When I was asked to participate in this event, I did not hesitate to say yes. Not only is it an honor to be an invited speaker at the annual TTWSD events, but I was asked to talk about something that I have a personal, social, environmental, political, and spiritual connection to – food!

I feel a powerful connection to food because I strive to understand the place it has in our global society, in our local community, in my family, and in my own life (even within my own body). I began my humane and sustainable food path over 20 years ago, when I chose to not eat any ore land animals (I eat fish, but with increasing hesitation). I strive (and don’t always succeed) in making humane & sustainable choices with my food every single day. Every food choice I make is loaded with all kinds of decisions, because I understand the importance of food on so many levels. Today I only have time to tease you with some of this information, but I'll encourage you to use the Q&A time and the resources provided to learn more.

There are three guiding themes for my talk today: 1) the deceptive and sinister effects of the industrial food system on our very souls, (I'll warn you now – I'm not fond of the industrial food system), 2) is the Earth Charter, and 3) this event's proximity to the fall equinox, which was on September 22nd. All participants take a lima bean from the basket being passed around.

But, what might food have to do with our souls, one might ask (as I did when presented with this idea for a talk)? The more I think about it, with confidence I say everything. What we choose to eat should nourish our souls – it should be good for our souls. Our soul has to do with our essence, who we are in the non-physical sense. Our souls are sustained in many ways – by friends and family, religion or spirituality, attending to our bodies in holistic ways, participating in community service, sharing with others, appreciating a quiet sunset o the sound of the rain. Our soul can also be nurtured by the foods we eat and the food systems we participate in.

Let me begin with the industrial food system – this can be defined as the complex, profit-driven, and mostly hidden system that involves the production, distribution, and consumption of food. That is, how food is grown, harvested, and processed, distributed to different people’s of the world (or not), and the practices of consuming that food (such as eating seasonally, eating at “all you can stuff your face with” buffets, eating communally, etc.).

The way we eat (across the world) has changed more in the last 50 years than in the previous 10,000 years! The origin of our current industrialized food system was the “green revolution,” which reached a pinnacle the 1960s. This promised decreased global hunger and famine by increasing agricultural production. This would be accomplished with modernization of agricultural processes (machines), and genetically modifying seeds for high yields, which then necessitated the reliance on synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. I can summarize a food system to a bumper sticker that was on my refrigerator during my childhood in the 1970s: “you are what you eat.” Well, we are oil – our minds, our bodies, and our souls are oil.

The industrial food system relies on cheap fossil fuels for almost every stage of food production/growing, distribution and consumption. In fact, the way we eat contributes more to climate change (greenhouse gas emissions) than what we drive, how much electricity we use, what light bulbs we buy...

Furthermore, this system of eating compromises local and global ecosystems because of fertilizer & pesticide runoff (when you are growing on this scale, these are needed), loss of biodiversity of crops (only certain strains are “high yield”), depletion of soils, and so many other reasons why ecosystems are compromised.
This system of eating compromises entire communities too. The vast majority of the world’s people earn their livelihoods by producing food (about 70%, and most of these are women). When giant corporations are controlling the production of food, with the ultimate motive of profit (that’s what they are supposed to care about), this undermines people’s ability to sustain their families, for entire communities to remain self-sufficient. People lose their ability to work, they lose their ability to contribute to their societies, and this becomes a slippery slope of diminished rights, diminished access to democracy, and diminished human rights overall.

And this is all connected. Most of what we eat comes from corn, and that most of that corn comes from genetically modified seed that often only grows with a specific set of chemicals reactions, and then does not produce seed to be collected for next year’s harvest (that’s right folks, a food plant that does not produce seeds – this is not how nature is designed). Imagine this bean you hold was useless – would not sprout unless you applied a proprietary chemical to it. And the plant that emerged needed a specific kind of fertilizer, and then that plant would not produce any seed for you to continue growing, eating, harvesting. That means a vicious cycle of dependency on the corporation that designed that seed. This is not sustainable.

And one more part of the industrial food system that we need to think about is the seemingly limitless supply of animals (cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys, fish). The environmental impact of mass production of animals for human consumption is almost beyond comprehension in terms of scale.

Beyond this, when you grasp, or witness, the kind of suffering a conscious, feeling animal experiences it becomes difficult to reconcile the pain in your soul with the fleeting satisfaction from a Styrofoam box from Chik Fil A. These MILLIONS AND MILLIONS of sentient creatures, not unlike our own dogs and cats whom we protect and care for, suffer horrifically as a result of being confined, deprived of social contact and natural sunshine, fed an artificial diet, and tortured in a variety of ways. My soul, my essence, hurts when I think of this suffering – and the scale of it.

What allows us to participate in the industrial food system without it paining our souls? Many reasons, but a particularly insidious one is the process of greenwashing. This is when a corporation puts a green spin on their product, spending more time and money on making us think we are purchasing a product that is good for us, for animals, for the environment than actually producing such a product. This makes our souls feel good. When we see the Happy Cow on Horizon Dairy products, we think we are doing good, and it says “Organic!” (it has to be good, right?). But part of the success of the greenwashing movement is deception and lack of transparency. We trust these corporations, and we should not. Horizon Dairy cows never see the light of day. They are chained (CHAINED) to their feed stations, mechanically pumped for their milk, and sent to slaughter when their bodies are exhausted and depleted. Those are not happy cows, and we should not be happy about it.

None of this nourishes our souls, in fact it poisons us – literally – from within. It separates us from the bounty of the earth, from each other, and from actual food! This becomes evident when we compare what we know – or what we should know – about the way food gets to us to the guiding principles of the Earth Charter. The Earth Charter, as many of you are aware, provides us with a set of guiding principles for creating a just, sustainable and peaceful global society. It is a code for individual people, local governments, and entire societies to live by. The document, developed over many years by hundreds of world leaders, scientists, teachers, writers, citizens, and activists, calls it like it is at this perilous time of human history, and
provides inspiration for moving forward with a greater respect and care for the community of life. Sounds like soul nourishing to me!

The EC’s guiding principles are intimately tied to food, and we can see that our current global food system stands in direct contrast to these principles:

1. respect and care for the community of life
2. ecological integrity
3. social and economic justice
4. democracy, non-violence and peace

The industrial food system compromises every single one of these.

What would happen if we cared about this?

What would happen if we cared that the chicken you ate from Chik Fil A today was pumped with antibiotics because the conditions in which it lived were so filthy and it produced so many diseases that all the chickens (and those who eat them) would die without the antibiotics? That it was pumped with hormones so that it could be slaughtered sooner and thereby more cheaply, and that this rapid growth produced by those hormones made it so that it could not stand under its own weight. Or that its beak was clipped off with no anesthetic so that it could not harm the other chicken that shared an 8x10 space with it (for the duration of its miserable life). What would happen if we cared?

What would happen if we cared about how the tomato in the salad we ate from Calistoga got to us? What would happen if we knew that the tomato was harvested not 25 miles from this campus by a mother of two children who was not allowed water, shade, or rest breaks since her 5am clock-in. That members of her community also toil in the fields for long days only to be chained to the inside of a U-haul truck at night, beaten and humiliated, and forced to pay for use of a hose for which to “shower.” What would happen if we cared about the modern day slavery that brought food to our tables?

What would happen if we understood the consequences of a bag of Cheetos? The ways in which a simple snack from our vending machines compromised ecological integrity, threatened social and economic justice for millions of people, and contributed to violence and lack of democracy?

What would happen if we cared to reward responsible companies with our business?

What would happen if we cared? A revolution!

The preamble of the EC states: The resilience of the community of life and the well-being of humanity depend upon preserving a healthy biosphere with all its ecological systems, a rich variety of plants and animals, fertile soils, pure waters, and clean air. The protection of Earth's vitality, diversity, and beauty is a sacred trust.

What if we cared about this? I'll say it again…a revolution.

But, let’s start with something reasonable. Let’s start with understanding why this revolution is needed, what’s at stake, and how your very souls are compromised every day because of way we eat and how disconnected we are from our food.

The fall equinox just passed, but a couple of weeks ago. Although our season in FL is a bit later, by the time fall rolls in, most of the autumn fruits, vegetables, and grains have been
harvested, and seeds have been collected for next year’s cycles. Within these seeds lies the birth of new plants, the promise of new beginnings. Fall is a time of giving thanks for our bounty, and we have much to be thankful for. The beginning of the fall is a time for meditation, an opportunity to open our hearts to change, to acknowledge the constant ebb and flow of life. And although the industrial food system effectively *(very effectively)* separates us from these cycles, we can still honor them within ourselves, within the foods we choose to eat, and with the mindful intention we can have towards our food.

It is not reasonable for us to think that we can grow all of our own food, honoring and revering seeds and seasons and the diversity of life as they should be honored (they sustain our very lives). But it is not *unreasonable* for us to imagine and to create a stronger connection to the natural world through food – literally and metaphorically.

Literally, we can strive to know more about where our food comes from, who plants and harvests our tomatoes, what is done to that tomato before it sits on our cutting boards. We can seek out the uncomfortable information about what kind of life the cow that gave her life for our beef teriyaki had. We can actively choose to participate in fewer patterns of food production, distribution and consumption that are stained with the blood, sweat, and tears of those we share this earth with.

Think of the mystery of the seed. As author Diane Stein says: “all growth is held in suspension and silence within.” If a seed is the very essence of life, representing the possibilities of something new, what promise can this seed, your seed, hold for you? *(remind participants of the bean in their hands)*

At this time of fall, transitioning to the silence and pause of winter, you can contemplate this seed, your seed, *metaphorically*, to guide you through your spiritual growth by helping you see the connections between all things. Consider the seed: “all growth is held in suspension and silence within.” Consider the seeds you have been planting in terms of your education or careers, your families, your personal growth. What will grow from these, what will bloom? Will your blossoms nourish you and others, the world around you?

The time to make new choices is now. There is no better time. Plant new seeds – literally and metaphorically. Participate in growth that nourishes your soul. If you have never grown a food plant (herb, vegetable, fruit) do it! There is nothing more satisfying than participating in that cycle of life (or just go out to our food forest!).

Most of us spouted lima beans when we were kids…do you remember that? Do you remember the wonder and the magic that created? That you could grow something…and then you could eat it! That magic and wonder is not gone, it is just dormant; it’s been stolen from us by the industrial food system. It’s time to revive it! Embrace it! Take it back!