

April 15, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "A World Without Order"

In 1963, as I immigrated to the U. S. deathly afraid of airplanes, I traveled by boat. Stepping ashore in New York, my first order of business was sampling American fare. At a nearby eatery I ordered a piece of cherry pie and a bottle of coke. The pie looked luscious; the coke was a novelty yet unobtainable in Europe.

I could not eat and drink what I had ordered. The stuff was so sickeningly sweet, it made me gag. By the same token, my spouse-to-be complained about European pastries: "Very disappointing. No taste."

Many of today's cereals are candy rather than breakfast, containing fifty percent or more sugar per box. Sugar—cane, fructose, corn—is much cheaper than grains; boxed cereals sell consumers the sugar at grain prices. Of course, it's the colorful pictures on the boxes, and the heavy advertising to children, that compels parents to shoulder the expense, simultaneously paying for the ill health of their children. When sugar got a bad rap some years back, "Sugar Frosted Flakes" became "Frosted Flakes." Other manufacturers changed "Sugar" labels to "Honey." The sugar content remained undiminished.

Food researchers have discovered that sugar lights up the "pleasure centers" in our brains similar to drug addiction. "Processed sugar in certain individuals can produce compulsive patterns of intake," says Nora Volko, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Members of Overeaters Anonymous often discuss sugar like it was heroin. Their only survival strategy is to stay away from the stuff altogether.

As if it weren't bad enough that fast-food manufacturers and its soft-drink coevals have ramped up the sugar in the American diet to unprecedented levels, "convenience food" contains salt and fat at staggering proportions. Profits—and Wall Street—are merciless drivers. So powerful are the industries, government regulators have been unable to prevail against them. Indeed, some government agencies—the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in particular—actively collaborate in the scheme, encouraging consumption of more red meat, more butter, more cheese.

The industries peddle their wares abroad as aggressively as at home. In a few cases, governments have curbed the most grievous excesses. For example, in the late 1970s, Finland's adult males were consuming twice, sometimes three times, the sodium they should be taking in. Then the Finish government embarked on a massive public-education campaign, simultaneously forcing manufactures to label every grocery item loaded with salt with the warning, "high in salt" while low-sodium fare could be touted accordingly. The result: By 2007, Finland's per capita consumption of salt had dropped by one-third; deaths from stroke and heart disease had fallen by 80 percent.

Michael Jacobson directs the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI). I am an avid supporter, subscribing to CSPI's monthly newsletter, "Nutrition Action," which is immensely helpful in making intelligent food choices. Since 2005, Jacobson has forced Kellogg to limit its advertising to young kids, Sara Lee to acknowledge that its "whole grain bread" is only 30 percent whole grain, PepsiCo to change the labeling of Tropicana Peach Papaya Juice to reflect the fact that it contains neither peaches nor papaya, nor is it a juice.

The country's high-blood-pressure rates, linked to sodium consumption, are of grave concern to

Jacobson. Already in 1978 he petitioned the FDA to reclassify salt from an ingredient to “an additive that poses health concerns,” which would allow FDA to mandate limits or warning labels. A massive campaign by Frito-Lay and similar “snack” manufacturers brought his efforts to naught. Some giant food companies—Kraft, General Foods—had been acquired by tobacco giants like Philip Morris, and they applied Big Tobacco’s disingenuous sales tactics to fast-food marketing. But Jacobson, who trained as microbiologist at MIT, isn’t done yet.

Overconsumption of fat is the third in the unholy triad that’s Jacobson’s red flag. The mainstays of processed foods that pump big doses of saturated fat into our bodies are chesses and red meat. Here’s where USDA’s conflict of interest comes in. “On one side are the 312 million or so people of the United States and their health, which the USDA is charged with safeguarding,” writes Michael Moss in his 2013 “Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us.” Conspiring against the 312 million are “the three hundred or so companies that form the \$1 trillion industry of food manufacturing, companies the USDA feels obligated to placate and nurture.”

While Americans are saddled with epidemics of obesity and hardened arteries, USDA grants the industry “its every wish.” As concerns “the greatest sources of fat”—red meat and cheese—USDA has become “a full partner in the most urgent mission of all: cajoling the people to eat more.” Not only does USDA subsidize Big Beef and Big Dairy, it undertakes marketing programs for both—all with taxpayer money.

Domino’s now delivers 1.6 million pizzas a month in Mexico. USDA’s 2002 report to Congress boasted, “In Mexico, a joint promotion with Domino’s Pizza featured the USDEC logo on all Domino’s pizza boxes with the slogan, ‘Made with 100% U.S. cheese’.” Meanwhile, notes the author of “Salt Sugar Fat,” as “taxpayer money was being used to promote cheese in Mexico, the people of Mexico were on their way to having the highest rates of obesity in the world after U.S. citizens.”

I have learned to stay away from granola bars, trail mixes, Go-Gurt, Lunchables, and other “healthful choices” so-called. On travels I take unsalted nuts and raisins, the occasional boiled egg without salt, apples, carrots, celery stalks filled with smidgens of peanut butter. If airline seatmates snicker and sniff, so be it.

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The following was composed in consideration of SANKOFA African Awareness event. I urge you to attend: Saturday morning, April 20, at LCCC.

To find yourself in another country is profoundly disorienting. You wake from fitful sleep and gaze around, bewildered. Unfamiliar furniture greets you, a half-opened suitcase. Eventually a friendly face swims into view. You recall that you’re visiting this strange place on your own volition. You heave a sigh of relief. You’re able to order your world, after all. Once again, you’re in touch with reality.

Now imagine you're thrust into a strange world against your will, ripped amid upheaval and violence from your village in the tropics. Granted, village life was not without strife. Neighboring villagers, your distant cousins, feuded with you over food resources and mating rights, raiding your storage sheds, kidnapping your women and girls. Whenever possible, your villagers retaliated in kind.

But this time, the menace is of vastly greater scale. Pale-skinned warriors invade your village, kill your elders and babies, cast you and other able-bodied individuals into chains. You're forced on a march of sorrow and suffering. From a distance, you may glimpse the leering face of a rival. It comes to you, your neighbors, your cousins, betrayed you. Too late you recall warnings about white devils who burn thatch-roofed huts and carry off whatever inhabitants they don't kill outright.

Now you find yourself in the infamous Middle Passage, that voyage in the belly of a ship where, densely packed, you're forced to lie in your own waste amid moaning, often dying, fellow sufferers whose dialects are foreign to you. Already you've suffered beatings, sexual assaults, and countless acts of contempt and derision. Every few days the crew forces you on deck, where you're hosed down, shivering. In your village it may have been the custom to wear but a decorative girdle in homage to your privates, but the adornment has long been ripped off your body. Amid white devils dressed to the hilt, you're utterly, shamefully naked. You try to jump overboard. More beatings follow.

If you survive Middle Passage, you're up for auction like cattle, your body prodded and probed. Eventually you're taken to far-off fields, where you're forced to tend cotton plants and gather the harvest. If boll weevil infests the crop, it's blamed on your witchcraft. You realize, despite the contempt of the white devils, they are deeply, superstitiously, afraid of you—and their fear drives them to ever more punishments.

Or you may be assigned to cane-sugar processing, where you stir boiling vats while hundreds of searing droplets splash onto your skin. You may work in a rum distillery. There, too, you're scalded by boiling liquids. You understand you are being worked to death. More slave labor is on the way. Your midday meal, a piece of mush, has been soaked in cheap liquor. It makes you plod on, without will or choice, until you lay your burden down. Your children, if they survive, must carry on where you left off.

These children are taught that their fate is the Will of God. They're taught that their reward is in Heaven. They'll learn to revere a Bible they cannot read; hence, can't understand that it's the very book that declaims the subjugation of "darkies," no thanks to a Biblical ancestor, Ham, declared—by the Almighty—on the basis of dusky skin as his brethren's servant.

Your children hear legends of a long-ago people, enslaved in Egypt, who escaped their tormentors to live as nomads in the dessert. Eventually the nomads waged war with a settled people to appropriate the Promised Land, the Land of Milk and Honey. That legend has become the myth of the bountiful Hereafter that will welcome you once you "cross over the River Jordan."

Your children grow up monumentally confused, saddled with your own profound sense of dislocation. Forbidden is any kind of learning that would tear the cobwebs of superstition. To be caught reading brings torture or death.

Nonetheless, amidst beatings from overseers, one or the other of your descendants makes friends with a white child who, in secret, teaches the young darkie to read. The descendants may be lighter-skinned than you were, having been fathered by white men. They are called mulatto, a term meant to “keep them in their place.”

One such individual is Frederick Douglass, a man sometimes struggling in vain against his own contempt: Contempt for his dark brethren who continue to submit to their fates, contempt for the whites who continue to profit from enslavement.

Frederick Douglass will escape slavery, embrace oratory, and become advisor to Abraham Lincoln, a president at odds with his own kind. A civil war and its aftermath will tear apart the fabric of society to rain fire and brimstone onto the heads of your descendants, whose existence is deemed the root cause of the outrage.

The exodus from slavery has begun. It will be decades, centuries, before the descendants of your children are accorded anything close to humane treatment.

Equality? Many can only dream of such a thing. Amidst horrid lynchings—and mass incarcerations that continue today under the most appalling conditions—a decent future, a living wage remain out of reach. That sigh of relief, that feeling of being able to order one’s world, that sense of in touch with reality, is but a distant hope for many.