

How Much *Can* I Afford?

Note: this piece is guest written by one of Lisa's alter egos, the Humble Baker

This morning as the Humble Baker (HB) took the Spoiled Sled Dog (SSD) on his morning walk through two miles of cornfield, she found herself ruminating about the price of food. For a one-person, one-dog household, she goes through a lot of money in groceries every week. SSD is on a hamburger-and-rice diet this week, and the HB found herself wrestling with the question of whether or not she could justify buying him humanely-raised meat. Not “can I afford it?” but “can I justify spending the money?”

Truth is, she is fortunate enough to be able to afford it. And, were it for her to eat, of course she'd buy the humane meat.ⁱ It just seemed odd to spend that kind of money on, well, on a dog. Because...why? Because the methods by which cattle are raised don't matter if it's a dog that's eating it? What kind of crazy thinking is that?

Walking and ruminating, she asked herself, “what is the *right* amount of money to spend on food? How much is toooooo much? Is it wrong to buy well-raised meat for a dog?” And into her head popped a voice saying “spend as much as you can afford...and then spend a little tiny bit more.”

Hmmm. The idea intrigued her. In our present food-focused era, various sometimes-competing “eating platforms” vie for our attention and loyalty: buy local/buy organic/buy sustainable/buy GMO-free/eat low carb/eat vegetarian/eat paleo. There's of course something wonderful about this, but there's also something sort of, well, vicious about it. Food choices have become a weapon we wield to beat up on others for their moral laxity or insufficient evolved-ness. Sometimes—often?!—they create moral hierarchies that turn into class hierarchies. Eating a diet of organic, local, sustainably produced vegetables, grains and meats costs a *lot*. (I know, I know; there are ways it doesn't have to, there are ways Cheetos cost more. But those ways are not obvious, are not immediate, and are often not easy.)

Furthermore, not only does it cost a lot to “do the right thing,” it's *not* (always entirely altogether) clear what “the right thing” is when it comes to food, no it is not. Or—this happens a lot—one “right thing” smacks right into another not-so-right thing. (Affordable organic produce! Hurrah! Grown by...de facto slaves! Boo!)ⁱⁱ It's complicated, and it's always incomplete. The philosopher Jacques Derrida observes that the ethical demands placed on us as humans always vastly outstrip our ability to realize them. That's just life.

So, what's a Humble Baker (or anyone else) to do these days, in the face of financial exigencies and competing, or at least incompatible, ethical demands?

One thing to do, I think, is to shift one's attention away from one's personal moral health and toward a larger vision of social justice. In other words, switch the question from “am I eating an ethically perfect diet?” to “how can my food choices contribute to a more sustainable and just food system?”

The answer that popped into my head that morning said, “Spend as much as you possibly can afford on your food...and then spend just a little bit more.”

Now this might seem like a naïve proposal—after all, there’s no guarantee that just using the criterion of “enough money spent” will do any good for any of the just food causes that surround us. Nor is it the case that spending money is sufficient unto itself to “fix” the food system.

But, it turns out, it’s a pretty darn good start. And if you put your money where your commitments lie—in sustainable farming practices, for instance, or tips for servers in restaurants, instead of EZ-Open/Single Serve/Throwitawayafterwards packaging—it can contribute, incrementally, to the growth and flourishing of those practices you believe in.

Yeah, yeah, we’ve heard all this before. Tell us something we’ve not heard a skillion times.

Okay, here you go: if I really adopt the practice of spending as much as I can afford, and then maybe even a little bit more, I radically shift my attitude in the grocery store.

Usually when I shop, I feel sheepish if I spend more than I “need to” on groceries—if I don’t buy the “best value” product. Frugality, it turns out, seems to be one of my cardinal virtues. The “spend as much as you can” philosophy tosses out frugality, not in favor of frivolity, but in favor of asking, “what is the most work I can do with my food purchasing? Ecological work, justice work, nutritional work?” It invites us not to use food as the place to eke out some savings or make up for a budgetary overrun elsewhere. But it also acknowledges the reality of everyone’s budget, by emphasizing choosing what each can afford. The “spend a little more” is perhaps a personal nudge to me, since I tend to be a rather miserable tightwad.

It’s also an effort to acknowledge a fundamental reality: making food is freakin’ *hard*.

The Humble Baker spends her summers living a little closer to the ground than she does during the nine months of the school year. (True confession: while the HB likes to call herself a baker, she in fact makes her living in the activity that the philosopher Novalis said “bakes no bread”: philosophy.) In the summer, I fill my days with food-related activities. I cook and bake a lot. I write about food. And—crucially—I hang out with people who actually produce food.

Doing so, I’m reminded of just. How. Much. Work. That. Is.

During summers spent in Maine, I’ve learned about lobster fishing and clamming and oyster farming and blueberry picking and goat cheese making and you-pick berry patches and making a seasonal living running a cheese shop in a town that runs on sailboats.

This summer, staying home in southern Minnesota, it’s been organic grain and pig farming I’ve been learning about.ⁱⁱⁱ Which is where we finally come around to something that is extremely clear to me: Witnessing the amount of labor that goes into the growing of twenty acres of organic grain surely does lead one to feel like spending a lot more money on one’s food.

ⁱ News flash! The longtime vegetarian HB in fact *did* buy and consume some humane hamburger for herself this summer. And enjoyed it immensely, she blushes to confess.

ii A famous philosopher coined the phrase “the boo/hurrah theory of ethics. It’s never seemed a very good theory of ethics to me, but it’s a great way to rate your day.

iii If you’re curious about these activities, you could mosey over to Facebook and look for Whole NHOats, or Pig in the Patch.