

Food Justice: A Q+A with LaDonna Redmond

Written by
Thursday, 01 May 2014 14:04



Part 1 of a series

The following is a transcript of a recent Conversations With Al McFarlane with Insight founder, Al McFarlane and food justice advocate, LaDonna Redmond.

Al McFarlane

You are a colleague in the radio industry. You have a regular and celebrated program on our sister station KMOJ. Your program is called "It's Your Health." It's a great service to our community, a great program. It's an important topic.

LaDonna Redmond

I talk about food as well as health. We take an approach to health that empowers people – not just things that you can do or make yourself as an individual; we examine the public policy issues that impact your health. We help our listeners get more engaged in their personal health by making choices on the ground and also making political and policy choices.

Al McFarlane

Define "food justice." What's the concept? It's a great combination of words – food plus justice.

LaDonna Redmond

It means a couple of things for people. One is that there is no justice around food for some people. At the core of food justice, the definition addresses any issues around access to food or the food system for anyone, whether they have limited access or whether they have all the access in the world. Everyone should have access to food. So the human right to food defines the topic of food justice. I also want to separate the two, food and justice, because I think food is a tool for organizing communities for justice. It's something that everyone does. Everyone eats; we all have some food some place at some point during the day. And even when you're struggling with access, still food is a part of the conversation in your family. So food justice is really about how do we acquire food that is economically, socially and politically just for all.

Al McFarlane

What does that mean for our community? We are Africans in the New World.

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LaDonna Redmond

For African Americans I think it means something very special. It is something that is not really well discussed in our community. And that's the reclaiming space, particularly land space in our urban communities where many of us live. In the Food Justice Movement African Americans are at the forefront of reclaiming vacant space and converting it to urban farm sites. One level of work is really expanding this notion of access to not just include people who are passive recipients of food, but enabling people to envision themselves becoming entrepreneurs again, being able to sell their produce and create a local food system that's vibrant. It also means reclaiming soul food. I hear lots of people say soul food is bad food.

Al McFarlane

They say soul food will kill you.

LaDonna Redmond

But that's not true. What's killing us is the industrialized food system that has replaced our food in our community. So you can get fried chicken from Kentucky Fried Chicken or Popeye's or any other mainstays that are in our community. But very few people are going home and eating a "mess of greens," as my grandmother used to say, with cornbread and drinking the pot liquor or baking a chicken. So there are some misnomers that we've accepted and internalized about our African American cuisine. Food justice for African Americans means reclaiming our food as well as our land.

Al McFarlane

LaDonna Redmond, founder, lead organizer for the Campaign for Food Justice Now. Their motto – Unite and Organize. LaDonna, you talked about the need to deal with our urban reality and a lot of our story is about pain and anguish and deprivation, doing without. We've moved away from our agrarian roots. We all came out of the South.

It reminds me that several years ago when Lucille's Kitchen was in north Minneapolis, we did this show called the Insight/KMOJ Public Policy Forum at Lucille's Kitchen. It was a great live radio show every week that used video conferencing to connect people around the world to our audience in north Minneapolis. One show we did with people in Crookston, Minn. Crookston are farmers connecting with people from my neighborhood, north Minneapolis. They had this presumption that we in north Minneapolis didn't know anything about farming or the plight and the challenges facing farming communities. They sounded as though they saw our people living comfortably, getting our regular allotments from the government and that we had no connection to food production.

I remembered Prof. Mahmoud El Kati reminding them and us that we are here in this hemisphere because of farming. He challenged them and us to discard any ideas questioning our natural affinity to – and knowledge of – the land, whether we're practicing it right now or not. It's in us and of us, he declared.

Likewise, LaDonna, you want us to connect to the knowledge of our story, our history and the oneness that I think you believe our community has with the soil and with farming, with food. Am I right or am I wrong?

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LaDonna Redmond

You're completely on point. I have had that experience myself. I'm from Illinois and I've sat on a number of committees with large-scale farmers who are mainstream farmers, farming corn and soybean and what not. They would look at me like, "what would be your interest in farming? Surely Black people don't know anything about farming."

I did the same thing. I reminded them that Africans were captured, enslaved and brought to the United States to create the contemporary agricultural system. So my perspective in food justice also uses historical trauma as the platform to understand the impact of enslavement on Africans particularly taking someone from another land and placing them on this land, as well as moving our Native American brothers and sisters off the land by policies of extermination against them for the purposes of cultivating land. So reclaiming our space means healing from that trauma. And part of the reason that they don't know about our history is because we don't tell them and we don't talk about it.

Al McFarlane

So we forget.

LaDonna Redmond

And so we forget. And it's convenient that we forget but we are reminded every day when we have the kind of health disparities that we have. You asked me earlier what does food justice mean. It also means reclaiming our history and being able to make a connection between the historical trauma of the past and our health disparities of today and the things that we have to do right now to remedy the situation: reclaim our land and reclaim our food.