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COMMENTARY

No free lunch

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Sunday afternoon in a crowded Westjet flight en route from Saskatoon to Toronto. I squeeze open my agenda book with a reminder of the commentary owed to *Agriculture and Human Values* on two papers on hunger and food surplus. Once again I begin the search for the right words to convey my concern about how income inequities translate into food disparities – the question underlying both papers. Dozing off in frustration, I reach for mindless entertainment in the inflight magazine, *AirLines*, and find inspiration in a short article, "Tantalize Your Tastebuds," by Calgary chef, Hobswan-Smith (2004). She reports how four Calgary chefs created culinary masterpieces from the staples found in food hampers from the Calgary food bank, including sliced bologna and macaroni with dehydrated cheese. These, along with other highly processed foods, are the mainstays of food banks throughout North America. With time, a little extra cash, a well-equipped kitchen, creativity, and culinary knowledge, even the cans, packets, and boxes of processed foods donated to food banks can be made palatable. Of course, time, money, kitchens, and culinary knowledge may be in short supply among the people interviewed.

- Gourmet chefs cook with food bank staples like bologna and macaroni.
- Food industry dumps its unprofitable waste into food banks, including seasonal products like chocolate Valentine hearts in March.
- Restaurants leave their "best before" items like donuts and fries in dumpsters.

What does this tell us about the relationship between the food secure and the food insecure? Perhaps the most disturbing message is the fact that what Caplowitz wrote in *The Poor Pay More* (1963) about how much more the poor pay for food remains relevant to present circumstances, particularly if we consider dignity in the costs. This shouldn't be.

As an anthropologist, I am pleased to be able to join this important conversation on the subject of hunger and food security. The two papers by Tarasuk and Eakin and Eikenberry and Smith highlight some of the contradictions in Canadian and American communities that manage to continue to support both food banks and food boutiques, to provide for both the food deprived and the food obsessed. But this facile cliche about the contradictions in food systems does not identify the processes that link the two together. These two papers, rich in ethnographic detail, provide insight into some of these linking processes.

Tarasuk and Eakin's focus on food donations to Toronto food banks draws the stories of food shortages and surplus together, giving us a starting point to tease out the interconnections between the two. Food banks make use of surplus food that can't be retailed, such as dented packages or misprinted labels – at first glance, a win–win situation for all. The food banks must rely on volunteers who donate the hours of labor necessary to maintain, sort, and distribute food supplies, particularly bulk food donated by food industries. They make an effort to remove unsafe food and repackage messy food. Food banks are protected by "good Samaritan" laws, and are strict about not distributing dented cans of outdated infant formula, for example.

Eikenberry and Smith draw attention to another relationship between food surplus and scarcity as shown by the practices of some urban poor in Minneapolis. Dumpster diving is not a formal part of the food system, but it is a source of emergency food, particularly for men. It is their immediate solution to the problem of hunger when other options are unavailable to them. By dumping their excess pizza, sausages, potatoes, donuts, and bread to meet food safety standards, restaurants provide an opportunity for those "in the know" to have clean, specialty foods on occasion – ideally the moment after they are removed from sale but before they are mixed with other garbage.

Service providers in both Canadian and American communities find their financial resources shrinking and the demand for food growing, following the dis-

mantling of social support systems in the 80s and 90s. Poverty and the lack of a regular cash income to purchase food is the most direct cause bringing individuals and families to community service agencies seeking assistance. Civil society is expected to feed those who are hungry, to provide food resources as oases in food deserts. Canadian cities are more likely to have strong food policy councils linking NGOs, academics, the food industry, agriculture, and public health. But Canadian and American food systems and policies are deeply interconnected.

Both papers provide new points of entry into discussions about food, including narrow and broad definitions of food safety, commensality, food dignity, and food aesthetics. Commensality is seldom considered in discussions of food security. Both papers reveal locations and contexts that encourage sharing food. Certain foods are easily shared; others are not. Certain locations encourage sharing food; others inhibit it. Food dignity includes people's right to refuse food they don't like and can't cook, in spite of opinions expressed that "beggars can't be choosers." These papers also speak to food aesthetics. The desire for a perfect pepper is fed by an industry that continues to monopolize and standardize everything from field to table, from advertising to genetics. Locally produced organic fruits and vegetables, by contrast, are neither uniform nor do they conform to some artificial aesthetic standard. Ironically, the most fastidious organic vegetarians and dumpster divers may both get to consume oddly shaped vegetables and fruit. The "crooked carrot syndrome," the rejection by many of these less than picture perfect foods, now feeds marginal populations in North American cities.

A disturbing persistence in food provisioning can be seen in two MA theses written 10 years apart on food banks in Toronto (Foley, 1992) and Winnipeg (Nicou, 2002). Both students undertook ethnographic studies of food banks, and noted their rapid increase in numbers and clients served. Both recognized food banks as temporary, inappropriate adaptations to poverty. Both reviewed how clients work the food banks into their survival strategies, and both decried the problems of food quality. Foley's chapter title, "Garbage Food for Garbage People," is reiterated by a volunteer who complains, "When we get donations sometimes it literally is garbage" (1992: 99). Eikenberry and Smith's informants complain that they are discouraged from dumpster diving when people mix non-food garbage with food waste to make their food supply inedible. As these two authors found, food for pigs is diverted to feed people.

Both papers and these two theses draw our attention to parts of the food system that are often ignored – waste, leftovers, cleanup. And they suggest a disturbing relationship between food waste and food solutions. Second Harvest – the name given to many food banks and commercial food recycling programs – evokes the Biblical tale of the poor gleaning the fields after the rich have harvested. I found a second meaning, a dimly recalled exotic tidbit from an introductory anthropology class. Desert hunters in the southwest survived seasonal hunger by reaping the second harvest – removing seeds from their own feces, grinding and roasting them before eating them a second time.

Hunger exists both somewhere else and at home. It is important to be able to recognize the interconnections between hunger here and there, past and present. These papers help us understand how our eating affects eating elsewhere, and it is in these interconnections that solutions must be found.

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