

Maine  
Extraordinary Food for Ordinary People  
By Mark Winne

*(Author of Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty)  
Thank You to the Maine Nutrition Council for bringing me back to one of my favorite  
places on earth, the beautiful state of Maine.*

Now, as you know, I'm a proponent of healthy and affordable food for all. If that food can be locally and organically produced, all the better. Another way of saying that is: I believe in food justice. To that end, I believe in three principles which I would ask each of you to consider. First, society, primarily in the form of public and private institutions has a responsibility to eliminate the economic and physical barriers to good, affordable food. Second, the need to operate profitable food businesses within the normal parameters of our free market system, whether they are small farmers or large food corporations, cannot override the right of consumers, especially low wealth consumers, to eat healthy and affordable food. And lastly, in pursuing a just food system that assures access to healthy and affordable food for all – one that effectively closes the food gap between rich and poor – we must all respect the natural resources upon which our food system depends. In other words, we must not pressure agricultural producers to violate the carrying capacity of the earth to produce enough food for the short term by sacrificing nature's long term potential.

Now, I'm going to tell you a story that I hope will focus our attention on the epidemic of obesity, diet-related illnesses, other forms of food insecurity, and our role as nutrition and health professionals in attacking these problems. The story is one of many that come from my 25 years of experience working on food issues in Hartford, Conn., America's second poorest city.

*I often feel the kind of frustration that I experienced late one night at a convenience store in Hartford, Connecticut. In front of me were a young, very pregnant mother and her overweight child. The mother was purchasing cigarettes, Pepsi, candy, and potato chips – and nothing else. I had to wrestle down my urge to rip those things from her hands and admonish her for all the terrible things she was doing to her body, her unborn baby, and her child. My liberal tolerance for self-destructive behavior has been tested on many occasions, and I have tried to avoid glib excuses, pat explanations, or the relativistic arguments of the politically correct. After taking a deep breath, I have tried to reflect quietly on encounters with irresponsible behavior to better understand the relationship between an individual's circumstances, his or her personal frailties, and a host of environmental influences. (Excerpted from Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty)*

The question this story poses for me is what can any of us do, personally or professionally, that will make a difference – a question by the way that is often asked of me, especially by younger people. To do the question justice I think we need to

understand the conditions that act on people's lives, conditions that may enable them to make either harmful or beneficial decisions. So let's investigate that landscape for a moment

As you know, our nation's cheap food policy has corrupted the air, the water, and most importantly, our health. Cheap food has lots of calories, but few nutrients. Because of bad federal farm policies, the actual, inflation-adjusted price of fruits and vegetables has increased 40% over the past 15 years while the actual price of high calorie, nutrient deficient products like soda and snack foods have declined as much as 15%. And our bodies have paid a tragic price: 65% of us are now overweight or obese, and due to diabetes and other diet-related illnesses, this generation of children may be the first in the history of our nation to live shorter lives than their parents. I saw a recent study that Americans spend more money on metabolic control drugs like those used to treat diabetes and high cholesterol, than any other group of drugs on the market. Overall, we as a nation are spending \$130 billion annually for additional health care related to obesity.

In spite of our policies of producing cheap food, almost 12% of Americans are hungry or food insecure; that's over 36 million of our brothers and sisters, a number that is only going up in these hard times as we see more people enrolled in the food stamp program, 32 million (190,000 in Maine), than ever before.

Food insecurity, which is clearly related to obesity and unhealthy eating, means that you may not know where your next meal is coming from; parents may skip meals so that their children can eat; an elderly person may only be able to eat once a day. Such choices in 21<sup>st</sup> century America!

Without much money, you eat high calorie, inexpensive food. Without a car or good public transportation, you can't shop at an affordable, high quality store. And without predictability and reliability as to when and what you'll eat, you are susceptible to binge eating; conditions which all breed overweight and obesity.

And for many Americans, it is not just a problem of having enough money to buy food; there is often no place to buy healthy and affordable food. In many of our urban areas – often the poorest neighborhoods – and increasingly in our rural counties – 800 rural counties according to the American Rural Sociological Society –there are very few decent food stores. These food deserts suffer from a scarcity of fresh fruits and vegetables, but often have an over abundance of junk food, convenience food stores, and fast food joints.

By way of example, let's turn to the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward in Wash. DC, located about one mile from the Capitol building. 70,000 residents; 38% of them are poor; 38% are obese; and until a year ago there wasn't a supermarket in the 8<sup>th</sup> Ward. Yes, there is every manner of fast food place: MacChicken, TacoBurger, and Colonel Coronary, but no place to buy fresh fruits and vegetables. With the support of the District of Columbia and local activists, a new supermarket opened last year and things are beginning to turn around.

If this is the environment that many lower income families live in – food deserts and limited income – can we expect our public education system to equip young people with enough knowledge and skills to resist the temptations of greasy fried food and find their way to healthy food – in effect, to overcome a very challenging environment like the one facing the woman and child I saw at the Hartford convenience store that night.

I write in my book “Closing the Food Gap...” of a meeting with the Hartford superintendent of schools. We asked him to remove the hundreds of soda machines that had sprouted like brightly lit tumors in the hallways of our public schools. He said if he did that, children would no longer have a choice. But when we found out that children in the school system only received 4 hours per year of health education, much of which was not even related to nutrition, we realized the schools did not give children information with which to make a choice. Instead, they had subjected them to the overwhelming battery of marketing America where all – even the most innocent and uninformed – are fair game for the master minds of persuasion, branding, and manipulation. The superintendent’s argument in favor of some kind of pseudo choice was disingenuous at best. Without good information and analytical skill, you are not free; without that freedom, you cannot make a free choice.

It has taken a vigorous and sustained advocacy by caring people and institutions to change the culture embodied by that school superintendent. In state after state, the soda machines have fallen like statues of tyrants in public plazas. But the battles have often been torturous and protracted. In Conn., a broad coalition of healthy food advocates required two years to convince the state to remove soda from the public schools. And the beverage industry resisted them every step of the way spending in one case over \$140,000 simply to secure a gubernatorial veto of a bill to eliminate soda that had passed both houses of the state legislature. The bill passed the second year, but ask yourself how fair it is that for those whose concerns are primarily for the public interest, for the health of our children, and for the right of a person to make an informed choice, must go up against King Kola with millions of dollars at their disposal to shape the public discourse to their desired end, and to skew democracy in favor of money over human health. It was at times like these when I asked myself what was the point in trying to provide nutrition education to a few dozen people every month when America’s food and beverage industry had us outflanked, outgunned, and outspent.

Aside from the raw abuse of power on the part of some, there is one other straightforward justice issue we must contend with in our food system: **HEALTHY FOOD AND often LOCALLY PRODUCED FOOD MAY COST MORE.** This may be true, and often it is for good reasons. But **WHY SHOULD A LOW-INCOME MOTHER HAVE TO SKIMP ON WHAT SHE BUYS FOR HER FAMILY; WHY SHOULD A SCHOOL FOOD SERVICE DIRECTOR HAVE TO ACCEPT THE HIGHLY PROCESSED COMMODITIES BECAUSE THE FOOD BUDGET IS TOO SMALL** to buy fresh fruits and vegetables; **WHY SHOULD ANYONE HAVE TO DRIVE 20 OR 30 MILES OR USE INADEQUATE PUBLIC TRANSPORTION TO GET TO AN AFFORDABLE, HIGH QUALITY FOOD store.** This is food injustice plain and simple.

We simply can't ignore the fact that America has one of the greatest gaps between rich and poor compared to anywhere else in the developed world. You can't say that the abuses of privilege so much in our faces these days, can be separated from food injustice and our poor dietary health. I learned from a friend whose son is a waiter at Spaggio's Restaurant in Chicago, made famous recently as the special occasion eatery of the Obamas, of a party of 12 who had dinner there a few months. The bill for the table of 12 – not associated in any way with the Obamas or even a certain group of disciples – came to a cool \$18,000. Using the current USDA allotment for food stamp recipients of \$1.15 per meal, the credit card holder that night could have picked up the tab for 16,000 food-insecure Americans. That's my idea of food injustice!

Perhaps to the annoyance of many people who have worked with me over the years, I could never stop asking myself and those who I worked with if we were doing the right thing. I never stopped questioning the assumptions, the facts, and even the benefits of the victories. In an itching, twitching, angst-ridden kind of way, I could never find comfort in simply continuing to do what we had always been doing, even it was working reasonably well.

To that end and perhaps more concretely, we can no longer take pride in food programs that only manage poverty by handing out food. I was a founder of a food bank in Hartford, Connecticut, which when it started in 1982 served only a dozen or so soup kitchens and food pantries. At the time, as we watched the Reagan Administration snip one strand of the safety net after another, and as the lines at our city's few existing food pantries started to snake around the block, we felt we had no choice but develop new ways of securing more food for free distribution. Today, that same food bank serves 400 such agencies. About three years ago it moved into its fifth warehouse – this one twice as big and twice as well equipped as the previous one – and completed yet another multi-million dollar capital campaign. Everywhere I visit I see new construction at food banks, capital campaigns underway to finance their expansion, and in some cases adding new programs. I ask: When did we accept this process as normal? At one point did we say that this was the best way to solve a problem as immense as hunger and poverty in America? At one point did we let government off the hook, forsake the goal of ending poverty, and give up the essential task of empowering others to help themselves?

As I look back over nearly 30 years of food bank growth, some of which I intimately supported, I am reminded of a few lines by T.S. Eliot who, speaking of his own generation, wrote, "Here were decent godless people: their only monument the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls." Will our only legacy of compassion and social change be the nation's 200 giant food bank warehouses and 60,000 food pantries that now fill this country end to end?

Throughout my 35-year career in community food systems and community food activism, I have been reminded on almost a daily basis of how food injustice reveals itself, and how immediately it is connected to poverty, politics, and disempowerment.

I think of Jeanette, a single mother of two living in Hartford, Conn. on a part-time job and food stamps. Without a car, she would have to use the public bus to do her grocery shopping. Often with one, sometimes two of her children in tow, she would change buses twice and endure a 45 minute one-way ride to a suburban supermarket because there was none in her city. But with good community organizing and an active involvement in public policy, groups like the one I ran were able to establish a new bus route that provided a direct 15 minute one-way ride to a new supermarket for Jeanette and her neighbors.

I remember Magdalena, another single mother of two young children who attempted to pull herself up by her bootstraps with a part-time job at McDonalds and to feed her children by entering the WIC Program. But her efforts to do get nutrition assistance were thwarted by the city health department which had closed a WIC clinic nearest her. She could neither get time off from work, arrange care, nor get a ride to the one other clinic in the city which was open only on banker's hours – 9 to 4, Mon. – Fri., one hour off for lunch and no weekend or evening hours. Again, diligent, organized and caring citizens intervened on behalf of Magdalena and the thousands of other WIC moms and children who had been all but forcibly removed from WIC. The old clinic was re-opened, the clinics were staffed at lunch time, and Saturday and evening hours were added.

And I will never forget Mrs. Williams, an imposing African-American lady of 75 years. She lived in a neighborhood that had once been prosperous and safe, but was now embedded in poverty and crime. She longed for the taste of real, fresh greens and other farm-grown produce that she remembered so well from her childhood in the American South. But lack of money, the lack of neighborhood grocery stores, and the lack of transportation made it nearly impossible for Mrs. Williams to even get something as simple as a bunch of collard greens. When we started a CSA farm just outside the city limits, we sought out people like her who longed for healthy food, but who had been denied it due to circumstances beyond her control. We secured federal funding from the Senior Farmers Market Nutrition Program that gave Mrs. Williams and thousands of seniors like her the means to buy locally grown, often organic food from our CSA and dozens of farmers' markets around the state. No, I won't ever forget the sight of Mrs. Williams, standing in the entry way of our barn, her face buried in a giant bundle of collards that she was clutching to her chest like a new born baby.

What unites these three women and their stories is that the food system failed them by denying them access to affordable and healthy food, by losing farming and farmland, and by a bumbling and indifferent bureaucracy. What served them, what gave them hope that they could once again participate in the prosperity they saw elsewhere, was the active engagement of private projects, community partnerships, and public policies that could make the food system work once again for them and their neighbors. What empowered them and others around them was a chance to participate in finding solutions to their own problems as well as those of their community.

By building the infrastructure for farmers' markets in Connecticut, we went from zero farmers' markets in 1978 to almost 100 today. This growth was supported by public

policy work at the local and state levels that brought us new market sites as well as funding from the Farmers' Market Nutrition Program to encourage low wealth consumers to shop at those markets. This combination of projects and policy also brought the EBT program to farmers' market which enabled them to accept food stamps. We also preserved farmland by working vigorously for farmland preservation funds from the state and federal governments. And we used a variety of means to ensure that public transportation took people to food, or that we could bring supermarkets and farmers' markets to the people.

As a person born into privilege, my first encounter with domestic hunger and poverty, ironically, was right here in Maine. As a student at Bates College I started off my freshman year as a Big Brother to a young Lewiston boy. The sights, the sounds, and the smell of his family's apartment that directly abutted the Bates textile mill were sensations I'll never forget. Sitting in virtual darkness because their apartment had only one window, in rooms that lacked both ventilation and heat, in a house that was so old it vibrated with the mill's giant mechanical looms only yards away, inhaling a rancid odor that was part macaroni and cheese, part upstream paper mill effluent that filled the open-sewer that was then the Androscoggin River, my little brother's family steadily decayed in a world without hope. As a 19-year old do-gooder with little skill and no knowledge, I played catch with him and took him to the college dining hall where he wolfed down great quantities of food that we snooty collegiates dismissed with a list of unspeakable names. After I had moved on to the hundreds of other distractions available to a student of the late sixties, he, I would discover later, moved on to the state's juvenile detention center.

William James, our great American psychologist and philosopher, once reminded us that we are not here on this earth simply to drink its milk and honey, to acquire as much wealth as we can, or to live as comfortably as society will permit. He told us over 100 years ago that, "If this life is not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of theatrics...from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight – as if there were something really wild in the universe which we...are needed to reform."

What's the fight about? What do we need to reform? How will we do it? The first point I want to make clear is that the task before us is not one for heroic individuals or brave lone wolves. It is one that requires collective action, collaboration, and partnerships. It calls for steady and persistent progress by people who have taken the time to assess the strengths and weakness of their local and regional food systems; people who understand how to build a long term plan for change. You will not win because you are cleverer, more skilled, or more powerful – you are up against forces that are, in raw American political terms, far more powerful than you'll ever hope to be. You will succeed because you have the numbers, the logic, and the facts on your side. Because you are transparent, democratic, and committed to the principle of inclusivity.

I like to start with the 3-Ps – projects, partners, and policies. We have done the first two Ps pretty well. We've established numerous projects – farmers' markets, nutrition

education programs, community gardens, local food campaigns. We have organized partnerships of ever increasing sophistication. But we are still weak on policy, where in my opinion, the real fight will be won.

Connecticut has organized 100 farmers' markets that have been generously supported by the funding from the state and federal governments' Farmers Market Nutrition Program.

In New Mexico and Washington state, food policy groups made up of dozens of partners have secured funding to purchase fresh food and vegetables from local farmers for their public schools and food banks. In Pennsylvania, they have used \$30 million from the legislature to leverage \$90 of private capital to develop 50 new supermarkets and 3,700 new jobs in undeserved communities. At the federal level they are now better funded programs to address diet-related health issues and even build community infrastructure through the Farm bill and the economic stimulus package.

I know that public funding is not the answer to all these problems. I know that the individual must also accept responsibility for the turning their life around. And to that end, opportunities and incentive must be devised to help people help themselves.

For example, I think everyone who wants it should have a small piece of garden land upon which to stand, to make what magic they can of it, and to experience for themselves the pulse of the seasons marked by the productions of the earth.

Community gardens build strong communities. School gardens build food competent young people. Neighborhoods, community centers, and institutions of faith that garden together are by all measures that I know, stronger than ones that don't. I am convinced that the more soil that trickles through a person's fingers, the more we can predict that they will take better care of their neighbors, themselves, and the land. Land for all who want it, teaching our children to garden, and respecting the effort to wrest something of value from the soil are principles and practices we must fight for, not always because they produce abundant quantities of food but because they build self-esteem.

Increasingly, we are seeing a complementary marriage of projects like community gardens and farmers' markets with local and state policies that helps the private organizations and governments achieve things together that they never could do alone:

In Cleveland, Ohio they are using the city's zoning authority to protect, expand, and enhance urban agriculture. In Missoula, Montana, the county is actively preserving farm and ranch land through their land use planning authority. And in Fresno, California, groups are banding together to increase farmers' markets, protect community gardens, and plan future communities that provide for growing space, supermarkets and farmers' markets, and farmland.

But again, that nagging voice inside me calls out. "Mark, this is still not just about food, man. This is about ending poverty and it is about doing what we can to give individuals and communities the tools they need to do that."

The questions are big and tough and sometimes philosophical. If your education is substandard, if information is unavailable or difficult for you to understand, if your food choices are limited by means and access, you are not free. Without freedom, none of us can live self-fulfilling lives, we cannot cultivate ourselves in any deeply meaningful way, nor can we find our voice, in whatever form that might take that gives each of us that most rewarding of human attributes, self-expression.

This is why I have taken umbrage with some of our leading national advocates for local and organic food who have stated that poor people could afford to buy local and organic food if they didn't waste their money on lottery tickets, cable TV, or new Nike sneakers. I suspect in such remarks an uninformed urge to prosecute the case for healthy, sustainable food by dismissing the annoying fact that poverty is with us and, yes folks, it's tough to beat.

But such narrow thinking on human behavior and its causes ignores the fundamental barriers to human freedom that poverty prescribes. That if I was in the shoes of my former little brother and his mother, trapped by the "satanic mills" of Lewiston, without the money to buy a different future, without the education to navigate an escape route, and without a supportive network of private and public helpers to develop my capacity for change, I will never, and I mean never, enjoy the liberty of mind and soul to be free. It is not only our job, therefore, to find ways to encourage healthy eating, it is also our fight to work in what ways we can to fulfill the promise of freedom for all – a freedom that will unlock the self and give each of us the chance to freely choose that which is healthiest for us and the environment.

Yes, we live in unfortunate times. We are all victims of those who were so smart, so clever, so bold as to endanger our nation's financial security. But blaming the men and women of Wall St. will probably get us nowhere. The need for all of us to do what we can for our brothers and sisters who are hurting has never been greater. And let's do so. Let's give as much as we can. But in so doing, we must not forsake the battle to end hunger and food insecurity at its root, which is poverty. If we must take a detour and give what we can so that others can get by, day-by-day, let's us do so. But in so doing, let's not forsake the long game, the big fight, the prize that may gratefully one day put all of us helping professionals out of business – economic justice. Living wage ordinances, like I am proud to say we have in my home of Santa Fe, New Mexico, a city that requires all of its businesses and employers to pay their workers \$10 per hour; health insurance for all, and an end to a low-wage economy that doesn't pay people enough to eat must be at the heart of our anti-poverty efforts.

A county food stamp director once told me that he couldn't figure out why he was getting so many food stamp applications when the county unemployment rate was less than 2 percent. Then he realized that the county's two largest employers were Wal-Mart stores whose wages were so low that their employees qualified for food stamps. Like Henry Ford who paid his workers enough to buy the cars they made, we must pay people enough to buy the food they need.

This suggests to me that we should join the fight for a just and sustainable food system with others whose primary interest may not be food. I urge you reach out to those who work to lift the minimum wage, and perhaps to take a position in favor of ensuring a living wage and health care for all.

Will we win the fight for a just and sustainable food system for all? It's my conviction that those who feel life the most, those with a ripper human presence, and those who embrace the true meaning of individual freedom, will ultimately win the fight. And I don't know anything that exposes the warm core of our humanity more than food or that gives us more opportunity for self-fulfillment than gardening and our appreciation for the life-giving force that surrounds us.

We recognize our humanity daily in our communities, schools, and at farmers' markets. It is there, face-to-face, in our face, undeniable, and omnipresent. And the more that recognition of the joy of good food spreads and the more seeds we sow, the more our humanity grows into an inexorable force for change.

But we have one more thing in our favor, one more reason why I believe we will succeed. It is because we find joy in our enterprise. We are thrilled by good food. The happy chatter around the dinner table and the pleasure we ultimately derive from the company of others gives us a winning edge.

I was reminded recently that revolutions like ours must also be fun by a D.H. Lawrence poem I came across: "If you make a revolution, make it for fun/don't make it in ghastly seriousness/don't do it in deadly earnest/do it for fun/Don't do it for the money/do it and be damned to the money...it would be fun to upset the apple-cart/and see which way the apples would go a-rolling/Don't do it for the working classes/Do it so that we can all of us be little aristocracies on our own/and kick our heels like jolly escaped asses."

And I am convinced that our common desire for many of the same things unites and reveals our common humanity – the low-income mother who wants the best food for her children is no different than the yuppie family that spends whatever it must to ensure the healthiest and safest food for their children. I do not believe that our desires are separated by race, class, or location, but I know the results are. The poor, the person of color, those in underserved urban and rural communities, are forced to the back of the line even though their desires are the same as those at the front of the line. This is the fight we must all own. It is the struggle for food justice; it is the struggle for the health of the earth and human freedom.

As community food activists you carefully observe the comings and goings of your communities; you are aware of the earth, the plants, and the seasons. Your nostrils flare more than those of others at the scent of spring; your eyes widen more than others at the sight of the sticky-green leaves; your ears become more dainty at the sound of birdsong and the crush of ground beneath your feet. You are more attuned, as the poet Seamus Heaney says, to that "phenomenal instant when the spirit flares." I beseech you to turn

these unique gifts to the private and public policy opportunities around you, and to find new and even risky ways of working together for social justice and a sustainable food system.

It is too easy to become complacent in our own individual projects. In the words of Abraham Lincoln we must disenthral ourselves of the notion that it is only our work and our work alone that will change the world. To reform our food system requires broader and bolder thinking, which often means a move outside of our comfort zones. It is important to remember that because the food system is so diverse and complex, it has many interconnected parts, none of which can be ignored for too long before the system falls out of balance. Focus too intently on hunger, and you'll lose sight of its cause – poverty. Devote yourself too narrowly to agriculture, and you'll forget the consumer, especially the lower income consumer. Care too much about your own food and individual health, and you'll forsake food justice and the needs of the larger community. There are larger purposes in life when all our interests come together. Closing the food gap is one of them. Thank you.