



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

12 October 2006

I noticed in the Times a couple of weeks ago that the season premier of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition had garnered an audience of some 13 million Americans. As I have never seen the show I cannot say for certain that this represents a complete waste of 13 millions hours of these people's lives. But I can guess.

So what? Americans are at liberty to waste their time—at least on their own time. Maybe your boss does not appreciate your solitaire prowess, but when you get off work you can do what you want: smoke cigarettes, drive around aimlessly, eat saturated fats, watch reality shows about interior decorators. This is America, land of the free to do as they please.

Far be it from me to suggest that we start legislating what we can do when we don't have to do anything, especially if such laws interfere with advertisers' access to tired minds. Just because I do not choose to watch shows about gaggles of curvaceous single women scheming to capture the limited attention of some fatuous, square-jawed man or gaggles of depressed curve-deficient woman hoping to find happiness through extensive plastic surgery does not mean that millions of my compatriots cannot spend their evenings doing so.

And yet, I cannot stop myself from thinking about what might have been accomplished had those thirteen million people chosen to spend that one hour of their time doing something slightly more constructive. I am not talking about heroic acts or moments of creative genius. Sure, it would be great if those thirteen million people spent part of a weekday evening performing life-saving surgery or composing beautiful sonnets. But I had simpler tasks in mind, the sort of tasks any one of us might reasonably hope to accomplish after dinner and a day of work. Like reading to the blind. Or registering voters. Or delivering meals on wheels. Or helping put on a school play. Or coaching a soccer team. Or picking up garbage. Or tutoring a kid. Or making calls for a political candidate. Or helping at a soup kitchen. Or building a neighborhood playground. Or shelving books at the local library. Or going to a town council meeting. Or joining a protest. Or giving blood. Or a hundred thousand other small jobs in the community.

I do not mean to suggest that Extreme Makeover's audience consists entirely of the lazy and selfish. No doubt some significant portion of those thirteen million do good works while not watching network television. Some of them may even do their good works during the show (assuming, correctly I would guess, that it does not require one's full attention). In fact, for all I know, they are all saints. But it is hard not to imagine how much more they could do for themselves and others—and god knows we need the help—if they chose to take an hour away from watching television to do something (especially if they are saints). When you consider all the work this country needs to do to come anywhere near achieving its grand vision of itself, when you consider the extent to which we have lost the desire to get that work done by paying for it with taxes, when you consider that the average American watches more than four hours of television each day, it seems to me reasonable to come to the conclusion that we are only going to get that work done if we do it ourselves and we are only going to have time to do it if we turn off the television every now and then and start pitching in.

This week's share: Artichoke, Vermont Cranberry shell beans, Carrots, Chard, Garlic, Onion, Peppers, Hot peppers, Huckleberry and Purple Majesty potatoes, Rutabaga, Suiho (Chinese broccoli), Parsley

Of course, if we all walk away from our television sets we will undermine the ability of networks to deliver audiences to advertisers. Their business will suffer and a bunch of copywriters and actors and network executives will lose their jobs. Fortunately for them, millions of Americans will be free to volunteer to help them get through the hard times, for instance by feeding them.

I bet a hungry former TV executive would appreciate some roasted root vegetables. And they are easy to make. Just chop carrots, potatoes, onions and rutabaga into chunks, toss them with a good amount of olive oil, toss in a few cloves of garlic, add a generous amount of salt and pepper and put them into a 375 degree oven for the length of a prime time show, turning them once or twice at commercial breaks to be sure they get nicely caramelized on all sides.

They would also enjoy some Suiho (the bunch of thick stemmed greens with small florets), particularly if you stir fry it with minced garlic and ginger until it starts to wilt, then add dashes of vinegar, soy sauce and sesame oil (and perhaps some hot pepper) and cover the pan to steam the greens until the stems are just tender.

I bet they would find a dish of purple or red (or purple and red) mashed potatoes amusing and tasty.

A bowl of cranberry beans cooked with garlic, onion, carrots and parsley would warm them up and it is nutritious.

Who knows, they might even be grateful for chard sautéed in olive oil and garlic, which you could make into a nice filling meal by putting it on noodles or stuffing it into bread.

Fruit share: no fruit this week.