce consumed in North America. They have managed to do this by relying heavily on the cheap labour I mentioned earlier, but also by overdrawing their water “account”. California is running out of water – so much so that there was a drop in production of 20% in 2005. This water shortage also means that they have to be less choosy about the water sources they use – which may have been a factor in the recent e-coli contamination and resulting food recalls. If you haven't yet noticed an impact on the price of food brought on by this over-use of water you can be assured that it will come soon. The ever-rising cost of fuel will also inevitably have an impact on the cost of food.

The increased land prices also affects ranchers and anyone raising livestock. If you have to pay more to have those critters grazing the land, you ultimately have to charge more for the meat that comes out at the other end. Increased land prices and the droughts that seem to have become so common are also playing havoc with the availability and the cost of hay. But the barrier at the consumer end, which in retail world lingo is known as “price point” thresholds, means that more often than not, the farmer is unable to pass along any of those increased costs of production.

The cost of getting a lamb processed has almost doubled in the past two years, and this does not bode well for ensuring access to local meat if the consumer is not willing to pay their share of that increased cost. The fees for processing cattle also continue to increase beyond what the

farmer can sustain on their own – brought on in part by all the new regulations for the licensing of abattoirs and for the disposal of the offal, including the portions believed to convey mad cow disease. The very few companies that control most of the meat industry, from purchase of live animals to mass production slaughter and processing, are paying the ranchers less and less each year – less in fact than what it cost to raise the animals.

Another huge factor that affects food processors and farmers is, again, related to our globalized food system. One hundred years ago, if someone made a bad batch of pickled carrots, their immediate family and perhaps a few neighbours got sick. The “traceability” was obvious – everyone involved knew that Sally made the pickles and brought them out for a mid-winter feast, or sold them at the local fair. Nowadays we have a system where most of the food on the shelves comes from all over the world. In fact some of the individual ingredients are a blend of crops or meat from all over the world, whether we are talking the high fructose corn syrup in your breakfast cereal or the hamburger on your barbeque – and if there are any vegetarians in the crowd, this may apply to your tofu.

In the mid 1990’s there was a recall of European chocolate from all corners of the world. What had happened was that in Germany they had a food oil recycling program that allowed people to dump their used food-grade oil into communal containers. This oil was then handed over to the livestock and pet food manufacturers. Someone added PCB contaminated oil to one of those communal containers. This then went into animal feed which was fed to dairy cattle whose milk was used to make the chocolate that was distributed to thousands of retailers around the world. That one person’s action threatened the well being of individuals in many different countries.

That kind of global, unsafe, food domino-chain scares the hell out of the regulators – and it should. But what ends up happening is that they develop regulations that address only that level of production and distribution – the global one. They try to address all the potential problem points with regards to food safety and they create regulations or systems that food producers have to follow, no matter what their size or market. It is our reputation in the global food system that our regulators and politicians are trying to keep squeaky clean.

And while I am heartily in support of safe food – I mean who likes throwing up?! - I know that many of these regulations are a nightmare for small-scale producers. Systems like “Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point”, known by its acronym, HACCP, are extremely costly to implement and maintain. And if you ask your local butcher or baker if documenting their every

action each day helps them produce a safer product they are likely to laugh in your face – unless they do something much ruder!

Speaking of the butcher, this brings me to another weak point in a local food system. Old age. Many of those who work in or support agriculture - the farmers themselves, the butchers, the agrologists, the veterinarians - are all getting on in age. If they are lucky enough to have a pension, they will be retiring soon. And the frightening thing is that no one is lining up to take their places. When the remaining Ministry of Agriculture's district agrologists retire, there is no plan to replace them. They are an invaluable resource to the farming community and many of them are very much a part of it themselves. Kids now entering vet school are generally doing so to learn how to cure sick kitties and dogs, not how to help a cow through a breach birth.

We don't encourage our youth to consider a career in agriculture, never mind teach them anything about farming. And the ones who know all about it, the kids who grow up on a farm and watch their parents get more and more demoralized while still working their hearts out – you can bet they don't see that as a wise career choice for themselves. Unless they, like so many before them, are caught by the "lifestyle", by the land, by the cycles of nature, by the satisfaction of working hard and seeing the fruits of their labour, of knowing that they have produced a high quality product.

Getting those products onto grocery store shelves is much harder than you would think. Most of the "real estate" on the grocery chain shelves is rented by the large processed food conglomerates. It is just so much easier for a grocery store when coke, Kraft or Heinz staff come and check on the stock every week, place the orders and maintain the volumes. In case you are not aware, most processed foods are manufactured by a few huge corporations with "families" of products. They have the infrastructure and all the genuine "economies of scale" for their globally sourced and marketed, highly processed foods to be able to afford those shelf fees.

Second only to price, convenience is the other major factor determining what is on the grocery store shelves. The individual store staff isn't to be hassled with product ordering – if the manufacturer's staff aren't attending to that, it all goes through head office. Head office requires that you, to them an anonymous food producer, submit all sorts of information about your product in order to get it accepted. In addition to product information you must also have

approved labeling with French and English, nutritional information (which is a joke on something like Doritos), and a bar code. Should you win the cottage-industry food producer's lottery and get accepted by the likes of Safeway or Wal-Mart, then your product generally has to be shipped to a central warehouse in places like Burnaby or Calgary before it can re-appear on your local grocery store shelf. If we are talking meat, it will mostly likely have to come from a federally licensed processing facility since the grocery chains want to be able to ship the meat anywhere in the country and not have to worry about trivial things provincial boundaries.

Those behind such buying policies will claim that the challenges that farmers and food producers face come from "the market". The "market" demands that cantaloupes be the size of a B cup bra, that pointy-ended cucumbers rot in the field, that peppers all be an identical size and shape. That is nonsense. We are the market – the collection of our individual buying habits and choices. And it is our buying habits that have driven farmers to suicide and many food processors out of business.

We have to wake up from the low-price stupor created by our governments, the Walmarts, Costco's, and Superstores of this world. We need to realize that if we all want to be eating in 10 or 20 years, we each have to take individual responsibility to aggressively support our local food producers so that we can rebuild a food system that will respond to our needs and not be dictated by events, economies and corporations far distant from us. It means getting your meat, dairy, fruit and vegetables either directly from the farmer, or from an independently owned and run local grocer.

It means making an effort, taking the time to acquire your food from different places in your community and from the farmers themselves. No more one-stop shopping. By supporting the many individuals who produce food in the our area, we are building community, helping farmers and food producers stay in business, supporting the local economy and building communal food security that we children and our grandchildren will be able to enjoy.

I know that I have painted a bleak picture of the globalized food system and the farmers and food producers that struggle under its weight. It is, in truth, a very bleak picture and I have barely scratched the surface of the issues; global warming, the decimation of our province's livestock producers from a horrible convergence of factors, the fight to save the Canadian

Wheat Board are just a few among the environmental, cultural, social and political factors undermining or actively tearing apart sustainable food systems.

We are in a desperate situation and frankly it terrifies me. Ask the any homeless person in Nelson and they can tell you that the need for food is very real. We all need it every day. Stop and think about how often you need a lawyer and how often you need food and then consider how the hourly wage of a lawyer versus a farmer compares? Which is more essential to our daily life? And don't tell me that the lawyer knows more than a farmer – it is just a different kind of knowledge.

But more than 98% of North Americans rely on less than 2% of the population and on a steady supply of imports to feed themselves. And we pretend that this is reliable, just, and sustainable. We have been sticking our heads in the sand for too long – this is dangerous and foolhardy. And fundamentally selfish to expect that the rest of the world, mostly peasant farmers driven off their own land, will keep producing our food year round.

I know that there is an alternative and that there are many who are producing great volumes of food that feed themselves, their neighbours and their communities. But even with the thriving local options here - the Kootenay Co-op store, Evergreen Foods, Endless Harvest - we have barely made a dent in import replacement in our region. We are in no way food self-sufficient. I am not proposing that we need to be, but we sure have to come up with an alternative to a food system that is dominated and controlled by the likes of Cargill, Monsanto, Sysco and Safeway. They don't care whether or not our farmers are all driven off the land. They don't care if we go to bed hungry. They don't care that the nutritional value of most of the foods they supply is laughable. They care about money and power in their sick food system. We need a full-scale food revolution and I can't think of a better place to start it than in the Kootenays.

There is much we can do, here, to create the alternative... Many of you will have heard of a marketing model that is spreading across North America – Community Supported Agriculture, also known as a CSA. It is a great model for reconnecting people with the source of their food, with the land, with the cycle of the seasons, and with each other. People buy shares at the beginning of the season, when the farmer is most in need of cash to buy supplies for new crops or livestock. Then as the season proceeds, each member or shareholder gets their share of the harvest. They participate in both the abundance and the risk of each crop throughout the year.

True CSAs require their shareholders to come and work a set number of hours on the farm. They also frequently have work and harvest parties. The community supports and often feels a sense of ownership of “their farm” – it is community-supported agriculture.

But if we turn that around, every community, whether it is aware of it or not, is an “agriculture-supported community”. Without farming, somewhere, we do not have food. Without food we don’t have people, never mind communities. And ultimately, the most food secure community is the one that has control over the source, quality and quantity of their food. It doesn’t work if we only think of ourselves individually – we need to create our food security as a community, one that genuinely cares about and actively supports its farmers and food processors and its poor and hungry.

To wrap up I am going to offer a bunch of different ways in which our community could work towards our own collective and long-term food security.

- Donate time and money to one of the many excellent venues in Nelson that offers free food.
- Support gleaning programs where unused food is collected and passed along to those who need it.
- If you are not one yourself, get to know your local farmers. Talk to them when they are not insanely busy with harvesting, calving or planting and hear their stories and needs.
- Seek out and buy food directly from our local farmers and never, ever try to give them less than they are asking for. Believe me, farming is not a get rich quick scheme and they ask what they need to be paid. Consider giving them more than they ask for.
- Get involved in land trusts that protect land and make it available to those who want to use it to produce food.
- Help to establish farmer-mentoring programs so that we can teach the next generations to farm and secure their own long-term food security.
- Lobby the local grocers, restaurants and institutions to source locally and adapt their buying policies and menus to reflect the change of the seasons and available products – what is better than the first fresh tomato of the season?!
- Work with the municipal government to ensure that there is a free and secure location for an accessible and centrally located farmers market
- Find out if our municipalities allow for backyard livestock within city limits and if they don't, get it changed.

- What about having a portion of our municipal taxes going to support the community good of a local food system, just like they do the communal services of schools, roads and libraries? These taxes could be used for such things as:
 - A depot for collecting food for the various agencies that feed the hungry
 - A composting facility to produce good soil for people's gardens
 - A refrigerated truck for transporting farm goods to the consuming citizens
 - The purchase of quota for a communal egg or milk supply spread out among various small area producers
- Go out of your way to patronize the locally owned and operated food venues and let them know that you support their efforts to source their ingredients locally and that you are happy to pay more for their food if they are sourcing locally.
- Get involved in communal food activities like canning or harvesting work parties.
- Learn to save seeds and preserve the diversity so essential to our future food supply.
- And most of all, bring joy and reverence back to your relationship with food.

Eating is one of the most intimate acts we engage in. What goes into our bodies becomes part of us. We are worth feeding properly and well – socially, environmentally, politically, morally and culturally. All of us deserve to eat well and to know that we will eat well tomorrow. And those who produce or gather our food deserve to be treated fairly, with dignity and with respect. Local food systems support our health, our communities, our cultures, our food security, and, ultimately, our future.