The Story of Tomatoes: How Picking Tomatoes Taught Me the Art and Attitude of Social Change

This particular story takes place on an organic farm. It was set in a small valley in the center of a horse farm in Seattle and every Thursday morning I was a work-share member. In the early mornings of fall the farm possessed the most perfect winter hues. The overcast, gray sky made all the colors on the ground explode in an amazingly luscious way.

On this farm, I have harvested lettuce, tomatoes, flowers, chard, kale, onions, peas, potatoes, and beans among others. I’ve planted many types of seeds, installed fencing, pulled hundreds of weeds, and tore up new ground for planting. All of this connected me to the land, my food, and the farmer. It all had an impact, yet nothing seemed to agitate or disturb me as much as the tomato harvesting that October. Henri Cartier-Bresson, a French photographer, spoke of a definitive moment. He believed that there was a moment in which, at that exact moment, something was happening or about to happen. If you pay attention to the surroundings enough, you will notice this moment and be able to grab ahold of it and ignite. I believe that is what happened one particular morning and what it ignited is below.

The story begins in October and with an overabundance of rain. We were scrambling to harvest as many tomatoes as possible before they burst open. There were large red, green, yellow, tiger-striped, heirloom, and cherry tomatoes. We, the work-share members, stood looking at the three long rows, breathing it all in, and took note of a complex situation. These tomato plants were not only gorged, but had also fallen from their tied perches and become intertwined and unwieldy, creating an incredibly detailed search and rescue of waterlogged tomatoes.

We observed the current state of the system and identified an objective of picking as many tomatoes as possible. This made us active participants within the system. French philosopher Jacques Rancière spoke of an emancipated spectator, in which the spectator is one who knows at least that she has to do something: switching from passivity to activity (Yap 2010). Active participants work with their environment to yield the most bounty. These individuals go from watching the world pass by to stepping into it, like the audience at a play becoming the actors themselves. We emancipated ourselves to fully interact with the tomatoes by engaging with all our attention and focus. The tomatoes were also emancipated from their glut of water and entangled vines. They were taken from their normal routine and shaken out of it.

I launched into the first row by siting all the different boxes around me. There was a box for each type of tomato and a box for the ones to ripen off the vine. Kneeling, I started plucking the tomatoes one by one, slowly making my way down the row. The plants were predominantly lying down instead of tied up, and I quickly realized that there had to be a way inside the plant without damaging it. I tried reaching straight in only to find that some of the vines would snap. How was I going to reach these hard to acquire tomatoes? Then, my hands went to the bottom of the plant and pushed the vines up towards the sky. With one hand holding the vines up, my other hand reached into the center of the plant and retrieved the inner tomatoes. It might seem that lifting the tomato plants from the bottom would be much worse for the plant than simply coming in from the side. However, coming in from the side requires one to pull the vines back like a curtain, which usually causes more damage. On top of that, reaching in from the side was like reaching in blind. It didn’t create a space to have a better view like lifting from the bottom.

This process continued down the row: plucking left and right from the forefront of the plants, lifting the vines to retrieve the inner tomatoes, and bending in all different directions. I was standing up and peering down, crouching down and peering within and up. Then I would take one or two baby steps forward to start it all over. How peculiar it was that the tomatoes didn’t stand out more. Was the other work-share having the same acrobatic difficulties? She was, though I
Acting on something means we are “acting” (Tzu 2001, 81) in Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching. Taking this concept further is the expression “act without effort” (Tzu 2001, 51). This phrase can naturally conjure confusion. What it means is to act with subtlety and effortlessness, with right attitude and right action. Systems are constantly changing, and it is precisely this constant change that requires subtlety and right attitude. Small shifts can bring immense change as a system whirls at the brink of chaos. Acting on something means we are refusing whatever it is. Frustration can follow, and from that, much wasted energy. Rather than constantly trying to fight and control situations, we can work with them. So I became an active piece, a musical note in the composition so that more tomatoes could be harvested and, ultimately, happily eaten.

The acrobatics described were all endeavors to find every last tomato. We embraced diversity at its core on that day. Every tomato had a purpose, had a use, much like individuals within the food system. It’s easy to forget that there needs to be a place for everyone at the proverbial table as we move forward into unchartered waters. We’re talking about food, which makes us all participants. Here’s where I want us all to get a little more creative. It’s not just the food justice organizations, unions, labor organizations, coalitions, and environmental and agricultural organizations that need to be at the table. This is diversity, yes, but not creative and necessary diversity. Where is industrial agriculture or corporate food like Walmart, Tyson, and Cargill? This may seem extreme, but can we move forward and create a new food system without them? I feel we cannot, because they are part of the system and play crucial roles within it, whether they are liked or not. This is the kind of diversity I want to see us get creative with. Let’s give our judgments and preconceptions a stretch and a really good workout. Much like the process to carefully retrieve the hidden tomatoes to create real change, we are going to have to ask ourselves who’s missing and extend an invitation to them. Not only that, we’re going to have to be sincere with that invite. Furthermore, we must listen to them (I mean really listen—to find that common ground) and not simply push our own agenda.

A few years ago I attended a conference whose theme was building common ground. Lawrence Lessig, a Harvard Law professor and campaign finance reform activist, and Tea Party Patriots co-founder Mark Meckler discussed building left–right alliances to reclaim politics for everyday Americans. It was a powerful conversation. The two seem so diametrically opposed that you wouldn’t expect to find them sitting in the same room, let alone talking with each other. Not to mention that most people at the conference wouldn’t normally find themselves sitting and listening to someone associated with the Tea Party. But Lessig and Meckler don’t just debate and agree on some things—they are friends. Meckler humanized the Tea Party (at least for me) because of the environment I was able to see him in. They spent an hour that morning talking about finding common values that unite traditionally divided groups, which is how they became friends. Why? Because whether you want to admit it or not, at some level most of us have underlying values in common. Our paths to adhering to them are just different.
This kind of diversity and inclusivity asks us to be willing to do one more thing: to let go of how we might think the future food system should look. As soon as I decide what the food system should be, there is another tomato waiting, or five, or even a hundred, signifying that it should look like something else. We will have to relinquish our control and fighting stance. When we try to control (the opposite of “act without acting”), the other will react and often retaliate, as we have been experiencing up to now. Yet having a vision is important and helps motivate forward motion, as any leader can attest to. We need to be courageously inclusive and creative. Lastly, we must accept when the vision changes a little (or a lot). I’m pretty sure most of us can’t predict the future nor can we even begin to realize all the intended and unintended consequences of our vision or someone else’s vision. This implies that there are a lot of visions out there. How do we hold them all? I’m not going to say that it will be easy. It’s going to take patience, an open mind, and long-term visioning. Now, I mean pretty long-term, like seventh-generation stuff, a philosophy commonly credited to the Iroquois Confederacy but practiced by many Native nations. The Seventh Generation philosophy mandated that tribal decision makers consider the effects of their actions and decisions for descendants seven generations into the future.

There is yet more personal work we each will have to do, such as suspending assumptions and judgments. These two must be suspended not just toward other groups, but also within groups we belong to. It’s going to be muddy, messy, scary, and with no resolution in sight. It’s right where we should be. This is change and this is life. We never really know what’s around the corner. We plan to prepare ourselves, but we must stay nimble and flexible.

Without patience, understanding, or humbleness (or even love) tomatoes will be left to rot. If I am bound and determined to stick to my approach, I may leave people by the wayside. Worse yet, moving forward as if I have the right way, makes me just as stubborn as everyone else, which won’t get anyone anywhere. Then what happens? Those rotting tomatoes become opponents out in this world. Seeing one another as opponents muddles the task at hand, resulting in an unworkable mix of attempting to both defeat one’s opponent and create a just food system. Breaking through either/or thinking provides a path to creative and sustainable solutions. To do this is easier said than done. Recently, I was at a workshop on asking “powerful questions.” We split into groups based on four basic kinds of powerful questions. I gravitated toward the powerful question on the subject of building bridges between groups. Based on my experience in food justice, I gave a real-world example of getting Walmart and a food justice organization to sit down together. What would that look like? What types of questions could be asked to get at the heart of the matter? When I actually tried to imagine it by acting it out, I realized just how hard it’s going to be. Mistakes will be made the first few (or many) times, people will probably get angry, and yet that invitation must continue to be extended, even if the likes of Walmart never reciprocate.

A simple place to start is with separating people from the issues. We need to focus on the values and principles that drive what we all do in the food system. For it’s here that we will find a potential common ground with someone we might normally see as an opponent. Leave the company (and the judgments and assumptions) and what we may not like about them aside, and look toward the individuals. Look toward why I want what I want. Also, why the other wants what they want. In addition, framing someone as an enemy will balance itself by that enemy viewing me as one and the same. This just begets further divisiveness and dichotomous behavior and thinking. Someone needs to kick-start new behaviors that will avoid each side viewing the other through this distancing lens. Why not you or me?

What I’m getting at, is that it might be possible to find some kind of common value with those whom we in the food justice movement may otherwise be tempted to turn our backs on. Maybe both of us want to provide for our families, which drives each of us to certain actions professionally. Maybe both of us want the world to be fed, but simply have different solutions. Maybe there are demands that we never knew people on the other side face. Maybe there are demands they do not realize for something, which exerts an immense influence over our actions. It’s going to require more patience than we ever thought we had. It’s also going to require losing one’s footing and embracing something called negative capability. Writer John Keats talked of negative capability which is “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Bate 1899, 249). This is where we are and we need to be okay with that.

Back at the farm, all the rain was causing the tomatoes to fill with water and grow too fast. Their skin was literally ripping at the seams. The farm couldn’t sell those tomatoes, so we were doing a little preemptive work to prevent as many as possible from bursting open. These tomatoes, which had to ripen off the vine, reminded me of people who may not be ready for the change that food justice activists are asking of them, whereas the ripe tomatoes are likened to individuals who are ready for change. There were so many more tomatoes that weren’t yet ready for the CSA. And so it seems with people too. We brought our boxes back one by one to the
packing and cleaning shed. I stood there staring at the boxes with the farmer and other work-share members. We moved all the smaller tomatoes together. Then, we moved all the larger tomatoes into another grouping. Lastly, we moved all the green tomatoes together. They took up more than half the large wooden worktable! There was a silent moment filled with sighs. There were so many tomatoes, yet so few were actually ready for CSAs. However, as each week unfolded, there were more tomatoes that had ripened and were ready to go in a CSA box.

How can we keep the individuals who are not ready for change engaged in the process? For the tomatoes it’s rather easy: they are placed in bins and we all patiently wait until they are ready to go into the CSA boxes. It can be this easy with people, though the patience factor might increase. Attitude can have a greater influence than action (here’s that act without acting again). With the tomatoes, we interfered at a minimal level, and then waited for them to be ready. We didn’t do any forcing of the situation. This applies to people too. Cultivate a space that is welcoming, because individuals who resist change are usually just holding on to what they know. Maybe they just don’t have the capacity yet to absorb change—much like the tomatoes and the sudden rain. As anyone who farms knows, very little is actually in your control. This is similar to change. It can’t be forced and expected to be sustained. Change is gradual with an eventual tipping point. What becomes ever important here to understand is that change means everything is always emerging. We are trying to find that definitive moment that emancipates the individual into action. Maybe it’s a leader, a vision, a shift, or a tipping point. Regardless, this emergence is the constant cycle of definitive moments and individuals becoming active participants. It’s a state of incessant becoming. Peggy Holman defines emergence as “complexity arising out of chaos in which novel, coherent structures coalesce through interactions among the diverse entities of a system” (Holman 2010, 18). According to this, emergence necessitates action and diverse viewpoints. The food system is constantly emerging and becoming known. This is yet another reason to remain flexible in our vision.

It is in this disruption of interactions where common ground is found among strangers. Recognizing emergence requires individuals to be adaptable and flexible to changing circumstances. Inflexibility in behavior or beliefs can lead to extinction. The tomatoes, for example, would burst, rot, and die if they had not been picked before maturity. Had they not been picked, the farmer would have surely lost hundreds of tomatoes. If I, as an activist, do not engage with varying individuals and instead become inflexible in my beliefs, then many people are left out.

Who knew picking tomatoes could be so transformational? It got me thinking about food systems, how complicated they are, and the problems with a single answer. The whole point is to honor, appreciate, and invite varying viewpoints. Further, if you look where it’s easiest, on the outside of the plant, not bending in all different directions like an acrobat, then views and people get left out and behind. I think with something as complicated, intricate, and interconnected as a food system, we must be willing to look from all angles, even the most uncomfortable, and we have to do it repeatedly.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


