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Our Forgotten Sacred Relationship with Food

June 5, 2023 | by Kaare Melby, Organizing Coordinator
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I don't think it's a controversial statement

to say that we have lost our relationship with food. But what does that mean? It means that our food has become divorced from the plants, animals, and traditions that it came from. The American diet is filled with highly processed junk foods, and the average person would be justified in not knowing what ingredients were used to create the foods they eat.

Over the past several decades, Americans have begun to realize that our food is making us sick. In a quest to understand why, we discovered that our food is filled with synthetic chemicals, preservatives, highly processed ingredients, and now even **ingredients derived from synthetic biology!** As a part of that realization, people began to notice that there were a few common commodity foods that seem to define junk food.

As the food movement grew, people also began to find that the commodity ingredients in junk food were produced using chemical-intensive industrial agriculture. And, as if that was not enough, these same commodity ingredients are the most common GMOs, making them even more toxic, and making the need to avoid them even greater.

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At some point along the line, many

commodity crops became synonymous with chemicals, GMOs, and junk food. Over time people began to simply avoid the most common commodity ingredients entirely. People decided that corn, soy, wheat, and even meat (and animal products) were bad for you.

I'd like to propose an alternative perspective: it's not the plants and animals that are bad for us, it's that we have lost the traditions and agreements that built our mutually-beneficial relationships with these plants and animals. But to understand that, I think we need to examine a teaching that Rowen White shared with me several years ago at the [Indigenous Farming Conference](#) in White Earth, MN.

The teaching that Rowen White shared was recorded [in a podcast](#) (starting at 14:30), and later included in an article titled [Cultivating Creation: Exploring Traditional Ecological Knowledge of Native Song](#):

...a long-long time ago our ancestors came into an agreement with our plant relatives – the wild and the cultivated ones – and particularly there were particular plants, corn and beans and squash and various ones, that gave up a little of their wildness and we gave up a little of our wildness as humans, and we came into this beautiful covenant and this agreement that we would

care for each other. And there were some plants that I've been told that decided that they didn't want to be cultivated and that we were going to have a different relationship to them, but those agreements, that covenant, that you know that sacred relationship, we carry those in our blood, in our bones, you know – like wild rivers they run in our blood and our bones.

This teaching stuck with me, and a few years later, I became a Bear Island Flint Corn seed keeper, and began **growing it on my farm**. This corn is a traditional corn that was grown in North Eastern, MN by the Anishinaabe people for many generations before Europeans came. As I researched the traditions and stories about how to take care of this corn, I found that when I took the time to build balanced regenerative systems that created communities of thriving organisms and microbiology, my efforts were reciprocated with healthy fertile soil and the corn began to produce enough beautiful seeds that I could afford to cook some. At this point I researched the traditional way to prepare corn, and learned about **the ancient tradition of nixtamalization**, a process in which the corn is prepared with ashes or mineral lime in a way that alters the corn and makes it more digestible and nutritious. I prepared the corn I had grown in this way and then processed it into tortillas and tamales.

The tortillas and tamales were outstanding, it felt like I was tasting corn for the first time, but in reality I was experiencing the re-establishment of my sacred relationship with this plant. I had worked hard and sacrificed to take care of this plant, this corn, this living being, in a good way that supported the whole ecosystem. And in return, the corn gifted me with a delicious food. I was experiencing that relationship that Rowen White had described. But that experience was only possible because I sought out the traditional methods of caring for and preparing this traditional food. That wasn't the case when Europeans first came to the Americas. They quickly adopted corn as a staple crop, and began to depend on it both in Europe and in the American colonies. But since they did not follow the traditional method of nixtamalization, the corn was not a complete food and led to a [disease called pellagra](#), which became an epidemic in the rural south of the United States in the early 1900s.

It was not that I had ignored corn until that day, I had consumed corn my whole life, in a galaxy of different foods and drinks. But it was not until I tasted corn that had been raised in a traditional interdependent and regenerative relationship that I woke up to the importance and beauty of corn. I realized that corn is not a generic commodity, synonymous with GMOs, chemicals and empty calories. Corn is not those things,

but rather those things are what we have done to corn. We had forgotten our sacred agreement, and instead abused the plant in the name of greed and growth. And our failure to uphold that agreement has resulted in a food that is unhealthy, indigestible, and nearly tasteless.

This experience was so eye-opening that I began to think about the other foods I am in relationship with, and if I was upholding my agreements with them. It also got me thinking about ways we as a culture can begin to honor and rebuild these relationships with the foods we eat. When it comes to corn, Mexico (where corn was originally cultivated by indigenous peoples) has actually just done something that could bring us a long way toward healing our relationship with corn: they have banned growing and importing GMO corn! And now, the Organic Consumers Association (along with others) are in negotiations with the Mexican Government and Organic Farmers in the USA to supply Mexico with the non-GMO corn they need. This means that the market for organic non-GMO corn is going to massively increase, further incentivizing more farmers to abandon the chemical-intensive industrial GMO corn growing model for an organic growing model that helps to regenerate local ecosystems and restore harmony to our long-ignored relationship with corn.

Now I want to share this mission with you, so that you can re-establish the sacred relationship to your foods as well. You don't have to grow these foods yourself to experience this – although I highly recommend it if you have the space and ability – instead you can buy foods that are grown or raised on [local regenerative organic farms](#), and then you can research how to traditionally prepare that food. Every staple food that we eat has a deep cultural tradition behind it, and I hope to explore more of these food traditions with you in the future. If you want to try your hand at nixtamalization, check out this video about [How To Nixtamalize With Wood Ash By The Sioux Chef AKA Sean Sherman of Owamni Restaurant](#).

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June 6th, 2023

REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE
Our Forgotten Sacred Relationship with Food
Kaare Melby, OCA's Organizing Coordinator, writes: "I don't think it's a controversial statement to say that we have contentious in Mexico. Maize, as it is known in most of the world, is the core of the country's diet and cuisine. The global food The artificial sweetener sucralose (marketed as Splenda) is widely used and found in products like diet soda and chewing gum. According to a new study, it's also capable of damaging the DNA material

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