



THE ALLEGED FARM NEWS

20 September 2007

We seem to spend a lot of time in this country worrying about being offended by other people's behavior. We worry about other people using words we don't like, reading books we don't like, praying to gods we don't like, not praying to any god at all. We worry about how other people raise their children and what they look at on their computers. We worry that other people don't show enough reverence for certain pieces of striped cloth, that they don't show enough deference to people in certain offices, that they love the wrong people. We are shocked by what others wear, by their hair, by their music, by their hobbies, by their houses, by their lawns, by their marriages, by their skin, by their temerity to speak their minds.

These trespasses upon our sense of propriety do not simply cause discomfort, distaste or dismay. Apparently, given the public hue and cry over such issues, the moral injury we suffer at the hands of those that dare to misbehave places the republic itself in grave peril. Gays in the military will undermine our ability to defend ourselves. Dissent will embolden our enemies. Rap music will turn our children into sociopaths. Pornography will destroy the family. Visible underwear will destroy order. Visible breasts will destroy football. Strict rules and criticism will destroy children. Hollywood will destroy, well, Hollywood. Burning the flag will lead us straight to hell. Godlessness will create hell right here at home; just take a look at what happened to New Orleans.

This taste for political moral outrage—for turning private matters into public ones—is nothing new. The question of whether or not Thomas Jefferson believed in god was a central issue during the Presidential campaign of 1800. Come to think of it, we are not just hung up on these sorts of questions, we are actually still busy debating this very one on the theory that defining the elusive personal beliefs of a man dead these past 181 years will tell us once and for all just what sort of a nation we are.

You could be forgiven for believing, given the way these moral issues dominate public discourse, that we must already have taken care of all the more mundane problems societies have to deal with—things like making sure everyone has food, housing, medicine and equal justice. What other people would have so much time to devote to political fights over organized prayer's role in the classroom, the wording of the Pledge of Allegiance, the well-being of flags, the desire of some women to marry one another, Holden Caulfield, Bill Clinton's libido, Tupac Shakur's lyrics and some cartoon sponge's sexual orientation.

But if we had in fact already dealt with the health, safety and welfare of all Americans there would not be two guys out in my field right now picking tomatoes for Community Action's food pantries. I am happy they are out there. We have a lot of extra tomatoes (we plant more than we need in a good year such as this one in case we have a bad year like the last one). If the Community Action gleaners did not take the tomatoes they would simply be left to rot. Because people support Community Action with money and time (one of the pickers is an employee, the other a volunteer) our extra tomatoes—and the extra produce from a lot of other farms around here—get to people who need food. It's a great program.

**This week's share: Beets, Carrots, Garlic, Husk cherries, Lettuce, Mustard greens,
Onions, Peppers, Hot peppers, Radicchio, Radishes, Tomatoes,
Delicata winter squash, Basil, Dill**

But it is a chancy, ad hoc way to take care of hunger. People in this country should not have to rely on the kindness of strangers in order to get a meal—or any other basic need. We are enormously proud of our charitable impulses, and for the most part rightly so. But our charity should take the place of government action. The fact that people have to hold bake sales to help their family and friends pay for vital medical care is hardly cause for general celebration. Advanced societies do not base their national health care systems on the sales of donated brownies.

I am not suggesting that we do away with moral outrage and apply ourselves solely to the nitty-gritty details of getting everyone a decent breakfast and some prenatal care. In fact, I suggest that more people try feeling a little righteous anger every now and then. I would love to see more mass demonstrations, more impassioned orations on street corners, more Americans willing to raise their voices in dissent. But we have to get past the juvenile belief that our government exists to protect us from the discovery that some of our fellow citizens see things differently. Once we have stopped egging on our representatives to save us from ourselves, they may learn to resist the cheap desire to enshrine indignation as law. This would certainly free up much of their time, allowing them get on with actual public business such as making sure that everyone has access to shelter, a doctor, a teacher, a lawyer and a vine ripe tomato—a vine ripe tomato grown in a way that does not poison us, picked and packed by workers with adequate pay and protection from injury and shipped as short a distance as possible on a vehicle that does as little as possible to skew the climate. Let them debate how best to do that; we can argue over which variety tastes best.

Not that there is much to argue about. It is completely obvious to anyone with the vaguest sense of taste and the slightest interest in what they eat which tomato is best. And if you do not agree with me, well then you are clearly beyond hope. Good tomatoes are wasted on you. Just thinking about your indefensible preference for inferior tomatoes makes me lose my appetite. People like you wreck tomatoes for the rest of us. You are a menace. You should not be allowed anywhere near tomatoes. There ought to be a law.

Please keep in mind that the CSA open house will be on Sunday, October 7th. I hope to see you here that day—pie in hand—no matter which tomato variety you like.