

June 23, 2020

Trinity Musings #20: Rev Brian Goodings (self-isolating but about to go on holidays from Trinity United Church)

Imagine driving past a gas station with a sign outside that advertised, Combustible Gas!” Huh? What other kind should be sold? Well, the same question might be asked about what we mean by having places called “Health Food Stores”. What other kind should be sold? Should the sign in front of our grocery stores say “Some Expensive Health But Lotsa Cheap Crummy Food Too”?

We have grown accustomed to the market making this differentiation and we know the difference is reflected in the price. Organic food, (aka Health food), costs a lot more than crummy food. It certainly isn't the fault of the grocery stores; consumers just demand the best deal- even if it isn't good for them.

Although many Health-food eaters are vegan or vegetarian (and more than eager to judge Neanderthal hamburger eaters like me) an “organic chicken” costs a lot more than a crummy chicken costs.

The organic chicken was named, had its own bedroom with matching sheets and pillow cases, and was read bedtime stories every night. When it was ready for market, it met with support staff and then was euthanized by a kind practitioner with music playing and low lighting.

The crummy chicken spent its miserable life jammed in a pen with dozens of others, was fed horrible feed filled with antibiotics made from the ground up feathers and feet of other dead chickens. One day, right on schedule, it was dragged from its pen and had its head cut off by a machine. Brutal but cheap. Don't blame the farmer, blame the consumer.

The same distinction (Organic vs Crummy) is made between vegetables, coffee, cheese, eggs, and even wine and beer. If we really are what we eat, some of us are organ-atons and some of us are crumm-atons.

Healthy food costs big bucks and not surprisingly, rich folk live on the organic side because they can afford it. The crummy side is where poor people feed, most of the time.

The unfairness-gap between the two very unequally sized categories has grown during this Covid-19 crises. Wealthy people were able to afford to purchase vast quantities of groceries to stockpile at home in giant freezers and cupboards while poorer people could only purchase small amounts and had to make many more trips to the stores. Each time they went, they were exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. If the prices go up because of low supply and high demand, the rich people will simply pay more. Poor people will just do without.

Not surprisingly, many poor people have poor diets and are not as healthy as those who live high off the hog. Poorer people have many health issues directly linked to eating lower quality food because cheaper foods are filled with sugar and salt and godonlyknows what. Poorer people also have more underlying medical conditions and co-morbidities than richer people and they are more likely to die from viral infections. Life expectancy is directly linked to wealth.

At the height of the recent crisis, the strongest advice and direction from our government and health officials was “shelter in place” and work from home. Poorer working people did not have the luxury of staying safely at home. Many of them, working for just over minimum wage, drive buses or work in grocery stores and nursing homes.

In the United States, the viral infections and deaths have further divided the population along racial lines. Covid-19 has disproportionately killed many more poor black people than non-blacks. It isn't even close. If you want a shock, check out the death toll among poor black people in places like Chicago.

Although better in Canada, the statistics are still being gathered and it does look like there is a significant and shameful racial divide here too. While many of us of privilege could shelter at home, meet on Zoom, and spend our time online collectively lamenting about how bored we were with Facebook and Netflix, the most vulnerable among us had to go to work. They needed enough money to at least buy crummy food. And so the cycle goes...

After the Covid crisis eases, we are going to be spending a lot of time scrutinizing the healthcare systems in Canada. Nursing homes are about to undergo a major overhaul and I believe the time has come to examine what constitutes acceptable quality for food too.

As long as we have universal health care in Canada, it is in our own shared interest to keep people as healthy as possible and out of hospital. It starts with food and our most vulnerable people should be able to eat as well as anyone else. (I'll leave the discussion of clean water for another Musing.)

The virus has exposed what we all really knew in our heart of hearts, a healthy culture costs more money than we have been spending. We now know that the cost of ignoring public health in order to save money in the short term is tragic and ultimately comes back to haunt us with a much higher price tag.

A lot of our good-bargain-deals for health care practices and products turned out not to be such a good deal after all.

(See you in September...peace out Rev B)

