

## Think Local

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These days there is a lot of discussion about food as medicine, with theories about which diet is right pointing in all directions. Anyone involved with farmers markets is at the center of those debates, and I spend a lot of time nodding along with folks whose thoughts are vastly different from those of the folks I'd just talked to.

And who am I to disagree? When someone finds something that works for them, that makes me happy, even if what they eat gives me inflammation and what I eat gives them gas. Getting nutrition right can be a long, painful search, filled with as many errors as trials, and it is personal to each of us.

The general consensus, however, is that local is better. I've talked about that in past newsletters, so I won't get into it here, and besides, if you're visiting a farmers market, you're probably already a believer.

But have you considered that just as feeding your body with local makes you healthier, feeding your brain with local can make you happier?

When I was at Penn State in the 90's, I accidentally signed up for a biology class that turned out to be a prototype. Rather than studying eukaryotes and mitochondria, we examined the human relationship with the natural world. It was the first time I'd ever heard terms like "sustainable," "regenerative," and "mycorrhizal," and it opened my eyes to concepts like "organic" and "local." We had lectures from visiting professors who studied the impact of Brazil Nut farming on the Amazon Rainforest. We watched a documentary by the heir to Baskin Robbins, which was clearly propaganda from an angry son – but it still had me go vegetarian for a year.

As an experiment toward the end of the semester, we all had to give up a piece of modern technology for a month. Being a stubborn Texan in Pennsylvania, I gave up two: my car and my television. Giving up driving was easy at Happy Valley. But giving up television proved to be much more difficult – what I imagine coming clean from heroin addiction might be like. As a confirmed member of Generation X, I was partially raised by television. It hadn't just shaped my thoughts; it had shaped my way of thinking. In its void I faced the task of relearning not just everything I knew, but how I learned it.

In short, I had to learn how to think for myself. In my month away, my brain became hyperactive. I filled my time with books and hikes through field and forest. I started cooking with a skillet instead of the microwave. My conversations with other students dwindled as I began to lose interest in whatever sitcom or sporting event had been on at the time. That month – and the years that followed – were both lonely and exhilarating.

When the experiment ended, I turned on the television and had to immediately turn it off. It was unbearably loud – filled with arguments and drama – and it seemed that

everyone on the box was shouting. Reality shows had just taken off, and I noticed that the on-screen drama had begun to bleed into the real world outside of it. It felt that people were angry, speaking just as loudly as actors who had to scream for attention because the degraded quality of writing could no longer do the trick.

Maybe it had always been that way and I hadn't noticed because I had been so immersed in television myself. But after that month, TV had all lost its relevance to my world, which was now occupied with investigating the late-spring sounds of forest floors at two in the morning and reading the poems of Li Po by moonlight.

It took a little while to come back from that.

Twenty five years later, I don't think anyone would argue that the world feels like a pretty angry place, and a lot of people are pointing at the media we consume as the source of that anger. I would argue that it's not necessarily the content that angers us, but the vehicles by which we receive that content.

In his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, media critic Neal Postman called it the "Information-Action Ratio."

200 years ago, there was no mass media. Most people lived in rural communities and the information they received was mostly in the form of gossip. Everyone knew the people involved and could ask direct questions. This was information they could act upon, and that increased their involvement – and for each of us, being involved is a big part of our happiness. This was how humans had lived for thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years. Some anthropologists think we are geared for gossip – not out of voyeurism, but as a protective instinct.

With the invention of the telegraph, suddenly we received news from all over the world, and for much of it, there was nothing we could do about it, which doubled our despair over an event. Hearing about a tragedy on another continent gives us sadness; not being able to fix it makes us feel helpless.

Or angry.

With the inventions of radio and television, we became inundated with that kind of news. Wars, famines, natural disasters: we hear these stories constantly – and all of it is beyond our personal sphere of influence. That is a lot of helplessness for us to absorb and a lot of anger for us to ball up.

And now we have the internet. With comment sections and social media streams, we can become part of the story we are actually alienated from. The gossip instinct kicks in and suddenly we are yelling at strangers on-line about subjects that aren't actually connected to our lives, using words like "could" and "should" instead of "will." Nothing we say on-line changes a single thing. It may feel good in the moment to score a point

on a stranger, but the more it happens, the more it becomes obvious how ineffective it is.

Which is why, suddenly, we're yelling at strangers on the highways and in checkout lines. We've all gone a little mad out of a desire to be part of something that isn't actually there.

If that story sounds familiar, like an old Spanish Knight galavanting around the countryside and attacking windmills, it's because it happened before. Over the centuries, *Don Quixote* has been glossed into a comedy about a crazy old man. But to Cervantes, it was a serious critique of a nation that had withdrawn into the comforting escape of pulp fiction as its empire declined.

A possible solution, as the kids are saying, is to turn it all off and "touch grass." Get outside. Do things that become the stories you tell and meet people whose gossip you share. Help them and let them help you. Pick up a challenging hobby. Fail. Refine. Who knows, maybe you'll get good enough to submit an application to a farmers market. And that, by golly, is a 1-to-1 on the information-action ratio, which makes you part of a community. Take it from me: there isn't a bigger source of happiness than that.

See you out there.