

Pricing Green Beans

Until eight years ago I was merely a consumer of food. Since then I have also become a producer. Taking on this second role has made a world of difference in my perception of the value of a pound of green beans, I was never a voracious consumer but I naturally wanted to come by whatever I did consume at rock-bottom prices. Food was something to be had as cheaply as possible, so as to leave the bulk of one's income for the good things of life, like books, travel, entertainment, telephones. We do not, after all, live by bread alone (though we cannot live at all without it).

Just as I was never the biggest consumer, we are hardly agribusiness producers. Wally and I have a macro-garden in western Massachusetts which we estimate, by the pacing method, to be three-quarters of an acre. The primary purpose of the plot is to provide our own food as the basic and most easily accomplished step to becoming as self-sufficient as we can manage, disentangled to that extent from getting our living from a system based on injustice (a big mouthful of a reason for having a garden, and sometimes I'm ready to eat those words).

It is amazing how much one can grow in a small space. Even from a quarter (estimated) acre in Ojo Caliente, New Mexico (where we set out on this new venture, this approach to our concept of nonviolent direct action), the earth yielded such bounty that we were unable to unload it all on friends and neighbors. As fate would have it, it was during that year that farmers' markets were started in Santa Fe, Los Alamos and Taos. We raked in \$250. Though it probably cost us that much to make the 120-mile round trips to Santa Fe, it felt good to be earning from the work of our unskilled hands. That was how we backed into the notion that we could make what cash we'd need from a mini-truck garden. I'd had to concede that we would most likely not be able to avoid cash altogether, and providing wholesome food seemed about as honest a way to make a living as

any--more honest than most.

When a garden plot gets beyond a 40-60 foot scale it escapes the category of pure recreation. It's a job, a demanding one. But there is the satisfaction--out there, hoeing under the punishing sun, picking off japanese beetles whose only interest seems to be recreating themselves, despairing over tenacious weeds, rejoicing in the aromatic abundance of raspberries-- there is a satisfaction in knowing that you are taking care of one little bit of the world's surface, that the sometimes backbreaking work is essential, because neither you nor I can live without somebody doing it. The satisfaction continues through long hours of canning and shelling beans and sorting squash and onions for storage. There is even a barely repressed smugness as those long hours of sweat over a wood fire turn into colorful shelves of winter stores.

Ah, but the good feeling begins to fade when it comes to exchanging the joint efforts of the earth's gifts and our labor in a market economy (and that's the only one we have access to). Here and there one can find a more direct barter. But how many gallons of gas do most of us grow in our back yards, how many hospital beds, how many hoes and shovels? The farmers' markets that have sprouted here in New England like alfalfa seeds in a sunny window promise a partial alternative: lovely organic vegetables direct from producer to consumer, without the intervention of brokers and teamsters and supermarkets. But there are, alas, some roadblocks on that direct route.

The first is a simple resistance to selling food. Somehow it seems that food, of all things, should be a gift. There is confusion especially with friends, whom I like to send home with an armful of just-picked carrots, lettuce and peas. They, knowing we depend on our garden for cash, try to insist on paying. This is even more awkward when I want to get rid of stuff that will otherwise end up on the compost heap. I am reluctant to offer it for fear of having money pressed upon me for my garbage, as it were. It's like having friends come for dinner and being offered payment because you run a restaurant. I carry over some

of that same feeling about selling food, even to strangers at the market. But I shake my finger in my face and remind myself that I have performed a service for which I should be able to claim a share of the production and services of others. If people don't grow their own food they have to put out energy, some way or other, to obtain food.

That settled, there looms ahead a more bothersome roadblock on the direct route from me to you. I can charge, I should charge, but how much? How much is one pound of green beans worth? (In that question I could wrestle with the whole of justice, morality, and economic theory.) I have said that I have a different sense of its value than when I viewed those same beans in a plastic bag in the grocery or at the open-air market in Philadelphia. Now I see them from the single bean seed to bushel basket. And there is no way that I know to figure exactly the time and labor involved in getting those beans from one state to the other. Even if I could do that, how to determine an even swap of my time and labor put into something that I need and want?

The garden is visible only for a few months, but it is a year-round labor: ordering the seed, planning the garden, preparing the soil, planting, thinning, weeding, de-bugging, mulching, putting the garden to bed. But I need not take account of all that. It is enough that I feel in my bones the work that has gone into those beans just since yesterday when we spent hours stooping or on our knees to pick. Darkness found us still washing and picking vegetables by flashlight. Up, then, on Saturday morning before dawn, still chilly even in summer, and often raining, to harvest those items most perishable, fit all into the truck and hustle to market to set up before eight. (Those Saturday mornings are colder and wetter as the year wears on.)

I do not know how much that pound of beans should bring. By the time I get to market it seems worth at least a couple dollars. (Strange that the equation should go in that direction, why not a couple-of-dollars worth of a pound a beans? Or a pound of beans worth a pair of mittens?) That's what I feel. But what I do is accept the

mimeographed sheets from the market master with price ranges for each commodity for that week. The range is wide and prices fluctuate insanely from week to week, depending on supply and demand and, I suspect, more than a little manipulation. I despise that list. It has nothing to do with any reality that I can deal with. It has to do with conglomerates that can afford to dump because their profit is somewhere else, and with brokers who never see a bean, let alone weed a garden. Yet I, not knowing the value of a pound of beans, let the list dictate to me. Usually I take the middle of the range, but often, for fear of asking too much, the lower end.

On the other hand, I do not wish to be exploited. I am unwilling to subsidize people with cheap food so that they might have more to spend on books, travel, entertainment, and telephone calls, to say nothing of stereos, new cars, and dishwashers. Such a line of reflection can lead to all sorts of probing. So, I am glad to note that it's time for the market to open and that, thrusting theory aside; I must straightforwardly and forthwith deal with economic reality. I scribble "45 cents" on a triangular piece of cardboard and stick it into my basket, relieved to be done with the business and reasonable content with my decision—until I chance to cast my eye to the right.

My neighbor is selling his beans for 25 cents a pound! A moment later I feel ashamed. He is simply not so mercenary as I am—perhaps he is basing his price on what he needs, and his needs are less than mine. Then, I realize that the truth is that my neighbor's price has to do neither with cutthroat tactics nor simple living. He has a fulltime job, does not depend on his produce. He has brought the surplus from a lovingly tended garden because he enjoys the carnival. Perhaps he will earn enough to buy his seed, but it doesn't matter to him.

Still his price will cut into my sales. I am sure he has not thought of that and I would be embarrassed to

bring it to his attention. How do you tell someone he ought to charge more? Maybe, to tell the truth, he should be charging even less, or giving away his beans because he doesn't need the money.

Oh-ho! The vendor across the way is charging 69 cents for her beans. Outlandish! She'll give the market a bad name, people will stop coming because they'll think the market is rip-off. She remains quite serene, though she must have heard the loud complaints intended for her ears. She is obviously convinced that her beans are worth 69 cents. I am sure they are—even so she'll hardly earn a minimum wage—and I admire her for not being intimidated by dirty looks. She told me she had plowed under a field of tomatoes because the price dipped too low.

Two approaches to the price of beans: easy going benevolence and hardnosed cost-plus accounting. And me trying to chart a course between the shoals and about to go aground.

I am tempted just then to propose a pricing policy for the market, if it's no more than to huddle each Saturday morning and decide on common prices for the day. We could avoid the great gaps and bad feelings. For me it would be easier. As it is I feel guilty for undercutting my 69 cents neighbor, greedy for charging more than my 25 cents neighbor. But price fixing? That would put us in the same boat, if not the same league, as the huge conglomerates with their under-the-table deals to the detriment of the consumer and our great "free enterprise" system.

There appear to be only two approaches to exchanging that pound of beans that seem anywhere near principled. The first is to calculate the time and materials expended. But I have concluded that's impossible for us. The other is to try to determine just how much I need to live on, and charge accordingly. More the "from each according to one's ability, to each according to one's need" method. Trouble is that I can only see one side—my own needs and abilities—unless we all do it together.

Juanita Nelson

It would be alright for me to take only what I need if it didn't involve the likelihood of working 12 hours a day to satisfy minimum work requirements from work exchange with people who might not have to work at all. Maybe it would be best to give the food away and make the cash in some other fashion.

But there is a third alternative. How about simply putting the vegetables out with a container on the table and a sign inviting people to deposit what they think they should pay or what they can afford? Transfer the responsibility for price setting from me to them.

Which brings me back to myself as consumer. On the other side of the counter, I wonder how much I'd toss into the bowl for a pound of string beans?

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