

INTRODUCTION

I've Come to . . . Shop?

TO ENTER THE PARKING LOT of any Hartford, Connecticut, supermarket in 1979 required a sharp, reckless turn into a poorly marked curb cut. If you came at it too fast to avoid a collision with the suicidal driver heading right at you, you would bottom out your car's undercarriage on the lot's steeply graded entrance. Once in the lot, Hollywood car-chase skills were essential to maneuver across a parking area that was strewn with broken glass, overturned shopping carts, and potholes deep enough to conceal a bushel basket. Since the white lines marking parking spaces were faded or nonexistent, you left your car wherever it suited you.

Once you got inside the store, the first thing you noticed was the smell. It wasn't so much that "something has died" odor, but more the scent of something that rotted and was never fully cleaned up. When seasoned with a pinch of filth, marinated in gallons of heavily chlorinated disinfectant, and allowed to ferment over many years, the store released a heady aroma that brought tears to the eyes of men stronger than I.

Crunchy sounds emanated from the floor as your shoes crushed imperceptible bits of grit and unswept residue whose origins had long since been forgotten. The black and white floor tiles were discolored, unwaxed, and marred at irregular intervals by jagged brown stains that were forever one with the tiles.

Granted, these were pre-Whole Foods Market days. The supermarket industry did not yet have the technology that gives today's stores the soft,

warm glow of a tastefully decorated living room. Instead, the humming neon bulbs, shielded by yellowed plastic coverings, cast a sickly pallor over the shoppers, the staff, and, worst of all, the food. The iceberg lettuce, already suffering from a 3,000-mile journey by truck, looked like the victims of a mass beheading. The rest of the produce case, from mushy apples to brown bananas, displayed a similar lack of life. A stroll down the meat aisle was as appealing as a slaughterhouse tour at the end of a busy day. Small pools of blood that had leaked from hamburger and chicken packages dotted the surfaces of the white enamel meat cases, the blood at times indistinguishable from the rust that discolored the chipped veneer. The atmosphere did not encourage a leisurely appreciation of food, nor did you feel like engaging in more intimate acts of product selection such as touching, squeezing, or sniffing. The fear of prolonging the unpleasantness made “grab and go” the prevailing *modus operandi*.

It didn’t take too many trips to this sort of market before I was sufficiently motivated to go to a suburban grocery store. I was lucky; I owned a working automobile. Up to 60 percent of the residents in Hartford’s low-income neighborhoods did not. Nor, as I would find out later, did the city’s public transportation routes go to the suburban supermarkets.

My journey to the nearest full-size chain supermarket was six miles roundtrip. The store had easy vehicular access and a large, well-maintained parking lot, as well as shiny, clean aisles, floors, and food cases. The floor space available for product display was at least twice that of the largest remaining Hartford store, and the products were pleasantly arrayed. The produce section, though not brimming with abundance by today’s standards, was quite ample and free of wilt, anemia, and other symptoms of imminent death. The store’s staff was reasonably friendly, albeit prone to the lassitude common among those who must do repetitive, low-paying work. At least they would help me locate hard-to-find items; those requests were usually greeted with hostile stares by workers at the city stores.

Besides offering a generally more inspiring shopping environment, the suburban store had another point in its favor: it was cheaper. While not every item in the suburban store was priced lower than in the city stores, I soon found that I was probably spending 10 to 15 percent less for my weekly grocery shopping than I had been in Hartford. This proved to be true even for chains that still operated stores in both the city and the

suburbs: the suburban unit had lower prices than its city cousin. How could this be? I wondered. The chain bought from the same wholesale suppliers, the stores had roughly the same pay and staffing structures, and they were only a few miles apart.

As it turned out, my revelations as a new resident of Hartford elicited not much more than a knowing sigh from colleagues and neighbors. The fact that city stores were inferior to suburban ones was nothing new to them. They had been watching the slow but steady abandonment of the city by supermarkets for ten years. "Yes," I was told on many occasions during my first year in the city, "the supermarkets have abandoned Hartford, and the poor, who can't get to the suburbs, pay more." "Supermarket abandonment" and "the poor pay more" became part of the lexicon of the organization I had come to lead, the Hartford Food System, and for many years to come, this prevailing understanding defined the food gap.

WELCOME TO HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT

I knew little of Hartford prior to my decision to take a job as the executive director of the Hartford Food System in 1979. Trips from my home in New Jersey to attend college in Maine a few years earlier had taken me along newly opened stretches of interstate highway that bypassed the city so efficiently that any thought of a stopover was strongly discouraged. I knew I had crossed a second river that wasn't the Hudson. The Tappan Zee Bridge's broad reach left no doubt that you had crossed that renowned waterway. But the highway bridge that led from Hartford to East Hartford over the Connecticut River had been designed to keep the river's existence a secret. Views of its gentle, tree-lined banks appeared to have been officially denied. After all, road engineers back then were not rewarded for their ability to incorporate natural features into highway designs but for their ability to pave the most territory for the least cost.

My first day of work in Hartford brought me into intimate contact with a city that had previously been placed off limits to the casual traveler. A car tour took me down long, wide boulevards intersected by neighborhood side streets that, on that chilly February day, were empty of all human activity except the occasional homeless man drawing life from a brown paper bag. Three-story brick buildings of late-nineteenth-century vintage gave many of the streets a graceful symmetry, although I noticed that several buildings had broken windows or plywood nailed over all the open-

ings. Known as “perfect sixes,” these buildings were evenly divided into six apartment units and were common both just north and just south of the city’s downtown.

Crossing over I-84 from Hartford’s Northend, I entered the city’s downtown business district, still a fairly vital place in 1979. It was filled with bustling pedestrian traffic headed to and from corporate office buildings and signature sandstone department stores. The world famous insurance industry was a driving force, with buildings sporting the companies’ tastefully understated logos: the Travelers’ red umbrella, the Hartford’s twelve-point stag (or hart, as in *hart ford*, the place along the river where the deer crossed), and Aetna’s mountain.

Among the many things I would learn about the city’s corporate culture was that Aetna was deferentially referred to as “Mother Aetna” for its oversized nurturing presence. The reality was that these insurance giants not only dominated the cityscape physically but controlled the city’s financial, social, and cultural life as well. Though commanding in their presence, they eschewed the kind of entrepreneurial brashness of today’s Donald Trumps and Steve Jobses in preference for a more button-down, paternalistic ethos befitting their high-toned Yankee origins. After all, they labored under the long-dead but still ironic gaze of Mark Twain, Wallace Stevens, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had burnished the city during its golden era.

Hartford’s Southend had the feel of Boston’s North End, with an abundance of Italian immigrants and foods and the kind of vibrancy that you wouldn’t expect from the uptown actuarial crowd. Wood-frame houses built in the 1920s lined the streets, some of which were still graced with elegant shade trees, whose generous canopies would later provide a welcome respite from the summer’s heat and humidity. In those months, old men leaning on canes would huddle together on street corners and in cafés holding fast to the customs of Italian village life, minus perhaps the public consumption of grappa. The non-Italian speaker had virtually no hope of finding his way into this closed brotherhood.

The older Italian families in the Southend, like the African Americans in the Northend and the Puerto Ricans in between, were now the predominant faces in a city that was moving rapidly from white to brown and black. Hartford’s civil disturbances (aka race riots) of the late 1960s had signaled the demographic ascendance of the city’s black and Hispanic communities and the steady exodus of its remaining white residents. Sim-

ilarly, the movement of Puerto Ricans into the Southend—they had come to the area in the 1940s and 1950s to pick tobacco—provoked an uneasy reaction among the younger Italian families, whose trickle to the suburbs was becoming a steady stream.

The nearby suburbs of Wethersfield, West Hartford, and Bloomfield beckoned. Increasingly, they were viewed as safe havens for Hartford's middle-class residents, who were growing uneasy with the city's changing complexion and growing number of lower-income households. Housing prices in the suburbs were still relatively low, the shaded streets were virtually crime-free, and the commuter ride to Hartford's central business district was comparatively short. Perhaps most important, the suburbs' public schools were excellent, which is usually one of the important criteria for any young family in selecting a community to live in.

What my windshield tour of the city revealed on my first day of work was the early but undeniable signs of a city in decline. It was a place whose natural chemistry had worked tolerably well for a hundred years or more but had been thrown too rapidly out of balance now that circumstances were changing. Middle-class flight, aided in part by America's car culture and the emergence of the interstate highway system, left behind a giant sucking sound in urban cores across the country. Like the surf crashing against a beach then draining seaward again, middle-class families rode a tide of fear, disorientation, and resentment as they escaped to the suburbs. Sometimes with an undertone of racism and sometimes with an aching kind of liberal guilt, most white families, and later middle-class Hispanic and African American families, left the city when their resources permitted.

There was a strong personal dimension to these social and economic circumstances as well. As someone who had moved to Hartford to run a social change organization, I was expected not only to talk the talk but also to walk the walk. The moral burden that I had willingly accepted was that I should live in and be a part of the community that I was there to assist. To commute to Hartford from the suburbs—to be a nine-to-five do-gooder—was frowned upon and in some cases explicitly forbidden. To only participate in social action had a lower status than to be committed to the same. Think ham and eggs: the hen participates, but the pig is committed.

EXPLAINING THE FOOD GAP

This was the physical and psychological landscape that welcomed me, one that would generally deteriorate in the years to come. More important, it formed the backdrop to what was then and, unfortunately, remains to this day America's food gap. As in the case of supermarket abandonment of urban (and rural) areas, the food gap can be understood as a failure of our market economy to serve the basic human needs of those who are impoverished. But poverty contributes to this gap, creating a situation in which a person or household simply doesn't have enough money to purchase a sufficient supply of nutritious food.

Hunger—the painful sensation that someone feels on a regular basis due to lack of food—is a relatively rare phenomenon in America today, but it nevertheless afflicts a small number of U.S. residents on an intermittent basis. The more common form of food insufficiency is known as food insecurity, a condition experienced by a much larger number of people who regularly run out of food or simply don't know where their next meal will come from. As part of the annual census update, the U.S. Department of Agriculture conducts a survey that determines the number of people who are food insecure (generally between 10 and 12 percent of the U.S. population) and severely food insecure (3 to 4 percent of the population, until 2006 labeled “food insecure with hunger”).

As our knowledge of the connection between diet and health has increased, the food gap has taken on yet another dimension, one that, ironically, includes the overconsumption of food. By overconsumption we generally mean a combination of eating too much of the wrong thing and too little of the right thing. Overweight and obese Americans now make up more than 60 percent of the population. Because of their association with the nation's increased diabetes rate and other diet-related illnesses, obesity and overweight are conditions that threaten the public health in ways that generally surpass the effects of hunger and food insecurity. As such, they have become central components of this country's food gap.

Yet as we will see, hunger, food insecurity, poverty, and overweight/obesity often have overlapping associations and connections, and as with supermarket abandonment, the community or environmental context is just as important as the income of an individual household. What we now call “food deserts,” for instance, are places with too few choices of healthy and affordable food, and are often oversaturated with unhealthy food out-

lets such as fast-food joints. People who live in or near food deserts tend to be poorer and have fewer healthy food options, which in turn contributes to their high overweight/obesity rates and diet-related illnesses such as diabetes.

Perhaps one of the most frustrating and perplexing features of the food gap is a certain relativistic quality that has wormed its way into our food system over the past ten years. Just as lower-income groups make some small gains in closing the food gap by, say, having access to new food stores in city neighborhoods or benefiting from a marginal improvement in the Food Stamp Program, higher-income groups leap ahead with an increase in their purchase of organic and locally produced food. In other words, as trends in consumption associated with lifestyle and health expand one class's universe of choice and perceived health benefits, a lower, less privileged class barely catches up to where the other class was in the last decade. The gap never decreases and indeed, as we will see, often increases.

In all the ways that we think about the food gap, we must think as well about the food system. In its simplest sense, food system thinking doesn't permit us to isolate one segment of food activity from another. We can't, for instance, think only about farming without also thinking about eating. We can't set a price for a food product without being sure that enough people want it badly enough to pay that price. All parts of the system, from seed to table, are connected in a vast and complicated web, and the more we understand those connections, the more likely we are to narrow the food gap.

POVERTY VERSUS HUNGER

Hunger, food insecurity, and poverty present us with a chicken and egg proposition. Can we significantly mitigate or even eliminate the first two if we eradicate the latter? Or, if the latter can never be eradicated (that is, as Jesus said, the poor will always be with us), should we focus society's resources on hunger mitigation as the most humane and practical strategy? The manner in which we debate this question has consequences for how society chooses to close the food gap. While the failure of supermarkets to adequately serve lower-income communities represents a failure of the marketplace, the marketplace is functioning rationally (as economists would say) by going to where the money is. In short, if communities weren't poor, they would have supermarkets and, as we will see, the best

and healthiest food available. To move forward in our understanding of the food gap, we must also understand the role that poverty has played in giving hunger and food insecurity such a firm foothold in the United States. And we must understand as well why we have chosen to respond to poverty and hunger in the ways that we have.

As an up-by-the-bootstraps kind of people, Americans have always struck an uneasy balance between poverty and the social welfare programs that have attempted to address it. In fact, many antihunger and antipoverty advocates assert that the public and private charitable sectors have never made a concerted and meaningful effort to eradicate domestic poverty. It is notable, in that regard, that in the course of reforming the country's welfare system, President Bill Clinton said we were ending *welfare*, not poverty, as we knew it. With the exception of an occasional burst of rhetorical and political fervor, such as President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty during the 1960s, our nation's approach to poverty has been to manage it, not to end it. And perhaps the best examples of good poverty management practices can be found in America's antihunger programs.

Of all the consequences that we ordinarily associate with poverty—crime; self-destructive behaviors such as drug and alcohol addiction; mental illness; shorter life spans; infant mortality; asthma; obesity and diet-related health problems; a failure to live up to one's potential in school, the workplace, or the community—hunger and severe malnutrition have traditionally given society the greatest pause. Whether as a result of fundamental religious teachings or innate human compassion, most of us will do what we can to prevent a fellow human being from teetering too close to the brink of starvation. Food is the basic human necessity in which we invest the most energy to produce, and it unites the human race in a universal spirit of awareness, sharing, and charity.

Although moral ambiguity and the failure of our political will stifle our ability to attack poverty with anything approaching a meaningful resolve, as human beings we are simply not wired to stand by and allow poverty's worst manifestation, hunger, to be ignored. It is for this reason that the United States has created a vast and complicated system of private and public antihunger programs—that is, poverty management strategies—that do not have an equal or obvious parallel anywhere else in the developed world. While European nations of social democratic leanings take a more aggressive approach to poverty than does the United States, their social welfare systems do not include the enormous and separate

food assistance programs that have evolved in this country over the past seventy-five years. The federal government's fifteen separate food assistance programs, which collectively spent \$53 billion in 2006 on food for lower-income Americans, are also collectively one of America's largest welfare programs. Though not generally regarded as adequate in terms of benefits to individual households to ensure their food security, they are without a doubt the most significant protection against hunger and food insecurity available to lower-income Americans. And as nutrition programs—even though sometimes their nutritional impact is marginal, if not occasionally harmful—they constitute a critical health promotion and disease prevention strategy as well.

But the evolution of these food programs is a testament to our political uncertainty over who should benefit and to what degree. As Dr. Katherine Clancy wrote in her essay "Sustainable Agriculture and Domestic Hunger," "The Great Depression spawned major welfare programs, including farm price supports, food stamps, and Social Security, and minor programs such as commodity distribution." The early history of food-related welfare programs and their evolution has received excellent treatment from Dr. Janet Poppendieck, who, in her book *Breadlines Knee Deep in Wheat*, traces the development of the Agricultural Adjustment Act in the 1930s and the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation. The inherent irony of these programs—the nation's first ongoing form of federal food assistance—is that they were actually designed not so much for hunger relief purposes but as "a convenient outlet for products acquired in efforts to increase the income of commercial farmers." What the New Dealers were doing apparently was establishing food relief programs to prop up agricultural prices. When the food relief side of the equation leaned too heavily in favor of hungry people, groups such as the American Farm Bureau and the National Association of Manufacturers intervened to ensure that free food did not reduce the demand for commercial food. The effect, calculates Poppendieck, is that individuals in 1936 received about five pounds of food per month, which was about 5 percent of what they needed.

According to Clancy's history of food assistance programs, a precursor to the modern Food Stamp Program limped along until 1943, when it was suspended during World War II. Farm interests led by southern Democrats kept the lid on the distribution of surplus farm commodities to needy people. Even as surpluses continued to mount following the introduction of chemical fertilizers and pesticides after the war, members of

Congress from urban areas could not push through permanent food stamp legislation in the 1940s and 1950s. It wasn't until 1961 that President John F. Kennedy created the current Food Stamp Program, albeit very modest in size, with one of the first executive orders of his administration. His action on food stamps was as much the fulfillment of a campaign promise to meet the needs of poor people as it was a means to placate senators from farm states, where concern over continued farm surpluses and falling prices was growing. The program was expanded significantly later in the 1960s when Senators Robert F. Kennedy and Joseph Clark "discovered" hunger in America.

After the Food Stamp Program, the second-largest publicly supported attempt to reduce hunger and promote nutritionally adequate diets was the National School Lunch Program, established by President Harry S. Truman in 1948. Today, National School Lunch also includes other child nutrition programs, such as School Breakfast, Afterschool Snacks, and summer meals in parks and at recreation centers, all of which provide free or reduced-price meals to lower-income school-age children. Widely credited by educators for its ability to help focus a child's attention on his or her schoolwork ("a hungry child can't learn"), school meal programs have proven essential to the psychological and developmental well-being of young people.

But like the Food Stamp Program, the origin of child nutrition programs served other political agendas. During World War II, a significant number of men were rejected for military service because they could not pass the standard physical exam. Much of the blame for the high rejection rate was ultimately laid at the feet of poor nutrition. That so many young men had such substandard diets that they were unfit for military service was a matter of national chagrin and a threat to national security. This was the impetus for the creation of the national meal program to feed malnourished children and thus to ensure that the nation's future soldiers were fit to fight its battles.

Now, we can be reasonably well assured that New Deal architect Franklin D. Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, and Harry S. Truman were as compassionate as other Americans of their times. We have no reason to believe that they didn't want to ensure that every American was well-fed. Yet as astute and practical politicians, they realized that neither Congress nor the American people would support multimillion-dollar (soon to be-

come multibillion-dollar) programs whose purpose it was to mitigate the poor health outcomes associated with hunger. So they found it necessary to dress these new social programs up in clothes that could be worn comfortably in both agricultural and national defense circles.

As time went on, liberal social programs continued to expand in scope and size. To the food stamp and school meal programs was added the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Program in the 1970s as a way to further assist the youngest and most vulnerable members of society with specialized methods of food assistance. The overt connections to agriculture, such as distributing food in commodity-size cans of peanut butter, sacks of cornmeal, or blocks of cheese, were disappearing (although the political alliance that had been forged between antihunger interests and large-scale agriculture was still intact). These awkward if not ludicrous forms of hunger relief were being replaced by sophisticated coupon and voucher systems that enabled their recipients to buy food in grocery stores, more or less like everybody else.

A major liberalization in the Food Stamp Program occurred in 1977 when Congress did away with the cash-purchase requirement. In the opinion of Zy Weinberg, a thirty-five-year veteran of antipoverty and anti-hunger programs, the cash-purchase requirement was one of the more odious features of the still fledgling hunger relief effort. Devised by conservative politicians, who grudgingly supported the Food Stamp Program but wanted to make it as difficult as possible for poor people to use food stamps, the program actually forced people to come up with cash—like a down payment on a house—to buy their food stamps. Weinberg credits the elimination of the cash-purchase requirement with bringing millions of needy people into the program.

Trained staff and efficient bureaucracies were emerging all across the country. Nutrition and food-budgeting education and training supplemented the distribution of food benefits, which increased their value in the lives of poor families. When combined with strong outreach work, record numbers of underfed Americans began enrolling in food programs that were substantially mitigating the most egregious impacts of poverty. Collectively, these and other social welfare programs, such as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), were managing poverty reasonably well. At various times, there were even teams of government-funded legal aid lawyers available to help low-income families who may have been ille-

gally denied food assistance benefits. While hunger and poor nutrition were still a regrettable part of many people's lives, America had succeeded in at least identifying the needy and was making a good faith effort to ensure that nobody went to bed hungry.

As a college freshman in 1968, I found myself profoundly moved by the images of starving children in the Biafra region of Nigeria—collateral damage, so to speak, of that country's civil war. I cannot recall having feelings as disturbing as the ones provoked by those images at any earlier time in my life. The suffering that those photos and a few magazine articles described literally sent shivers up my spine. I knew very little of the larger political or social context of the conflict, but the hurt of these people had somehow lodged itself inside me. It was so powerful that I was compelled to start a campuswide movement to raise money for Biafran famine relief.

Such feelings, I believe, are the same ones that compel most Americans not to ignore hunger. When properly stirred—as we sometimes are by the media, social activists, members of the clergy, or inspired political leaders—we respond to hunger with direct acts of charity or support of publicly run antihunger programs. Our understanding of the events that caused the hunger may be blurry. We may not care to delve too deeply into the sources of someone's suffering. And complex social, political, and economic explanations may soar over our heads or simply hold no interest. But when we can feel the hurt, we respond.

As you will see throughout this book, however, the bridge from empathy to the political will necessary to create profound institutional change is a wobbly one. As the food gap grows in both width and complexity, it continually calls upon us to develop a more sophisticated understanding of its nature so that we can cross more confidently from empathy to political action.