

Oneota Community Food Co-op in the Context of the Larger Community and the World by Lyle Luzum, Board Member

Expansion, Downtown, and Oneota – in Context

In the co-op world, the Board of Directors has various responsibilities. Certainly the major one is to safeguard the assets of the member/owners. These assets include their financial interests, but also the purpose of the co-op in the world. Co-ops typically exist to serve a purpose beyond the financial bottom line. Rather, achieving a healthy financial bottom line becomes a “means” to the “ends” because without financial health, the purposes of the co-op will not be achieved. Thus, co-ops have multiple bottom lines.

One of the main tasks of a co-op Board is to constantly look at the larger picture – to place the Co-op's purposes and processes into context. In the next few issues of the “Scoop” I would like to draw this larger picture and how Oneota Community Food Co-op fits into it – to place our little piece of the world into context.

It hardly seems possible, but it is more than 3 ½ years ago that the Co-op made the commitment to expand in downtown Decorah and more than 2 ½ years since we opened for business in our new store. Even more amazing is the fact that we have been here for 36 years! As one of only three Food Co-ops in the State of Iowa, what we have is unusual and special for small town Iowa. With almost 2300 member/owners, Oneota Co-op is truly integrated into the fabric of our community.

We were bumping our heads, so to speak, in the old store, finding it more and more challenging to meet the needs of customers for natural, wholesome, whole foods. Our expansion was a leap of faith that the community would respond to our efforts to reach out and welcome even more people as they explored new paths in their food journey.

As we considered where to expand, one thing was clear: we were committed to the downtown. We didn't ask for special privileges, we didn't threaten to leave if we didn't get special breaks. We saw ourselves as an anchor for downtown and strive to become even more a part of the fabric of an unusually successful community. That's what locally owned and operated businesses do.

We are proud of our store. We are gratified by your response. We welcome you to shop, eat, and, hopefully, join us as we continue to bring unusually good food, good eating, and good living to our community.

Good Food, Kellogg, and Oneota – in Context

In April, 2009 I had the opportunity to attend, as a representative of the Northeast Iowa Food & Fitness Initiative, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation's “Food & Society Gathering for Good Food, 2009”. The Kellogg Foundation has a definition of “Good Food”. It is food that is Fair, Green, Healthy, and Affordable. “Fair” food does not depend on exploitation of people in its journey from farm to fork. “Green” food does not depend on exploitation and degradation of the environment in its journey from farm to fork. “Healthy” food encourages health, not chronic illness or obesity. “Affordable” food is available to all, not just the rich.

I struck me, as I listened to the definition, that is what the Oneota Community Food Co-op strives to sell. It also struck me that the goal of Good Food for everyone is a daunting task, for the dominant

economic drivers tilt toward exploitation of both people and the environment in the farm-to-fork chain, and the promotion of nutritionally vacant “food” at prices that give the appearance of affordability (quantity at the cheapest possible price).

At the first session of the Gathering, attendees were asked to write, on the back of our ID badge, a word that represented what we hoped to gain that week. After a little mental panic, I wrote, “perspective”. Well, listening to the speakers and talking to people – the Florida farm worker involved in the battle to get tomato pickers a penny more per pound, the county supervisor from SW Iowa, the board member from Weavers Way Co-op in Pennsylvania, the organic dairy farmer from Wisconsin, the Food & Fitness Initiative representatives from Detroit working to even get a grocery chain to open a store in Detroit (there are none), the Tohono-O'odam Native Americans struggling to extract their people from the health disaster caused by the “American” diet – this gives perspective and puts our problems and opportunities in context. The micro-picture we live in can consume us, but we cannot ignore the macro-picture.

All people are on a journey with food. We are at different stages thinking about food's trip to our plate, what goes into it, and what are the consequences. In our new, expanded store, Oneota is bringing more Good Food to more people. We invite you, where ever you are in your journey, to explore at Oneota.

Fair Food, Foreign Foods, and Oneota – in Context

Our society has a tendency to ignore very real, but hard to quantify costs of things we buy. In our constant effort to drive costs down, our system pretends that, because non-economic costs are hard to calculate, we can therefore ignore them. But these costs are real. One of the costs we pretend not to see is that of human exploitation and the social, cultural, and political impact it brings.

We all now (officially) agree that human slavery is an unacceptable cost to have cheap products. But how about when workers in third world countries labor in banana fields at wages that keep them in desperate poverty so that we can have our cheap daily snack? How about when third world farmers are driven off the land by subsidized, imported American corn and their local economies collapse because there is no work? How about when these people cross illegally into the US in a desperate attempt to make some money to send home to their families and end up working in unacceptable conditions in our meat packing plants? There is a huge social, cultural, and political cost to this human exploitation in those countries, but also in ours, as we in NE Iowa have come to realize.

This is why the Fair Trade concept was developed. Fair Trade certification works to assure that the food results in fair return for those who work to produce it. Around the world Fair Trade coffee, chocolate, bananas, nuts, spices, and other products are bringing living wages to producers. This helps create healthy local economies in the producing country, reduces out-migration, and promotes societal, cultural, and political stability.

Oneota Community Food Co-op carries many Fair Trade products and strives to provide food that minimizes human exploitation. I urge you to think about who is being exploited to bring you amazingly cheap food. In your food journey, are you sensing that the human cost of cheap is too high? Check out Fair Trade at Oneota.

Fair Food, Local Foods, and Oneota – in Context

The concept of Fair Trade works to assure that food certified as Fair Trade results in fair return for

those who work to produce it. We have typically thought about this in relation to coffee, chocolate, bananas, and other foods produced in Third World countries. But this concept is equally valid for domestically produced food. Why should we demand that our food be so cheap that farmers have to lose money in order to feed us? Or, why should we accept that small, local farmers be driven out of business because only mammoth, industrial-scale producers can produce our food for the price we have come to expect?

In Third World countries, when many small, local farmers are driven out of business by a few large enterprises, communities die. Around the world, local farmers are the foundation of communities. It is no different in the US. We, in rural America, have seen the same devastating effect on our communities as farms have gotten big and farmers few.

That is why the efforts of the Northeast Iowa Food & Farm Coalition (NIFF) are so important to us in NE Iowa. As the “food” component of our Food & Fitness Initiative, NIFF is striving to re-create a local and regional food system that offers opportunities for producers and processors to provide local food and for consumers, the opportunity to buy local food. You can't have one without the other and together they can keep local economies vibrant.

So, this is basically Local Fair Trade. If our neighbors are going to produce food for us, we should not expect that they lose money doing it. If they can't support their families doing so, it cannot happen. As small, local farmers disappear, so does the reason for existence for most of our rural communities. By supporting their efforts with a fair return, they produce, we eat, and our money circulates within our economy.

Oneota Community Food Co-op has long been a prime outlet for local producers and currently counts nearly 80 producers among its suppliers. Good Food is Fair to producers. Join us at the Co-op and support Local Fair Trade.

Green Food (Way Beyond Salad) and Oneota – in Context

Our economic system is not good at embedding inconvenient costs into the goods we buy. Rather, in the continuous drive to the lowest possible price, we tend to cut corners, and one of the easiest corners to cut is the environment. As consumers we too often accept the idea that the goal of all buying is to get the lowest possible price. Increasingly, in our global market, domestic producers who want to do the right thing face stiff, sometimes impossible competition from produce grown under lax to non-existent environmental protection rules. When only price matters, the standard falls to the lowest common denominator and that, almost always, is achieved by extracting an unacceptable environmental and social cost.

When Indonesian rain forests are burned and the wildlife killed off to put in palm oil plantations to create the cheapest form of added fat for our junk food, is that an acceptable environmental cost? When sun-grown, chemically dependent coffee plantations replace Amazonian rain forest, is that an acceptable cost for your cup of joe? When fruit is produced with multiple intense applications of chemicals long banned in the US, is that an acceptable environmental cost just because it's happening somewhere else? If giant confined animal feeding operations create a stench that devalues neighboring properties, creates water pollution risks, creates low-level antibiotic dependencies, and threatens the health of workers in the facilities, is that an acceptable risk for cheap chops?

Each of us are on this earth for only a small time and are such a small part of any problem. Our time

frame of reference is often too short to see our impact, and the economics of business too often discourages taking the long view. But the cost of cheap is often very high and we need to get better at seeing these embedded costs.

Oneota Co-op strives to provide food that is environmentally benign. That is part of what we're about. It sure would be nice if we didn't have to think about these things, but we do. Every food dollar we spend is a vote in support of some type of food system. Good Food is Green, and not just the salad.

Healthy Food and Oneota – in Context

Good food sustains health and life. For untold generations people around the globe have developed what we now think of as “ethnic” diets built around natural foods adapted to their environment. It appears that humans, being omnivores, don't have one “right” way to eat. The wide variety of foods that have sustained people through the millennia suggests that humans and the foods nature provides have evolved together, and in great variety. They tend to be whole foods; balanced in essential fatty acids (Omega 3 & 6); with limited fat; not too sweet; not too salty; and balanced in protein, unrefined carbohydrates, and fiber.

But it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a “wrong” way to eat. Through most of human history sugar, fat, and salt were scarce, precious commodities that our taste buds crave. Unfortunately, we have built a food system in the last 50 years that turns things upside down. In our hubris, we have engineered and built an agricultural and industrial processing system around, as Michael Pollan says, “edible food-like substances” made primarily from industrial by-products of corn and soybeans.

Unfortunately, these substances have characteristics that are the inverse of nature's foods. They are mere components of whole foods; unbalanced in fatty acids (excessively toward Omega 6); laden with fat, sugars (in the form of high fructose corn syrup), salt, and refined carbohydrates; and low in fiber. Our animals, also fed with these same products, produce protein that is of the same general nature. As Michael Pollan observes, “We've all heard that 'You are what you eat.' But it is also the case that 'You are what, what you eat, eats.’” (This applies to plants, too.)

The result is the “Western diet” that (not coincidentally) brings Western diseases with it wherever it goes – heart disease, obesity, and diabetes among the most obvious. We gobble it up because it provides in abundance what our taste buds have evolved to seek out as scarce luxuries – fat, sugar, salt. “Treats” are now embedded in massively excess quantity into almost every food, and that is taking a huge toll on our health.

Even when we know this, few of us are good enough to eat only what is good for us. But try the 80-20 rule: Eat 80% whole, nutritious foods and don't obsess about the other 20%. Over time, the taste buds adjust and treats can again become just that – treats that bring variety and appreciated pleasure to your life.

Eating is one of life's basic pleasures, as well as being essential, but it shouldn't kill you. At Oneota Co-op we have wonderful treats because we know that these, if made with appropriate ingredients, do make life better. But our specialty is whole, natural foods that maximize the natural balance that provides a basis for a healthy life.

Affordable Food and Oneota – in Context

Ah, affordability! There's the challenge! Why is it that food that is Fair, Green, and Healthy costs more? Michael Pollan suggests turning that question on its head and asking, "Why is food that is none of those things (and that dominates the food production/consumption chain) is so cheap?" Why have we as a society taken "cheap food" (read "cheap calories") as our main goal?

As I pointed out in previous articles, the main reason food is cheap is because we have chosen to ignore real, but hard to quantify costs – fairness to producers, impacts on communities when producers can't make a living, environmental degradation due to unsustainable production practices, and health degradation due to abundance of food-like products that are simply bad for us. The fact is that we have created an industrialized "food" system that excels at producing cheap calories, because it is easy to create products from fats and sugars that tempt our taste buds. One reason this is possible is because our system is built on government subsidies for the building blocks of those cheap calories – corn and soybeans. The government does not subsidize vegetable production and whole foods aren't as profitable for industrial processors. As a result, a dollar buys several times as many calories in the form of junk food as in the form of fresh vegetables.

So, if our "affordable" food makes us ill, maybe our definition of "affordable" is topsy-turvy. Maybe it we need to stop thinking "calories per dollar" and start thinking about a more difficult "nutrition per dollar" or "societal/environmental impact per dollar of food".

One effective way to attack affordability is to buy whole foods and prepare them ourselves instead of going for the over-packaged, over-processed versions. Buying in bulk DOES allow more and better than pre-processed. Connecting with your food by making it yourself DOES make you more aware of goodness and taste, and eventually of the other things that go into the farm-to-fork chain. It's a step-by-step process of changing one's food values. Once a person realizes that "calories per dollar" is NOT the gold standard of value, how you view food changes.

Oneota Co-op specializes in providing access to quality whole and bulk foods. Our customers are not a rich elite! A great number, in fact, have simply learned that high quality whole foods, prepared creatively, produce greater nutrition and satisfaction per unit of food than "cheap" food. "Cheap", it turns out, is not inexpensive when the larger picture is viewed. If the idea of eating food that is Fair, Green, and Healthy resonates with you, then Affordable takes on a meaning that is more comprehensive than it seems at first.

Oneota Co-op does not fight for the "cheap food" mantle, but we feel that, when all things are considered, people of all income levels can find a way to affordably eat well at the Co-op.