

In the Soup.

I have been simmering now for weeks - ever since Tuesday Jan 5th, when I attended the first Real Farming Conference in Oxford.

I had no idea how much trouble we are all in.

It is not that I'm especially stupid, and it's certainly not that I don't care - (my views on climate change and political hubris would be considered heretical), but the notion of 'food security' was honestly new to me. And if this was news to me, how many more millions of us have yet to encounter this unpalatable prospect? Why, more sinisterly, is an enlightened approach to feeding *everyone* properly not being plastered all over our TV screens now?

I grew up in the '70s in Cornwall when the biggest worry was job security. Early last year my partner and I set up "Love Loaves" (www.loveloaves.biz), a home bakery in the village of Wolvercote, as a back-up plan in case the recession choked our normal streams of income (Dragan is a professional magician and I am a copywriter).

This minor piece of self-interest (earning a living doing something we love) has, paradoxically, led us into being far more connected with and concerned about our community, both locally and at large, than ever before. Following the Real Bread Conference in November '09, we found ourselves ditching the supermarket flour we were innocently using, in favour of flour ground at Shipton Mill, a miller we trust not to add anything to the flour beyond what the government insists upon, i.e. Calcium Carbonate, Iron, Thiamine, Nicotinic Acid. We don't make a fuss about it being organic, because we believe organic should be the default - it's the supermarket flour with its hidden enzymes and additives that should be labelled more honestly. (There is also an issue with some consumers being suspicious of 'organic' labels, believing them to be an over-priced indulgence for the middle class. This will be crucial to address in the near future.) Our aim is simply to provide Wolvercote villagers with fresh, home-made bread every morning at a price they can all afford. There's nothing like hot crusty loaves for cheering everyone up, especially in the snow.

The Real Bread Conference led us logically to the Real Farming Conference, and that's where we started to get really worried. Here are the things I had *not* been sufficiently aware of:

- 1 'Peak oil', which is coming soon, will make it impossible to continue industrial farming because there will be no fuel to run the machinery and no chemicals to fertilise the soil or control the pests.
- 2 Peak phosphate, also coming soon, will make this worse.

- 3 This substantially threatens the production of sufficient food to feed us all - which will have all kinds of violent social repercussions before we actually starve. (Just remember last week's empty supermarket shelves, and muttered comments about panic buying.)
- 4 Farmers ought to be a protected species. The population is dwindling and ageing.
- 5 Our farmers have been forced by government and 'agribusiness' in cahoots to farm in ways that go against nature, for profit and not for feeding people.

What I *am* sure of is that moral values today have been undermined by irresponsible advertising and what passes for 'entertainment' on TV and elsewhere; we define ourselves through our material aspirations more readily than any spiritual ones. Unhealthy relationships with food and with our bodies (bulimics, anorexics, the obese) are direct consequences of this. Dieting is a massive industry, but in a world where at least a billion of us are starving to death, it is an obscenity. We need to find ways of being gentler with ourselves and each other.

Hilary Benn's statements at the annual Oxford Farming Conference across the road from the first Real Farming Conference, about his strategies for food security in Food 2030 were, in the end, not that much more widely reported than our own Real Farming strategies. I found this shocking, but maybe, given the loopholes he left for GM crops and the perpetuation of agribusiness, this was no bad thing. Perhaps the idea championed by the Real Farming Conference, of multitudes of small, independent, polycultural farmsteads, being managed by independent thinkers, is simply too much popular 'independence' for the government's liking?

What became clear to me at the Real Farming Conference was that feeding everyone properly, sustainably and ethically, is perfectly possible, very exciting, and already starting to happen. Rebecca Hosking's BBC film, *A Farm for the Future*, outlines further very inspiring examples of this and I think it should be mandatory viewing in schools. What also cheered me up was the scale; multiple, nimble and diverse solutions are more likely to succeed than one stomping, propaganda-chewing/spitting mammoth. The co-owner of North Aston Dairy, Matt Dale, could actually have been speaking for us as small bakers; he has a herd of 18 cattle and no plans to grow it, but would like to spread his knowledge of mini-dairy farming to like-minded potential farmers. Our own business, Love Loaves, is a two-person concern, feeding real bread to 200 or more mouths (and hearts) a week: we have no interest in getting any bigger, or selling a 'franchise', or selling out - all we want is to maintain our current business and to help other people set up their own mini-bakeries at home.

The final comment from the conference floor came from one of the UK's ten carrot farmers, a surprise delegate on 'our' side of the road, who suggested that if the general public only *demand*ed that their food be farmed in a certain way, the big farmers would oblige (he neglected to mention at what cost). This was Hilary Benn's point too; if only the consumer would *demand* more ethical/ sustainable food and the rest would naturally follow, as they apparently did with free range eggs and Fair Trade goods. It sounds marvellously free-market, as others have said, but I believe it is disingenuous. Getting consumers to demand things requires that they be *informed*, that campaigns be run - and the information simply isn't being put out there. Why?

Various sorts of campaigns can be run to inform the consumer and change his/her behaviour: hype or scaremongering, advertising or PR, carrot, stick or both. But they all have to be paid for, one way or the other. My question is, who funds them?

Big producers and supermarkets have big budgets to run prime time TV commercials - and it does take an astonishingly large amount of money just to say every little helps. Small producers have little or no budget - especially not to manage a relatively complex message about vital diversity. Big brands will win simply on their power to buy space/ airtime.

The success of Fair Trade products is based on forty years or more of persistent international efforts, mainly on the part of charities and non-profits. If it takes that long to convince consumers to demand food that is sustainably farmed, it will be too late. Even if enough oil were miraculously still obtainable, forty years is two generations, in which, based on current rates of decline, our farmers will have all but died out. We need upfront investment from the government in telling the truth about farming real food and educating the consumer right now.

If a number of 'diversity' farmers pooled resources to fund a campaign advertising their alliance, and with it their produce, it might work. But as soon as the alliance got too successful it would risk being bought out by the giants again. Green & Black sold out to Cadbury. Innocent sold shares worth £30 million to Coca-Cola. Even the greatest brand-owners risk betraying their original beliefs when faced with vast sums of cash. In short, the future of the world's food is too vital to leave to the treacheries of personal avarice, or the vagaries of simply waiting for the consumer to 'ask for something else'.

We need to make *real* farming attractive to young people, not simply as a career/ livelihood choice, but as a valued and respected contribution to society. If you hold life sacred, you must hold food and water sacred too. How about giving farmers the status of doctors? They are, after all, as critical to our health. We pay doctors a salary according to their experience (not based on how many people they've cured/not), so maybe we should be paying our food-producers the same way?

Most importantly, we have to remember that it is up to us, individually, to take responsibility for waking each other up in time to not only to spread the word about our increasingly fragile food systems, but to debate the solutions, implement them and see them flourish.

Food is life. Not business. Even the most blasé plutocrat or politician will remember the man who overreached his golden touch: King Midas, almost starving to death before a pile of solid gold fruit.

Penny Williams 17th January 2010