



La Vista Visions

A NEWSLETTER ON THE INTEGRITY OF CREATION

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A Personal Journey

by Sharon Zayac, OP

For one of my classes in my Earth Literacy masters program I had to identify an environmental issue about which I have changed my position. I would like to share it with you. It is my choice to become a vegetarian.

My initial position on vegetarianism was like most Americans. I had heard of people who chose to eat no meat, but I never considered it as an option for myself. I liked meat, and I liked vegetables. If I didn't have meat at a meal, I was quite satisfied. If I had it, I was satisfied. But I never considered not ever having it.

I grew up eating meat. It was almost always a part of every meal, except when my mother cooked Italian (her heritage). Then, there would be little or no meat in the main dish. I was fine either way. When I entered our midwestern religious community where meat and potatoes were the essential part of every main meal, I continued the pattern as well.

A few years ago, all of that changed for me. What led me to vegetarianism? A growing knowledge. I can no longer willingly eat meat. Though I do not necessarily wish everyone to become vegetarians, I do wish that the American people would eat far less meat than they do.

I choose not to eat meat because of health reasons. The antibiotics, insecticides, and hormones that are injected into animals to ensure "healthy" meat enter our own bodies when we consume them. Eating the disproportionate amount of meat we do in this country means our bodies are accumulating these substances in dangerous amounts. Why should we willingly consume known toxins; why should we add fuel to the fire of emerging drug-resistant bacteria?

Another health concern is the growing number of outbreaks of *e coli*. The conditions to which animals are subjected before they are slaughtered and the inability of meat inspectors to adequately do their jobs, both contribute to these outbreaks. How frequently in the last few years have millions of pounds of beef been recalled?



I take issue with the treatment of animals themselves, each of which has the desire for life and family in its own way as we do in ours. "Livestock" is a telling term. They are literally factory animals, removed from their mothers shortly after birth; raised in crowded, untenable conditions; fed unhealthy (for them) diets to fatten them up; often injured and subjected to extreme heat or cold during transportation; left standing in mountains of their own excrement; and die in terror as they are electrocuted or

brained with steel rods.

The fact we as Americans consume far more meat than our own bodies can healthily assimilate also places a tremendous burden on the land. More than 80% of the grain we grow is to feed animals waiting for slaughter. The land that supports that grain is fertilized and herbicized with tons of chemicals that seep into the groundwater and run-off into the river and oceans, poisoning us and other plant and animal life. Billions of gallons of water are siphoned off rivers (often onto the naturally dry, desert lands in the West) to grow the grain and to wash, feed, and slaughter the animals. The amount of methane produced by our huge stockyards contributes to the greenhouse effect.

Because we want cheap beef, raising cattle has become a cash crop for many cash-strapped Third World countries. They burn off thousands of acres of their rainforests, displace their own indigenous people, and end up importing food since land

Letter from the Director

Welcome again to *La Vista Visions*! This issue finds us at the beginning of Autumn. What are the images you associate with this season? As the seasons flow one into the other, I find myself especially grateful this particular Autumn. After a severely dry and hot Summer, the cooler and shorter days of this season are most welcome.

Wendell Berry has said that “how we eat determines to a considerable extent how the world is used”. How do we eat? What differences do these choices make upon the world? It seems to me that these are religious questions and moral ponderings. Indeed the way we choose to nourish ourselves has larger implications than solely the effects upon our bodies. Thus we dedicate the lead story of this Autumn issue to help us critically examine and re-think our Western diet. We thank our friend **Sharon Zayac, OP** for the permission to reprint her words.

The harvest theme of Autumn continues as we hear from our **farmer Kristopher Larson** describing the emergence of his ecological vocation. Kris has worked diligently in this his first season at La Vista to provide organic vegetables, herbs and flowers for our 160 shareholder families.

Speaking of harvest...back on August 4th, in the hottest and driest part of the Summer, the **Community Supported Garden at LaVista** held it's second annual Tomato Fest. That time of year is “peak” for tomatoes in this part of the world and did we ever have fun! Tomato games, a tomato cook-off, tomato inspired art and poetry and even a tomato piñata! Go to www.lavistacsa.org to read the press reporting on this fun seasonal event.

Autumn Equinox, 2006

Also successful was this August's Earth Literacy program “**Exploring the Sacred Universe**”. A total of 22 people journeyed together in this week long process dedicated to being mutually enhancing with Earth. This group pondered the Universe Story, justice, peace and the integrity of creation, and bioregionalism. These days centered around an exploration of meaningful ponderings of our origin. A reconnection with the Divine through immersion into the emerging Universe was facilitated. Eight Oblates were part of this group including Bill Antone, Norm Comtois, Charlie Gilbert, Jack Lau, Darrell Rupiper, Bob Aaron, Seamus Finn and myself.

May the season of Autumn find you grateful and sharing the harvest of many blessings! ☯

-Maurice Lange, OMI



Maurice and the other Oblates at Earth Literacy

Creating a Mutually Enhancing Human/Earth Relationship

Resources for “Just” Food

Books:

- *“Hope’s Edge; The Next Diet for a Small Planet”* Frances Moore Lappe and Anna Lappe. 2002.
- *“Fast Food Nation; The Dark Side of the All-American Meal”* Eric Schlosser. 2001.

Videos:

- *“The Global Banquet: Politics of Food”* Maryknoll World Productions. www.maryknollworld.org
- *“Diet For A New America”* KCET Video. 1-800-343-4727

Websites for Eating Locally-grown Food

- Local Harvest. www.localharvest.org
- Robin Van En Center - Center for CSA resources. www.csacenter.org

Pastoral Statement:

- *“For I Was Hungry & You Gave Me Food - Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers”* United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. 2003. 1-800-235-8722



(continued from page 1)

they once used to grow their own food now supports cattle for our consumption.

As I learned these things, I could no longer in conscience continue eating meat. I chose first to eliminate beef from my diet. I struggled in the beginning, but after a while I found I no longer craved it. I decided it was time to give up pork, followed by chicken at an even later date. I knew that I was fooling myself. I made the decision to just do it, except for fish and seafood! After all, they're not meat, right? The Church taught me that.

It took several more months to cross that barrier. What is the difference between sea-based meat and land-based? None, really, and for all the same reasons! The world's oceans are drastically over-fished and species on the brink of extinction. Many of the fish and seafood we eat do not even come from the ocean! No happily swimming salmon or shrimp waiting to jump onto my plate. They are also produced in factory fashion on aquaculture farms and fed meal that comes from ground-up animal products, bearing all those toxins and drugs. The salmon are even given pink dye in their food to have the nice color we like to see on our plates. There is no difference! I gave them up, too.

Why did I ever eat meat? A whole host of assumptions led me to believe it was the right thing to do: Eating meat is "normal." Only "weird" people are vegetarians. Everyone I knew ate meat. Animal products are essential for protein and calcium. Vegetables don't have enough of either to keep us healthy. Whole holiday traditions center around the turkey and ham. Memories of the table and all the aromas are part of the warm feelings I have about the day.

In the beginning stages of my learning, I continued to eat meat. As I began to associate with others who had opted to refrain, I became self-conscious about my inability to join them. I was absorbing all the information they already knew, but I couldn't totally let go.

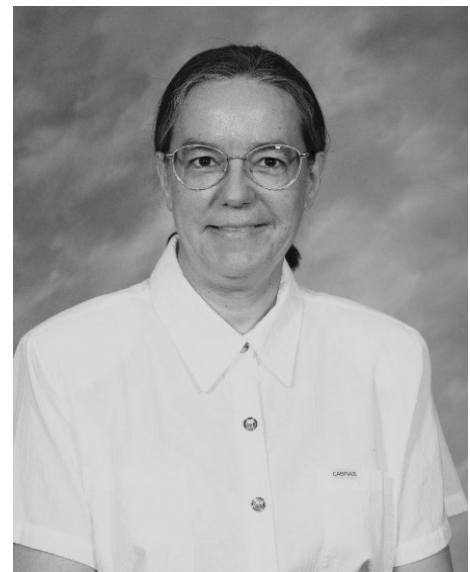
Yes, there were toxins in the meat. But, there are toxins in water, air, and other food we eat. Yes, my meat consumption adds to Third World debt, but so does just about every other choice I make in this very consumer-oriented culture. I could "yes, but" to every reason to give it up.

Slowly, however, it all began to come together. I can't really say in what sequence. As all things in our universe, everything is interrelated and flows in and out of each other. I was becoming more attentive to the issues that meat-eating raises. My growing awareness of creation spirituality and quantum theology was changing all my metaphors about God, my understanding of the universe and who I am within it. I was literally seeing the world differently, and I knew my actions would have to coincide with what I was coming to believe, or I would be in total contradiction of myself.

All life on this planet is sacred. All life deserves respect and reverence. The animals we choose to consume have an interior life of their own, and we do violence to them in the manner in which we "handle" them for our consumption. And though ours is a universe where one eats another to survive, the kinds of choices about what I was eating were not based upon survival but habit and cultivated taste. I've always loved vegetables. Eating them is far less harmful to the soil and water and air than eating meat. The right thing for me to do, the ethical thing, would be to give up eating meat. It had become a moral issue.

And although it is a moral issue, my decision is tempered by the context in which I find myself. I do not willingly eat meat. I graciously accept a small amount of it when it is offered in a setting in which I can't refuse it. I will not dishonor my aunt who on her limited income fixes me my favorite childhood Italian dishes.

Certainly the dynamics present in my on-going process of change include a growing awareness of the real issues: letting in all the data, even that which is painful for me to hear; seeing my change not as a denial of pleasurable tastes but an opportunity to experience a whole new world of tastes. Most significantly, it is allowing my assumptions to change and being gentle with myself in the "strenuous waiting" as I learn what the right actions are for me, now. My shift to vegetarianism is, in reality, a metaphor for all that has been happening in my life. ☯



Sharon Therese Zayac, O.P., a Springfield (Illinois) Dominican Sister, is the Director of Benincasa Ministries which includes Jubilee Farm, her congregation's 111-acre center for ecology and spirituality in Springfield, Illinois. She lives at Jubilee Farm where she offers programs, retreats, and workshops on a variety of ecological topics.

Emergence of an Ecological Vocation (ninth in a series)

by Kris Larson

I've been in organic farming for seven years now, and am currently in my first season as the Head Farmer at the **Community Supported Garden at La Vista**. I look back, now, and am surprised that I have farmed for so long already and plan on many more years of this because I never chose, at any one time, to become a farmer. I never planned for a



career in farming. Nobody convinced me to try farming, and no one recruited me. Farming is a field you don't enter these days. People get out of farming. They don't get into it.

Although my grandparents grew up on farms in Illinois and Tennessee, they were the last generation in my family to do so. I was not raised to be a farmer. I grew up in three different Southern towns, the only son of a college administrator and radio disk jockey. I spent many hours playing pick-up baseball or football, getting good grades in school, reading, and watching every Atlanta Braves game I could find. The closest I came to farming was bagging groceries, and that's not close at all.

Farming entered my life very slowly. Some organic farmers I know jumped right into it, usually because they had land or a mid-life crisis or most likely both. I've been too young and naïve and landless to jump into it. And thank goodness! I've had too much to learn from too many people over the years to make it fast. Some things take time.

I could trace my path into farming by detailing a dozen forays into the weed-lots, woods, and creeks near each of my homes, and then afterward as I worked my way west through National Parks and National Forests before landing in California as a Natural Resources Planning major. But, none of that was sufficient to get me into farming. My

growing love of nature was not enough to get into farming. My need for working with the Earth was not enough. I got into farming for one reason. I got into farming because farmers of an older generation taught people like me what they know. Then, they gave people like me the opportunity to try it, to learn on our own by doing. Without teachers, none of this would have happened. Without farmers teaching farmers, the healing way of growing food would slowly die out.

As a college student, I could never put my finger on where I was headed. I dabbled in environmental activism, music and dancing. I was inspired early on by the work and life story of Aldo Leopold, and turned out to love land restoration, planting a thousand trees along the open spaces of California's North Coast. I pulled several tons of invasive species from forests and parks and coordinated hundreds of volunteers in outdoor work. Nevertheless, there was always something missing.

The turning point was simple. I took a course in Permaculture, followed by one in Community Agriculture. The courses were taught by Susan Ornelas, a 20-year veteran of small-scale organic agriculture who founded a one-acre educational garden and CSA. She created the courses at the university to teach youngsters like me where food comes from. She taught these courses because, as a farmer, she was increasingly dismayed by the alienation of farming from our culture. In a small way, she decided that at least college graduates should know something about one of the more singular parts of a healthy life.

I can say now that without her I could not have become a farmer.

The two courses did not fit into the school mission, however. There were several liability concerns about students coming out to the farm. She was able to offer these courses only through many hours spent persuading university faculty and staff of the importance of an agriculture introduction to the educated public.

Ironically, she was not the best teacher. She tended to lose her place in the middle of a thought and proceed towards tangents that ate up precious class time. There was nothing overtly inspiring about any of the classes, no moments where, as a student, you found yourself floating in a whole new world freshly opened by a master. She was just a farmer talking about what she does while trying to teach us thing or two.

She did one thing well above all else. She showed

that farming is a normal thing for a person to do. She unveiled the myths of farming and displayed its natural humanity. She never for a second made organic, small-scale farming look like anything except a valid occupation for anyone able to do the work. She taught a manner of physical work that anyone could do. She made farming possible by bringing it down to earth. She made farming a bonafide option for me. She simply showed the way, like all good teachers do.

Inspired by the two ag classes, I volunteered at a local farm for two summers. That farm happened to have been founded by one of Susan's former students. I volunteered to uncover the extent of my interest. At first, I just had to know if I could actually enjoy the work. Soon, I worked because it was the highlight of my week. Then, at some point, it became a part of who I wanted to be.

Then came the risk, the moment of personal choice. The hardest decision came after that second summer. I graduated college and faced a fork in the road. I had to decide whether or not to choose farming or a "normal" career. I had to choose between mud boots or shirt and tie. I had to choose between learning how to grow amazing carrots or having my own personal office. For me, it was a choice between a life or a living.

Looking back, the choice seems easy and logical. At the time, it was neither. I chose an apprenticeship at a farm near Eugene, Oregon, and learned just about everything I know. The risk turned out to be low, though, as I knew I could get out after one year. It turned out that I liked it even more once I was doing it full time.

As that first apprenticeship was nearing its end, many options besides farming loomed. However, the farmers offered me the opportunity to return as a full-time paid staff the next season. That's the second part of how I got into farming. First, the path was opened. Then, the invitation was offered for more. The choice was never as hard, nor as large, as that first choice. I never chose the Big Picture of farming throughout the course of a lifetime. So far, it's been one small step at a time.

Each year has been a choice. The fact that farming, in our modern economy, remains a "dead end" job hasn't gone away. The pressures to get out are as strong as they've always been. It's hard work and seemingly unstable, utterly dependent on the elements of time and nature, neither of which conform to our naïve notions of progress. Each winter has offered every opportunity to get out of farming. Come December, beat up and exhausted, I'm sending out resumes to organizations and land agencies of every kind. Come

January, though, I've come around once again, and find myself seeking another farm, another year of learning about food.

I met my wife at my apprentice farm and we've since had a darling little boy. I've learned that it's extremely important that farming be a part of one's family. Farming thrives only if it is fully embraced, and it's hard to do this alone. It's also important that farming support your family in every way.

I still feel like a very new entrant into the world of farming. I have a lot of learning ahead, a lot of mistakes, and a lot of new experiences. I'm still finding the rhythms of nature and learning to dance in time to the music of the seasons. Many times I feel totally inadequate to the task at hand, but somehow I have the opportunity to try.

I'm honored to have the opportunity. I feel consistently humbled. It's a job that makes you want to give back. Ultimately, I always return to that first introduction, to the person who decided to teach what otherwise could not have been known. Everybody has a farmer inside of them. Everybody has that dream they feel rumbling in their heart. We're all capable of reaching higher, of touching that core that makes us take these unconventional leaps.

Sometimes we need someone to show us that the door exists. I owe my career to at least one person, and in fact several people, who decided to teach a younger generation that their dreams aren't crazy after all, that their dreams are a simple series of small steps, with several hard choices along the way, but a true path indeed. Someone once said that to change the world, teach someone something you know well. Imagine the possibilities. I offer one testimonial that you can make a life for someone. You can change the world one restless kid at a time. ☯



Kris, wife Stacy, and son Jacob speaking with garden shareholders



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"You must be the change you wish to see in the world."

-Mahatma Gandhi



Father Maurice leading participants in prayer

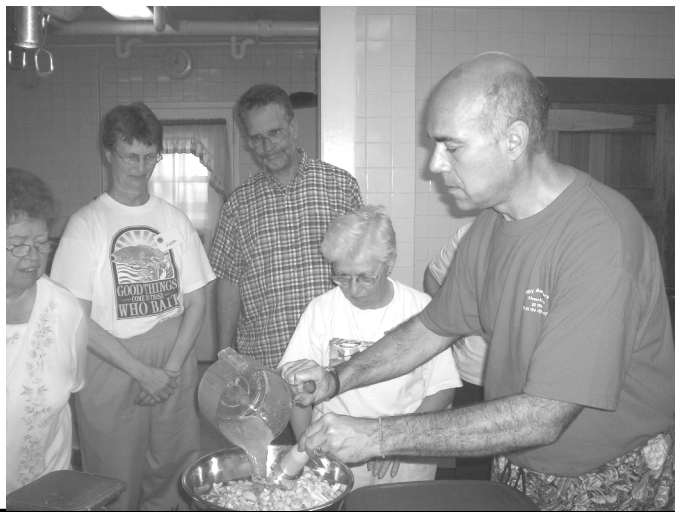
Earth Literacy Week

August
2006



Revitalized by a delicious lunch, participants discuss bioregions with Bill Antone, OMI

Chef Jacques Lau, OMI preparing lunch with Earth Literacy Week participants



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