



The Art of Teaching

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TEACHING CENTER NEWSLETTER OCTOBER 2009

Merrie B. King, Director, Teaching Center

Welcome from the Teaching Center to the 2009-2010 academic year at Belmont! As we gather together to teach and to learn, we are invited to read the poetry of Mary Oliver, ponder the question *A Paradise Lost?*, and reflect on the meaning of the *U.S. News and World Report* ranking of #7. Although to the writers and readers of *U.S. News*, number seven calls attention to noteworthy academic accomplishments, we know that the number seven has additional significant meanings.

In the Hebrew, seven is shevah, from the root, "savah," meaning to be full or satisfied or to have enough of. It occupies a large place in the Word of God and is considered a very powerful and spiritual number. And, according to one source, because of these characteristics, it often revolves around the teacher and the student! Thus, to members of the Belmont community, we have multiple reasons to celebrate the ranking.

Many faculty members joined Summer Reading Groups, and this issue of the Newsletter features reviews of three of these thought provoking books: *Omnivore's Dilemma* (our common book), *Stroke of Insight*, and *Mindset*. May they provide ideas and compelling questions to begin your new semester.

This fall we are focusing on the theme of What is the Context? Our four lunch discussions center around this idea. Also, we are glad to introduce a new column in The Art of Teaching! It will help all of us better understand the history of Belmont. The column: "Past Is Prologue" will be written by our columnist Dr. James Stamper, historian and professor of education. He has been at Belmont since 1980 and has served as Academic Dean and Vice President for Academic Affairs. He has served as chair of 30 visiting committees for SACS and serves as a trustee for International College in Naples/Ft. Myers, FL. Student teachers have the highest regard for his mentorship and continue to stay in touch long after they graduate. He is also known far and wide as The Cookie Man, infamous for his Chocolate Chip Cookies. We can look forward to learning more about the place we work through his knowledge and gift of storytelling.

We at the Teaching Center hope, through our programming and availability, to keep the conversation alive about teaching and learning. Through the Fall Workshops, Pause for a Poem, Lunch discussions, and the Courage to Teach Retreat Series, we hope that you will find a way to connect with yourself and others across campus around the ideas and engagement of teaching and learning. ■

OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA

by Jenny Rushing, Reference Librarian, Library Services

THANK YOU MICHAEL POLLAN? After reading *Omnivore's Dilemma* this summer and participating in a wonderfully insightful reading group through the Teaching Center, I'm not sure if I should thank Michael Pollan for challenging my way of thinking about food or curse him for ruining my appetite! I have been looking forward to reading this book, realizing my ignorance when it comes to industrialized food, especially since the organic and local food movements have exploded in Nashville this past year. I hear of friends' visiting the Farmer's Market, of them joining food co-ops, buying organic and shopping at Whole Foods, and I feel guilty, or behind the curve, or maybe just not hip enough to be part of this crowd. Pollan's book has given me a lot to chew on but has raised even more questions and left me more confused than before!

AHHH, BLISSFUL IGNORANCE While I was looking forward to reading the book, I was also anticipating uncomfortable results. For a number of years now I have been perfectly content being blissfully ignorant about the food I consume. I can recall many times eating a suspect "food product," being asked what's in it and replying with something like, "oh, you don't want to know!" How else can you really enjoy those chicken nuggets or Cheetos or Krystal burgers? I really thought I was doing okay before Pollan got into my head. I don't eat fast food very often, although I admit I love an occasional Krystal burger, perhaps the worst of the worst when it comes to industrial meals. Is that real meat on those burgers? You really don't want to know! I thought that I didn't eat very much processed food in general, but now I'm not so sure. Just because I don't eat frozen dinners or Hamburger Helper doesn't mean I'm not consuming plenty of high-fructose corn syrup, xanthan gum, monosodium glutamate, and any number of other strange substances. Now I see corn everywhere!

WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS? Now I really do feel a dilemma every time I go to Kroger (still haven't made a trip to Whole Foods). I have started buying organic apples, but feel guilty about how far they have been shipped. I'm wary of all the meat because all I can think about are the feedlots, drugged up cows, and those poor, cooped-up chickens. If as an omnivore, my brain is wired to avoid unsafe foods based on recognition and memory, then very little in the supermarket seems safe to eat. It is at this point, standing in Kroger with an empty cart and growing anxiety, that I start to question Pollan's work. Who does he think he is anyway? What gives him the authority to tell me what to eat? It is part of my job, as a librarian, to question authority. That is what we are trying to teach those freshmen in First Year Seminar after all. Maybe if I find he is a fraud and can discredit his claims, I can buy that frozen pizza that I want so badly! Well, it turns out that he is well-credentialed and has written extensively on the subject. But more than his impressive curriculum vitae, I am swayed by the fact that it all just seems like common sense. Pollan says this himself and then backs it up with some pretty convincing evidence. So, whether I like it or not, I have to face this dilemma now. There is no turning back.

WILL I EVER CHANGE? I am pleased to report that I have taken a few baby steps since reading the book. I made my first trip to the Nashville Farmer's Market, which resulted in a delicious squash casserole and butter beans. Just last week I happened upon a produce stand close to my house. I can say with certainty that I will

never buy another mushy, tasteless Kroger tomato. I have started to purchase some organic produce, although as Pollan points out, it's hard to judge the value, both for my health and the environment. I also stopped buying bagged lettuce, instead going for the bunch of red leaf. Does this count? I wonder how long I will stick with these changes, as minor as they are. I recall swearing that I would never eat McDonald's again after watching *Supersize Me* a few years ago. I still avoid their burgers, but admit I am a sucker for those French fries. After a little time passed, it was pretty easy to put that documentary out of my mind. And will the minor changes really make any difference anyway? This is where it gets overwhelming again. I'm not sure how much more I am able or willing to do at this point. Pollan says it is just a matter of making our food a priority, but time and money are realistic barriers.

THE GREAT FOOD DIVIDE While it may be common sense to eat organic and local whole foods, it seems completely out of reach for much of the population. As Pollan put it, the "plague of cheap corn" has created an industrialized food industry that 1) is apparently making us less healthy and more obese than ever before, 2) is getting rich in the process, and 3) seems impossible to dismantle. A privileged few can opt out by shopping at Whole Foods or joining a co-op, but that simply is not an option for many people. For this reason, the organic/local food movement seems like a trend, or at least a luxury. One of the best meals I've had in awhile was at City House, a Germantown restaurant that uses mostly local, seasonal ingredients, but it was also the most expensive. I laughed recently when I saw that "organic foods" and "farmer's markets" appear in the top ten list of Stuff White People Like, a hilarious but also provocative website and book by Christian Lander. I heard an interview with Lander recently on NPR, which also makes the list along with "Whole Foods and grocery co-ops." Lander is making fun of racial stereotypes, but there is an economic divide when it comes to food consumption, as with so many other things. This could be just one of countless issues our students might take on after reading *Omnivore's*. There could be some great argumentative papers in First Year Seminar this year.

GREAT COMMON BOOK I felt frustration with the book because I want the answer! What should I eat, and where should I buy it? How do we make healthy food more affordable and accessible to everyone? I feel like the student who comes to the library reference desk asking me for the perfect article. You know, the one article or book that answers all of their questions in the title. Well, *Omnivore's Dilemma* is not that book. It has left me confused, overwhelmed, and irritated but has also shifted my way of thinking in a profound way. Like I said, there is no going back now. I have so many more questions that I must answer, so many choices for what's for dinner. That Pollan really got into my head, and I hope he will do the same to our students. What a great common book! Has anyone warned Sodexo? ■

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OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA

by Courtney Stephens, Electronic & Educational Resources Librarian, Library Services

Like Jenny, I was aware of some of the issues raised in *Omnivore's Dilemma* before I read it, not because I had sought out information about our industrial food system, but because it has been gaining more prominence over the last few years. I've had a few limited conversations with people about some of the issues, but most of my information has come from a *New York Times* blog called Bitten, written by Mark Bittman. (Bittman is the author of *How to Cook Everything* and *Food Matters*). I found *Omnivore's Dilemma* to be very informative, and when I finished it, I promptly went through the bibliography, looking for more about the websites and other resources that Pollan had mentioned.

Thanks to the Teaching Center's Summer Reading Group that I was participating in, I learned about *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, by Barbara Kingsolver. While I had checked out many books from the resource list of *Omnivore's Dilemma*, I wound up reading *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* instead of those. Kingsolver approaches the same topics covered by Pollan in a much more hands-on manner. *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is the story of the Kingsolver family's year of giving up the "industrial-food pipeline." Some of the information offered in *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* is the same as in *Omnivore's Dilemma*, but it's a much more personal book. While living off our own acres of land is not feasible for most of us, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* offers a wealth of information on gardening, canning, what foods are in season when, and the challenges of giving up the traditional ways of obtaining food. This information is helpful in figuring out what small steps you can take to help break out of the Western diet. This book was much more eye-opening for me than *Omnivore's Dilemma* because I realized that I had approached my own garden all wrong. Next year (starting this fall, actually), I will be paying much more attention to my garden and how and when I plant the vegetables I want to grow.

After finishing *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, I was still looking for more information on what I could do about the issues raised in *Omnivore's Dilemma*. My garden certainly isn't big enough to support me for a full year (and I don't think I'm quite ready for that level of commitment yet, either). I returned to Michael Pollan's writing, picking up *In Defense of Food*. Written after *Omnivore's Dilemma*, *In Defense of Food* talks more about the science (nutritionism) behind the food industry and what the Western diet does to the human body. He also discusses how to escape the Western diet and gives more of a how-to on the topic than he does in *Omnivore's Dilemma*. The third section of *In Defense of Food* focuses on three phrases – "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." Pollan deconstructs each phrase and offers many tips on how to actually act on these phrases.

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle and *In Defense of Food* gave me more of the tools and information that I needed to start acting on the disturbing information presented in *Omnivore's Dilemma*. I still feel the confusion and frustration that Jenny mentioned, and I'm still eating fast food and shopping at Kroger. But I'm hoping that my garden will do better next year and that I can start cooking more and being much more careful about what I do eat. These changes are hard, though, since it feels like I have no time to put into cooking SOLE (seasonal/sustainable, organic, local, ethical) meals on a regular basis. I gave up (or thought I had) super-processed foods a while ago, but *Omnivore's Dilemma* made me realize that maybe I hadn't given up as much as I thought. I have friends who've given up things like sugar and HFCS (high fructose corn syrup) for health reasons, and I'm amazed by their strength. I'm hoping that the changes I intend to make in my eating habits will carry over to my soon-to-be husband as well. Since he is a fairly recently diagnosed diabetic, much of what I've read about the effects of the Western diet makes me think that maybe we can reverse some of the effects he's already feeling. I'm not sure he believes that I'll actually make him eat his vegetables, though!

There are many other books and resources available to help with these changes (large and small), but I'm glad I started with *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* and *In Defense of Food*. I do intend to continue reading and learning about this topic and will probably continue reading Michael Pollan's books on the subject. Another author I've seen recommended is Wendell Berry, whose books will certainly be added to my reading list as well.

You can find a list of the websites that are mentioned in these books, as well as others I've found at http://delicious.com/library_chic/omnivoresdilemma. ■