



# Franciscan Action Network

Transforming the World in the Spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare

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## ***“Food, Glorious Food”***

Maurice Lange, Director of Eco-Justice  
Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, St. Louis, MO  
maurice@fsolph.org

Dominican Sister and mentor of mine Sr. Miriam MacGillis writes:

*“Several months ago I experienced a moment of profound awareness in a very simple act. The day was cold, the kitchen warm and silent. I was alone, enjoying a steaming bowl of vegetarian chili, extremely conscious of its flavors and textures. It occurred to me that this bowl really held rock and soil, minerals and water, and the energy and heat of the stars. All of the ingredients – the beans, onions, garlic, carrots, tomatoes, basil, pepper and oregano – had once been seeds that I inserted into soil.*

*Now they were all providing me with delight and nourishment. And they would soon become my blood, my bones, my sight, my movement, my thoughts, my prayers. I was overwhelmed by the limitless generosity of the universe and its Creator. It was gospel and eucharist in a sacrament so simple, so holy, my heart brimmed with gratitude.”*

What strikes you about Sister Miriam’s description of this simple meal? For me it is her ***mindfulness*** of where the food came from.

Let me continue with an exercise in our imagination:

Imagine you are by yourself, or maybe with a small group of friends, and you are out hiking in some deep woods, or perhaps driving the back streets of an unfamiliar city. Gradually you recognize that you’re not quite sure where you are. You decide to make this turn, to hike that other trail, but to no avail: you finally recognize that you are lost.

What’s the first question that comes to mind as a way to re-orient yourself? ***“Where am I?”*** You need to locate your whereabouts in order to situate yourself, and then eventually make it to your destination.

Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, philosopher and poet, has said, ***“You can’t know who you are unless you know where you are.”***

Well, ***where are we?***

Pondering our global ecological crisis, where we are is at a time and place where we humans have lost our way in a sustaining relationship with the planet.

Where we are, where we find ourselves, therefore, is in these two or three very poignant decades where our decisions will tell the fate of future generations of so many of the Earth's species, including our human descendants. **This** is where we are.

Three signs of our ecological times include the very high rate of species extinction, the continual fouling of air and oceans, and an unprecedented Western ignorance of the source of our food, as well as its true cost.

We seem largely oblivious to asking basic questions about our sustenance, such as

**Where is our food from? How was it grown? Who grew it for us?**

**This is not to mention the tragedy of our ignorance regarding any answers to these basic questions.**

This sort of ignorance is something *very* new for humans; it is historically very new for us to be so disconnected from that which nourishes us, from that which *becomes* us.

For hundreds of thousands of years of hunting and gathering and the last 10,000 years of agriculture, we could answer with confidence these three fundamental questions. We knew where our food was from, we knew basically how it was grown, and if we did not grow it for ourselves we at least had a sense of the farmer in our region.

Of course the *way* that food was grown for a majority of these last 10,000 years was the *only* way: it was *organic*.

What is "organic"? Most would say that "organic" is an absence of chemical fertilizers and pesticides; some others would say "organic" contains no genetically modified organisms; or "organic" is free from the use of toxic sewer sludge and the process irradiation

While those definitions would be considered *partially* correct, they are really a *negative* definition, i.e. they describe what organic *isn't*.

What is a *positive* definition of organic? Well, if you are an organic farmer, you know that the **soil is alive**. Organic = life! The *soil* is alive, it's organic. Healthy soil is teeming with microbial life, and it's those microbes, from what I understand, that are the *real* farmers. They are busy transmitting the nutrients within the soil to the root hairs of the plants. So, an organic farmer wishes to *enhance* the microbial life of the soil. Healthy soil leads to healthy plants. Healthy plants are better able to withstand predation by any pests that come along.

An organic farmer would not dream of putting anything on or in the soil which would degrade or erode the life and habitat of those microbes. And, yes, the vocation of the organic farmer is about reaping the harvest *from* the soil; but he or she also is as dedicated to *giving back to* that soil in turn.

Here are some of the techniques that organic farmers use to produce healthy organic crops as well as to replenish the soil: cover cropping, fabric row covers, mulching, composting, companion planting, rotating of crops, fallowing.

I would like to distinguish between “*industrial organic*” and “*local organic*.” We might feel that if we go to the corporate grocery and find food labeled with the USDA organic seal that this is the best we can do. While this “organic” food is certainly a step in the right direction, do we know where it is from? Much of the organic food in grocery stores comes from California or other places not very near. Think of all the “*food miles*” that food has traveled, which includes the oil used for transport and coolants used for preservation, not to mention the question of *when* it might have been picked and under what labor conditions.

“**LOCAL organic**” is at the heart of the organic philosophy ([www.centerforfoodsafety.org](http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org)) and is typically small-scale, family-operated, biologically diverse, humane, and socially-just.

My particular experience in “local organic” is with **Community Supported Agriculture** (or CSA). In the late 1990’s I interned for two years at **Genesis Farm** in New Jersey. Genesis Farm began in 1986 as the sixth CSA in the United States. (Now there are thousands of CSA’s in this country.) In 2003, I joined others to begin the second CSA in Illinois, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, called the *Community Supported Garden at La Vista*. Shareholder families purchase a seasonal share of the harvest from the farmer. The food travels *very few* food miles, is seasonal, is most likely harvested the day of or prior to delivery, and fosters a direct relationship with and knowledge of the farmer. Local organic benefits the local economy and keeps food dollars in the region; it builds community and that community’s tie to the local region of life.

It has been said (and I’m not sure who to attribute this to): “*When a culture loses touch with the source of its food, then that culture is endangered.*”

Given these ecological times, it is *vital* that we regain a knowledge of and deep appreciation for the source of our food:

*Where is the food from? How was it grown? Who grew it?*

Wendell Berry has also said “*The way we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used.*”

*How do you choose to eat? How does your choice impact the world?*

Let us work towards bringing about a *local* food system that focuses on organic practices which sustain our needs today without compromising the right to life of future generations. May these precious years be the time when we chose to establish a healthy human-Earth relationship.