

Dinner speech

This year I anticipated, and actually gave some thought to the dinner speech.

Each year John tries to congratulate me and I bumble and mumble my way through a few thanks and welcomes.

One step ahead this year

On behalf of the food systems group we, as your hosts, welcome you to Oxford, personally as well as professionally. It is wonderful to see many new faces this year and make new friends. We received very warm apologies from those that attended last year and personally could not make it themselves. There is a lot of interest in this area.

Here we hold in our hands the topic of our effort [wine glass aloft]... sunlight restructured and restructured in what a way. We view and are mostly discussing during the day the loss, let us remember this evening, - and yes I'm totally trying to side step the fact I have no idea of the environmental, social or health cost of the meals before us/coming to us...at each event I try and get a zero-footprint or zero-waste caterer but do not succeed...so let us conveniently side-step the loss and recall now the profit. And if I may say so - the wonder.

The lives these products have touched...this is their craft and their labour. What pathways of the sky and deeps of the earth has the very water embedded in our meal trod, who or what mouth has eaten the very same molecule in the billions years history of the earth - what dinosaur ate this, what whale, what worm, what ancestor - the story behind each. Even in our industrial system who designed the machine, who drove it to port or fork, and in what ends of this earth.

Something we all know, but whatever mechanism it is of our human brains that makes us fixate on the smaller scope, that makes us forget...food is not just an input into life, nor just an integral part of our personal and communal enjoyment of life, it is a product of life. Even the plant, producing seed, strives upward sensing the sun. Chemically induced. But you might say that about our own upward reaching.

Thinking of our quest - accounting for wonder and its damage side by side, is not holding both simultaneously the philosophical peril of the first worlder in

our time...and our standard human response is not to be able to hold both together, to have to look to one side or the other, to narrow our scope. A simple but powerful part of impact valuation or true cost accounting, I think, is that it is an account - a story, a recording of events that brings with it remembrance of origins and consequences, an acknowledgement, hidden behind a simple number.

Let us take heart that sustainability itself, as a quest, is gathering traction. That, tonight, is our toast. For this short term blindness - that I, we, globally, could be just a mouth and that all processes of this world end with input into it, to deny the wonder of what we are part of, and to not be a part of transforming the sacrifices of those inputs into outputs that are food for someone or something else, is a lonely and disconnected place to be – long before it becomes ruinous in terms of health or resources, and a place where we, globally, are only being and seeing half of ourselves.

So...here's to you all and your efforts towards sustainability in each of your organisations.

Writing this speech down, I recalled a quote from my youth. I debated about putting it in but then thought- yeah, it gives the ending of my speech a mystical flavour. Those whose have read The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran will know it...

"...since you must kill to eat, and rob the young of its mother's milk to quench your thirst, let it then be an act of worship,
Let your board stand an altar on which the pure and the innocent of forest and plain are sacrificed for that which is purer and still more innocent in man.
When you kill a beast say to him in your heart,
By the same power that slays you, I too am slain; and I too shall be consumed.
For the law that delivered you into my hand shall deliver me into a mightier hand."

It is our pleasure to bring you this meeting - Oxford style,
good discussion,
amongst the finest minds,
global problems, old halls,
and fine wine.

Cheers.