

Trusting the Earth to Provide
Sunday, April 3, 2022
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Summerfield, FL
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One of my Unitarian Universalist ministerial colleagues Rev. Sara Moores Campbell wrote, "I am not religious," says my neighbor as he hoes the rows between his beans and corn.

"Oh, yes you are," I say to myself.

"To plant a seed is an act of faith.

To collect compost is a response of gratitude to the creator.

To water, fertilize, and mulch the ground is an expression of religious responsibility.

To kneel down and pull weeds is a prayer.

To harvest is to participate in the fullness and grace of the spirit.

To protect and replenish creation is to love God.

"I am not religious," says my neighbor.

'Yes, you are,' I say."

My friend Don grew up in a coal mining town in the hills of West Virginia. He was one of the youngest of a large family. I always forget the number of siblings. I think it was twelve or thirteen. I once asked him how in the world his parents fed them all. His answer was that they had a large garden and his mother canned. They had chickens and a cow. They picked berries in the woods in season. They fished and they hunted. In other words, about the only food they had to buy were things like sugar and coffee. Now Don himself will tell you that he has no desire to ever eat squirrel again, but he and his siblings and parents had enough to eat.

My parents bought a lot more food at the grocery store. My mother said she remembered helping her mother can in a hot August kitchen with no air conditioning, and she was not going to do it. But our freezer was stocked with pumpkin, sweet corn, string beans, applesauce, strawberries and rhubarb sauce from our yard and garden. And I remember hiding in the house and making sure not to go out into the backyard when my father decided some of our chickens were going to be converted from egg providers to meat.

Despite having grown up in farm country regularly passing corn fields with signs at the edge of the field by the road announcing alternately that this was Pioneer #6 and that Jesus loves you I did not really think much about seeds. Recently though I watched a documentary about seeds. Until I watched the film I thought the controversy about Genetically Modified Organisms, GMOs was all about whether GMO foods were healthy for us. But as a film discussion guide notes, "Genetically engineered seeds (GMOs... are protected by genetic patents, which means they must be repurchased each year and cannot be saved and replanted by farmers," [SEED Guide - What to Know about GMOs.pdf - Google Drive](#).

According to Indian scholar and environmental activist, Vandana Shiva, "Soaring seed prices in India have resulted in many farmers being mired in debt'.... According to data from the Indian government, nearly 75 per cent of rural debt is due to purchased inputs. Shiva claims that farmers' debt grows as GMO corporation's profits grow." [Vandana Shiva - Wikipedia](#).

The "Seeds" documentary discussion guide notes that, "There are many different types of GMOs that are designed to serve different functions... However, the majority of GMO crops currently being grown are engineered to either withstand applications of chemical pesticides or to produce their own pesticides systemically. Well-known examples are Monsanto's "Roundup Ready" line of crops (e.g., corn, soy, and cotton), which can survive being sprayed with Roundup herbicide. Bt corn, an example of the systemic pesticide type of GMO, is engineered to produce its own insecticide in the form of a protein derived from *Bacillus thuringiensis*, a bacterium. This protein is carried in each cell of the corn plant and kills certain insects when they eat the crop," [SEED Guide - What to Know about GMOs.pdf - Google Drive](#).

Most of us may already know this, but let me continue reading from the discussion guide, "Pesticides have long been associated with environmental harms going back to the use of DDT, the insect-killing chemical banned by the US in 1971 for its destructive effects on wildlife. We are seeing similar ecological impacts with today's popular pesticides. Recent research on glyphosate suggests it is toxic to certain types of bacteria and fungi crucial to plant health. It also has been shown to repel earthworms and increase root-borne diseases in crops. Neonicotinoids, another type of pesticide in widespread use and often added to GMO seeds, have been linked to declines in populations of bees, monarch butterflies, and other keystone pollinator species. Perhaps the most important, overarching concern with GMOs (as they are predominantly used) is that the chemically-intensive, industrialized agriculture model they support is simply unsustainable. This system is failing to live up to its promises of less pesticide use, higher yields, healthier environments, and more prosperity for farmers. By continuing down the increasingly futile path of industrial farming driven by GMOs and pesticides, we face very real threats to our lives and communities that can no longer be ignored," [SEED Guide - What to Know about GMOs.pdf - Google Drive](#).

Instead of trusting the earth to provide we have decided we know better. Because of our meddling, "The ethnobiologist and nature writer Gary Nabhan says in the trailer for the Seed documentary that 'the diversity of our seed stocks is as endangered as a panda or a polar bear right now,'" According to the film, we have lost 94% of our vegetable seed varieties in the 20th century, [Trailer — Seed: The Untold Story \(seedthemovie.com\)](#).

Frances Moore Lappé, author of [Diet for a Small Planet](#) says, "Making conscious choices about what we eat, based on what the earth can sustain and what our bodies need, can help remind us that our whole society must begin to balance sustainable production with human need." In 2015 Lappé published [World Hunger: 10 Myths](#) written with Joseph Collins. Myth two is: "climate change makes hunger inevitable." Their response begins, "Climate change is no myth. It already means crop losses from drought and the expansion of pests into new regions. The World Food Program forecasts the number of malnourished children to increase by 24 million by 2050, or about one-fifth more than without climate change. These expert observations form a powerful call to action, but they are a far cry from a verdict that hunger and famine are inevitable.

“We can instead decide that climate change is an opportunity for instigating positive change. Because the global food system is so inefficient and inequitable, we have plenty of room to increase available food before we hit earth’s actual limits.”

Myth five is “we have to choose between greater fairness and more production.”

Their response begins, “Justice and production are not competing but complementary goals. On average, small farms in the Global South produce more per acre. They often use land efficiently by integrating diverse crops as well as livestock or fish, which are typically fed crop residues and produce waste that can be used as fertilizer. Such integrated systems can also yield greater nutrition compared to single-crop systems. Small, agroecological farms are also commonly more energy-efficient and use little fossil fuel. By contrast, capital-intensive US agriculture characterized by large farms uses seven to ten units of primarily fossil energy to produce just one unit of food energy,” [World Hunger: Ten Myths : Food First](#).

I am not advocating today a particular diet; vegan, vegetarian, organic, local or something else. I am advocating that in this Earth Month each of us take time to consider that our choices in what we eat and what we buy are ethical and ecological decisions. This month is not just Earth month, it is also Ramadan. Our Muslim neighbors are fasting today. The holy month of Ramadan began Friday evening. The Dutch Pakistani Urdu writer and poet Ehsan Sehgal says, “Ramadan is not only to stay thirsty and hungry: it’s also to realize the real thirsty and hungry ones to help; it is true worship.” What we eat and what we buy are ethical and ecological decisions for ourselves and for our neighbors. It is a form of worship.

Whether the words you sing to David Mallet’s “Garden Song” are his, “Inch by inch, row by row, gonna make this garden grow. All you need is a rake and a hoe and a piece of fertile ground. Inch by inch, row by row, someone bless these seeds I sow. Someone warm them from below ‘til the rains come tumbling down,” or Eric Kilburn’s words “Slug by slug, weed by weed, my garden’s got me really teed. All the insects love to feed on my tomato plants. Sunburned face, scratched-up knees, my kitchen’s choked with zucchinis. I’m shopping at the A&P next time I get a chance,” garden or grocery store, ultimately, we all must trust the earth to provide. To quote Frances Moore Lappé again, “The act of putting into your mouth what the earth has grown is perhaps your most direct interaction with the earth.”

Please join me in prayer using words from the book [Earth Prayers](#) labeled simply “Unitarian Prayer.”

“The food which we are about to eat is Earth, Water, and Sun, compounded through the alchemy of many plants. Therefore, Earth, Water and Sun will become part of us. This food is also the fruit of the labor of many beings and creatures. We are grateful for it. May it give us strength, health, joy. And may it increase our love.” Amen.