



Video Story Transcript

Grow to Give: An Interfaith Food Equity Project

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9NVLTPK7DI>

Note: The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Heather Forest. Every year in my town of Huntington, Long Island, New York on Martin Luther King's birthday, there is an interdenominational prayer service dedicated to a social justice theme. About 500 people attend; and priests, rabbis, monks, imams, pastors and ministers from all the local congregations participate in creating the service. They participate in the presentation of the service in full religious regalia. It is a colorful event filled with taluses, and yarmulkes, and vestments and saffron robes. But the most amazing thing about this event is that such a diverse collection of clergy manages to agree on a social justice theme.

Well, in 2012, the social justice theme was "We Can End Childhood Hunger." Since it was to be a child centered theme, the organizers decided that instead of having someone from the clergy offer the 15-minute long sermon, they would invite a storyteller to come and tell stories about food.

When I received the invitation, I was delighted. I said, "Uh, I'm a farmer and, and a food equity activist. Of course, I'll participate. I love your theme, 'We Can End Childhood Hunger.' That's great. What are you going to do to end childhood hunger?"

And the organizer said, "We're going to pray."

I said, "Well, that's wonderful but what are you going to DO to end childhood hunger?"

And the voice replied, "Hm, we're going to raise awareness!"

“That's wonderful. What if, as well as raising awareness, you raise vegetables. You know, there's hardly ever any vegetables at the food pantry and vegetables are very important for the nutrition and the health of growing children. What if,” I said, “What if... You know, the congregations in this town, the synagogues, and the churches, they all have big lawns... What if people dug up the lawns, planted vegetable gardens tended by the congregants and then the food was donated to the local pantry. They hardly ever have any fresh vegetables.”

There was dead silence at the other end of the telephone. And, finally, I heard him say, “Well, young lady, you'll have 15 minutes to make your case. Good luck!”

On the day of the prayer service when it was my turn to speak, I stepped up to the microphone. I took a big breath, and I said to the gathering...

“I'm a traveling storyteller. And one time when I was at an outdoor performance festival along the Hudson River, I took a break and I went for a walk along the river bank to, to enjoy the view. And as I stood there, I was joined by a woman in full African traditional dress and we enjoyed the visit together.

And she then turned to me and she said, ‘I don't understand your country. In my village back home, it's different. You have so much land and yet people still go hungry. In my village, if there was a little patch of earth showing, somebody would have planted it with seeds and there would be food growing.’

‘What a novel idea,’ I thought, ‘Planting food everywhere! But how would that ever happen in an urban or suburban environment?’ Well, actually, in fact, it has!

In the town of Todmorden in northern England, a woman named Estelle Brown awoke one morning and thought, ‘If the men can go to the pub, have a beer and start a war, the women can go to the café, have a cup of coffee and change the world.’

And so, she invited a group of her dearest friends to join her in the café, to have a meeting about changing the world. And, of course, they realized the very first thing they needed to decide was a topic about which to change the world. And they chose the topic of food, for food touches everyone's lives. They made a plan. And they all went back home and took down the fences and walls at the edges of their front yards along the sidewalk. They replanted their flower gardens with vegetables and then put signs in the vegetable patches that said, “Help yourself.”

Well, when the vegetables came to fruit and people walked along, at first, they didn't know what to do. But then, they enjoyed picking the tomatoes and the peppers. And soon people were planting vegetables in every patch of earth in Todmorden. There was a patch of vegetables growing everywhere from the train station to the police station. The town of Todmorden didn't... has vowed to become vegetable self-sufficient. And now people from all over the world come there to see how they could turn their towns, and their cities, and their villages into food forests so that no child goes hungry.”

I said to the gathering, “If anybody here wants to learn about how to plant food everywhere come to a meeting next week right here, same time, same place.” (*Well, the next week, representatives from 30 congregations came.*)

And as I stood before the clergy assembled before me, I said, “The history of lawns dates back to the 1500s, to medieval times when kings' in Sp... in England, and France and Scotland would order their serfs to cut down the trees and brambles around their castles so that guards up on the parapets could look out across the vast open space. And they would be able to see the kings' enemies approaching.

By the 1600s, wealthy landowners emulating the monarchy in an ostentatious display of wealth, cleared the land around their manor houses. And created great, grassy fields to show that they were so rich they didn't need to use the land to grow food. Instead, they used those grassy fields for bowling games. The fields were called bowling greens and the game that they played evolved into our modern-day game of golf.

Well, in the 1800s, Scottish immigrants brought this new game to the United States and it caught on. It became very, very popular. And the newly burgeoning United States Golfing Association joined forces with the Agricultural Department. And huge research funds went into the development of a new kind of grass seed, a sturdy seed that didn't have thistles and, and could be grown on golf courses. This is the lawn seed that we're most familiar with today.

When soldiers returned after World War II, there was a housing boom. And people like William Levitt made places like Levittown and in the interests of the democratization of neighborhoods, he forbid fences. The neighborhood would be united by a carpet of pristine, green grass with no weeds, no seeds, no dandelions and, certainly, no messy fruit. Well, to a human being, a pristine, green, grassy lawn might look beautiful but to a migrating bird swooping down looking for food after a long flight, that lawn is a desert. There's nothing for a bird to eat. No bugs, no seeds and, certainly, no messy fruit. You know, we are losing species of migrating birds because of lawns. And the petrochemicals that are used to keep those lawns green and pristine, leach down into the ground and, and they damage the fragile water table."

So, I invited the clergy before me, "Close your eyes. Imagine yourself standing in front of the front door of your house of worship and look at your lawn. Ask yourself a question. Does this lawn represent my values? Do I really need a great, green grassy field around my building so that I can see my enemies approaching?"

Well, that afternoon, four of the congregations in attendance dug up their lawns: Huntington Jewish Center, Dix Hills Methodist, St. John's Episcopal, Bethany Presbyterian. By the end of the spring, there were ten flourishing community service gardens on lawns in congregations in town. And by the end of the summer, 2000 pounds of fresh produce was delivered to the local food pantry.

The stories that I told that spawned the "Grow to Give Project" helped people from a diverse collection of religious perspectives work together and also to look at something ordinary, like a lawn, in a new way. One of the many powers of storytelling is that it provides an opportunity to envision change.