

Sermon: The Power of Your Food Choices

Delivered to First Unitarian of Ithaca, January 18, 2026 by Don Barber

Today most of us are feeling powerless. Yet we can exert significant power in our lives through our food choices which impact our environment, our economy, our health, and our community. We interact with food several times a day. Where it comes from, how it's produced, how it's prepared, and how we eat it are all choices which can convey our values and our choices for the world we will live in. Granted, food choices alone can't alter global conflicts or end state-sponsored thuggery in US cities, but it will impact you, your family and can improve our local economy, environment, and community.

It is my honor to be with you this morning. I am grateful for this opportunity to speak about a topic which I'm passionate about. And most of all I'm grateful that each of you made it a priority to be here today. I'm inspired by Fran Korten's call to resistance, David Korten challenging us to rethink our world and our role, and Jane Goodall reminding us that we have a role, to find it, and that our actions matter.

I've been feeling quite vulnerable this past year with regard to the events happening in our country and abroad. When I hoped things wouldn't get worse, that hope has been dashed by the events of the first weeks of 2026. It feels like we're in an epic battle for control of how the future unfolds. It's against this backdrop that I have a message of hope for gaining some control over our lives and the future. That hope begins with a daily activity: Our Food Choices. I plan to draw connections of how our food choices shape the world closest to us.

I was born into a family that focused on food all day long. It was a small dairy farm where I spent my childhood in the 50's and 60's. In addition to caring for and milking our cows, we produced and preserved at least 80% of our food. Our meals were prepared from those whole foods. Although we had little discretionary cash and did without, we never felt poor because we always had ample, quality food.

When Rita and I moved to Rosebarb Farm 35 years ago, we immediately set up gardens and orchards to take control over our food supply. I guess it's hard to break that food focused culture I was born into.

In 2017, I joined a group of like-minded community activists, called FPC [Tompkins County Food Policy Council] , who

recognized our food system had been highjacked by agribusiness corporations. In 2019 we were able to get enough traction to convince the Tompkins County legislature and CF to provide resources for

us to create the first ever TC FSP [Tompkins County Food Supply Program] which was released in 2022. One can read this plan,

and I encourage you to do so, by going to TFF [Tompkins Food Future] website. The goal of the plan is to create

a local, resilient, equitable, and healthy FS [food supply] for humans and the planet.

My work on this FSP is the source of my deeper understanding of our local food system's interconnection with economy, environment, social justice, interpersonal relations, and the health of people and the planet. This morning, I will share my understanding with the hope of raising this community's awareness of the power of food choices to shape our future.

Like air and water, food is a requirement of life. We interact with food several times a

day. Most of us live in a world where we have choices of where our food comes from, how it's produced, how it's prepared, and how we eat it. These choices are influenced by price, availability at that moment, and a desire, when living in this fast-paced world, for convenience.

Let's start with food production- All food we consume starts from plants. We consume plants directly or they are eaten by domesticated animals from which we then eat their products like milk, eggs, and meat. Take a moment right now to bring forward pictures, in your mind's eye, of food production. I suspect you have two different pictures in your mind. One is of the Midwest with endless miles of corn, soybean and wheat with no weeds in sight. The other is New England - small, pastoral, integrated farm of a few animals, gardens, orchard, and dandelions or goldenrod. These two pictures are of competing food production philosophies.

What we now call conventional farming techniques were not what our ancestors evolved with and not practiced until the middle of 20th century. After WWII, herbicides and pesticides and heavy equipment were unleashed onto our farmland. This new industrial philosophy of thinking, that a farm's plants and animals were outputs, also changed the way farmers thought about the food system. It was about maximizing production for visually pleasing products at the lowest cost with no concern about nutrition. We now know the true costs of conventional farming practices are externalized into the environment via polluted surface water, soil, and plants.

Industrial techniques are also used for the handling of farm animals: both their confined living conditions and feeding them herbicide and pesticide laden foliage.

We have choices. Foods produced organically are also available to us. Organic producers have a starkly different philosophy of their role. They are stewards of the

land and their produce. Organic farming techniques honor and respect the value and worth of the plants and animals. Organic techniques don't exploit the earth but work in concert with the environment. The organic grower's holistic philosophy creates healthy, nutritious food products.

There are many organic growers in our region. By making it your preference to buy local organic foods, in addition to helping the environment, you can also positively affect our local economy. TFF learned that 90% of the food consumed in TC is not produced regionally. When we choose to spend our money locally, we create more demand for those local products, which causes food retailers, especially locally owned stores, to stock those products. Local product demand stimulates more local organic farmers with their associated environmental, economic and health benefits, and our money stays in our community rather than going to an industrialized food producer. It's so important to internalize that our purchasing decisions shape our world.

Also, choosing locally produced food ensures our FS's resilience when war, famine, pandemics, and weather events disrupt the global food system.

Another benefit of locally produced whole foods is our reduced exposure to plastics. Food coming a short distance from the farm to our table doesn't need plastic to protect it, unlike the non-regional food needing to make the average 1500-mile transit. Plastics burdens our environment by clogging our oceans and surface water. And plastics don't break down. They break up into smaller pieces. Microplastic particles are in the plants and meat we eat and our own bodies as well. With our purchasing choices, we can begin the uphill battle of removing plastic from our personal food system.

I suspect many of you have read or heard of Paul Hawkins book Drawdown.

The global FS annually releases 1/3 of the annual GHG emissions. In his list of 80 Drawdown actions to reduce carbon in the atmosphere, 17 are associated with the FS. Drawdown identifies four FS actions within top 15% of most effective actions for GHG reduction. They are #3 Eat a Plant-rich Diet (without beef), #4 Reduce Food Waste (35 % of food grown is not consumed), #9 Silvo-pasture grazing animals, #11 Use Regenerative Ag- which incidentally is the largest carbon sequestration opportunity of all 80 recommendations. We can each reduce GHG by making plant-based, whole food a greater part of our diet, buying foods from organic and regenerative producers, and reducing food waste. And when we eat meat, we can choose meat from organic farms and farms that practice silvo-pasturing; which intentionally integrates trees, pasture, and livestock on the same land for mutual benefit.

There is a battle for control of the food system which most are just beginning to become aware of. It's been waged by the largest agribusiness corporations like Nestle and Coke since the 1970's. Their aim is to capture a greater share of the 8 trillion global food market by producing and selling cheap substitutes disguised as food but known as UPF [ultra processed food].

UPFs are reconstructed mostly from plant material and some from animal products that has been reduced to their basic molecular constituents, then modified and reassembled into hyperpalatable food shapes and textures, which without the color, sweetening, and flavor additives would not be recognizable to one's brain or tongue as food. Processes and ingredients used to manufacture UPF are designed to create highly profitable (low-cost, long shelf life), heavily marketed, convenient (ready to consume), and hyperpalatable replacement for freshly prepared dishes. To be clear, their goal is to capture a greater share of the 8 trillion global food market.

To facilitate this takeover, these wealthy corporations funded research in the 70's and 80's to show that naturally occurring sugars, fats, and carbohydrates (which our bodies have evolved to digest and absorb) were the cause of obesity and diabetes. It's only now that unbiased scientific research is showing that we cannot digest or absorb UPF and they are the source of these conditions. I Highly recommend reading Chris Tulleken's 2023 NYTimes best seller *Ultra-Processed People*. After reading it, You'll look at your food choices completely differently.

UPF were state-sponsored inventions during times of war when food was scarce. Napoleon III sponsored the invention of margarine and during WWI, Crisco was invented. Both products take the basic ingredients of water and vegetable oil and expose them to process of hydrogenation which introduces hydrogen gas at high pressures to change molecular structure of the original ingredients to make products that function like butter and lard respectively with long shelf life at room temperature at a lower cost than their real food precursor.

Our bodies don't recognize UPF products, so they don't trigger the hormones that tell us we're full. And with enticing flavor enhancers, we keep eating. Evidence shows we consume many more calories when eating hyperpalatable UPF than with our prior diets. Think of how many calorie loaded energy bars you can eat at one time.

These UPF corporations manipulate our food system's environment by constant marketing on all electronic media and buying up prime grocery shelf space to ensure their UPF gets front and center display. And they build more and more convenience stores which don't sell fresh food or healthy groceries- only UPF. Dollar General has a

business plan of a store every 8 miles to sell UPF by becoming a prominent presence in our food environment. It's hard work to go to a supermarket or convenience store and find a product that isn't laden with UP components.

UPF has been associated with a list of 12 diseases that have sprung to dominance in the same past 40 years that UPF's have been consumed by Americans. Diseases like malnutrition, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and Type 2 diabetes. Lots of documentation now exists showing how the American diet, heavily laden with UPF, where adopted by countries and cities around the world, have experienced skyrocketing obesity rates.

It's important to become aware that UPF have environmental, cultural, social, and economic impacts. UPF's are made from conventional farming commodity crops of genetically modified and herbicide laden corn and soybeans. We've already discussed the environmental and health impacts of conventional farming techniques. UPF also impacts the economy by removing the money from our local economy that we would have spent on nutritious whole foods. And replacing fresh nutritious food in our diet with UPF that does serious harm to our health.

We can start now by reading the ingredient labels on our food purchases. If it contains ingredients you wouldn't find in your kitchen like high fructose corn syrup, gums and flavorings, you've got UPF in your hands. We can exert our independence from corporate food control of our food system and how it impacts our environment by shunning UPF. Working towards a whole food, plant-based diet moves us away from UPF is better for the environment and our health. If you want further justification to spend a little more money on fresh, nutritious food, the TFF food system project discovered folks eating a poor nutritional diet paid \$1800 more per year for health care in 2020 than those eating an adequate, nutritious diet. That addition cost is much

higher now.

Lastly, I'd like to talk about our food environment and the way we eat. Food environment is the physical (which includes the barrage of advertisements), economic, political, social, and cultural context that affects what we buy, the number and complexity of preparation steps, where we eat, and with whom. Food environments have a greater effect on what we eat than our aspirational choices.

In TC our local food environment is dominated by Wegman's and chain restaurants, relentless food advertising, and the social pressure to be on the go and eat on the run. So we go to Wegman's for the convenience of one-stop shopping, we go to chain restaurants for consistent experience expectations, and we make food choices to save time like- grab and go, quick warm-up in the microwave, or products combined separately in a box to boil the pasta or rice for example, nuke the other contents that don't need refrigeration like real food does, then combine and serve.

Bee Wilson, author of the book: "The Way We Eat Now", makes the point that humans have sourced their food for centuries of families working together. Gathering, peeling, cooking, mixing, baking, and setting the table are shared by family members. And then the family sits down together to eat and converse, building family and community. With today's food environment, we often eat in solitude, in our cars, while multi-tasking. The way we eat is a choice. All aspects of gathering, preparing and eating food are opportunities to build and strengthen relationships. We can make this community building food experience a priority.

Further to our food experience, In Ithaca we can find many local restaurants that proudly prepare entrees from local organic producers. Look for them.

If you're considering learning more about your food choices, I'll recommend listening to podcasts from Food Sleuth Radio by Melinda Hammelgarn. Her tag line is "Connecting the dots between food, health, and agriculture."

The FSP identifies 8 actions each of us can take with our daily choices to create a local, resilient, equitable and healthy FS [food supply].

1. Eat for your health.
2. Eat for planetary health.
3. Eat to Reduce Food Waste.
4. Eat for equity
5. Eat for our local economy.
6. Build a food budget that aligns with your values
7. Engage with local and national food advocacy efforts.
8. Learn about the Food System

Each of us has power to take control. I hope I made the case today that food choices are a source of power to move into a better world, and live into our values. Practice resistance to the corporate food system.

Thank you for joining me.