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“Inspiring in the midst of humanity’s careening toward disaster, is his deep commitment to hope.”

This book from Dundurn Press’ Point of View series is a welcome addition to the often heated dialogue about why so many people struggle for enough food and livelihood security while our agri-food systems produced excess amounts of food. Ralph Martin shares his earliest memories on his grandfather’s farm; his and other’s agricultural, ecological and food systems research; teachings of Indigenous people, philosophers and theologians; and insights gleaned through a lifetime of thoughtful reflection about humans eating on this Earth. Through questions he invites the reader into a conversation, a set of stories about his and others’ experiences, drawing in threads of relevant information and views from novelists to natural scientists, newspapers to scientific journal articles, and classic written works to oral truths from Indigenous elders (see the book’s Bibliography).

As a reader I slowly constructed a sense of his origins from a settler, Mennonite farm heritage, to his becoming socially engaged, ecologically aware, and seeing with multiple eyes - scientific, spiritual-philosophical, and deeply human. His acknowledgements (p 187) elaborate: “It was from my Grampa, as we did our chores on the farm, that I fundamentally learned about respect; respect for soil, respect for plants, respect for animals, both in the barn, and those outside, who walk, crawl, fly, and swim....[and]... The material and ideas in this book were formed under the influence of numerous colleagues, students, farmers, authors, scientists, relatives, and friends.” His transparency throughout is refreshing, for example “let me be clear that as a scientist I have biases and I’m sure all scientists do, whether acknowledged or not.” Inspiring in the midst of humanity’s careening toward disaster is his deep commitment to hope.

In the Introduction, he lays out the principal challenges and potential: “A campaign to create sustainable food production by showing the necessity of choosing less to avoid losing more, and by promoting sharing, even though that will result in having less to go around, faces similar hurdles. Yet, paradoxical as it seems, such a course can lead to more choice and greater freedom, while improving our chances for survival.” He exhorts humanity in an inclusive way (p 12): It’s time to mature, get together, and work with what we have. If we continue to compete to consume more of the less that remains, we will have failed as a species” And then offers hope “If, on the other hand, we properly appreciate our special heritage and opportunity on Earth, if we adopt the necessary gratitude for what we have, then we will be able to lead balanced lives, ones that help foster a sustainable and nurturing planet.”

The first chapter Appropriately starts with Indigenous Food Systems, quoting Indigenous elders at length and recognizing the inspired work of his graduate students such as Paul Wartman on forest garden systems (FGSs) (p 14) – “multistoried plant communities providing food from vegetables, herbs, shrubs, and trees.” He describes how “Appreciation of our mixed blood and interdependence may soften our notions of “us” and extend our sense of family. Learning to live in harmony with, rather than by exploiting, our fellow creatures and the earth’s non-living

entities will deepen our potential for resilience.” (p 23). In chapter 2, he explores food chains – from agricultural inputs to wasted food – recognizing that “for the average consumer, the workings of the whole system are impossible to understand” (p 29). He critiques agri-food corporations in their boasts to feed the world, while exhorting people to learn to feed themselves and reduce the length of food chains by buying locally, something more have turned to as the global COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted food supply chains. Linked is the need to reign in food production and the raiding of Earth’s resources, and to limit human populations (chapter 3): “with some partnership and planning we may learn to eat and live sensibly, and not crash like raiders inevitably will.” (p 49). We could cast our lot as keepers, promoting the sustainability of Earth’s systems.

However, this involves questioning common slogans of the agricultural industry (p 54, chapter 4) “What do we *do*, when we salute the imperative of feeding the world? Let’s start by defining “the world.” Are we planning to feed all people or only those who can pay? Do we feed only people? If so, would it be okay to deprive other beings, or even to wipe out species, so that more people can eat or so that each person can consume more? Is it acceptable to use food as a weapon by poisoning the food of enemies, or withholding it from enemies, or destroying the food-producing capacity of enemies?” Martin comes to the biting conclusion that “Feeding the world is usually a matter of producing enough food for those people living in non-hostile nations who can pay” His critical social analysis goes on to note that “Food flows to those with money or power” (p 54), increasingly agri-food corporations. He cautions readers not “blame farmers for being enthused about the possibility of selling more... [as farmers] have subsidized the plenty for people’s palates with their sweat and investments. Farmers justifiably resist admonitions to produce food sustainably. After all, the cost would be theirs.” Instead “The challenge is to keep rural people engaged with their eyes, synthesizing proficiencies, relational awareness, and respectful attitudes. ... We must shift the priority from production to local adaptation, from innovation to familiarity, from power to elegance, from costliness to thrift.” (p 63) These are among the many quotable quotes in Martin’s book.

Chapter 5 makes the links between the current agri-food system, its promotion of processed food e.g. soft drinks, and widespread illness such as obesity and diabetes. It cites research on the higher health care costs among those with food insecurity (p 74) and argues the need for the Guaranteed Annual Income. He then tackles the mass of wasted food globally (chapter 6), opening it with his uncle’s admonition to finish an apple “If you start to eat a perfectly good apple, then eat it all. In our family we don’t waste.” He explores bringing back earlier human patterns in modern form such as converting food humans won’t eat into livestock feed, before arguing that more agricultural production should go to food for people, rather than livestock (chapter 7), consistent with humans eating a healthy planetary diet of less meat. Chapters 8 through 11 draw on Dr. Martin’s agricultural science understandings to explore ways to optimize energy and nitrogen use, reduce greenhouse gas contributions, build soil and recover biodiversity.

In chapter 12, Martin turns to “quintessence” ... believed to be the “breath of the gods” and to pervade all things.” He waxes transcendent “Surely, we desire the purest and most perfect form of our relationships. We seek to transcend our egos and live lives of love and selfless service to other people... we are not just members of a human community; we are connected to all and

everything that we share our planet with: animals, plants, and even the non-living elements.” (p 161) He draws on deep ecology to argue for connection with all species, recognizing the role of connection in addressing despair. In the Conclusion, he recapitulates themes from earlier chapters and makes a plea “for as many people as possible to show up with emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and relational maturity. Too much deference to a corporate rationale is to diminish ourselves and our chances for meeting Anthropocene challenges.” (p 178). Returning to the title “Excess is yesterday’s notion. Being grateful for enough is the assurance of today and tomorrow.” (p 185)

Food Security covers lots of ground in a highly approachable way, accessible for a wide range of readers. Some may find his emphasis on all as “in the same boat” grating, not fully challenging corporation bent on profit in the existing agri-food system yet most will appreciate his tolerance, his explicit attention to opportunities for change, and his deep faith in humans being with other species in the world differently. I hope other readers agree and are moved accordingly.