

~ A Strange Summer ~

Another summer's fruit and vege swapping is over, and what a strange summer it was.

During the previous two summers, our weekly gatherings at the park saw a proliferation of produce astonishing in both diversity and profusion. The table, indeed two tables, crammed with fruit, vegetables and preserves, had regular and occasional attendees effusing each week about nature's abundance and the amazing diversity within our tiny local suburban area.

This year the produce was conspicuous by its absence. That the volume of backyard produce could drop so dramatically from one year to the next struck me anew each week. Last year passionfruits came by the bagful, almost more than we could give away; this year we saw none, nor any lemons, and almost no plums or figs, all of which we've had in previous years for weeks at a time by the bucketful. Peaches were scarce, small and misshapen; we had a couple of crops of grapes, one basin of apricots and one or two of nectarines, a few zucchinis and almost no eggplants or tomatoes. I don't think we filled the table once.

Coincidence, perhaps - the particular mix of gardeners and their individual circumstances attending the Swap this year? No, because Swappers from previous seasons confirmed they stayed away this year due to the reduction in their crops. A "bad year" (that archetypal Australian, or is it universal, phenomenon)? Climate change, already making itself felt in our own backyards? No need to jump too quickly to drastic conclusions; but there seemed little doubt amongst our group that things are not as "they've always been".

Conversation at the Swap is relaxed and undirected, but organically gravitates to relevant topics such as gardening, cooking and preserving. This year the scarcity of produce was a weekly focus for discussion.

Everyone agreed that tomato crops this summer were hopeless; zucchinis did okay, and capsicums boomed late in the season, but other vegetables such as cucumbers and eggplants suffered a low yield. Stone fruits

were terrible. Fruits which did crop were set upon to a greater extent than usual by starving birds, who in their desperation were undeterred by nets and other barriers which normally would have kept them at bay.

Speculation ensued about what could have caused the noticeable change in produce patterns. The summer was hot, but that's typical of Adelaide summers, and didn't seem drier than usual. Despite the worrying situation in other countries, we agreed our gardens are home to plenty of bees. Perhaps the most convincing hypothesis was that long and intense heat waves very early in the season - in October, and again in November - coincided with flowering periods for many crops and that the heat may have 'sterilised' the flowers, preventing the fruit from setting. This seemed to be confirmed when self-seeded tomatoes, flowering well into the new year, bore much more plentiful crops.

Our discussions at the Vege Swap are not scientific, but do stimulate those present to seek out information from other sources and bring it back to the group. The profound diversity of group members in terms of occupation, background and social class ensures that the information contributed represents a wide variety of perspectives. Above all, the gathering creates a space where this discussion can occur.

Climate change is a term entering the public discourse with increasing frequency but mainly as applied at 'macro' levels - the theoretical, the scientific, the political - and by those 'qualified' to speak at those levels. Our Fruit and Vege Swap this summer became a space which bridged the gap between the fears whispering in the private realms of houses and hearts, and the dramatically-toned warnings, pleas and pronouncements thundering about overhead. It was an informal, unstructured public space where real, 'ordinary' people with real, 'ordinary' lives brought their concerns, ideas and questions about the changes in the world in their most direct and immediate manifestation - in our own gardens, our own lives - and could talk without pretence or fear of judgement about what is really going on.

We didn't come up with too many solutions, and maybe there aren't any - at least, not easy or obvious ones. But we did canvass ideas ranging from what we can do differently in our own gardens, to larger-scale schemes such as using group buying power to acquire affordable solar power and rainwater tanks.

Whilst it requires huge shifts at the "big picture" levels of government and international policy and structure, environmental sustainability also is ultimately about individual people making choices. We are empowered to make choices when we know about different ways of doing things and have the confidence, through information and support, to try them out.

It seems to me that most people are concerned about sustainability, but many feel overwhelmed by the size of the problem. It feels too big for an individual to solve, and our lives lack the spaces in which to reflect, learn, consider and gain the confidence to make changes. The Community Fruit and Vege swap doesn't tell people what to talk about or what they should do in their homes and gardens. But it creates a space for people to come together to talk, share and learn, in their own way and at their own pace.

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I noticed at the Vege Swap this summer are that even as changing conditions fuel our motivation to grow our own food, they simultaneously leave us feeling puzzled and bewildered. In the words of one Vege Swapper, "I'm scratching my head, rethinking my whole garden and what I can grow."

The scanty produce at the Swap this summer, along with my own beginner's attempts at food gardening, underlined for me that growing food in urban spaces is not quite as easy as it looks. Various factors impact on crops, many of which are outside the gardener's control: sun and shade, soil, micro and macro climates, and of course what goes on in neighbouring gardens. Even when plants themselves grow and flourish, crop yields can be low.

My courtyard boasts a little, promising garden bed with good sun and shade, but pollination from bees and insects is limited because the garden area is small and is

surrounded by high fences, which also produce intolerable radiant heat. The soil has clearly been depleted by the gardening activities of previous residents, while as a small household with a little garden my capacity to produce organic, home-made soil improvers like compost is limited. (And yes, I've tried worms. They, too, are not quite as easy as they look!)

Perhaps it was unrealistic to expect that serious food growing would be a feasible proposition in a small rental unit. That in itself, I guess, is part of the learning. I'm more than ever sceptical of propaganda from countries like Cuba in which we see an army of beaming urban workers transform every available pocket-handkerchief of urban space into flourishing gardens and exhibit prolific crops.

In my experience, it only takes one degree of separation to lose knowledge about how to make food grow. My father's family of origin were subsistence farmers, my mother's forebears smallholders on returned servicemen's blocks in the Victorian Mallee. But I wonder if, for all their knowledge, even they, transplanted into the modern urban environment, would know how it's done? On top of his upbringing, my father studied agricultural science, yet he says none of that applies to the endeavour of a small urban home garden. My elderly neighbour hails from a Greek village, yet despite a lifetime of experience and careful daily tending and watering, like the Vege Swappers she had little success this summer with her eggplants or tomatoes.

The CSIRO, in its *Home Energy Saving Handbook*, recently named "Growing your own food" as one of the four key food-related steps individual households can make in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. I wonder whether the information gathered to support such claims can possibly address the complexity, in sustainability terms, of different styles and methods of gardening: the type and amount of irrigation and fertilisation; the use of pesticides (or loss of produce to pests); the source of soil improvers (such as home compost versus bagged commercial products); the amount and type of equipment and infrastructure employed - pots and beds, landscaping, tools, shade and storage

structures; and of course the length and frequency of trips to Bunnings in the four-wheel-drive to purchase all of this - and above all, whether all these inputs with their respective embedded water, energy and greenhouse emission components are evaluated in any way against an empirical measurement of the volume of food produced.

Anecdotal energy at the Vege Swap suggests to me that the crops produced by most of us, particularly in a season like this, would only supply a fraction of our household's fresh food needs. The local greengrocer (or supermarket, depending on our shopping choices) need have no fear. Personally I can say without hesitation that the volume of water invested in my cherry tomato bushes this summer was not justified by the few handfuls of fruit I picked. And let's face it: for my father's family, subsistence farming - not in an urban backyard, but plots amounting to a couple of hectares in a fertile rural valley with a moderate climate - was a full-time job for every family member; even so, they often went hungry.

Naturally this does not apply to everyone. Since beginning to write this, I seem to keep meeting people who tell me about their prolific backyard food gardens. They are devoted and energetic gardeners. The other common factor I've noticed about these gardeners is the availability of whatever funds are required to create the ideal garden. They are not living in rental properties, nor perching mentally, emotionally or financially on the edge of survival.

I'm talking about myself, my family and friends, and the people I know at the Vege Swap. Like most Vege Swappers, I love my garden, but it's not the top item on my life's list. If I find the time to plant a little, water, and keep things tidy, I'm doing well. Of course there are ways to make food gardens work even in far from ideal conditions, and to reduce one's environmental 'footprint' at the same time, many grouped under the banner of 'permaculture'. There are websites and books and groups and courses. I'd like to learn about these, when my son is a little older, my health a little better, and my employment position a little more secure. Call these excuses if you will; all our lives are based on

priorities; there are so many things I'd like to do, and I just can't do them all *now*.

I guess priorities shift when necessity enters our lives. I have no doubt that growing our own food is an important step, and that the more it becomes essential for our survival, the more we rapidly we will figure out how to make it work. I'm struck by the story of a young Lithuanian mother who nursed *five hundred* self-seeded tomato seedlings, indoors, through the bitter Lithuanian winter of 1943 by carrying them from one windowsill to another during the day to catch as much sunlight as possible. They would provide food, but more importantly, income to feed her desperate family.¹

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How does change to the weft of our lives - our everyday ways of being and doing - come about on a vast scale, society- or world-wide? It seems to me that such pervasive change is driven either by desire or by necessity.

Changes accelerating rapidly over the last century towards ways of living now recognised as "unsustainable" have been driven by the deep human desires for ease, comfort and satiation, all expressions of the survival instinct as manifested in circumstances of abundance; and by the desire most primary to survival - procreation - with its derivative instincts such as adornment and prestige.

Even the much-decried 'profit' principle is surely born of the deep human urge to stock up now for an uncertain future, to make provisions for 'our own' against potential scarcity. But it's more comfortable to condemn than to see ourselves as part of it, and it as part of us.

Incrementally and inevitably, these desires have driven us, changed us, until ultimately those changes have shaped not only our lives but also our environment, until it's difficult to imagine how we could live without them. We rely on the automobile, for instance, to assuage our lack of community, even as the automobile shapes a physical and conceptual

¹ Jonaitis, Elena. *Elena's Story*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1997.

modern environment which severs community.

Perhaps this is how the process of change always goes, the 'Story of Life'. But as we stand before this gargantuan feat accomplished – albeit only a couple of generations old – and hear that our patterns of energy and water use, consumption, transportation, are "unsustainable", we feel guilty and yet simultaneously perplexed. Where would one possibly start to undo the colossal fabric of 'How Things Are'? we wonder, even as we struggle valiantly, inadequately, one plastic bag or bucket of water at a time, to begin.

It's surely fairly obvious on any degree of reflection that it will take more than tinkering around the edges of what has become normality to reach a sustainable way of living. (It's not just me who thinks like this: past Adelaide Thinker in Residence Dr Geoff Mulgan exclaimed during a recent lecture, perhaps in reference to current feelgood advertising campaigns (it's fine to keep buying all this stuff, but don't forget your green bag!): *"We're not going to save the planet one plastic bag at a time!"*²) It's as if we still wish to convince ourselves that we can pay, through minor forfeits and token obeisances, to keep our current lifestyle. Instead, far more fundamental change is required and will come upon us by force if we are unwilling or unable to conceive of it by choice.

Which human being, while water flows from the tap and electricity from the switch, will not employ these resources in the services of the life-preserving instincts to secure comfort and conserve effort? Yet necessity is the other inexorable driver of change. When we no longer have access to unlimited water, we'll use it sparingly. When we haven't enough to eat, we'll be careful not to waste food. My grandmother washes her hair in a basin, the habit of a lifetime without running water. I could do so too (and have attempted it), but probably won't adopt the habit unless or until I have to. My grandmother carried the household's entire water supply up a steep

² *Think Again! Time to recover or time to change?*, Adelaide Thinkers in Residence Public Forum, Tuesday 13 April 2010, Adelaide Convention Centre, jointly presented by Adelaide Thinkers in Residence and The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre

hill from the village fountain, in a hard, heavy wooden pail, as the first chore of each morning. There was, in any case, no other way to wash her hair; but prudent water use does magically become an attractive proposition in the circumstances.

Necessity can arrive overnight, as it did in Iraq in March 2003, when from one day to the next the population learned to live without regular running water and electricity supplies, as many still do.³ Or it can come slowly, incrementally, so that we adjust our lives inch by inch almost without noticing, as has happened in southern Australia with water restrictions which have now become permanent.

Change is, after all, nothing new. Perhaps those who have lived through such challenging times before - the Great Wars and the Great Depression - could offer insight into how human beings tend to react when necessity enters our lives.

When things get tougher - as most people seem to agree they will - I wonder will a "nice idea" like the Community Fruit & Veg Swap become irrelevant, or will it take on the tenacious flavour of survival? As succinctly expressed by someone who came to the Swap in previous years, but not this summer: "When you have less, you don't feel as much like giving it away."

The paucity of produce this summer made the community aspects of the Fruit & Veg Swap more visible. Surprisingly perhaps, the drop in the volume of produce was not reflected in a proportionate drop in attendance numbers compared to previous summers. The tea and coffee which I poured away untouched after many Swaps in the past became the 'heart' of this year's Swap. My pot of (fresh, real) coffee was matched by another

³ For a compelling account of the texture of daily reality when modern infrastructures and supplies are disrupted, I highly recommend the remarkable writing of 'Riverbend', an anonymous young Iraqi woman. Her blog, riverbend.blogspot.com (still online) has also been published in two printed volumes: *Riverbend, Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq*, New York: The Feminist Press, 2005 (published in UK by Marion Boyars Publishing, 2005) - third prize winner in the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage, 2005; and *Baghdad Burning II: More girl Blog from Iraq*, New York: The Feminist Press, 2006.

loyal Swapper and was frequently accompanied by freshly baked delights - pink butterfly cakes, fresh scones with cream and home-made jam, sugary home-made doughnuts still warm. It became clear that many people come as much because of the conversation, the networks, the uniquely local and informal quality of the Swap, as for the produce itself. As we relished a mild sunny morning in the park, someone commented: "It's nice for once to just *sit*." The Swap creates a space for that - with no agenda, no structure, no pressure, no rush, to just sit, just be, just talk.

Will our appetite for community be sharpened or extinguished, I wonder, by the circumstances which squeeze human beings - scarcity, insecurity, discomfort, distrust, perhaps a breakdown of law and order as government and social systems struggle to cope with increased stresses and demands? Or perhaps both simultaneously?

Recently I heard a friend describe her life with her husband: "We're busy, we don't really have time for friends. He's happy being by himself, and I'm the same. We really don't need other people..." Her words sounded like a gong for me, because of their striking similarity to the way, a few years ago, my husband and I used to describe our insularity. Then life took an unexpected course, our partnership ended, and, in that moment of crisis, it became clear to me why we need community. We can afford to be blithe about isolation while the going is good.

Without family support close by, the Vege Swap which I initiated three years ago to avoid wasting surplus figs became a network upon which I was forced to draw for assistance with the essential task of survival.

As demonstrated by the behaviour of this summer's starving birds, competition between species increases when resources grow scarce. I'm certain the same is true between the sub-groups of the human species. My feeling is that tightening conditions result in an intensified perception of "us" and "them", with greater provision for and protectiveness of 'our own' mirrored by greater distrust and protectiveness *against* those on the 'outside'. What happens to community then is perhaps well described by the words of a character in

a novel I read recently: "*It all depends on how big you think your family is.*"⁴

Perhaps, when things get tougher, we will have even more need than we do now for networks of relationships within local communities which replicate, to some extent, the safety nets of extended family - for all their frictions and faults - from which so many of us in our mobile modern society seem have come undone.

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⁴ *The Wasted Vigil*, Nadeem Aslam, London: Faber & Faber, 2008.