

Seeds For Change

Growing Faith, Food, and The future (Victoria Davis)

It's wake up time. Our nation heaves under the weight of complicated, layered crises; wars, a failing economy, economic and racial divides, collapsing infrastructure and urban decay, environmental devastation, soil and air pollution and challenges that affect the source, quality and supply of our foods. The crises are so interrelated and polarizing that it is difficult to know where to begin to affect meaningful change. Perhaps, however, the real challenge involves making a shift in the way we think about change. Should you venture to listen beyond the bitter argumentation inside Washington for example, beyond the deafening rhetoric within city councils and mayoralties, beyond even the overwhelming negativity, fragmentation and divisive national conversations, you will find quite a different scenario unfolding. Critical numbers of people within urban neighborhoods are demonstrating a powerfully creative approach to issues that adversely impact the quality of their lives. The seeds of change are being quietly sown and have already sprouted wondrous roots. At first glance, you may never hear or notice them at work as you drive through the neighborhood. Nevertheless, intergenerational bands of earth warriors, urban farmers, people from diverse backgrounds and cultures are busily engaged in a grass roots movement now comfortably called "The Good Food Revolution". And far more than good food is being introduced.

The Revolution is being led and carried out by everyday folk across the country who, quite simply, feel called to make a difference. They know they can. They include once alienated youth, wisdom-filled elders, eager of school kids, working folk and the under-employed, singles and partners, war veterans now armored with hope, the formerly incarcerated now intent upon growing a new life, volunteering college interns and apprentices of all ages. Each in their own way is defining the meaning of this movement to their future and to that of their community, regardless of the signs of despair all around: abandoned buildings, empty lots and warehouses, homes and apartments in varying states of disrepair. Exiles within our American cities are emerging out from seeming chaos and obscurity, daring to rediscover and unfold earth's secret resources and uncover the alchemic mystery of soil and biosphere. After clearing away broken glass and debris, they carry out their tasks with such passion, sacrifice and sacred regard, that it is almost best understood through the lens of those touched by some unifying spiritual force and driven by deep religious commitment. But most of all, they are providing the world with a template for creative community development that may be imaginatively applied as we all rethink the restoration of our beloved neighborhoods and cities.

FERTILE VOID

Struggling urban areas have historically been victims of the exigencies of modern living and the subjective strategies of developers and urban planners. So what exactly is going on here that is different? And why is it unfolding within the more hidden and forgotten areas of the city? Perhaps like grassroots movements throughout modern history, the focus remains upon the plight of disconnected peoples, disenfranchised voters, people who have been denied basic civil and human rights or who experience social and environmental injustices, racism and unemployment on a daily basis. And like former movements that began within the black church tradition, today's Good Food Revolution addresses the continued adverse conditions that compromised urban neighborhoods must contend with each day. Leaders in this movement are called upon, once again, to conjure ways of intentionally transforming adversity into advantage in the face of a subtle dismissal of their existence and of the seriousness of their concerns. But unlike food movements from the sixties and seventies that involved the folklore of flower children and life within organic- producing communities, this one is directed across inner- city communities that have great social, cultural and economic diversity. And today's urban farmers incorporate an ingenious mix of traditional and cutting-edge technologies to achieve their goals. The specific objective today is to target and eventually eliminate what is currently being called "food deserts", neighborhoods that suffer from the unavailability of fresh fruits, vegetables and wholesome foods. When found at all in local markets, foods are rarely fresh and always far too costly for purchase by the people who live there.

The presence of "food deserts" also points toward even more devastating consequences of living beneath the poverty line: regular consumption of fast foods and restaurants foods that contain zero nutritional value, cholesterol-laden diets, foods prepared with excess salt, sugar and preservatives. In communities where obesity, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease are the norm, this is a deadly diet. It is the breeding ground for chronic poor health and all too often, premature death from entirely preventable diseases. Creating a "good food consciousness" is certainly critical for every one. But within inner-city communities, it has become a matter of life and death. Yet as grim as the outlook seems to be, and despite the appearance of city spaces void of income and important resources, an experience of fertile goodness is quite still possible. A Good Food Revolution is already in progress.

SACRED LABOR

All vibrant life hinges upon the infinite evolutions of mysterious cycles that carry us across the threshold of birth, awakening to vibrancy, gradual decomposition and regeneration. Following the honored legacy of creative conjurers of social change, the imaginative leadership within this particular revolution, have placed the locus of activity within the most symbolic of life-affirming, sacred space. In the midst of often unsightly, uninviting urban decay and devastation, they are at work inside the garden. Faithful co-laborers within the movement now retreat to the garden for work and think-space in which to introduce new directions that will make things happen in a powerful way. From

there, they safe-guard a vision that will feed many thousands, market fresh, organic produce and foods, restore neighborhoods, and in time, help make sick people whole again.

The religious imagery here is intentional although religion, as such, is hardly the subject. Far from attempting to label the urban farmer as participant in some new kind of spiritual order, we are challenged to think more broadly and go beyond conventional interpretations. While there may be unquestionable spiritual significance in the act of introducing change from within a garden, there is no particular allegiance to any ideology or system of belief. The contemporary urban farmer, however, does operate from a fundamentally unifying, inspirational, life-affirming idea: people can be empowered to grow good food and create healthier, more vibrant communities for their families. Farming is understandably a metaphor for the cultivation of life. But from the vantage point of the inner-city urban farmer, it also becomes an in-your-face, revolutionary action carried out in order to return the power of life back to the people.

When we borrow from the insight of Joseph Campbell, prolific religious scholar, writer and authority on global mythology, we uncover a more depth understanding of how religious imagery is, in fact, relevant here. It may even help dispel some misinterpretations about what religious activity truly means. The word "religion" derives from an old Latin verb, "re-ligare", meaning 'to link back', to re-link, or re-connect that which has become broken off. The emphasis here is placed on the action of a verb that is pointing toward some ultimate good being activated. "God", in the ancient Hebrew, is an ultimate, ineffable, un-nameable reality and represents more than a noun that identifies some Divine Being. The focus shifts instead to what happens as a result of a re-connection to an ultimate, life-affirming reality always at work within creation. The intent of the Good Food Revolutionary then, the challenge of the urban farmer, is to 'hook' people and communities back up to a re-creative possibility that is always available. How easy it is to forget this awesome reality amidst the fragmentation of city life. Harvesting good food is a fundamentally transformative activity and certainly qualifies as sacred, re-connecting labor. It is work that involves constant reflection, redirection and sacrifice, but ultimately, the joy of providing sustenance for our communities. It is whole-making and healing labor that, coincidentally, also seems naturally fashioned for participation by communities of Faith, outreach programs and interfaith collaborations across all traditions. For any community, farming activity is a 'sacred' way to bring meaningful perspective to the anxiety-producing, divisive preoccupations of the world and to participate in a larger vision of wholeness for our beloved communities.

Every major and indigenous spiritual tradition, especially within the mystic traditions, provides a path for retreat to the realms of re-creative activity, followed by a return to the world to confront particular conditions of brokenness. The created space within community gardens provides both a path of retreat and a strategy for important community action. It is also a process easily adaptable across language and culture and transportable across the globe. The vision of urban farmers co-laboring world-wide,

attempting to address issues of food shortage and community disruption is profound and entirely realizable.

Whether it is a person or community in crisis, a neighborhood plagued by broken moments of history, ill-treatment, neglect and oppression, or a city attempting to overcome the adverse effects of a plantation economy, industrialization, discrimination or environmental degradation, the drive toward transformational insight and change starts from the single revolutionary act of sacred reconnection. Beyond the limited labels we like to use, the work of change introduced from within the garden in has, in fact, awesome spiritual significance. It is a way of tapping back into the source of all creative energy that exists eternally, without condition. Those who dare labor in the garden become empowered to recharged themselves and return to work in a world that is continually being disconnected or broken, a world that is always in need of more harmony, more justice, more healing... and of beginning again.

INSIDE THE URBAN COSMOS

Co- laborers inside gardens and hoop houses share more than productive work. They are creating a new story of community. They are re-storying their lives. They gather to share their own life stories, dreams and visions of new homes, markets that provide places to work and sell their produce and new ways to nurture their neighborhood. Abandoned buildings and warehouses, rather than representing a blight of disintegrating wood, bricks and mortar upon the urban landscape, are re-envisioned as a restorable projects, potential financial and community investments. Working together, people envision new small businesses, better schools and vital organs of community life that can possibly emerge over time.

Along with the growing presence of beautiful and fruitful community gardens, many contemporary urban farmers have incorporated the process of aquaponics, a visionary fusion of ancient, conventional and cutting- edge bio-scientific technology. It is a process that moves biology beyond the boundaries of a Cartesian-Newtonian framework within science. Inside this garden, plant cells are experienced as highly activated, energizing organisms that thrive within a dynamic complex of living systems, far removed from any machine- like imagery. Inside the building, the aquaponics system re-creates a fully organic environment where plant life grows and flourishes with or without the use of soil. It is an integral system that has proved useful in the creation of green spaces within a variety of urban environments.

The vibrations from within an aquaponics facility, frequently an abandoned neighborhood building, are nothing short of amazing. As you enter you are struck by the overwhelming presence of light and greening life everywhere. Folk are busily tending to tanks able to hold thousands of gallons of water and swimming fish, either tilapia or perch. Above the tanks are long rows, sometimes even layered rows of seeding grow beds, soon to evolve into mature plants. And above everything, efficient grow lights are constructed to correspond to the rows of plants growing below. In some

facilities solar panels are also incorporated. The creativity evidenced in making all this happen is as great as the imaginations of the people involved. It is simply unlimited. Plants are fertilized and cultivated by the circulation and recycling of water and waste from the fish tanks below. Tanks are monitored regularly for proper nutritional content, toxins and an optimal growth environment. This is an entirely self-sustaining system. It is good for the neighborhood, good for the community and wonderful for the production of abundant, fresh food destined to cover the food deserts with new life. It is an efficiently maintainable, bio-scientific process that produces a continual supply of fresh fish, certain kinds of vegetables and herbs, all from inside an old building, inside a garden, inside a so-called food desert. In reality and in truth, through the eyes of creation, there is simply no such thing as a desert.

The work of creation unfolds mysteriously, intentionally, rhythmically and eternally. Liberated from restrictions of denomination, ideology and dogma, co-laborers of creation- possibility are free to direct their attention away from external signs of neighborhood disintegration and focus upon the movement of creation being nurtured from inside an urban Cosmos. Unbound from the paralyzing polemics of restrictive scientific paradigms, where boundaries between space and matter, people and things prevail, a way he is being made out of no way. Life- affirming activity is unleashed to perform the work of reconnection at vibrating atomic levels. Sub atomic particles move in quantum flights, leaping through boundless growth space within a bio-scientific garden. No separation exists between the creative realm, the laborer, the growth of wholesome foods and the healing activity of faithful human beings intent upon making a difference. It can be said that a new age of urban farmers are engaged in holy tasks from within the sacred spaces of gardens and aquaponics "temples", critical realms of transformation and change. That is exactly what seems to be happening. They are places where virtual vibrational fields of spirit- filled human and plant energy surround seeds, fish, sprouting roots and created goodness, powerful enough to heal a dis-eased people, resurrect weakened communities, restore decaying neighborhoods and re-birth dynamic cities of hope. What entirely credible dreams can be cultivated from within an urban cosmos!

THE URBAN SHAMANS

This radical revolution could not move and fulfill its purpose without extraordinary leadership throughout its ranks. The Good Food Revolution definitely has such leadership which, for the purposes of this writing, will be referred to as "Urban Shamans". In conventional terms, Shamans exist in most indigenous cultures where they are thought of as practitioners of healing. They are believed to be individuals who possess special gifts that enable them to identify and address particular conditions of destruction and imbalance within their communities. We can adopt this term in an urban context not only because many indigenous cultures and people who understand the term well now live within our urban communities, but also because the work performed by leadership demands the kind of sensitivity, wisdom and healing engagement that is

asked of the traditional Shaman. They are leaders who deeply understand the conditions within their communities and serve as co-creators in order to bring about a change. Leaders within this Good Food Revolution combine personal skills, wisdom, and experience, along with current technological know-how, in order to create a new reality within the communities where they live and operate.

An African saying speaks of a wisdom that is the essential challenge and charge to a new generation of Urban Farmers and Shamanic-Leaders within the Good Food Revolution. It is a reminder that

“The Creator may send a famine, but he also provides a way to find food”.

It also helps to understand that, within the African sacred dynamic, all life is imbued with a vital life- affirming, spirit- filled energy that comes from the Creator of all life. The responsibility for the care of creation, however, is assigned to the human being.

Ancestors play an important role as guardian of their descendants and over community life. They are always a shrine or invocation away and can be called upon to intervene in human affairs, frequently answering the call through visions and dreams. Those who listen and respond to their ancestors must often go to extreme lengths in order to restore a sense of balance within their communities.

Enter the powerful presence of a gifted African American man and leader within the movement. Will Allen is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of Growing Power Inc., an ambitious urban farm enterprise with facilities located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Chicago, Illinois, Detroit, Michigan and satellite communities across the country. Recently he has been the recipient of the Katherine T. MacArthur Fellowship Award for Genius and among others, a grant from The Clinton Global Initiative. One can only wonder at some mysterious ancestral connection and insight that may have caused this professional basketball player to stop, reassess a successful career, completely change direction and tackle the issues of food deserts within our urban communities. What visions and dreams might have come from Will Allen's own ancestors, once rural sharecroppers and farmers, and influence him to return to the path of growing food?

Growing Power Inc. farming initiatives are extensive and engage communities in a number of critical ways. In addition to starting urban farms, Growing Power also operates farms in more rural areas that include the raising of organic-fed poultry and beef. Growing Power produces and distributes their foods within community markets and provides important community outreach through local workshops. There is also a Training Center which brings in people from all over the country and teaches the technology of growing food and the development of community food systems. Will Allen and the urban farmers within the Growing Power extended family easily qualify as dedicated co-creators who are intent upon cultivating a more healthful urban reality. The dedication of its co-laborers beautifully illustrate its name and vision by growing good food, growing greater consciousness, community concern and ultimately, by growing communities without food deserts.

The Good Food Movement continues to grow nationally and internationally but a vibrating Hub of model initiatives remain in the mid-west of the country. Detroit Michigan

is a city that exemplifies historic urban crises at every level. For centuries it has been home for waves of slaves escaping to freedom on the Underground Railroad, Americans and immigrants in search of an American dream, and industrial tycoons making vast fortunes from the manufacturing every major American vehicle. The excesses of war, economic collapse, out-of-control costs of gas and oil, urban “flight”, fires, floods and riots have had devastating effects upon the once vibrant the beautiful city along the lakes.

Resilient people and communities within the city, however, have remained singularly focused on a restorative vision. Detroit has two mottos that illustrate its intent. “We hope for better” and “We will rise from the ashes”. The Good Food Movement is also present and is now strategically woven into that vision. But there is the presence in Detroit of someone we can easily anoint as a kind of “High Priestess” within grassroots activity nation-wide: a mid-wife of urban restoration and Radical Revolution. Her name is Grace Lee Boggs. Now in her nineties, Grace is an appropriate name for a woman who has offered so much of herself to Detroit and grassroots activists over the years. As author, teacher, mentor, philosopher and advocate of bold, visionary change, Grace Lee Boggs continues the work begun in partnership with her late husband, James Boggs, many years ago. Their mutual commitment to “radical revolution” has initiated generations of urban warriors, nurtured grassroots activity, restoring hope, vitality and creative direction in Detroit and across the country. Her sharp intellect and sensitive humanity stimulate and energize people into purposeful participation and evoke relentless community action and change. Despite mountains of difficulty that must still be overcome, the results of her influence in and around Detroit are palpable and visible.

Similar challenges, but on a smaller scale, exist in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. But confronting the devastating effects of collapsed businesses, failing economy and urban deterioration is Urban Shaman, James Godsil. Brother James is a roofer, Renaissance man, social artist, and provocateur of possibility. He is also the co-founder of Sweet Water Organics and President of the Board of The Sweet Water Foundation. Sweet Water, “The Farm,” is a successful urban farm and aquaponics facility. The Sweet Water Foundation, “The Academy,” is a non-profit enterprise harvesting information from the work of The Farm and diffusing it to learners of all ages throughout Milwaukee, the nation and beyond. Godsil studied the art of urban farming as an apprentice of Will Allen and Growing Power Inc. Sweet Water Organics is an intensified fish and vegetable farm located in an old factory-warehouse building where trains were once maintained and massive mining cranes assembled. Covering the space and rails where cargo trains once traveled, are now huge fish tanks and rows of captivatingly beautiful green produce cultivated with the help of aquaponics technology. Sweet Water fish tanks hold 8,000 to 12,000 gallons and, at this moment, they are among the largest tanks in the aquaponics system in the world. Sweet Water is also a Foundation and 501C3 Organization. Like Growing Power Inc., Sweet Water Inc is also involved with economic development at the local level, social justice initiatives, growing food and fish for market, creating jobs and training workshops.

There is a special place at Sweet Water for involvement with school children and introducing them to the mysteries of plant growth, the world of bioscience, artful expression and community engagement. At any given time, you will see elementary and High School students focused on studying or discussing this art with Sweet Water staff. But what James Godsil is perhaps best known for is his portrayal of an endearing character called "The Worm Mon". Moving about Sweet Water gardens, hoop houses and compost, "The Worm Mon" teaches schoolchildren about the magic and function of worms as they busily feed and fertilize the soil so that good food might grow. Children can even taste as they go in the edible gardens and farms that they visit. High school students are welcomed at Sweet Water. In collaboration with their school teachers and administrators, they are encouraged to learn through a kind of 'school without walls' experience. They learn the art and discipline of urban farming while serving as apprentices, contributing their gifts and acquiring new skills.

Walnut Way Conservation Corps, also in Milwaukee, is another exciting example of the partnership in the vision of community restoration. Husband and wife team, Sharon and Larry Adams, lead by example throughout their greening activities within the Walnut Way community. Its programs have successfully brought together youth, elders, families, new home owners and renters in a shared vision of community restoration and development. The productive community gardens at Walnut Way, special events, art projects, housing restoration and renovation, economic strategies, all play important parts in the healing and empowerment of this community. And all began inside a garden.

The redefined interpretation of Urban Shamanic activity within a contemporary urban environment plays out well here. The Shamans/grassroots leaders identified go to great lengths indeed, taking on the responsibility of restoring fundamentally broken aspects of community life and reconnecting the people to the resources helpful for wholeness. They attend to the crucial, bridge-building relationships that move a disenfranchised people toward intentional, faith-filled, spirited activity. They initiate meaningful movement from their existence as isolated neighborhoods to healing reconnecting action within empowered communities, and from abandoned city lots to reclaimed property and personal ownership of real estate. And they facilitate progressive movement from a hopeless, struggling past toward a more hopeful, healthful and fulfilling future.

New Vision Grows

Emmanuel Pratt is a young African American Urban Shaman who now serves as Executive Director of the Sweet Water Foundation. He brings his particular life experience to the vision of healthy, vibrant urban living. Musician, architect, and doctoral candidate in Urban Planning at Columbia University, Emmanuel is a weaver of connections between people, institutions and organizations within the Milwaukee and Chicago urban farming community. His study of struggling urban communities world-

wide gives him a panoramic view of the challenging issues that city-dwellers face every day while attempting to forge a life and create community.

Through his work at Sweet Water, Emmanuel communicates a vision for good food and good living by creating an intricate web of resources networks that altogether, empower communities to create good spaces in which to live and grow. Emmanuel represents a new generation of urban planners, shifting away from conventional emphasis upon blueprints, buildings, city developers, anonymous housing subdivisions and isolated communities. This new reality in urban planning seeks to create habitable spaces that foster a sense of belonging, where people want to live and contribute, be respected and, just as within the garden, have a stake in the total well-being of the communities in which they live.

This shift in thinking about inner-city urban life serves as an important corrective to planning schemes where, despite decades of living and serving a beloved community, people can be uprooted like useless weeds, then exiled to other alienated neighborhood, perhaps even in another city. They easily become the victims of entrepreneurial or political re-zoning and gentrification schemes that significantly and adversely effect neighborhood demographics. Creating Urban Farms initiates a direction that moves people from institutionalized victimhood to empowered personhood.

This is where you, the reader, prospective urban farmers of good food, earth warriors, potential visionary Urban Shamans and restorers of broken community dreams come in. You are invited into a new story of re-creation. Whoever you may be, teachers, students, laborers, principals, professionals, pastors or members of the flock, you have much to offer to a new age of meaningful urban life. So when you decide to explore a neighborhood within your city, and should you come across a local community garden there, you now know that far more is happening than meets the eye. And should you feel called into sacred, co-creative action and want to participate in a wonderfully mysterious urban adventure, should you feel seduced by the sheer madness and magical possibility of making good things happen inside the deserts of your city, you are welcome to a revolution that will surely not be televised. Most of all, if you have become tired of the disgruntled, frenzied, negative voices of the world, it is time to plant the seeds for change. In the words of an old gospel song, "There's a plenty good room..."

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