

Eating Responsibly

The text of the keynote speech given by Joan Dye Gussow at the Connecticut NOFA End of Winter Conference at the Unitarian Society of Hartford on Saturday, March 1, 2003

Eating Responsibly by Joan Dye Gussow

When I started writing this talk. I was afraid that before I had delivered it our country would be engaged in World War III, the first major war initiated "pre-emptively" by our once free nation. And I knew that even if we weren't at war, we would be damn close to it, and that I would be psychologically unable to deliver a keynote address that was only about EATING responsibly. In the late seventies, when the clock hands on the cover of *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* had moved terrifyingly close to midnight, and I was teaching at Columbia Teachers College, I attended an informal cafeteria talk by that brave and outspoken anti-war activist, the Reverend William Sloan Coffin. He was speaking on America's role in the defense policy called Mutually Assured Destruction, or "MAD" for short.

Coffin spoke eloquently of how he had set out to learn enough about the thinking that lay behind that policy that he could comment on it intelligently. For months he studied our nuclear defensive triad- thousands of missiles buried in silos scattered about the nation, thousands more effectively immune to Soviet attack since they were either carried on submarines deep in the ocean or on bombers that were in the air in significant numbers at any given time.

At the completion of his review, Coffin concluded that we were desperately overarmed, that we really didn't need our land-based missiles at all, and that they were, in fact, our area of greatest vulnerability. So he went to the Department of Defense, got an appointment with the appropriate general, and told him what he had concluded. The general listened politely while Coffin explained his logic-that the missiles planted on our own soil would be the only available targets for Soviet missiles, and that we would, therefore, be much safer without them. He expected to be told that he had got things wrong, that there were secrets he didn't know that explained everything. Instead, the General drew himself up to his full height, clenched his jaw and said sternly, "Reverend Coffin, do you imagine that the American military is going to let the Soviet Union force us to remove missiles from our own soil. . . ."

At a much later time, when we were, in fact, removing some of the land-based missiles for reasons of our own, I remember reading in the paper about a man who lived near one of the now empty silos. Asked by a reporter, he said, and I kid you not, "Well, I did feel safer knowing it was there." So much for American strategic logic.

After listening to Coffin, I swore I would never do another speech in which I didn't mention the madness of our nuclear buildup. I kept my promise-until other crises superceded that one-and the next time I gave a speech I spent a bit of time at the beginning indicating that if we didn't take care of peace, nothing else would matter. In fact, I think I told the Coffin story. After the speech, a woman came up to me, tense jawed and absolutely enraged by what I had said.

As it turned out, however, what had made her angry was not the Reverend Coffin and his nuclear analysis. In the course of talking about the ways that humans had trashed the food-producing environment, I mentioned that whales were being choked by floating plastic bags which they interpreted as jellyfish. "Whales did not evolve," I had said, "in a world that could have taught them to avoid plastic bags." This was California, in the 1970's, and the lady found my mention of evolution- in which she did not believe-deeply offensive. That experience taught me that you ought always to say what you are thinking, since you never know what will make people mad.

I gather from my advanced publicity that what I am expected to speak about is my life as a mini-farmer. Ever since I published my book, *This Organic Life*, a couple of years ago, explaining why I undertook the challenge of trying to eat locally and what I learned from it, I've gone around the country talking up that idea—partly to sell my book, of course, but partly, I have to admit, because it was so relaxing to go around giving people good news. It was fun to talk about bringing our food habits home, shortening our food chain, buying from local farmers, changing the world by eating wonderful, seasonal food. Of course, I sometimes had to start by explaining how messed up the planet was, but I could get through that quickly. Implied in what I was saying, I think, was the notion that if we all just ate locally, everything would be OK.

But George Bush has done me in. I can't keep kidding myself any longer that things will be OK if we just get eating right. The leaders driving the present system are too deeply embedded in the belief that our historical destiny is to attain what Thomas Berry describes as "a kind of industrial-technological wonderworld" of which we are in charge. So although I really do think we need to eat locally, the state of the planet convinces me that I need to start talking about some of the things I obsess about in addition to making a local dinner in the winter Northeast.

So this morning I'm going to talk about the planet and how we relate to it, and how disturbing I have found the warriors' apparent lack of concern about its continued functioning as a food producing environment. Then after I've thoroughly depressed you, I'm going to talk a bit about what I think we need to do. And I'm going to do all this using as my structure a short essay by David Budbill from which I quoted at a CSA conference a year or so ago, an essay in which he talks about feeling outside of the New American Dream.

I warn you, this will be a ramble, but it will end, I promise, with a hopeful view of what I think those of us Budbill calls outsiders are accomplishing, what we represent, those of us gathered together here to work at sustainability, and others like us around the world, what it is we represent on the planet in this present, frightening moment. I'll try to be amusing, sometimes. If you're in any doubt about my intentions, just laugh.

So here goes. David Budbill's essay (he's a Vermont poet by the way) was published over 20 years ago in the newsletter of the environmental group Friends of the Earth as the first in a series organized under the title "Old Dreams and New Signs." Ronald Reagan had just taken the presidency, and the theme of Budbill's piece was that many of us felt deeply outside the culture that was then emerging, a condition I have found myself in for a long time. The title of Budbill's piece was taken from Camus: "We have nothing to lose but everything." As you listen, remember that this was written twenty-three years ago.

We have all heard the new Secretary of Energy say that the solution to our energy problem is not conservation but production. We have heard the new Secretary of the Interior outline his views toward the use of land. We've heard the new Secretary of State tell the world that our country will not be afraid to use nuclear weapons if it feels it needs to.

Hideously familiar, isn't it? He goes on:

The rest of the world sees America and has for a long time, as an enormous glutton devouring the world and everything in it in order to produce electric toothbrushes, MX missiles and vaginal deodorant. The rest of the world is either angry with us for that or jealous or both. What I hear our new officials saying to the rest of the world is: "Eat your hearts out. Your vision of us is right, and it will be right, more and more, now and on into the future." What do people do who don't share this new American Dream? What do people do who want a life in which they

try, don't always succeed, but always try, to be loving, honorable, wholesome and kind to themselves, to those around them, and to the earth under their feet?

Then Budbill goes on to tell those who do not share that dream four things to do. I will be taking up his recommendations as I go on. But first let me do a kind of state of the planet update post-Budbill.

I began my career in the field of nutrition as Cassandra. Thirty years ago I started warning students that-given our behavior toward the planet-the end was near. Later I would run into students whom I hadn't seen for ten years. They would tell me that they had taken seriously my warnings about our over-consumption of the planet, but that their families were getting restless with their material restraint in the face of the apparently flourishing consumer culture. They wanted to know when the end was actually coming.

I didn't know the answer to that question, but I can say with confidence that I feel more threatened now than I did 30 years ago. I won't spend time on numbers and details-you all know enough of those-the new danger of biotech, the leap into prominence of water wars in the face of declining water availability, the hideousness of our treatment of livestock, the continued disappearance of farmland and farmers, the global loss of species, the growing disparity between the obscenely rich and the unimaginably poor, and so on. So I want to focus this morning on the larger ignorance-or avoidance-of the underlying problem, just to remind us all that what we are about is not just agriculture.

I think the deepest, most pervasive problem humanity has in dealing with the earth-in recognizing the earth as something to be dealt with-is the degree to which our technological inventions have progressively seduced what is now a large proportion of the human race into a conviction that we can, on the whole, discount the natural world. Indeed, technology has seduced some of my academic colleagues into the belief that nothing is really "unnatural" and that science and technology have got most things pretty well under control-which, they would see as a good thing.

Too many of us are, in our arrogant naiveté rather like the stockbroker looking out the window of her 64th floor Manhattan office and experiencing an exhilarating sense of freedom at the sight of New York City at her feet. In reality, she is utterly unfree, tied to an umbilical cord of air-conditioning, heating, and lighting, to the pumps that draw water up from the street level to provide pressure in her private kitchen and bathroom, to the reliability of the elevators that allow her to arrive in her office ready for work, instead of winded from 64 flights of stairs. Accustomed as she is to ignoring the massive inputs of fossil energy that once thrust into the air the tower that surrounds her, and the further massive inputs that are expended daily to keep her world functioning, she imagines she is self-reliant.

The great majority of U.S. residents now live much of the time in a world of their own species' making--surrounded by artifacts that seem to have little or nothing to do with nature. Increasingly we spend time peering at lighted two dimensional surfaces that mimic reality poorly, and tell us lies about the world beyond them. (I would worry more if the mimicry were absolute since a simulacrum of a frog, however lifelike, can't warn us that the world real frogs live in has turned toxic and an electronic tree can't concentrate nutrients with its roots, collect CO₂ with its leaves, restore oxygen to the air, or help infiltrate rain water back into the earth.)

This utter dependence of everything we see--all these buildings, these desks and chairs, this paper, these lights, everything--the utter dependence of all that on plants--supplemented for this brief moment in time by fossilized plants--is almost inconceivable to us because the trail of production is so long and for the most part so obscured.

Someone e-mailed me recently-an agricultural person by the way-to ask me where vitamins came from. "I know that minerals in foods come from the soil," she wrote, "but where do the vitamins come from?" So I wrote to tell her that the vitamins, like most of the substances that plants are composed of are self-

manufactured, because plants are autotrophs. And then I quoted from my very old copy of Introduction to the Biochemistry of Foods which explains that autotrophs are organisms

capable of growth and reproduction by preparing for themselves all the required complex materials from very simple inorganic compounds: carbon dioxide, water, and a few minerals, utilizing sunlight to provide the energy necessary for the synthesis of organic matter."

What I did not add to that explanation was the next paragraph, which states much more bluntly than I imagine a newer text would that the heterotrophic organisms (that's us and all the other animals, as well as most microorganisms) are "**strongly servile**" toward the autotrophs since they cannot subsist, grow or reproduce without food, which they get by eating autotrophs or "other members of their own group." It's that "strongly servile" phrase I want to emphasize. Even Donald Rumsfeld, even Richard Perle, even Sadaam Hussein. All of them are strongly servile to the plant kingdom and they had better not forget it. Yet to read the ruminations of the planners, the futurists, the gee-whizzers about technology is to know despair. For they don't get it. They will talk about the next 50 years as if there were no problems with air, water, soil, pollution, eco-collapse, you name it. I have read futurist volumes that don't even have an index entry for food. Yet in ecosystem terms, the war toward which our government is impelling us is not merely a war on Iraq but another war on nature.

We are making war on Nature first, by assuring America of cheap fuel so that we 4% of the earth's people can go on producing 25% of the gasses that are heating up the planet, and second, by assuring that yet another region of the world will be rendered unfit for food production for the foreseeable future by bombs, artillery and other ordinance, whether smart, dumb or just gigantic. (my older son told me that when he visited Verdun, he noticed that the fields there, 80 years after World War I, still showed the signs of war-caused infertility) . Does anyone in Washington know that food has to be grown somewhere on fertile soils? Do they care?

I am afraid I understand all too well where their ideas are coming from because years ago I participated at my college in a renegade committee concerned about our institution's uncritical embrace of digital technology. At some point, I made the mistake of mentioning "nature," and suggesting that humanity was damaging "nature." One of my colleagues-in what I thought was a group sympathetic to my concerns-was seriously put off by my suggestion that anything humans did was not natural. The essence of his argument was that because humans were themselves natural, anything we did was natural and hence part of the natural world. "Digital machines," he wrote at the time,

are as integral a part of nature as is anything else and through their ability to help us take complexity into account they will be immensely valuable aids in the human effort to learn how to maintain the ecological equilibrium of the environment."

It has taken me years to be confident enough of my own position to refer to such comments as "biology free." In that time, I have come to the depressing conclusion that some of our most brilliant thinkers and all of our leaders (these are not overlapping groups!) need repeated reminders that nature is not just an intellectual concept, but an organism affected by the rocks of the lithosphere, the soils of the pedosphere, the waters of the hydrosphere, and the living matter-autotrophs and heterotrophs alike--of the biosphere, all of which interact in ways that are only dimly understood by humans. The environment was maintaining its "ecological equilibrium" just fine without us; whether it will survive our clumsy interventions is surely an open question. So because we seem to need regular reminders of our own ignorance, let me offer several.

Here's the shortest and simplest, a list of what biologist Paul Ehrlich has spoken of, on a number of occasions, as Nature's free services -the things Nature throws off just in the course of equilibrating herself:

"Maintenance of the gaseous quality of the atmosphere, amelioration of climate, operation of the hydrologic cycle (including the control of floods and the provision of fresh water to agriculture, industry and homes), disposal of wastes, recycling of the nutrients essential to agriculture and forestry, generation of soils, pollination of crops, provision of food from the sea, and maintenance of a vast genetic library from which humanity has already drawn the very basis of its civilization."

I've always been fond of crop pollination as a particularly vivid example of nature's unrecognized contribution to our survival; it would be a major technological challenge to reproduce the busy-ness of bees going about their life task, just one of the things that Nature now takes care of without our attention--so long as we don't interfere too much.

So let me provide a couple of perspectives on the ways we uniquely interfere. I offer these not because I think the underlying ideas will be new to you, but because they may help you, as they helped me, to think freshly about humans and nature. The first of these comes from a book that threw me grieving into the new millennium when I read it at the end of 1999 . It reminded me that all those videoed New Year's celebrations of human relatedness around the world were irrelevant if their focus was--as it was--entirely limited to humans.

The book that rained on my Millenium parade is called *Dominion* and it's by an evolutionary biologist named Niles Eldredge. Eldredge explains that before the emergence of *homo sapiens*, all species survived by depending on the plants and animals that surrounded them in the areas they inhabited. All species other than our own still do live that way. They cannot trash their local ecosystems because they live in them, and if they overexploit them, they will perish from privation or pollution, or both.

However, a series of physiological changes, and such cultural discoveries as fire and agriculture, made humans, alone among the species, capable of living outside their local ecosystems. In the simplest terms this meant that if a group of humans happened to overexploit an ecosystem, they could move on. And they (we) did. Now the idea that we were no longer ecosystem people but people who exploit the whole biosphere was certainly not a new idea to me. But what Eldredge said that shifted my vision was the following: **we are the only species that thinks only about our own species**. We are incredibly self-absorbed. . . What does that mean? Here's Eldridge:

We spend most of our waking (and all of our dreaming) time contemplating details of human life--our own, of course, but also other's lives as we see them impinge on our own. . . There is very little time left over to consider the non-human world. . . . A squirrel spends far more time contemplating members of other species--the trees it feeds on, and takes shelter in, the hawks and cats that might eat it, the birds and rodents that may compete for its food--than any human in this postagricultural world ever does. We think almost exclusively of ourselves and each other. . . .

So humans are almost exclusively interested in each other, and if you pay attention to the media, you will recognize that an astonishing proportion of what we like to know about each other has to do with sex and money. As the world's "first and, so far, only inner-directed species," Eldridge says, we seem unable to imagine that we are not entirely self-sufficient. This illusion

so strongly conforms to everyday life experiences of such a huge proportion of the 5.7 billion of us currently alive, that it cannot be airily dismissed as mythic. . . We seem able to wriggle free of resource limitations

more readily than any other living species in the history of the planet. But have we really stepped outside of nature, away from the natural world? . . . Are we really no longer subject to the usual rules of resource limitations that dominate the rest of the living world?

Not at all, says Eldredge. We have gotten away with this because until relatively recently, our numbers were small enough and the size of the planet was large enough that the effect of our destructiveness was not evident.

We haven't yet awakened to the fact that we face a major reckoning with the rest of the planet: the species, ecosystems, waters, gases, rocks and soils of the earth.

Since the health of the global system that supports us depends on "the combined health of all the local ecosystems," we must pay attention to the other species with whom we share our home, because, whether we recognize it or not, we still depend on the same systems that they do and if they're in trouble (and they are) we are too.

But, says Eldredge,

It is decidedly not obvious to all of us, living in the last decade of the twentieth century, that a mass extinction of the majority of non-human species would be seriously detrimental to the future of humanity.

This being the case, Eldredge concludes, humans need to change the story we've told ourselves since we first took control of some portion of the earth and grew our own food. We need to learn, and quickly, that we do not manage, we do not have dominion over the planet. Consider the arthropods, everything hard-shelled and joint-legged, from insects to barnacles. E.O. Wilson has pointed out that if we should manage to kill the arthropods--and our society acts as if that would be a terrific idea where insects are concerned--we could probably not outlast them by more than a few months.

My second example of the risks of human interference is more contemporary in its focus, and more lyrical. It is the first two pages from an essay about biotech by Barbara Kingsolver called "A Fist in the Eye of God." The phrase refers to terminator technology, the fact that the biotechnologists are putting into crop seeds genes that would prevent the second generation of seeds from sprouting. In her essay Kingsolver explains the risks of genetic engineering so engagingly--with reference to land races, Wylie Coyote, Darwin, and allergy-producing pollen as inhaled sex--that even those whose lack of biology she deplores can get the point. And she begins this essay as follows:

In the slender shoulders of the myrtle tree outside my kitchen window, a hummingbird built her nest. It was in April, the sexiest month, season of bud-burst and courtship displays, though I was at the sink washing breakfast dishes and missing the party, or so you might think. Then my eye caught a flicker of motion outside and there she was, hovering uncertainly. She had in the tip of her beak a wisp of wadded spider webs tiny I was not even sure it was there, until she carefully smoodged it onto the branch. She vanished then, but in less than a minute was back with another tiny white tuft, which she stuck on top of the first. For more than an hour she returned again and again, increasingly confident of her mission, building up by infinitesimal degree a whitish lump

on the branch--leaving me plumb in awe of the supply of spider webbing on the face of the land.

I stayed at my post, washing everything I could find, while my friend did her own housework out there. When the lump had grown big enough--when some genetic trigger in her tiny brain said, "now, that will do"--she stopped gathering and sat down on her little tuffet, wagging her wings and tiny rounded underbelly to shape the blob into a cup that would easily have fit inside my cupped hand. Then she hovered up to inspect it from this side and that, settled and waddled with greater fervor, hovered and appraised some more, then dashed off again. She began now to return with fine filaments of shredded bark that she wove into the webbing along with some dry leaflets and a slap-dab or two of lichen pressed onto the outside for curb appeal.

When she had made of all this a perfect, symmetrical cup, she did the most surprising thing of all; she sat on the nest, stretched herself forward, extended the unbelievable length of her tongue, and licked the nest in a long upward stroke from bottom to rim. Then she rotated herself a minute degree, leaned forward and licked again. I watched her go all the way around, licking the entire nest in a slow rotation that took ten minutes to complete and ended precisely back at her starting point. Passed down from hummingbird- great-grandmothers immemorial, a spectacular genetic map in her mind had instructed every step from snipping out with her beak the first spiderweb tuft to laying down whatever secretion in her saliva was needed to accrete and finalize her essential creation. Then, suddenly, that was that. Her busy urgency vanished and she settled in for the long stillness of laying and incubation.

If you had been standing with me at my kitchen sink to witness all this, you would likely have breathed softly, as I did, "My God." The spectacular perfection of that nest, that tiny tongue, that beak calibrated perfectly to the length of the tubular red flowers from which she sucks nectar and takes away pollen to commit the essential act of copulation for the flowering plant that feeds her--every piece of this thing and all of it, my God. You might be expressing your reverence for the details of a world created 4,004 years ago by a divine being approximately human in shape. Or you might be revering the details of a world created by a billion years of natural selection acting utterly without fail on every single life form, one life at a time. For my money the latter is the greatest show on earth and a church service to end all. I have never understood how anyone could have the slightest trouble blending religious awe with a full comprehension of the workings of life's creation.

The only trouble with reading that passage is that it's a very hard act to follow. But I need to try. I have described Eldridge's take on humans in nature to remind us all again that humans, uniquely among living organisms, have used technology to step **outside** of nature, and affect it on a planetary

scale. I have read Kingsolver because she explains so exquisitely the almost incomprehensible complexity of one piece of that planet, a fragment so tiny that we could blow it away without even noticing.

Who after all, really needs hummingbirds? Surely the scientists who have genetically engineered goats so their milk produces spider's silk, have not asked themselves whether their invention will accidentally show up in the hummingbird's world, or if it did what difference it might make. Kingsolver is introducing in her essay, the idea that genetic engineering of food crops, taking the planet's evolution into our own hands, is a very risky enterprise, just because of nature's long experience in keeping the planet functioning.

So the species of which we are a part has been trashing the planet for a long time, but, as Eldredge says we have gotten away with this until relatively recently because "our numbers were small enough and the size of the planet was large enough that the effect of our destructiveness was not evident." Now our destructiveness as a species is frighteningly evident, although apparently not to everyone. There are those who still argue, against reason, that everything is fine and getting better-and our leaders urge us to spend and enjoy (while remaining alert, of course) as if that were true. Which accounts for the New American Dream and brings us back to Budbill.

Given this dream of endless consumption of the natural world, what ought we to do? Let me begin by reading the first of Budbill's suggestions. Then I'll summarize his second and third recommendations, and spend some time on the last. First, he says, we need to see ourselves as outsiders and rebels;

This notion of the self as rebel in revolt is especially needed now. Never have we been so close to eliminating ourselves and all other things. . . This is the first age in human history when that unfortunate statement has been possible. Earlier in the history of our species, if a group of people couldn't get along and they killed themselves off, it was their own stupid fault and good riddance anyway. But now it is clear; if we kill each other off, we will also, out of spite if nothing else, kill off the earth itself as well, or at least maim it so badly it will take a billion years to heal itself.

Those of us who really do believe that it's wrong to be producing 25% of all the world's greenhouse gasses when we're only 4% of the population, those of us who weep to watch species crashing on the land, in the sea, and in the air, those of us who are trying desperately to bring attention to the plight of farmers and agriculture around the world; those of us, in short, who are profoundly worried about the planet, really have no choice but to experience ourselves as outsiders, for all around us people are going to be behaving as if none of this is true.

I tell the story in my book of sitting in a restaurant, with a friend who has just indicated that she might order the salmon crusted with horseradish. And I'm newly back from a meeting where I learned that producing a pound of farm-raised salmon requires 3 pounds of wild-caught fish. Should I tell her? Doing so might either ruin her meal or lose me a friend. And Budbill warns us that even though we are rebels in revolt, none of us knows enough to be self-righteousness or condescending toward those who hold on to the American Dream. "Our job is not to hate them," he says, "our job is to resist them."

People don't want to think about how bad things are, at least partly because they're not sure what to do with that knowledge. Being "different," being a careful consumer-worrying as I do about replacing a toaster because you know that someone, somewhere spent miserable days mining the chrome-is hard; it is to experience yourself as an outsider every day. But it's what we have to do if we want to be true to what we believe.

And, at least partly because it is so hard, we need to help ourselves-Budbill's second suggestion, by getting together.

we will need more and more connections, contacts, associations, not only locally and regionally, but over a much broader range as well. . . We need to foster the community of souls who choose life and not destruction."

We know that. We know that we are all energized by events like today. We come together with people among whom we are not outsiders. not only because it is so reassuring to move among those who, in Budbill's phrase, choose life, but because when we mingle with those whose assumptions we share, we can learn better how to do what all of us are working toward--to move the planet in a sustainable direction.

Last week, I spoke in Stateboro, in South Georgia, to Georgia Organics. I could tell from the reactions of the people to each other that all of them felt enlarged just looking around and realizing that there were other folks like themselves, scattered about the state, swimming in a sea of people who were pretty much indifferent if not actually hostile to their concerns.

At the end of my talk, I brought up, rather hesitantly, my concerns about the environmental destructiveness of war. I suspected I might be out of line, but I couldn't stay silent. But when I had finished, all the questions were about why the public protests were having so little effect, and what was wrong with the media. One woman described having marched in a peace rally and being denounced-to her shock-as a baby killer. It was clear I had offered a channel for them to share their real concerns. So it is impossible to overstate the importance of coming together with those who share our underlying assumptions, and reaching out from there to create coalitions that link people-like poor New Yorkers and upstate farmers-who didn't used to understand how much they had in common.

But when we get together, we realize that something more is needed. We may be doing the right things, but the effort sometimes wears us out because the culture in which we are embedded seems so hostile to what we stand for. Which brings me to Budbill's third recommendation. Of course we need to articulate our vision in our own lives and share it with like-minded people, he says, but in addition

we are going to need to articulate our resistance in public ways, to those who choose destruction-in the streets and in the places of power. We are going to need to lend ourselves more and more from time to time to organized public forms of protest.

And then he adds that he wishes he didn't have to say this because he hates crowds, and would rather stay home. I would rather stay home too, but I think we have all become aware in the last few years, and especially in the last few months, that mass protest, and speaking up in public about things like the coming war, may be absolutely unavoidable in a time when the forces of repression are closing in once again. Let me read you a wonderful paragraph by George Monbiot from the February 18 edition of the *Guardian* newspaper of London.

We are a biological weapon. On Saturday the anti-war movement released some 70,000 tonnes of organic material onto the streets of London, and similar quantities in locations all over the world. This weapon of mass disruption was intended as a major threat to the security of western governments.

Our marches were unprecedented, but they have, so far, been unsuccessful. The immune systems of the US and British

governments have proved to be rather more robust than we had hoped.

I attended college in California from 1946 to 1950, in a time when my state had its own House UnAmerican Activities Committee, just like the one in Washington. It was the Joe McCarthy era, and it threw the fear of government into a lot of people, including me. In college, I joined nothing, not even the young Democrats because we had the Hollywood Ten as an example-join something that turns up on the Attorney General's list (!!) in that era, and you might never get a job. Though I found my voice in my late 40's, I have not yet walked enough picket lines. I intend to change that, and I sincerely hope this Attorney General has me on his list.

Budbill's fourth recommendation is, as he says, almost the converse of protesting, and it may become more and more difficult. We need, he says, to

"act with kindness and grace, tenderness and good will toward ourselves, toward our wives, husbands, lovers, friends and children, toward the earth itself," for "there is no point whatsoever in trying to save the world if we cannot save ourselves."

So how do we do that? How do we save ourselves? In these past weeks of what surely seemed like impending war, it has been extraordinarily difficult to think of any way to end on an honest but hopeful note. How do we act with "kindness and grace, tenderness and good will" in angry, fearful, harsh and unforgiving times?

I found myself less than a month ago, on a farm in England, a farm that is just getting started on 2500 acres of land lying about an hour outside of London. Given the location, the "farmer" is obviously a rich man and he has grand ideas of creating what he referred to as something like the "best large small organic farm in the world." He plans to grow birds and animals, grains and beans, and vegetables and fruits, to do whatever processing is needed on site and to sell everything in his own store!

Although I suspect what's going on at Laverstoke may offer one ray of hope, I don't want to talk about that farm. I want to comment on what I took away from the two days I spent there with a group of talented growers from the U.S. and Europe whom Eliot Coleman had brought together to offer the owner of that spread what help they could. Eliot asked the group to talk about the state of organic, including things like what they thought was their least sustainable practice and what they woke up in the morning worrying about. After the assembled struggling farmers used up a bit of time taking out their frustrations on our wealthy host-2500 acres and money to farm them is, after all, a lot to envy-each of them explained how he was trying to do it right.

Their approaches were very different because the farmers lived in very different geographies, and each was proudly committed to doing it right on his piece of land-as many of you have been doing all along-trying to find ways of making a living on the land while living responsibly from it. The difference now is that we have come to a time when, as everything I have said up to now is meant to indicate, our margin for error has narrowed frighteningly. And at this moment, at the beginning of what may be World War III, we are forced to face the fact that this war will change not only the lives of the people on the battlefield and their relatives at home, or those nearby suffering "collateral damage," it will change the lives of all of us, as we face a world enraged by our insistence on doing whatever it takes to continue to drive big cars, live in big houses, and eat the products of poor nations all over the world. The chickens are coming home to roost. Today's threats make the monolithic threat we faced in Coffin's time-a nuclear-armed Soviet Union-seem trivial by contrast.

And thinking back on the two days those of us privileged to be at Laverstoke had spent in talk and reflection, I realized that it felt as it must have felt to live in a religious community during the Dark Ages, sharing and keeping alive the knowledge the world would need after the conflagration. That particular

metaphor struck me, I think, because I had recently read Gene Lodgon's wonderful book *At Nature's Pace*, in which he comments that those of us trying to create a rational, healthy food system are

to today's headlong rush toward the earth's destruction what the monasteries were to the dark ages: places to preserve human skills and arts until some semblance of common sense and common purpose return to the public mind."

And so I concluded that the only way one can act with "kindliness and grace, tenderness and good will" in a world headed in the wrong direction is to live by what we believe, thereby preserving what wisdom we can. Which brings me to eating locally and the end of my talk.

For the particular piece of wisdom I am trying to preserve has to do with the delights of local food. Oddly enough, I first wrote about localizing the food supply almost exactly twenty-five years ago, on the last day of February, 1978, when I finished up the Epilogue to my book *The Feeding Web*. Attempting to give the reader hope after what was a pretty gloomy overview of the future of food, I titled the Epilogue "What Can I Hope For?" and went on to write about initiatives going on around the country that were working on one or another of the problems I had laid out. There was no single answer to the problems we faced, I said, but a general understanding that the reasonableness of particular solutions would be judged by whether they reflected both global awareness and local reality.

since we do not know what is ecologically optimal even on a small scale, we must encourage a multitude of experiments aimed at finding ways of living carefully on the planet. I am grateful to have discovered in the writing of an anthropologist the very useful term *relocalization* to encompass many of the changes that look most promising where the food supply is concerned.

I then went on to give some examples I knew about at that time, like the exploration of a Vermont-based diet, John Jeavons work on intensive agriculture, or a study examining whether there was enough Massachusetts farmland left to feed Massachusetts (in the 1970's, there was). And I ended my hopeful chapter by quoting from an interview with someone who had a view of the world not very different than mine. Asked how he could be optimistic, he explained (and these were the last words of my Epilogue)

"I'm practical about these things, but I think there is great hope in the world. There are substantial number of well-intentioned, well-educated people who are passionately committed to making things better in this country and around the world. They are working hard on these problem and making substantial gains. I gotta be an optimist. If I wasn't laughing, I'd be crying. I mean, why else would I be knocking myself out?"

Twenty-five years later, I'm still an optimist. But in the years since, I have moved from optimism to action. Convinced that we had to relocalize the food system, I realized that I had to walk my talk. Unfortunately, I had started talking about eating locally when I didn't have a clue what that would mean where I lived. Local produce availability was so limited at the time that local eating meant mostly growing your own.

So my husband and I set out to do just that, intending, as we said, to "grow our own food." Since we never produced anything except fruits and vegetables, and we also ate grains and beans and animal products, that statement seems remarkably naive in retrospect. But since the things people worry about

most when you talk about eating locally are fruits and vegetables--"what would I do for salad in January?"-the effort seemed worthwhile, at least to me.

The idea wasn't to demonstrate that everyone could grow her own if she wanted to--which would have been silly, given that I live 20 minutes north of New York City. I wanted to show what local farmers could make available if we created a market for what they could produce. I was trying to model--and I still am--the sorts of eating choices I thought we all needed to work toward if we were to have a sustainable food system--and a sustainable society. And for the last 25 years, I've been going in that direction.

I'm not as good as I will be, if I live long enough, or as I would be if I had more than 1000 square feet and could really rotate my crops. But I'm trying to live by my convictions--which is what my book "This Organic Life" is all about. And that turns out to be my contribution to bringing it all together, the best advice I can give this morning. Think globally, learn to grow what you can, eat as locally as possible, and try hard to live what you believe.

Let me end, then, by going back to where I started, to the conflict the entire world should be hoping does not erupt. I learned only recently that one of my favorite authors, Barbara Kingsolver was not only a brilliant novelist and essayist, but a remarkable poet, and I found in her book *Another America* a poem so pertinent to the present moment that I felt I should share it. It was written in January 1991 before the first (and God willing the only) Gulf war. It's called "Deadline"

The night before war begins, and you are still here.
You can stand in a breathless cold
ocean of candles, a thousand issues of your same face
rubbed white from below by clear waxed light.
A vigil. You are wondering what it is
you can hold a candle to.

You have a daughter. Her cheeks curve
like aspects of the Mohammed's perfect pear.
She is three. Too young for candles but
you are here, this is war.
Flames covet the gold-sparked ends of her hair,
her nylon parka laughing in color,
inflammable. It has taken your whole self
to bring her undamaged to this moment,
and waiting in the desert at this moment,
is a bomb that flings gasoline a liquid sheet,
a laundress's snap overhead, wide as the ancient Tigris,
and ignites as it descends.

The polls have sung their opera of assent: the land
wants war. But there is another America,
candle-throated, sure as tide.
Whoever you are, you are also this granite anger.
In history you will be the vigilant dead
who stood in front of every war with old hearts
in your pockets, stood on the carcass of hope
listening for the thunder of its feathers.

The desert is diamond ice and only stars above us here
and elsewhere, a thousand issues of a clear waxed star,
a holocaust of heaven
and somewhere, a way out.

For all our sakes and for the sake of the fragile earth, struggle to preserve what you care about, and work for peace. Thank you.