

The Delicious Revolution

I believe there is something very wrong with the way most people in our culture relate to food, and this is something that seems to me to be absolutely central to the future of environmentalism. Even the environmental visionaries who seem to be seeing the trees awfully well, even some of these brilliant revolutionaries keep missing the forest. And the forest is, that learning to make the right choices about food is the single most important key to environmental awareness—for ourselves, and especially for our children.

Why do I think making the right choices about food is so important? I want to tell you a little story.

I recently visited a natural history museum with an old friend of mine. We had just come back from taking my daughter to Vermont, where she was at a school that incorporates a working farm into its curriculum, and we had had a couple of wonderful meals with old friends.

And then we walked into the museum, which is such a monumental piece of Romanesque revival architecture, and I remembered what it had been like to go to that museum as a child, and feel uplifted by the soaring spaces, and inspired by the amazing dioramas celebrating the natural sciences and the family of man. The museum still feels a lot like that: It's almost as if it were a sacred space. All the animals! All the activities of so many different peoples! Hunting, gathering, fashioning shelter and clothing... And so many dwellings—igloos and yurts, huts and pavilions, tea rooms and palaces... The whole world on display: Native American canoes and totem poles; Japanese ceramics and textiles; African masks and musical instruments... And there were dioramas and displays with plates and tableware and all kinds of activities centered around food and cooking and the hearth. And there were exhibits of agriculture down through the ages. And it was so wonderful to see all this again—how everything was so celebrated and revered.

Then we came to a brand new exhibit about a contemporary environmental disaster: the destruction of the rainforest. It was very high-tech and very powerful, with lots of graphs and statistics about biodiversity and the number of square miles destroyed every day. Here was an exhibit that wasn't about the past, but about the survival of the planet—something that's happening right now.

But then we walked into the museum cafeteria. And suddenly everything changed. There was a crowd of people in this sort of sunken space—badly lit—and it seemed like some other kind of odd display. A vast diorama of late twentieth century life. And then the smell hit us: that steamy, industrial, water-logged hospital-food smell. You know that smell; we've all smelled it—the one where you immediately imagine how pre-cooked, portion-controlled plastic pouches are being cooked and microwaved and then opened and slid onto trays.

I had to leave. Yet this was how the people in this place were choosing to feed themselves. It was an overwhelming moment: *This is the way things really are*. Here were all these people in this magnificent space, surrounded by exhibits of biological and cultural splendor celebrating all these aspects of being human and being alive, but when it came to this other aspect of their experience, their *real* everyday experience, they seemed to just stop thinking.

And that cafeteria *could* have made you think *and* delighted your senses. It could have been a kind of continuation of the environmental lessons of the rainforest exhibit *and* the biological and anthropological lessons of the other exhibits. They could have been serving delicious food in a way that taught you where the food came from and how it was made. You could have learned about composting and recycling. It could have been set up so that you could *at least* have some friendly human interaction. And it could have inspired you to head out of the museum and see the world in a different way. But instead, it was like a filling station.

And I was struck again by the fact that until we see how we feed ourselves as just as important—and maybe more important—than all the other activities of mankind—there is going to be a huge hole in our environmental

consciousness. Because if we don't care about food, then environmentalism will always be something outside of ourselves. And yet environmentalism can be something that actually affects you in the most intimate—and literally visceral—way. It can be something that actually gets inside you and gets digested.

Why is it that people don't understand the profound disconnection between the kind of human experience that we value so highly and put on display in ethnographic museums and the way we actually live our lives today? How can most people submit so unthinkingly to dehumanizing experiences of food—not only museum cafeterias, but the lifeless fast food that's everywhere in our lives? How can you marvel at the world and then feed yourself in a completely unmarvelous way? I think it's because we don't *learn* the vital relationship of food to agriculture and of food to culture, and how food affects the quality of our everyday lives.

To me, food is the one central thing about human experience which can open up both our senses and our consciences to our place in the world. Consider this: Eating is something we all have in common. It's something we all have to do every day and it's something we can all share. Food and nourishment are right at the point where human rights and the environment intersect. Everyone should have the right to wholesome, affordable food.

What could be a more delicious revolution than to start committing our best resources to teaching this to children?—by feeding them and giving them pleasure; by teaching them how to grow food responsibly; and by teaching them how to cook it and eat it, together, around the table? When you start to open up a child's senses—when you invite children to engage, physically, with gardening and food—there is a set of values that is instilled effortlessly, that just washes over them, as part of the process of offering good food to other people. Children become so rapt—so enraptured, even—by being engaged in learning in a sensual, kinesthetic way. And food seduces you *by its very nature*—the smell of baking, for example: It makes you hungry! Who could resist the aroma of fresh bread, or the smell of warm tortillas coming off the *comál*?

There is nothing else as universal. There is nothing else so *powerful*. When you understand where your food comes from, you look at the world in an entirely different way. I think that if you really start caring about the world in this way, you see opportunities everywhere. Wherever *I* am, I'm always looking to see what's *edible* in the landscape. It may seem like sort of a trivial example, but now every time I see the median strip in the street in front of Chez Panisse, I can't help but imagine it planted with waving rows of corn. And I see garbage in an entirely different way, too—every little scrap is something that can be turned into beautiful rich soil. At the restaurant, the compost buckets really *are* beautiful. (On April Fools' Day, the local radio station announced that Chez Panisse was serving compost croûtons, and people actually called up for the recipe!) Now I see Nature not just as a source of spiritual inspiration—beautiful sunsets and purple mountain majesties—but as the source of my physical nourishment. And I've come to realize that I'm totally dependent on it, in all its beauty and richness, and that my survival depends on it.

In order for there to be a future to the environmental movement, we *must* teach the children that taking care of the land and learning to feed yourself is just as important as reading, writing, and arithmetic. For the most part, our families and institutions are not doing this—remember that cafeteria at the natural history museum? Therefore, I believe that it's up to the public education system to teach our kids these important values. There should be gardens in every school, and school lunch programs that serve the things the children grow themselves, supplemented by local, organically grown products. This could transform education *and* agriculture. A typical school of, say, one thousand students, needs two hundred and fifty pounds of potatoes for one school lunch. Imagine the impact of this kind of demand for organic food!

Which brings me to the Edible Schoolyard at Martin Luther King Junior Middle School in Berkeley, the program at the public school in my neighborhood that I helped start. Everything that has happened at the Edible Schoolyard has convinced us that we're on the right track lobbying for this kind of education in ecoliteracy. It works! The students at King are so hungry, that they learn the best lessons of the garden quickly and unforgettably.

There's nothing new about these lessons. In a pamphlet published in 1909, a California educator argued for a garden in every school. School gardens, he wrote, will teach students that actions have consequences, that private citizens should take care of public property, that labor has dignity, that nature is beautiful... And they teach economy, honesty, application, concentration, and justice. They teach what it means to be civilized.

I've seen all this happen at King. I've seen the kids sitting around the picnic tables in the schoolyard, eating salads they've grown themselves with the most polite manners. They *want* these rituals of the table. They *like* them. I've seen troubled kids who've been given a second chance and allowed to work in the garden be so transformed by the experience that they return to King School to act as mentors to the new students.

Right now, though, there's no cafeteria at King School. The old one has been turned into a classroom, and at lunchtime the only options for the kids are concession stands run by fast food vendors at the end of the schoolyard. What we want to do next is build an ecologically designed cafeteria where the messages we are trying to get across will be reinforced every day through the experience of working in a beautiful space. I can imagine a wonderful kitchen with an especially beautiful dishwashing area, and an orangerie and greenhouses warmed by the kitchen ovens. When this is finished, we'll expect to see parents and old folks from the neighborhood volunteering to shell peas and be with the kids, and we'll expect to see the kids participating in the cooking. The Edible Schoolyard, with its garden and kitchen curriculum, and the school lunch program built around it, could then be a model for every school in the country.

It is a truism of progressive thought that communities are created through interactions such as these, but it is nevertheless true. You can't just *ask* people to be responsible for one another. You have to create the circumstances where it is clear that it is in their best interests to do so. And the Edible Schoolyard creates that kind of clarity—and its potential lies in the multiplication of these epiphanies of responsibility two or three times a day, at school. The closeness, the understanding of life that comes from the experience of the table: this is what environmentalism must have at its very core.

An appreciation of food is environmentalism at its most personal and least abstract. And it is through the development of a commitment to food that the values of the environmental movement in this nation can most effectively be advanced.

Wendell Berry has written that eating is an agricultural act. I would go farther and say that eating is also a political act, but in the way the ancient Greeks used the word “political”—not just to mean having to do with voting in an election, but to mean “of, or pertaining to, all our interactions with other people—from the family to the school, to the neighborhood, the nation, and the world.” Every single choice we make about food matters, at every level. The right choice saves the world.

I want to close with a quotation from Paul Cézanne. He said: “The day is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will set off a revolution.” So let us all make our food decisions in that spirit: Let us observe that carrot afresh, and make our choice.