

Food First
A sermon by Steven Epperson
December 13, 2009
UCV

Sometimes it's the little things that jolt me out of the fog of routine; a veil lifts and, for a moment, there I am looking clearly at something I had taken for granted, not known, or only dimly perceived. Here's an example: deep in the pages of a newspaper a couple of weeks ago, I read an article about the Harper government's plans to close down all of Canada's prison farms. (Lawrence Scanlan, "Cultivating Convicts," *Globe and Mail*, Dec. 5, 2009, A21) These farms, operating within the walls and wires of federal prisons from New Brunswick to Alberta, are tended by inmates. They rise at 4:00 in the morning to milk cows, collect eggs, repair machinery and work in the fields. Milk, eggs, meat and vegetables feed the prison population; food not consumed by inmates is donated to local food banks.

"The farm has saved my life," one inmate said. Wayne Easter, who was once in charge of our prisons, noted the inmates' sense of pride in their work and genuine affection for the animals in their care: "Their eyes light up and their chests stick out when they talk about the animals...They're dealing with living creatures." There is no violence in the barns, no anger. There is a unique chemistry at work in these places: the "beginnings of groundedness and a sense of peace...a feeling of a job well done." (Scanlan) After all, Andrew McCann of St Lawrence College notes, "the cows are all mothers." "The beauty of plants and animals is that they are free of prejudice—they reward the nurturer" and don't care if a man has "a record as long as his blue tattooed arm." (Scanlan)

The reasons given by the feds for closing the prison farms? Too few inmates once released actually go into farming, and the farms are a \$1 million drain on the system. "The farm has saved my life," an inmate said. What is the worth of a human life? With crime rates in

decline across Canada, the government plans to pave the farms over and build new cellblocks and even super jails?

Self-respect. Dignity. Self-discipline. Love of plants and animals. Watch out when you pay attention to the seemingly small things like one's daily bread, like when you start with food first, because trap doors can suddenly open, fog can blaze away in the sun. And you see things differently than before.

This story about the prison farms underlines a deeply disturbing trend across North America and parts of Europe; we are awash in an ideological language called “economism”—that is, the invocation of economics in all discussions of public affairs. Far too often, we do not ask, nor do we hear our politicians asking with regard to policy proposals or initiatives: Does it respect the worth and dignity of persons? Does it promote the common good? Instead what we hear is: Is it efficient? Is it productive? Will it benefit the gross national product? Will it contribute to growth? When we restrict ourselves to issues of profit and loss—with economic questions in the narrowest sense—like the way the feds are talking about our prison farms, we have entered a world of tragedy—a world where we erode and lose our most basic moral sentiments, our commitment to the common good. (see Tony Judt, “What is living and what is dead in social democracy?” *New York Review of Books*, December 17, 2009)

In the big scheme of things, the closure of a food bank depot in a middling size city is a small thing. But because it has happened here, at 49th and Oak, it's huge for me, for many of us. I have been brought to think about it every day for the past four months. It's been one of those fog clearing events in my life—revealing and testifying to much bigger issues and needs, to structural problems in our economy and public policy, and the way, for decades now, that successive governments, both provincial and federal have been literally legislating large numbers

of our fellow Canadians into poverty—one budget, one law, one policy at a time. That’s what looking at food first will do to you.

For over seven years, I have arrived at work on Tuesday mornings with the social hall and the courtyard filled with people, pallets, boxes of food, and enormous activity. I saw people leaving with parcels of food. I stepped inside and there were people being served, fed, and their infants and toddlers cared for while parents waited for a food allotment. It looked great. It was heart-warming. I thought: here’s something concrete we can be proud of—and there are many things that have taken place at this food bank for which we can be justly proud.

When you are a teacher, a doctor, social worker, or minister; when, as a professional or a volunteer, you enter into and get involved in someone else’s life—what is your minimal, essential ethical and moral norm? “Do no harm”; isn’t it? Based on this norm, there are five reasons why our food bank coordinators and Food Bank Advisory Committee recommended to the Board of Trustees of this congregation to close our site as a depot of the Greater Vancouver Bank Society as of December 8th, and then to open in January as a service agency with a different mandate, and with a new program that, in essence, brings us back to our roots.

The reasons for closing the depot are driven by the ethical and moral norm of “do no harm.” It was closed a week ago because, first, the food we were distributing from the Greater Vancouver Food Bank Society was mostly terrible, highly processed and non-nutritious; it was high in calories and low in protein and vitamins. Most of it was salvaged from grocery chain stores; it’s the stuff they couldn’t sell. Expired, dented and damaged. It’s the stuff they could *dump*, and in the bargain, get a tax write off. On closer inspection, if you actually looked at what clients were walking away with on Tuesday mornings, you realized: this is not the kind of food I’d want to eat, or serve to my family and friends. When asked, food bank clients said, they

wouldn't buy this stuff if they had the money. They want and need whole grains, beans and meat, fresh dairy products, cooking oil and fresh produce. Sound familiar?

Do I need to say it? Good nutrition contributes to good health, and a lot of the food leaving this campus every Tuesday was teeth rotting, diabetes and obesity inducing dreck. One UCV volunteer told me, "I feel ashamed giving them this food."

The second reason we decided to shut down our food bank and re-imagine and re-create it, is that charity—and that's what food banks dispense—charity is inherently humiliating. Food is not a gift to dispense; it's not a commodity to be exchanged in the market of benevolence; the point is not to make *me* feel good and *them* to feel grateful; food is a right. A human right equal to, in company with human rights of life, liberty, speech, movement, and belief. This nation has signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) and the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989), and these documents don't mince words: food is a right. We have the right to be free of hunger; we have the right to an "adequate standard of living...including adequate food clothing and housing, and to a continuous improvement of these conditions." I am neither embarrassed to be alive nor humiliated to be free because these are basic human rights. I possess them; they are mine by virtue of birth into the human family. Food is a right, not a gift, or a handout to be dispensed from a benevolent hand, nor should the hopes of receiving it entail massive anxiety and sacrifice.

At a food bank you wait sometimes for hours. Going to a food bank is a sacrifice of precious time and money—people on social assistance don't get free bus passes. Going to a food bank is a gamble—will there be enough food? Is it nutritious? If I didn't get here early enough, if I'm not near the front of the line, what's going to be left for me? No wonder there were harsh

words over a jar of peanut butter a few weeks ago. No wonder that just behind the veneer of patient waiting for food lurks the dread anxiety and the humiliating prospect of coming up short even if the person serving you is filled with all the goodwill and compassionate intent in the world.

And what kind of impact does the food bank have on the environment? We're already deeply concerned about how much energy is consumed to grow, truck, ship and warehouse food in our local markets and grocery stores. The food bank system adds additional costly steps. First, grocery and food stores have to pack and transport their food donations to the Food Bank warehouse. The warehouse has to be heated, and then Food Bank delivery trucks drive through our congested streets to distribute food to 125 agencies and 15 depots scattered around the metropolitan area. Later the same day, those same trucks return to the 140 agencies and depots to collect pallets and food not handed out, and then they all drive back to the warehouse to start the process all over again. Meanwhile, thousands of volunteers are driving to agencies and depots to serve food bank clients, who themselves have to drive or take public transit to arrive at food bank destinations to collect their food.

Do you get the picture? It's a crazy, polluting, and inefficient system. For most of us, food shopping means just a short trip around the corner to a local market. Many of us can do that on foot or bike.

But instead of ensuring that people receive a living wage for their work, or that income assistance is at a level that enables people to cover essential expenses so that a family has enough money in their pockets to shop at a local store for the food they need and want like the rest of us; instead of that, our provincial government has imposed an immiserating policy regime that keeps 13% of BC's residents--that's 546,000 women, children and men in our Province—trapped in

poverty; that percentage is significantly higher than any other Province in this country. BC has the lowest minimum wage in Canada—\$8.00—and it has not been raised in eight years. In fact, Gordon Campbell went out of his way in last spring's Throne Speech, which was otherwise littered with goodies, to underline his government's resolve to not raise the minimum wage; and this, in a Province where the median real wage has dropped by a staggering 11.3% between 1980 and 2005.

Meanwhile, we have the highest percentage of children living in poverty of any Province and the greatest degree of income inequality in Canada. And our social assistance, if you can qualify for it, just about requires an independent advocate or a university degree to understand and navigate the byzantine labyrinth of our provincial welfare system; I know, I did this for a couple of people. And if you qualify for assistance, what do you receive?: \$610 a month for a single, "employable" person. You are expected to pay rent with \$375 per month, and use the remaining \$7.58 per day to cover **everything** else. \$610 per month is less than the average rent for a bachelor suite in British Columbia, let alone in Vancouver. Do you see why people are desperate enough to resort to the humiliation of food handouts? But I digress.

Two more reasons why we have decided to close the food depot. The first is that our site was overwhelmed by a burgeoning number of clients. At best, as a depot, we could serve about sixty families. This fall, the number swelled to a 120+. As a result, our volunteers were swamped, kids were getting lost underfoot, our woefully inadequate kitchen appliances couldn't keep up with the need, and we were coming up short of decent food.

Which brings me to the final reason we had to close up shop and figure out what on earth we were going to do; remember the ethical norm that obtains and guides us when we involve ourselves in the lives of others as professionals and volunteers: do no harm. Food bank depots

are inevitably plagued with the issue and hard reality of inequity. The distribution of food at our food bank, no matter our good intent, was rife with inequity, and it begins when I compare how I can purchase and put food on my table with what our food clients face every day. Compare what's in my pantry with what's in their pantry, my table, my children's plates, their children's plates. There the inequity begins.

Next, consider what happens on the floor of a food bank depot. A select group of Vancouver Food Bank clients are trained and serve as volunteers to receive the depot's allotment trucked in from the warehouse. They have to unpack, sort, stack and lay out the food, then distribute it to the rest of the clients who are waiting anxiously in the wings. It's hard, demanding, strenuous work. These hard working volunteers, who are also clients, and that's important to remember, are compensated by the Food Bank system by being allowed *first access to the food* arriving from the warehouse. And here, we place these individuals in an impossible ethical situation. They go through and pack their bags with food first. Two things happen; first, more food ends up in their bags than those of the other 100+ client families. And second, the volunteers take the lion's share of the best, most nutritious food. One volunteer who was asked about what was happening was honest enough to put it like this: "Most of the stuff that's put on the table, I wouldn't take home to feed my family—so I take more of the good food that's there and leave the rest."

Scores of people don't receive their fair share. They watch; they know what's happening, and after hours of waiting with growing anxiety they're left wondering: what food, what kind of food is going to be left for them to take home to their families. The only way to prevent this from happening is to actively intervene and rigorously police what is going on; and we've just

haven't had the stomach to do that. Inequitable distribution of food happens every day in one form or another in 100s of food bank depots across North America.

Look, we knew the optics of closing a food bank depot weeks before Christmas weren't that flattering. But given all I have said above, our food bank coordinators, our Advisory Committee and the Board felt they had little choice going into the New Year. I want to thank them for looking at this dilemma clearly and honestly. I want to thank them for the hours and hours of interviewing, observing, working and meeting that led them to make this difficult decision on our behalf. We had to close up shop because what was happening here, behind a veil of what seemed to be so good and right, was doing enough harm to us and our clients to call for an honest, critical reevaluation of what we were doing.

Having said all that, many things that took place at our food bank depot were good. And here I want to acknowledge and thank long-time food bank coordinators who broke Food Bank system rules for the sake of the dignity of our clients. No one stood in lines outside in the cold, rain and snow here. People were welcomed into our buildings with something hot to drink and healthy to eat. We offered quality infant and child care with educational activities that enabled parents to converse, eat and gather their food together. Volunteers brought in free clothes, dental supplies, and housewares. There were occasional visits by community nurses and pre-literacy programs for toddlers and their guardians run at our site by the Vancouver Public Library. All of these additional services and practices contravened system Food Bank rules and conventions; each of them was offered here in order to promote the dignity and worth of our clients.

So where do we go from here? As the decision to close the depot took shape, so did the outline of what we should and could responsibly provide in its place. We are going to return to our roots. Single moms in this congregation started a food pantry here in the 1970s when they

needed some extra help finding food, childcare and community building. Their numbers were small; the service to each other was participatory and non-bureaucratic. Together, they met and prepared healthy food, swapped recipes, stories and ideas about how to raise their kids.

That's where we're going to go; back to the future. Beginning in January, UCV will host a new six-month pilot food and education service program called "Our Children's Table." Our food bank coordinators have already interviewed and registered about thirty-five families with pre-school children for the program. Each week for about two hours, participants will prepare and share a healthy snack and a sit-down lunch together. As well, based on interviews with clients who have indicated what kind of food they need and want, healthy, fresh food will be packed for the families to take home. While the food is being packed in Hitchmanova by a crew of UCV and neighbourhood volunteers, parents and children will participate in a pre-school literacy program from the Vancouver Public Library.

In addition to the food component of "Our Children's Table," the program includes dental and eye check-ups for children, and a speakers bureau with health and social assistance advocates explaining to parents how to effectively navigate and access resources for which they are eligible.

When the six month program is completed, our client families will "graduate"; and another group of families, referred to us by Vancouver Coastal Health, will take their place. Monies that we have donated for years to the UCV Food Bank Fund will be used to pay for this year's pilot program. We will assess how the program is going; what changes need to take place to improve it, to make it more effective; or whether it should be continued.

Here I am at the bottom of page nine, our children's RE classes are coming to an end, and yet I have to tell you this is an unfinished sermon....

The politics of food nests, like one of those Russian matrioshka dolls, within an ever expanding and oppressive political, economic and ideological framework. Food banks are a symptom of a something rotten, root and branch, in our politics and in our world of ideas which right now are dominated by a harsh, economics obsessed, neo-Victorian view of humanity and of human relations that could be taken right out of a novel by Dickens.

The time has come again to place the common good of all Canadians, including the 85 food depot families not eligible for our program, it is time again to place the common good of all Canadians as the foundation and touchstone of our country. And that is going to take more than one food and education program at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver; that's going to require a sea change of soul and mind, and a systemic change in policies and politics.

Religion is a strange thing. Oft times way too pompous for its own good. Obsessed with institutions, dogma, and exclusion. Fixated on purity and violent assertions of its own rectitude. But at its best, we find in each and all a solicitude for what is small, and the courage to speak the language of compassion and justice into the teeth of the mighty and powerful. It seeks to re-knit the threads of humanity and of the good that have become unraveled; it binds up wounds and gathers up the broken fragments of divinity strewn across the landscape by violence and wanton disregard; it would repair a broken heart and soul, a troubled mind, a hurting planet. That's why I am here, and why we are gathered in this place. May the good we share, the compassion we feel, and the ache for justice that throbs away in our hearts radiate out from this place and be a blessing to us as we continue our adventure into the holiday season.

(This sermon would not have been possible without the assistance of Diana Epperson, one of our food bank coordinators; I interviewed her for hours about the food bank. Through those interviews, the reasons for the decision to close the depot down and start up "Our Children's Table" became very clear and compelling. Thanks as well, to her assistance in editing the first draft of the sermon.)