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Sharing Abundance: Transforming America's Dinner Table

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> The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.
>
> The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on…
>
> At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.
>
> Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.
>
> - Joy Harjo, *Perhaps the World Ends Here* (1994)

When I was seven my mom told my brother Ethan and I to grab a shovel and head outside to the backyard, that it was time to plant the carrots. It was perfect weather that fall, and we scurried out to sprinkle seeds as she watched us from the kitchen bay window. She always loved the idea of a farm and said that one day she and my dad would move far away, purchase some goats, and live a new, slower life. I later learned she was inspired by Barbara Kingsolver's "100 mile diet" and she arranged for my school's weekly farm delivery and the corresponding newsletter suggesting tasty recipes for kids. Come January, Ethan and I watched the green tops sprout. As soon as we could see the small rim of orange, we picked all of the little guys, ogling at their strange shapes and statures. Never before had I felt connected to the food I ate. We ate those vegetables around the dinner table in my childhood home that winter. The carrots in my matzo ball soup had never tasted so good.

A dinner table has the unique ability to bring people together, to share, and to make us appreciative of food and—more importantly—one another. Food is one of our most fundamental human needs. It is just as easy to take and hoard as one's own as it is to redistribute to others. It is that primal urge to be fed mixed with the less obvious opportunity to share that makes the table a major locus for community building. Currently, America's dinner reflects a fundamental tension: while individuals pursue their own sustenance, large-scale food insecurity reveals how far we have drifted from collective care for one another. The question is whether food sharing can close that gap. By revitalizing the principles of reciprocity, rooted in indigenous knowledge systems and evolutionary biology, and by

championing food sovereignty, Americans can begin to address food insecurity and rebuild community at the national dinner table.

In *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World*, Robin Wall Kimmerer—a Potawatomi botanist and pioneer of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)—writes about the variety of provisions that are given to us by the Serviceberry plant. The framework by which she views food elucidates my passionate reaction to growing and eating my own vegetables. Kimmerer writes about the robust nature of the Serviceberry, which runs faithfully on a calendar system, harbors medicinal uses, and tastes "like a Blueberry[1] crossed with the satisfying heft of an Apple…wild, complex with a chemistry that your body recognizes as the real food it's been waiting for" (Kimmerer, 2022). However, my interest in Kimmerer's account of where this plant originates is its Potawatomi name Bozakmin, "min" meaning simultaneously "berry" and "gift". The abundance of berries with their many benefits is a wholly pure and unwarranted gift from the land unto the people picking and consuming them. We did nothing to deserve it, but look, there they lie upon the tree—sweet, substantial, and ubiquitous. They take care of us and expect nothing in return. In the act of naming these plants as gifts, our relationship with them changes, just as mine did with those carrots. My carrots served an entirely different purpose than the sticks or crinkle-cut carrots I might buy in the store. They are associated with the Fall of 2013, my childhood home in the desert, and inviting my grandparents over for Shabbat dinner and matzo ball soup: physical and emotional sustenance. Kimmerer states that by no longer seeing Serviceberries as physical "products and commodities" but rather as lenders of "generosity and care," gratitude becomes our first response (Kimmerer, 2022). "If our first response is gratitude then our second is reciprocity, to give a gift in return," in particular to others within our community. She coins this as the gift economy of nature.

This framework contrasts sharply with the economic story many Americans are used to. The United States is shaped by Scottish moral philosopher and economist Adam Smith's defense of laissez-faire capitalism established in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). In this tradition, scarcity is treated as a fundamental assumption driving innovation, competition, and economic growth. Under a commodified system of limited goods and services, individuals are invited to compete and act in their own interest to succeed. The gift economy exists outside of that market logic. It is built on mutual trust and strengthened social bonds, prioritizing communal prosperity over individual gain. In *Free to Choose,* Milton and Rose Friedman, two of the most influential free-market economists of the twentieth century, build on Smith's legacy in their discussion of equality. They argue that "no one should be prevented by arbitrary obstacles from using his capacities to pursue his own objectives" (Friedman & Friedman, 1990, p. 128). In this view, equality is defined by the individual freedom to partake in markets. They also assert that "a society that puts equality—in the sense of equality of outcome—ahead of freedom will end up with neither equality nor freedom" (p. 148). Kimmerer's

[1] The names of fruits are capitalized by Kimmerer.

gift economy begins from a different premise. Scarcity and competition are not organizing principles; as a "person schooled by plants," she argues for an abundance mindset: "there is enough if we share it" (Kimmerer, 2022). To her, equality is rooted in the well-being of all people within a community. The Serviceberry inspires us to feel responsible for caring and providing for one another rather than competing for what we can claim on our own. Is it possible that this American fear of scarcity might be prohibiting us from equitable food sharing at our national dinner table? Must we be motivated by scarcity to survive with seemingly limited resources, or can we choose to perceive abundance?

To understand how a gift economy might function beyond metaphor, foraging societies offer an important historical and anthropological example. Their practices show that food sharing was not simply moral idealism; it was a practical response to uncertainty. In *The Serviceberry*, Kimmerer points to an interaction linguist Daniel Everett had while writing a report on a Brazilian hunter-gatherer community:

> A hunter had brought home a sizable kill, far too much to be eaten by his family. The researcher asked how he would store the excess. Smoking and drying technologies were well known; storing was possible. The hunter was puzzled by the question—store the meat? Why would he do that? Instead, he sent out an invitation to a feast, and soon the neighboring families were gathered around his fire, until every last morsel was consumed. (Everett, as cited in Kimmerer, 2022)

What puzzled Everett was why, in an area where the next opportunity to catch big game was unsure, would the hunter give away his surplus and risk his next meal. When questioned, the hunter responded, "Store my meat? I store my meat in the belly of my brother." In a gift economy, our gratitude for our food means that a surplus is not a personal comfort blanket, but rather an opportunity to share. In comparison to what Smith and the Friedmans may claim, this vision of reciprocity is neither naive nor as removed from reality as we think.

The behavior exhibited by the Brazilian hunter is not historically unique. There is overwhelming evidence that gift economies were widespread. Albeit, much of the narrative surrounding these Indigenous communities in Polynesia, Melanesia, and the American Northwest comes from Western scholars' secondary, not primary, accounts of Kula Rings, potlatches, and the Moka Exchange[2] ("7.4: Modes of Exchange", 2021). Second, however, beyond the historical record, is an even more salient point: sharing is part of our evolutionary biology. For years, economists and anthropologists alike have wondered, why are humans altruists? Why did we cooperate so extensively and maladaptively when it cost something to us as individuals in an environment with limited resources? Anthropologist Robert Boyd and biologist Peter Richerson, best known for their extensive writing on gene-culture coevolution, hypothesize in their book *Culture and the*

[2]Marcel Mauss, Bronisław Malinowski, and Marshall Sahlins are the anthropologists who wrote about these exchanges.

Evolutionary Process that early Homo sapiens were able to engage in large-scale collaboration with non-kin because sharing increased group fitness ("Overview", 2021). This is similar to how a random chemical mutation in our cells might confer a competitive advantage in Darwinian evolution. Foragers learned that by engaging in technically maladaptive food-sharing, they were more likely to survive both individually and as a group in uncertain ecological environments. This was especially true in small groups where reputations were continually evaluated by members. Prosocial behaviors were passed down from generation to generation from ancient Pleistocene hominins onward. As humans, food sharing is an integral part of our brain, which was selected for over millions of years, much longer than we've had governments and sedentary societies. Why is it that we fail to see these sharing behaviors now?

The loss of the gift economy is closely tied to state formation. In *Against the Grain* (2017), author James C. Scott, a scholar specializing in agrarian and non-state societies with a strong foundation in ethnographic research, examines the transition from foraging to sedentary living and the emergence of grain-based states in 3300 BCE. In chapter 4, "Agro-ecology of the Early State", he challenges conventional narratives, arguing that agriculture alone was not sufficient to drive the formation of states (Scott, 2017, p. 117). Contrary to what is often taught, foraging bands avoided sedentism for extended periods of time. There was a gap, spanning two thousand years, between the rise of farming and the emergence of city-states during which indirect reciprocity was already sufficient in maintaining large-scale cooperation. However, a surplus of visible, easily divisible, and storable cereal crops altered the structure of society (pp. 129-30). Maintaining excess grain required specialization and centralized control, which contributed to labor divisions, social hierarchies, and inequality. When food was less easily accumulated, we were required to lean on one another and foster cooperative relationships. Yet the allure of storable excess, what Scott treats as a kind of luxury trap, drew societies toward centralized control and the market logic that shapes American food systems today. A full return to the gift economy is not possible, but partial forms of reciprocity can still challenge the assumption that scarcity must organize how food is shared.

In 2007, the New Oxford American Dictionary declared "locavore" as the word of the year (Oxford University Press, 2007). Throughout the past thirty years, locavores have pushed to break down the globalized and industrialized agriculture system and turn to eating locally grown and prepared foods. The movement rests on the idea that fresh, local produce is not only more nutritious and tastier than store-bought foods but also more environmentally conscious due to reduced transportation fuel expenditure. Thus consumers should opt for growing their food and buying from farmers' markets for their health and to support local agriculture. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the movement has grown substantially: "the number of farmers' markets has increased from just under 2,000 in 1994 to currently more than 8,600 markets" (USDA, as cited in Norton et al., 2022, p. 2). What is it about farmers' markets, beyond the nutritional and ethical appeals that draws people in? The appeal is not only

nutritional or ethical. Farmers' markets also promise a kind of social repair by reconnecting buyers to growers, neighbors, and place. According to Clare Hinrichs, Professor Emerita of Rural Sociology at Penn State, this promise can be understood through the economic sociology term embeddedness:

> In providing an alternative market, farmers' markets create a context for closer social ties between farmers and consumers, but remain fundamentally rooted in commodity relations. In attempting to construct an alternative to the market, as reflected in an explicit emphasis on community and in the distinctive "share" relationship, community supported agriculture moves closer towards the decommodification of food. (Hinrichs, 2000, p. 295)

This feeling of fulfillment makes sense. It is so easy to remove community from the eating experience and to treat food as only sustenance, a pattern visible in the ubiquity of fast-casual restaurants and the ease of grocery delivery. In an online survey of 2,000 diners, the restaurant booking platform OpenTable revealed that 60% of respondents dined alone during 2024 (Meyersohn, 2024). In comparison, roaming the stalls, chatting with regulars, and visiting your favorite local farmer to buy the week's produce–it is an extremely social event. Jessica Prentice is one of the four creators of the term locavore. In an interview with Oxford University Press's blog, she echoed this sentiment while sharing her personal experience with farmers' markets:

> Here I bought vegetables and fruit that had been harvested that morning from a field just an hour or two away from where I lived. I got to know the farmers who had grown the food, and got to put my dollar directly into their hands. (Prentice, 2007)

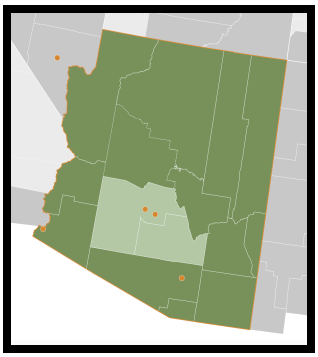
However, Kimmerer and Scott might be skeptical of farmers' markets as a community forum. The sense of social connection and ethical responsibility associated with farmers' markets, although admirable, is futile and synthetic in comparison with foraging communities. While buyers like Jessica and her well-off locavore colleagues in San Francisco might feel loyalty toward their farmers, it pales in comparison to the authentic gratitude-to-reciprocity pipeline that Kimmerer associates with foraging and the gift economy. A study conducted on 115 markets in three regions of New York City in 1993 concluded that, although farmers found "the market experience as their most important motivation for participating" in the market, economic motivations such as earning extra money were only slightly behind (Lyson et al., as cited in Hinrichs, 2000, p. 298). As Brewster Kneen, a Canadian analyst and critic of agribusiness, argues, "Farmers' markets may provide a valuable alternative to the 'monoculture market economy,' but they do not challenge the fundamental commodification of food" (Kneen, as cited in Hinrichs, 2000, p. 298). Locavorism can make food feel personal again, but because it still depends on purchasing power, it follows Smith and Friedman's equal-opportunity approach rather than Kimmerer's outcome-based reciprocity. The next question, then, is not whether local food can build community, it is whether that community reaches people who cannot afford to enter the market in the first place. Farmers' markets reveal both the promise and the limits of market-based solutions: they can shorten the

distance between producer and consumer, but they do not automatically redistribute surplus to communities facing hunger[3].

This limit becomes clearer in Arizona, where county-level maps of food insecurity can obscure the uneven distribution of access within the same region. With locavorism and Kimmerer's gift economy in mind, Figure 1 from Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger-relief charity with a network of more than 200 food banks, takes on a new significance.

Figure 1

Food insecurity rates in Arizona counties



Note. Adapted from Map the Meal Gap (Feeding America, 2022). Dark green represents a food insecurity rate between 26.1-39.0% www.feedingamerica.org/sites/default/files/2024-05/MMG%202024%20Executive%20Summary%20%281%29.pdf.

Initially, I was struck by the gradient—the stark contrast between Apache County, shaded in dark green with a 21.5% food insecurity rate, and Maricopa County, represented by a lighter pastel shade at 12%. Food insecurity describes a lack of access to sufficient, nutritious, and appealing food, leading to reduced diet quality and variety. Yet, *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick* (2008), a seven-part documentary series produced by California Newsreel, shows that county-level averages can hide stark inequalities within Maricopa County itself. California Newsreel describes itself as the "oldest, independent non-profit documentary center in the country" and the first "to integrate media production and distribution with the media needs of contemporary social change movements" ("About Us," n.d.)

Episode four, "Bad Sugar," explores how Indigenous Arizonans such as the Akimel O'odham, referred to as the Pima in the documentary, came to experience some of the highest diabetes rates in the world. The episode explains that the Coolidge Dam, constructed in 1924, diverted the

[3]Peter Kalmus's article "A Gift Economy Could Change the Food System" describes FrutaGift, a group in Oakland, California, that tries to make farmers' markets more circular by redirecting surplus produce.

community's water supply (Adelman, 2008, 2:45–3:00). It then links this loss of water to the disruption of traditional farming, hunting, and foraging practices (Adelman, 2008, 4:45–5:34; 12:25–15:02). As a community, they became dependent upon the government to redistribute free commodity foods, which are typically highly-processed, calorie-dense and fiber-deficient, contributing to weight gain, metabolic syndrome and diabetes. The documentary notes that in 1902 there was only one recorded case of type 2 diabetes among the Pima (Adelman, 2008, 15:04–15:15). By 2002, more than half of the Pima had been diagnosed, which the episode describes as the highest rate in the world according to the CDC and Indian Health Service (Adelman, 2008, 2:08–2:30). It was only in 1996 that distribution centers began offering fresh produce (Adelman, 2008, 17:00–17:12). Locavores like Jessica Prentice see a world in which everyone can experience the Slow Food movement and rebel against industrial agriculture—experiencing the "age-old pleasures of eating real, fresh foods grown and prepared in the context of community" (Prentice, 2007). However, what she and others fail to realize is that their very own neighbors, just 30 miles south and in the same county, are unable to put quality food on the table. In "Bad Sugar," Donald Warne, M.D., a member of the Oglala Lakota Tribe and co-director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Indigenous Health, argues that "all of the prosperity of Phoenix and the prosperity of this entire state was built on the backs of the health of the local tribes" (Adelman, 2008, 15:30–15:40; "Donald Warne," 2024). Within the 581 square miles of the Gila River Reservation, there remains only one small market with a limited produce section. The nearest supermarket is an hour's drive away (Adelman, 2008, 17:42–18:22). Although the Coolidge Dam enabled agriculture to flourish in parts of Maricopa County, fostering a sense of community among white ranchers over shared meals, the Pima were immiserated and excluded from this vision of a healthful future.

Figure 2

Map of Indian reservations in Arizona

Note. Adapted from USEPA Air Quality Analysis Maps (USEPA, 2011). The Pima, who struggle to access healthy food while living on the Gila River Reservation, bridge Arizona's two counties with the lowest rates of food scarcity.

According to a Needs & Assets Report done by the Gila River Indian Community Regional Partnership Council, in 2018, 97% of families in the Gila River Region participated in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) compared to 36% in Maricopa and 39% in all of Arizona (FTF Gila River Indian Community Regional Partnership Council, 2020, p. 48). SNAP is one of several nutritional support programs such as the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children[4] (WIC). On the surface, these programs play a major role in reducing hunger and improving food access. Nonetheless, UDSA's approach is flawed in principle, as it fails to address the root causes of food insecurity, the systematic disruption of traditional agricultural systems and Indigenous control over land, water, and food[5]. Kimmerer says that it "is manufactured scarcity that [she] cannot accept." This phrase matters because the scarcity facing

[4]To learn more about USDA's (re)distribution/supplemental nutrition programs, see here on their website: https://www.usda.gov/topics/food-and-nutrition/food-distribution
[5]Examples of USDA's half-baked attempts to acknowledge and integrate of food sovereignty: https://www.usda.gov/tribalrelations/usda-programs-and-services/usda-indigenous-food-sovereignty-initiative

communities such as the Akimel O'odham is not a natural absence of food. It is the result of human decisions that redirected water, displaced food practices, and then offered processed assistance as a substitute for sovereignty.

This logic continues in contemporary food policy. In 2025, House Budget Committee Chairman Jodey Arrington proposed cutting $12 billion from school breakfast and lunch programs over ten years, partly by raising the Community Eligibility Provision threshold from 25% to 60% of identified students (Hysom, 2025). CEP allows high-poverty schools to provide free breakfast and lunch to all students, but raising the threshold would make thousands of schools ineligible, meaning many students would lose access to free meals even though they would still need them. This is a modern example of manufactured scarcity. Instead of asking how a society with enough food can feed all children, the policy narrows who counts as needy enough to receive help.

A reciprocity-based response would look different from existing food assistance programs. Instead of only distributing benefits or commodity foods after scarcity has been created, it would place resources directly in the hands of communities by funding community-led farming, returning control over food procurement, buying from local and Indigenous producers[6], supporting mobile or cooperative markets, and treating culturally important foods as central rather than optional. Programs like this would still feed people in the present, but they would also rebuild the relationships that make communities less dependent on emergency redistribution. The goal is not merely to solve hunger by adding calories but to restore Indigenous food sovereignty at the dinner table.

The term "food sovereignty" was coined by La Via Campesina at the 1996 World Food Summit (La Via Campesina, 2021). To them, food sovereignty, "is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their food and agriculture systems" ("About La Via Campesina," 2024). La Via Campesina is an international movement that unites small and mid-sized producers, farm laborers, rural women, and Indigenous populations from eighty local and national organizations in eighty-one countries. It fights against neoliberal policies that prioritize international trade, which has pressured farmers to abandon their traditional agricultural practices. Through grassroots organizing, policy advocacy, and presenting at several international forums such as the UN Human Rights Council, they aim to elevate and empower small-scale food producers who remain at the heart of agricultural systems[6]. In "Food Sovereignty: A Manifesto for the Future of Our Planet," members emphasize that smaller local communities and individuals, rather than capitalistic politicians, hold the power to shape policies addressing poverty, inequality, and food scarcity. Food sovereignty

[6]For an example of their work on the international stage: "La Via Campesina participates and gives inputs to the first in-person meeting of the UN Working Group on Rights of Peasants in Geneva" (https://viacampesina.org/en/la-via-campesina-participates-and-gives-inputs-to-the-first-in-person-meeting-of-the-un-working-group-on-peasants-in-geneva/)

protects communities' "right to produce and consume before trading the surplus" (La Via Campesina, 2021). By reasserting control over excess food, producers can prioritize local needs, revitalize food sovereignty, and address inequities created by market systems that commodify food rather than share it with communities experiencing hunger. This is one tangible step toward a partial gift economy: it shortens the distance, both literal and figurative, between growing food and bringing it to the dinner table. However, La Via Campesina does not specifically address the long history of violence, displacement, neglect, and disempowerment in the United States, as seen in the Akimel O'odham case. The Earth to Tables Legacies project seeks to bridge this gap by focusing on something more personal and transformative than global policy: dialogue across communities that can build mutual understanding and collective action.

Earth to Tables Legacies was founded in 2015 by settler[7] farmer Dianne Kretschmar and Mohawk food activist Chandra Maracle. The initiative echoes La Via Campesina's values of global food sovereignty by emphasizing both local food production and the shared experience of eating around the table. For them, it is our relationship with the Earth that takes center stage as the protagonist in procuring food. Earth to Tables illustrates the way humans maintain a wide array of cultures and food-sharing practices ("Story of a Project," n.d.). Through five years of conversations and multimedia storytelling with sixteen collaborators from diverse locations, professions, ethnicities, and backgrounds, this project invites us to explore food-related tensions between Eurocentric knowledge systems and Indigenous ways of knowing from a "more-than-human" perspective—"like a bee, like a plant, or like soil" ("Pollinating Relationships," n.d.). This perspective powerfully examines the symbiotic ecology of humans and all natural life forms. By shifting the focus to Earth rather than ourselves, policymakers, government officials, farmers, and Indigenous activists may find new ways to engage with food systems beyond the limitations of a scarcity mindset. Although this might not result in a return to traditional practices of hunting and gathering, our commitment to the earth and "produc[ing] the food in a way that respects nature" incentivizes us to democratize food systems ("Food Tensions," n.d.). When these stakeholders develop a deeper understanding of both their individual roots and irrevocably shared future, they can come to the table as equals. Perhaps this touches on the heart of why America's dinner table holds such potential as a locus for community building: beyond being a space for equitable food-sharing, the dinner table can transform into a platform for exchanging ideas and building mutual respect.

As Americans in 2026, we find ourselves nearly anonymous in a highly complex society where hunger persists in the face of food surplus. The gift economy seems not only impossible but—compared to our ancestors—unnecessary for our survival as a species. And yes, the purest

[7]The word settler was used by Dianne herself. Here is the article that is linked on the Earth To Tables website with why she chooses to label herself this way: https://earthtotables.org/storytellers/our-migration-stories/

form of reciprocity, as exemplified by the Brazilian hunter, may not be realistic in our communities. Nonetheless, it is problematic that American economists portray the agricultural revolution and the rise of the market economy as progress—as going from plight to plenty. This is not only because it is untrue, but also because it creates a false story of what humans are biologically capable of in terms of resource sharing, especially food sharing. In a 2005 Analyse & Kritik article titled "The Biological and Evolutionary Logic of Human Cooperation," Terry Burnham—a Harvard-educated economist, ex-pharmaceutical CFO, and ex-Goldman Sachs & Co. employee—proposes "The Evolutionary Legacy Hypothesis," which illuminates how we might move forward by exploiting our past as foragers. In this era where "our social environment has changed dramatically in the blink of a gene's eye, our brains have not, leaving humans with strange tendencies left over from a bygone era"—sharing meals, engaging in volunteer work, and donating to charity (Burnham & Johnson, 2005 p. 130). He continues, "For any one individual, New York still is a village—just many different villages overlapping each other" (p. 131). Despite being "as far from our ancestral hunter-gatherer groups as we can imagine…people interact within networks of family, friends and acquaintances, where kin, reciprocity and reputation are still crucial to everyday life and maintain the highest level of attention and social intrigue."

This economic and evolutionary perspective supports Kimmerer's more intimate concept of Serviceberry reciprocity, illustrating how deeply ingrained prosocial behaviors might set the foundation for the widespread emergence of gift economies today. Thus, it is extremely productive to "bring out the best of our evolutionary roots[8]" by building upon the inchoate efforts of groups like Earth to Tables (p. 131).

By reinforcing the overlap between living in villages and maintaining a sense of gratitude for the earth, we might find a more subtle gift economy in our lives. It is at that moment when the more obvious fundamental human need to eat melds with a more nuanced need for human connection and interdependence. Unlike the performative activism of suburbanites at farmer's markets, let us sit together at the table, fill our brothers' and sisters' bellies with our shared resources, and transform consumption of food into nation building by sharing our collective abundance.

[8]In the article, they also talk about how we should alter our institution to re-incentivize our prosocial dispositions (i.e "Already, architects are moving away from residential tower blocks housing large groups of people that commonly led to social decay, and replacing them with model villages and communities.."). See this article from the World Economic Forum called, "Scarcity and growth: our world's contradictory terrors," and how we might work to circularize the economy:
https://www.weforum.org/stories/2020/01/scarcity-growth-worlds-contradictory-terrors/

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