

Lily's Chickens

Barbara Kingsolver

My daughter is in love. She's only five years old, but this is real. Her beau is shorter than she is, by a wide margin, and she couldn't care less. He has dark eyes, a loud voice, and a tendency to crow. He also has five girlfriends, but Lily doesn't care about that, either. She loves them all: Mr. Doodle, Jess, Bess, Mrs. Zebra, Pixie, and Kiwi. They're chickens. Lily likes to sit on an overturned bucket and sing to them in the afternoons. She has them eating out of her hand.

It began with coveting our neighbor's chickens. Lily would volunteer to collect the eggs, and then she offered to move in with them. Not the neighbors, the chickens. She said if she could have some of her own, she would be the happiest girl on earth. What parent could resist this bait? Our life style could accommodate a laying flock; my husband and I had kept poultry before, so we knew- it was a project we could manage, and a responsibility Lily could handle largely by herself. I understood how much that meant to her when I heard her tell her grandmother, "They're going to be just *my* chickens, Grandma. Not even one of them will be my sister's." To be five years old and have some other life form entirely under your control-not counting goldfish or parents-is a majestic state of affairs.

So her dutiful father built a smart little coop right next to our large garden enclosure, and I called a teenage friend who might, I suspected, have some excess baggage in the chicken department. She raises championship show chickens, and she culls her flock tightly. At this time of year she'd be eyeing her young birds through their juvenile molt to be sure every feather conformed to the gospel according to the chicken-breeds handbook, which is titled, I swear, *The Standard of Perfection*. I asked if she had a few feather-challenged children that wanted adoption, and she happily obliged. She even had an adorable little bantam rooster that would have caused any respectable chicken-show judge to keel over-the love child of a Rose-comb and a Wyandotte. I didn't ask how it happened.

In Lily's eyes *this* guy, whom she named Mr. Doodle, was the standard of perfection. We collected him and a motley harem of sweet little hens in a crate

and brought them home. They began to scratch around contentedly right away, and Lily could hardly bear to close her eyes at night on the pride she felt at poultry ownership. Every day after feeding them she would sit on her overturned bucket and chat with them about the important things. She could do this for an hour, easily, while I worked nearby in the garden. We discovered that they loved to eat the weeds I pulled, and the grasshoppers I caught red-handed eating my peppers. We wondered, would they even eat the nasty green hornworms that are the bane of my tomato plants? *Darling*, replied Mrs. Zebra, licking her non-lips, that was to *die for*.

I soon became so invested in pleasing the hens, along with Lily, that I would let a fresh green pigweed grow an extra day or two to get some size on before pulling it. And now, instead of carefully dusting my tomato plants with *Bacillus* spores (a handy bacterium that gives caterpillars a fatal bellyache), I allow the hornworms to reach heroic sizes, just for the fun of throwing the chickens into conniptions. Growing hens alongside my vegetables, and hornworms and pigweeds as part of the plan, has drawn me more deeply into the organic cycle of my gardening that is its own fascinating reward.

Watching Mr. Doodle's emergent maturity has also given me, for the first time in my life, an appreciation for machismo. At first he didn't know what to do with all these girls; to him they were just competition for food. Whenever I tossed them a juicy bug, he would display the manners of a teenage boy on a first date at a hamburger joint, rushing to scarf down the whole thing, then looking up a little sheepishly to ask, "Oh, did you want some?" But as hormones nudged him toward his rooster imperatives, he began to strut with a new eye toward his coopmates. Now he rushes up to the caterpillar with a valiant air, picking it up in his beak and flogging it repeatedly against the ground until the clear and present danger of caterpillar attack has passed. Then he cocks his head and gently approaches Jess or Bess with a throaty little pickup line, dropping the defeated morsel at her feet. He doles out the food equitably, herds his dizzy-headed girls to the roost when it's time for bed, and uses an impressive vocabulary to address their specific needs: A low, monotonous cluck calls them to the grub; a higher-pitched chatter tells them a fierce terrestrial carnivore (our dog) is staring balefully through the chicken-wire pen; a quiet, descending croak warns "Heads up!" when the ominous shadow of an owl or hawk passes overhead. Or a dove, or a bumblebee-OK, this isn't rocket science. But he does his job. There is something very touching about Mr. Doodle when he stretches up onto his toes, shimmies his golden-feather shawl, throws back his little head, and cries-as Alexander Haig did in that brief moment when he thought he was president--"As of now, I *am* in control!"

With the coop built and chickens installed, all we had to do now was wait for our flock to pass through puberty and begin to give us our daily eggs. We were

warned it might take a while because they would be upset by the move and would need time for emotional adjustment. I was skeptical about this putative pain and suffering; it is hard to put much stock in the emotional life of a creature with the I.Q. of an eggplant. Seems to me you put a chicken in a box, and she looks around and says, "Gee, life is a box." You take her out, she looks around and says, "Gee, it's sunny here." But sure enough, they took their time. Lily began each day with high hopes, marching out to the coop with cup of corn in one hand and my twenty-year-old wire egg-basket in the other. She insisted that her dad build five nest boxes in case they all suddenly got the urge at once. She fluffed up the straw in all five nests, nervous as a bride preparing her boudoir.

I was looking forward to the eggs, too. To anyone who has eaten an egg just a few hours' remove from the hen, those white ones in the store have the charisma of day-old bread. I looked forward to organizing my family's meals around the pleasures of quiches, Spanish tortillas, and souffles, with a cupboard that never goes bare. We don't go to the grocery very often; our garden produces a good deal of what we eat, and in some seasons nearly all of it. This is not exactly a hobby. It's more along the lines of religion, something we believe in the way families believe in patriotism and loving thy neighbor as thyself. If our food ethic seems an unusual orthodoxy to set alongside those other two, it probably shouldn't. We consider them to be connected.

Globally speaking, I belong to the 20 percent of the world's population--and chances are you do, too--that uses 67 percent of the planet's resources and generates 75 percent of its pollution and waste. This doesn't make me proud. U.S. citizens by ourselves, comprising just 5 percent of the world's people, use a quarter of its fuels. An average American gobbles up the goods that would support thirty citizens of India. Much of the money we pay for our fuels goes to support regimes that treat their people--particularly their women--in ways that make me shudder. I'm a critic of this shameful contract, and of wasteful consumption, on general principles. Since it's nonsensical, plus embarrassing, to be an outspoken critic of things you do yourself, I set myself long ago to the task of consuming less. I never got to India, but in various stages of my free-wheeling youth I tried out living in a tent, in a commune, and in Europe, before eventually determining that I could only ever hope to dent the salacious appetites of my homeland and make us a more perfect union by living *inside* this amazing beast, poking at its belly from the inside with my one little life and the small, pointed sword of my pen. So this is where I feed my family and try to live lightly on the land.

The Union of Concerned Scientists notes that there are two main areas where U.S. citizens take a hoggish bite of the world's limited resources and fuels. First is transportation. Anybody would guess this. I'm lucky, since I can commute from

bedroom to office in my fuzzy slippers, by way of the coffee pot in the kitchen. We get the kids to school via bus and carpool and organize our errands so trips to town are minimized. I have lived some years of my adulthood without a car (it's easier in Europe), though for now I have one. I hope soon to trade it in for one of those electric-hybrid station wagons that gets forty-eight miles per gallon. Ironically, my interests in conservation and the personal act as political have led me into a career that garners me hundreds of invitations a year to burn jet fuel in order to spread my gospel. I solve this dilemma, imperfectly, by sticking mostly to recycled paper as the medium of that gospel and turning down ninety-nine invitations out of a hundred, taking only the trips that somehow promise me a story whose telling will have been worth its purchase. So in the realm of transporting myself, so long as I can avoid the wild-goose chase of a book tour, I can live within fairly modest means.

Gas-guzzling area number two, and this may surprise you, is our diet. Americans have a taste for food that's been seeded, fertilized, harvested, processed, and packaged in grossly energy-expensive ways and then shipped, often refrigerated, for so many miles it might as well be green cheese from the moon. Even if you walk or bike to the store, if you come home with bananas from Ecuador, tomatoes from Holland, cheese from France, and artichokes from California, you have guzzled some serious gas. This extravagance that most of us take for granted is a stunning energy boondoggle: Transporting 5 calories' worth of strawberry from California to New York costs 435 calories of fossil fuel. The global grocery store may turn out to be the last great losing proposition of our species.

Most Americans are entangled in a car dependency not of our own making, but nobody *has* to eat foods out of season from Rio de Janeiro. It's a decision we remake daily, and an unnecessary kind of consumption that I decided some time ago to expunge from my life. I had a head start because I grew up among farmers and have found since then that you can't take the country out of the girl. Wherever I've lived, I've gardened, even when the only dirt I owned was a planter box on an apartment balcony. I've grown food through good times and bad, busy and slow, richer and poorer--especially poorer. When people protest that gardening is an expensive hobby, I suggest they go through their garden catalogs and throw out the ones that offer footwear and sundials. Seeds cost pennies apiece or less. For years I've grown much of what my family eats and tried to attend to the sources of the rest. As I began to understand the energy crime of food transportation, I tried to attend even harder, eliminating any foods grown on the dark side of the moon. I began asking after the processes that brought each item to my door: what people had worked where, for slave wages

and with deadly pesticides; what places had been deforested; what species were being driven extinct for my cup of coffee or banana bread. It doesn't taste so good when you think about what died going into it.

Responsible eating is not so impossible as it seems. I was encouraged in my quest by *This Organic Life*, a compelling book by Joan Dye Gussow that tells how, and more important why, she aspired to and achieved vegetable self-sufficiency. She does it in her small backyard in upstate New York, challenging me to make better use of my luxuries of larger space and milder climate. Sure enough, she's right. In the year since I started counting, I've found I need never put a vegetable on my table that has traveled more than an hour or so from its home ground to ours.

I should explain that I do this in the *places* where I live, because I am not I, but we. My husband and I met in our late thirties; he had already grown deep roots in a farming community in southern Appalachia. I had roots of my own, plus a kid, in my little rancho outside Tucson, Arizona. So our marriage is a more conspicuous compromise than most: We all live out the school year in the Southwest and spend the summer growing season in Appalachia. By turns we work two very different farms, both of which we share with other families who inhabit them year-round so nothing has to lie very fallow or stand empty. Eventually, when we've fulfilled all our premarital obligations, we'll settle in one place. Until then I blow some of the parsimony of my daily bedroom-slipper commute on one whopper of an annual round trip, but it's a fine life for a gardener. In the mild winters of Tucson, where we get regular freezes but no snow, we grow the cool-weather crops that can take a little frost: broccoli, peas, spinach, lettuce, Chinese vegetables, garlic, artichokes. And in the verdant southern summers, we raise everything else: corn, peppers, green beans, tomatoes, eggplants, too much zucchini, and never enough of the staples (potatoes, dried beans) that carry us through the year. Most of whatever else I need comes from the local growers I meet at farmers' markets. Our family has arrived, as any sentient people would, at a strong preference for the breads and pasta we make ourselves, so I'm always searching out proximate sources of organic flour. Just by reading labels, I have discovered I can buy milk that comes from organic dairies only a few counties away; in season I can often get it from my neighbors, in exchange for vegetables; and I've become captivated by the alchemy of creating my own cheese and butter. (Butter is a sport; cheese is an art.) Winemaking remains well beyond my powers, but fortunately good wine is made in both Arizona and Virginia, and in the latter state I am especially glad to support some neighbors in a crashing tobaccobased economy who are trying to hold on to their farms by converting them to vineyards. Somewhere near you, I'm sure, is a farmer who desperately

needs your support, for one of a thousand reasons that are pulling the wool out of the proud but unraveling traditions of family farming.

I am trying to learn about this complicated web as I go, and I'm in no position to judge anyone else's personal habits, believe me. My life is riddled with energy inconsistencies: We try hard to conserve, but I've found no way as yet to rear and support my family without a car, a computer, the occasional airplane flight, a teenager's bathroom equipped with a hair dryer, et cetera. I'm no Henry D. Thoreau. (And just for the record, for all his glorification of his bean patch, Henry is known habitually to have gone next door to eat Mrs. Ralph W. Emerson's cooking.) Occasional infusions of root beer are apparently necessary to my family's continued life, along with a brand of vegetable chips made in Uniondale, New York. And there's no use in my trying to fib about it, either, for it's always when I have just these items in the grocery cart, and my hair up in the wackiest of slapdash ponytails, that some kind person in the checkout line will declare, "Oh, Ms. Kingsolver, I just love your work!"

Our quest is only to be thoughtful and simplify our needs, step by step. In the way of imported goods, I try to stick to non-perishables that are less fuel-costly to ship; rice, flour, and coffee are good examples. Just as simply as I could buy coffee and spices from the grocery, I can order them through a collective in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that gives my money directly to cooperative farmers in Africa and Central America who are growing these crops without damaging their tropical habitat. We struggled with the notion of giving up coffee altogether until we learned from ornithologist friends who study migratory birds being lost to habitat destruction, that there is a coffee-cultivation practice that helps rather than hurts. Any coffee labeled "shade grown"-now available in most North American markets-was grown under rain-forest canopy on a farm that is holding a piece of jungle intact, providing subsistence for its human inhabitants and its birds.

I understand the power implicit in these choices. That I have such choices at all is a phenomenal privilege in a world where so many go hungry, even as our nation uses food as a political weapon, embargoing grain shipments to places such as Nicaragua and Iraq. I find both security and humility in feeding myself as best I can, and learning to live within the constraints of my climate and seasons. I like the challenge of organizing our meals as my grandmothers did, starting with the question of season and which cup is at the moment running over. I love to trade recipes with my gardening friends, and join in their cheerful competition to see who can come up with the most ways to conceal the i.d. of a zucchini squash.

If we are blessed with an abundance of choices about food, we are surely also obliged to consider the responsibility implicit in our choices. There has never been a more important time to think about where our food comes from. We could make for ourselves a safer nation, overnight, simply by giving more support to our local food economies and learning ways of eating and living around a table that reflects the calendar. Our families, of course, will never need to be beholden to the seasons as the Native Americans who called February by the name "Hungry Month," and I'm grateful for that. But we can try to live close enough to the land's ordinary time that we notice when something is out of place and special. My grandfather Kingsolver used to tell me with a light in his eyes about the boxcar that came through Kentucky on the L&N line when he was a boy—only once a year, at Christmas carrying oysters and oranges from the coast. Throughout my own childhood, every year at Christmastime while an endless burden of wants burgeoned around everybody else, my grandfather wanted only two things: a bowl of oyster soup and an orange. The depth of his pleasure in that meal was so tangible, even to a child, that my memory of it fills me with wonder at how deeply fulfillment can blossom from a cultivated ground of restraint.

I remember this as I struggle-along with most parents I know—to make clear distinctions between love and indulgence in raising my children. I honestly believe that material glut can rob a child of certain kinds of satisfaction—though deprivation is no picnic, either. And so our family indulges in exotic treats on big occasions. A box of Portuguese clementines one Christmas is still on Lily's catalog of favorite memories, and a wild turkey we got from Canada one Thanksgiving remains on my own. We enjoy these kinds of things spectacularly because at our house they're rare. And yes, we eat some animals, in careful deference to the reasons for avoiding doing so. I don't really feel, as some have told me, that it's a sin to eat anything with a face, nor do I believe it's possible to live by that rule unless one maintains a certain degree of purposeful ignorance. Butterflies and bees and locusts all have faces, and they die like lambs to the slaughter (and in greater numbers) whenever a field of vegetable food is sprayed or harvested. Faceless? Not the birds that eat the poisoned insects, the bunnies sliced beneath the plow, the foxes displaced from the forest-turned-to-organic-wheat-field, and so on. If the argument is that meat comes from *higher orders* of life than those creatures, I wonder how the artificial, glassy-eyed construct of a bovine life gets to weigh more than the wiles of a fox or the virtuosity of a songbird. Myself, I love wild fives at least as much as tame ones, and eating costs lives. Even organic farmers kill crop predators in ways that aren't pretty, so a vegetable diet doesn't provide quite the sparkling karma one might wish. Most soybeans grown in this

country are genetically engineered in ways that are anathema to biodiversity. So drinking soy milk, however wholesome it may be, doesn't save animals.

No, it's the other savings that compel me most toward a vegetable-based diet—the ones revealed by simple math. A pound of cow or hog flesh costs about ten pounds of plant matter to produce. So a field of grain that would feed a hundred people, when fed instead to cows or pigs that are *then* fed to people, fills the bellies of only ten of them; the other ninety, I guess, will just have to go hungry. That, in a nutshell, is how it's presently shaking down with the world, the world's arable land, and the world's hamburger eaters.

Some years ago our family took a trip across the Midwest to visit relatives in Iowa, and for thousands of miles along the way we saw virtually no animal life except feedlots full of cattle—surely the most unappetizing sight and smell I've encountered in my life (and my life includes some years of intimacy with diaper pails). And we saw almost no plant life but the endless fields of corn and soybeans required to feed those pathetic penned beasts. Our kids kept asking, mile after mile, "What used to be here?" It led to long discussions of America's vanished prairie, Mexico's vanished forests, and the diversity of species in the South American rain forests that are now being extinguished to make way for more cattle graze. We also talked about a vanishing American culture: During the last half century or so, each passing year has seen about half a million more people move away from farms (including all of my children's grandparents or great-grandparents). The lively web of farmhouses, schoolhouses, pasture lands, woodlots, livestock barns, poultry coops, and tilled fields that once constituted America's breadbasket has been replaced with a meat-fattening monoculture. When we got home our daughter announced firmly, "I'm never going to eat a cow again."

When your ten-year-old calls your conscience to order, you show up: She *hasn't* eaten a cow since, and neither have we. It's an industry I no longer want to get tangled up in, even at the level of the ninety-nine-cent exchange. Each and every quarter pound of hamburger is handed across the counter after the following production costs, which I've searched out precisely: 100 gallons of water, 1.2 pounds of grain, a cup of gasoline, greenhouse-gas emissions equivalent to those produced by a six-mile drive in your average car, and the loss of 1.25 pounds of topsoil, every inch of which took five hundred years for the microbes and earthworms to build. How can all this cost less than a dollar, and who is supposed to pay for the rest of it? If I were a cow, right here is where I'd go mad.

Thus our family parted ways with all animal flesh wrought from feedlots. But for some farmers on certain land, assuming that they don't have the option of turning their acreage

into a national park (and that people will keep wanting to eat), the most ecologically sound use of it is to let free-range animals turn its grass and weeds into edible flesh, rather than turning it every year under the plow. We also have neighbors who raise organic beef for their family on hardly more than the byproducts of other things they grow. It's quite possible to raise animals sustainably, and we support the grass-based farmers around us by purchasing their chickens and eggs.

Or we did, that is, until Lily got her chickens. The next time a roasted bird showed up on our table she grew wide-eyed, set down her fork, and asked, "Mama ... is that ... Mr. Doodle?"

I reassured her a dozen times that I would *never* cook Mr. Doodle; this was just some chicken *we didn't know*. But a lesson had come home to, well, roost. All of us sooner or later must learn to look our food in the face. If we're willing to eat an animal, it's probably only responsible to accept the truth of its living provenance rather than pretending it's a "product" from a frozen-foods shelf with its gizzard in a paper envelope. I've been straight with my kids ever since the first one leveled me with her eye and said, "Mom, no offense, but I think you're the Tooth Fairy." So at dinner that night we talked about the biology, ethics, and occasional heartbreaks of eating food. I told Lily that when I was a girl growing up among creatures I would someday have to eat, my mother had promised we would never butcher anything that had a first name. Thereafter I was always told from the outset which animals I could name. I offered Lily the same deal.

So she made her peace with the consumption of her beloveds' nameless relatives. We still weren't sure, though, how we'd fare when it came to eating their direct descendants. We'd allowed that next spring she might let a hen incubate and hatch out a few new chicks (Lily quickly decided on the precise number she wanted and, significantly, their names), but we stressed that we weren't in this business to raise ten thousand pets. Understood, said Lily. So we waited a week, then two, while Jess, Bess, and company worked through their putative emotional trauma and settled in to laying. We wondered, How will it go? When our darling five-year-old pantheist, who believes that even stuffed animals have souls, goes out there with the egg basket one day and comes back with eggs, how will we explain to her that she can't name those babes, because we're going to scramble them?

Here is how it went: She returned triumphantly that morning with one unbelievably small brown egg in her basket, planted her feet on the kitchen tile, and shouted at the top of her lungs, "Attention, everybody, I have an announcement: FREE BREAKFAST."

We agreed that the first one was hers. I cooked it to her very exact specifications, and she ate it with gusto. We admired the deep red-orange color of the yolk, from the beta-carotenes in those tasty green weeds. Lily could hardly wait for the day when all of us would sit down to a free breakfast, courtesy of her friends. I wish that every child could feel so proud, and every family could share the grace of our table.

I think a lot about those thirty citizens of India who, it's said, could live on the average American's stuff. I wonder if I could build a life of contentment on their material lot, and then I look around my house and wonder what they'd make of mine. My closet would clothe more than half of them, and my books-good Lord-could open a library branch in New Delhi. Our family's musical instruments would outfit an entire (if very weird) village band, featuring electric guitars, violin, eclectic percussion section, and a really dusty clarinet. We have more stuff than we need; there is no question of our being perfect. I'm not even sure what "perfect" means in this discussion. I'm not trying to persuade my family to evaporate and live on air. We're here, we're alive, it's the only one we get, as far as I know, so I am keenly inclined to take hold of life by its *huevos*. As a dinner guest I gratefully eat just about anything that's set before me, because graciousness among friends is dearer to me than any other agenda. I'm not up for a guilt trip, just an adventure in bearable lightness. I approach our efforts at simplicity as a novice approaches her order, aspiring to a lifetime of deepening understanding, discipline, serenity, and joy. Likening voluntary simplicity to a religion is neither hyperbole nor sacrilege. Some people look around and declare the root of all evil to be sex or blasphemy, and so they aspire to be pious and chaste. Where I look for evil I'm more likely to see degradations of human and natural life, an immoral gap between rich and poor, a ravaged earth. At the root of these I see greed and overconsumption by the powerful minority. I was born to that caste, but I can aspire to waste not and want less.

I'm skeptical of evangelism, so I'm not going to have a tent revival here. But if you've come with me this far, you are in some sense a fellow traveler, and I'm glad for your company. In this congregation we don't confess or sit around chanting "we are not worthy"; we just do what we can and trust that the effort matters. Of all the ways we consume, food is a sensible one to attend to. Eating is a genuine need, continuous from our first day to our last, amounting over time to our most significant statement of what we are made of and what we have chosen to make of our connection to home ground. We can hardly choose not to eat, but we have to choose *how*, and our choices can have astounding consequences. Consider this: The average food item set before a U.S. consumer traveled 1,300 miles to get there. If Mr. Average eats ten or so items a day (and most of us eat

more), in a year's time his food will have conquered five million miles by land, sea, and air. Picture a truck loaded with apples and oranges and iceberg lettuce rumbling to the moon and back ten times a year, all just for you. Multiply that by the number of Americans who like to eat-picture that flotilla of 285 million trucks on their way to the moon-and tell me you don't think it's time to revise this scenario.

Obviously, if you live in Manhattan, your child can't have chickens. But I'll wager you're within walking distance of a farmer's market where you can make the acquaintance of some farmers and buy what's in season. (I have friends in Manhattan who actually garden-on rooftops, and in neighborhood community plots.) In recent years nearly three thousand green markets have sprung up across the country, giving more than a hundred thousand farmers a place to sell their freshly harvested, usually organic produce to a regular customer base. In some seven hundred communities, both rural and urban (including inner-city New York), thousands of Americans are supporting their local food economies by signing up with Community-Supported Agriculture, a system that lets farmers get paid at planting time for produce that they then deliver weekly to their subscribers until year's end. Thousands of other communities have food co-operatives that specialize at least in organic goods, if not local ones, and promote commodities (such as bulk flours, cereals, oils, and spices) that minimize energy costs for packaging and shipping. Wherever you are, if you have a grocery store, you'll find something in there that is in season and hasn't spent half its life in a boxcar. The way to find out is to *ask*. If every U.S. consumer would earmark just ten dollars a month for local items, the consequences would be huge.

I realize there are deep, traditional divisions of class between white bread and whole wheat. I grew up among many people who would feel uncomfortable saying the word *organic* out loud. But I know I am witnessing a reordering of tradition when some of my rural Virginia neighbors who've heretofore grown, and chewed, tobacco become comfortable saying (and growing) "Chardonnay" and "Merlot grape." A dear friend of mine who has gardened for over six decades using the fertilizers and pesticides recommended by her farming father and husband, while they lived, confided to me not long ago that she'd secretly gone organic. (Her tomatoes that summer were some of her best ever.) It's clear that this movement is reaching across class lines, when farmers' markets redeem more than \$100 million in food stamps each year. Community food-security initiatives in many areas are also working to link organic farmers with food banks and school lunch programs. Growing and eating are both infused with new politics.

Before anyone rules out eating locally and organically because it seems expensive, I'd ask him or her to figure in the costs paid *outside* the store: the health costs, the land costs, the big environmental Visa bill that sooner or later comes due. It's easy to notice that organic vegetables cost more than their chemically reared equivalents, but that difference is rarely the one consumers take home. A meal prepared at home from whole, chemical-free ingredients costs just pennies on the dollar paid for the highly processed agribusiness products that most Americans eat at restaurants or heat up in the microwave nearly every day. For every dollar we send to a farmer, fisherman, or rancher, we send between three and four to the shippers, processors, packagers, retailers, and advertisers. And there are countless other costs for that kind of food. Our history of overtaking the autonomy and economies of small countries with our large corporations, the wars and campaigns we wage to maintain our fossil-fuel dependency-these have finally brought us costs beyond our wildest fears. Cancer is expensive, too, as are topsoil loss and species extinction. The costs of global warming will bring us eventually to our knees. When I have to explain to my kids someday that, yes, back at the turn of the century we *did* know we were starting to cause catastrophic changes in the planet's climate that might end their lives prematurely, do I have to tell them we just couldn't be bothered to alter our convenience-food habits?

It doesn't, in principle, take more time to buy a local peach than a world-weary banana, and cooking from whole ingredients is not prohibitively time-consuming, either. As a working mother I am possessive of my time; I have to log in hours on my job-about forty a week-my spouse does the same, and our kids require of us the usual amount of kid-attention. But sometimes our family outings involve picking apples. I can peel the fruit and cook it into pies, jam, and purees for flavoring yogurt while I listen to the news on the radio or hear about my kids' day at school. Like many busy families, we cook in quantity on the weekends and freeze portions for easy midweek dinners. And we've befriended some fascinating microbes that will stay up all night in our kitchen making yogurt, feta, neufchatel, and sourdough bread without adult supervision. (I think copulation is involved, but we're open-minded.) Gardening is the best way I know to stay fit and trim, so during garden season, when it's up to me to make the earth move, I don't waste hours at the gym. Eating this way requires organization and skills more than time. Our great-grandmas did all this, and they may not have had other employment, but they did have to skin hogs for shoe leather, cut stove wood, sew everybody's clothes, and make the soap to wash them. Sheesh. My kitchen's on Easy Street.

It seems to me that giving up junk foods and jet-lagged vegetables is something like giving up smoking: It takes some discipline at first, but in the long run it's hard to see the minus sign in the equation. If there's anyone left who still thinks eating organically is a bland, granola-crunching affair, he or she must have missed the boat back around midmorning in the Age of Aquarius. The movement has grown up. Most Europeans think we're fools to eat some of the tasteless gunk that passes for food in our supermarkets. The Italians who pioneered Slow Food have forged a conscientious movement for preserving farms and the culture of unique, sustainable foods, but their starting point was pure epicurean disgust with fast food and watery, transported vegetables. Now that I've gotten into local eating I can't quit, because I've inadvertently raised children who are horrified by the taste of a store-bought tomato. Health is an issue, too: My growing girls don't need the hormones and toxins that lace American food in regulated quantities (the allowable doses are more about economic feasibility than about proven safety). But that is only part of the picture. Objecting to irresponsible agriculture for reasons of your personal health is a bit like objecting to having a nuclear power plant in your backyard for reasons of your view. My own two children are the smallest part of the iceberg. The millions of children in sub-Saharan Africa and other places now facing famine and historically unprecedented climatic extremes because of global warming they are the rest of the iceberg.

Developing an intimate relationship with the processes that feed my family has brought me surprising personal rewards. I've tasted heirloom vegetables with poetic names-Mortgage Lifter tomato, Moon and Stars watermelon-whose flavors most never will know because they turn to pulp and vinegar in a boxcar. I've learned how to look a doe-goat right in the weird horizontal pupil of her big brown eye, sit down and extract her milk, and make feta cheese. (Step 1 is the hardest.) I've learned that with an unbreakable jar and the right music, a gang of kids can render butter from cream in eleven minutes flat. I've discovered a kind of citrus tree that withstands below-zero temperatures, almost extinct today but commonly grown by farm wives a hundred years ago. I've learned that the best-tasting vegetables on God's green earth are the ones our garden-wise foremothers bred for consumption, not hard travel. And I seem to be raising kids who like healthy food. When Lily streaks through the crowd at the farmer's market shouting, "Mama, look, they have *broccoli*, let's get a *lot!*"-well, heads do turn. Women have asked me, "How do you get one like that?"

I'm not going to tell you it's a done deal. If there were a bin of Twinkies at the farmer's market, the broccoli would go to rot. Once upon a time, when I had my first baby, I believed that if I took care not to train her to the bad habits of sugar,

salt, and fat, she would grow up not wanting those things. That delusion lasted exactly one year, until someone put a chocolate-frosted birthday confection in front of my sugar-free child and-how can I say this delicately?-she put her face in the cake. We humans crave sugar, fat, and salt because we evolved through thousands of years in which these dietary components were desperately scarce; those members of the tribe who most successfully glutted on them, when they found them, would store up the body fat to live through lean times and bear offspring. And now we've organized the whole enchilada around those latent biochemical passions - an early hominid's dream come true, a health-conscious mom's nightmare. If my cupboards were full of junk food, it would vanish, with no help from mice. We have our moments of abandon - Halloween, I've learned, is inescapable without a religious conversion-but most of the time my kids get other treats they've come to love. Few delicacies compare with a yellow-pear tomato, delicately sun-warmed and sugary, right off the vine. When I send the kids out to pick berries or fruit, I have to specify that at least *some* are supposed to go in the bucket. My younger daughter adores eating small, raw green beans straight off the garden trellis; I thought she was nuts till I tried them myself.

The soreness in my hamstrings at the end of a hard day of planting or hoeing feels good in a way that I can hardly explain except to another gardener, who will know exactly the sweet ache I mean. My children seem to know it, too, and sleep best on those nights. I've found the deepest kind of physical satisfaction in giving my body's muscles, senses, and attentiveness over to the purpose for which they were originally designed: the industry of feeding that body and keeping it alive. I suspect that most human bodies have fallen into such remove from that original effort, we've precipitated an existential crisis that requires things like shopping, overeating, and adrenaline-rush movies to sate that particular body hunger.

And so I hope our family's efforts at self-provision will not just improve the health and habitat of my children but also offer a life that's good for them, and knowledge they need. I wish all children could be taught the basics of agriculture in school along with math and English literature, because it's surely as important a subject as these. Most adults my age couldn't pass a simple test on what foods are grown in their home counties and what month they come into maturity. In just two generations we've passed from a time when people almost never ate a fruit out of season to a near-universal ignorance of what seasons mean. One icy winter I visited a friend in Manhattan who described the sumptuous meal she was making for us, including fresh raspberries. "Raspberries won't grow in the tropics," I mused. "And they sure don't keep. So where would they come from in the dead of winter?" Without blinking she answered, "Zabar's!"

Apparently the guys running the show don't know much about agriculture, either, because the strategy of our nation is to run on a collision course with the possibility of being able to feed ourselves decently (or at all) in twenty years' time. I can't see how any animal could be this stupid; surely it's happening only because humans no longer believe food comes from dirt. Well, it does. Farmers are not just guys in overalls, part of the charming scenery of yesteryear; they are the technicians who know how to get teensy little seeds to turn into the stuff that comprises everything, and I mean *everything*, we eat. Is anybody paying attention? For every farm that's turned over to lawns and housing developments, a farmer is sent to work at the Nissan plant or the Kmart checkout line. What's lost with that career move is specific knowledge of how to gain food from a particular soil type, in a particular climate-wisdom that took generations to grow.

I want to protect my kids against a dangerous ignorance of what sustains them. When they help me dig and hoe the garden, plant corn and beans, later on pick them, and later still preserve the harvest's end, compost our scraps, and then turn that compost back into the garden plot the following spring, they are learning important skills for living and maintaining life. I have also observed that they appreciate feeling useful. In fact, nearly all the kids I've ever worked with on gardening projects get passionate about putting seeds in the ground, to the point of earnest territoriality.

"Now," I ask them when we're finished, "what will you do if you see somebody over here tromping around or riding a bike over your seedbeds?"

"We'll tell them to get outta our vegables!" shouted my most recent batch of five-year-old recruits to this plot of mine for improving the world one *vegable* at a time.

Maria Montessori was one of the first child advocates to preach the wisdom of allowing children to help themselves and others, thereby learning to feel competent and self-assured. Most of the teachers and parents I know agree, and they organize classrooms and homes that promote this. But in modern times it's not easy to construct opportunities for kids to feel very useful. They can pick up their toys or take out the trash or walk the dog, but all of these things have an abstract utility. How useful is it to help take care of a dog whose main purpose, as far as they can see, is to be taken care of?

Growing food for the family's table is concretely useful. Nobody needs to explain how a potato helps the family. Bringing in a basket of eggs and announcing, "Attention, everybody: FREE BREAKFAST" is a taste of breadwinning that most kids can attain only in make-believe. I'm lucky I could help make my daughter's dream come true. My own wish is for world enough and time that every child might have this: the chance to count some chickens before they hatch.