

Exchanging Our Gifts

By Kate Adamick

In a few weeks, many Americans will find themselves once again fighting department store crowds to exchange ill-fitting clothing and inoperable electronic devices, and to return various items the attraction of which was fully understood only by their purchaser. The Annual Gift Exchange Season will be upon us.

The chore is time-consuming, tedious and frequently frustrating. Nevertheless, countless people put themselves through the dreaded task in order to obtain something more suited to them – something better for them. It is, quite simply, a largely self-motivated action to get our needs met.

As I ponder the approach of this frenetic season, it occurs to me that we lose so much by not exerting the same effort in demanding that our needs be met by our food system. Why don't we sit in traffic for hours to insist that our food be free of antibiotics, hormones and pesticides? Why don't we endure heavy crowds to protest energy-consuming, pollution-emitting transport of our food from far-off places? Why don't we stand in long lines to demand that the food industry stop spending billions of dollars to market sugar and fat-laden "food" to our children?

It is unquestionably true that we live in the wealthiest country in the world. Most of us are surrounded by seemingly endless opportunities to acquire food. Restaurants, food carts, grocery stores, convenience stores and mega stores line many of our streets. Store shelves and coolers are overflowing with tens of thousands of food items of every imaginable shape, color and size. Surely, to many impoverished and isolated people around the world, these would be considered gifts and, indeed, they are.

Nevertheless, as with the child who spends all of his waking hours playing his new video games, or the adult who listens to her iPod at full volume, the gifts we've been given can do us more harm than good. Moreover, those on whom we may naively rely to look out for our interests are frequently looking out for their own. This is all too clear when we consider that it is money, and not human welfare, that drives so many decisions made by both our government and private industry. Thus, it is incumbent upon each of us as individuals to use our gifts wisely and, if they are not meeting our needs, to exchange them for those that will.

The implications of continuing to buy into a food system that isn't meeting our needs are fast approaching crisis level. The Center for Disease Control tells us that more than a third of our children will acquire diabetes in their lifetimes, and that their life expectancies will be shorter than our own. Heart disease, cancer, stroke and asthma will affect more and more of us at earlier and earlier ages. The healthcare system will near its breaking point as it continues to struggle in the face of the increasing financial burden brought on by diet-related illnesses. Our country will continue to replace national wildlife refuges with oil wells and to wage battles against oil-rich nations.

Few among us choose to wear ill-fitting clothing or make futile attempts to use inoperable electronics rather than fight the traffic and long lines to exchange them. Why, then, do we so willingly sacrifice our health and well-being to a profit-driven, tunnel-visioned food industry that may simply need to be reminded that the customer is always right? If we wish to consume hormone-free milk and pesticide-free produce, we must approach the manager of our local grocery store and demand that he carry organic. If we want to eat meat free of antibiotics, we must insist that the meat we purchase is, in fact, free of antibiotics. If we're worried about the potential impact of genetically modifying our food supply, we must consistently purchase non-GMO products. If we wish to see more restaurants in our neighborhoods that support sustainable agriculture, we must religiously frequent those that already exist. If we're concerned about fossil

fuel consumption and emissions, we must require that as much of our food as is humanly possible be sourced from local growers.

Am I suggesting that we, as a people, revolt and begin marching in the streets until our food system needs are met? Perhaps, for most, that would be asking too much at this point in our history. I am, however, asking that each of us put forth at least as much effort into demanding that our food system meet *our* standards for healthy, environmentally-friendly food as we put into insisting that our new sweaters fit well and our new computer games work properly.

It's time to exchange our gifts for something more suited to *our* needs – to something better for *us*.

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