Right to food

Zine of the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House

Banana Beat

A Feast in a Slum

Community Kitchens

Life In The Trash Trenches

Homegrown Food

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A Feast In An Indian Slum

by Rebecca Ipe

What do people eat in a slum? The question teases my imagination. Surely they can't eat much? Slums, according to photojournalists and the general public, are habitations of misery and chronic starvation.

Yet, after two months spent entirely in a slum in Kolkata, one of India's poorest and most densely populated cities, I can confidently affirm that not only did I encounter food, but I also met smiles and a hospitality so radical, it melted my befuddled heart.

Being a resident in Downtown Eastside Vancouver, I am accustomed to breaches of food justice, of listening to friends' accounts of the daily struggle for food. I expect much worse in a country that had no concept of social welfare. As soon as I set foot in the slum that is to be my neighbourhood for the next two months, I feel my courage deserting me. My friend Mia and I know no one in the slum, and we can't even speak Bengali, the local language. We have to start from a terrifying, yawning zero.

As we walk nervously round the rows of compactly clustered one-room houses, a woman in a thin orange sari gestures excitedly to us. Mia and I look at each other and smile tentatively at her. We greet her in Bengali snatched from our phrasebooks and she replies back, launching into a stream of syllables that makes no sense to our confounded ears. But wait! I'd caught a word—no, surely not! "I think she's inviting us for lunch," I say dazedly to Mia. I am quite sure that my ears have caught that most welcome of words in any language: eat. A tip for travelers: memorising words such as "food", "drink" and "meal" is of utmost importance.

> "It is one of my life's greatest ironies that I walk into a slum expecting to witness heart-wrenching poverty (which I do), but I also walk away with a full belly and a nourished heart."

The woman, whose name is Madida, leads us to her home: a one-room shack constructed of bamboo, with walls blanketed by newspaper. A bed, hard and light, takes up most of the room, and is the pièce de résistance of the house, serving as couch, dining table, study desk and storage all in one. Madida reaches underneath it to retrieve small glass tumblers into which she pours water and mixes in a little sugar. She offers us the sugar water while her neighbours take turns crowding in the narrow doorway and staring at us with unabashed curiosity. Noticing the sweat dripping down my forehead, which I'm discreetly trying to wipe away with my scarf, she starts fanning us with a rolled up newspaper. Pointing to the inert fan overhead, she sighs, "Current, *nai*." No current. We learn later that power cuts, ubiquitous India-wide, are combined with regulated shifts for the water tap outside the houses. These shifts run for two hours thrice daily. The women and

children of the slum can usually be found there at those times, patiently filling up their empty two-litre pop bottles and steel vessels.

We have reservations about drinking the water offered to us (understandable in a country where to drink tap water is a masochistic invitation to food poisoning, cholera and a host of other life-threatening experiences), but the women assure us that they place their water bottles on the roofs of their houses. We're intrigued. Could this be SODIS (solar water disinfection)? It seems that someone at some time taught the slum dwellers this easy and foolproof method of killing bacteria and making their water safe to drink. It's an essential life-hack: fill a clear plastic bottle with water and let it stand in the sun for six hours. SODIS is known to kill viruses, bacteria and parasites and the Red Cross,WHO, UNICEF recommend it for the developing world thanks to its economical prevention of water-borne disease.

Madida serves us heaping ladlefuls of rice, until we each have a little hill of sliding rice grains on our plates. She then dishes out potato curry with green leaves in it, fish curry (fish ranks as a staple of Bengali cuisine) and finally, mutton. This she serves with extra excitement, for meat to these families is a treat, consumed once a week, or, if one has enough money, twice a week. We eat our lunch with our hands, Indian-style. The food tastes earthy and nourishing, the blend of spices subtle, yet with enough bite to tease the tongue, the mutton so full of fat, I swallow it whole after giving up trying to completely masticate it.

We stagger home and collapse on our mats, unable to believe that we've been to a slum—and we've been fed. This, we soon discover, turns into the invariable finale of our day. Thus, it is one of my life's greatest ironies that I walk into a slum expecting to witness heart-wrenching poverty (which I do), but I also walk away with a full belly and a nourished heart. Day after day, Mia and I visit the slum, practising Bengali, and making friends with the women. We become witnesses to the way food is treated before, during, and after its preparation. No fancy gas stoves for these women. Most make do with wood fires, with the wood gleaned from scrap or twigs. Vegetables are diced with a knife called a *boti*, which resembles a scimitar stuck on a wooden block. You sit with a foot resting on the wooden block on either side of the blade and you run the vegetables through its edge.

Rice and curry form the backbone of our meals in the slum, although the curry tends to flare into the unexpected: a popular dish is *puishag* curry, *puishag* being the leaves of a thick vine that grows on slum roofs.

Ashima (left) and the author

Despite our broken Bengali, food becomes a consistent and exciting conversation topic between us. "What do you eat for lunch? And breakfast? And dinner?" These questions are fired at us with all the intensity of genuine curiosity.

I make the thrilling discovery that "What did you cook today?" is the password to unlocking a woman's mouth. As soon as I greet a woman of my acquaintance, I ask her this magical question and watch her face break into a wide grin before she replies. This question has never failed to endear me to the hearts of housewives in the slum. Indeed, it is a question they ask each other as they go about their daily routines, even if the answer itself is invariable. Potato curry with rice and fish are the usual staples, with fried eggplant breaking the monotony a little.

My friend Ashima, a lovely teenager with merry eyes, invites me to her house, where her mother, four sisters and grandmother are curled up on the bed watching one of their favourite television serials. As I fix my eyes on the screen and try to follow the story with my minimal grasp of the language (not entirely difficult as it happens to be the Indian-adored theme of adulterous wives and scheming in-laws), I notice Ashima and the girls dipping their hands into bowls of puffed rice, which Ashima informs me, is called murri. *Murri* originates in Bangladesh, from whence many of the residents emigrated years ago. The girls consume *murri* with as much gusto as we North Americans devour buttered popcorn. *Murri* is presented to me by Ashima's family as a parting gift, together with a packet of buttery cookies I'd once told them I liked. And when we bid our friends in the slum farewell, this is not the only gift we receive.

On our last day in the slum, we have invitations for "dinner" at four houses. At one house, a friend who is young and male and therefore not expected to cook, rectifies this gap by treating us to bowdlerized Chinese food, the noodles being infused with the chilli and turmeric of the Indian spice cupboard. At another house we are treated to thick slices of egg-toast (eggs fried together with bread). By the time we stagger to Supiya's, an elderly woman with a penchant for wit and hearty laughter, I pray that she'll have mercy on us and merely serve us light snacks. Which she does—at first. But then she bustles in, bringing the fragrance of a wood fire and two heaping plates of biriyani.

Supiya (far right), the author, friend, and Supiya's children

For those unfamiliar with Indian culture, biriyani is a rich, aromatic, expensive, spice-stuffed dish that one can only get right by the amount of love that has been poured into its making. Supiya has laboured the good part of the day to make this biriyani, which had surely made a dent in her meagre wages. It is a biriyani that demonstrates her love for us.

As someone with Indian heritage, I know that biriyani is a special dish, a royal dish, a dish served as the pièce de résistance at wedding banquets. I can barely swallow it. Supiya's love and sacrifice has been lavished out on the plate in front of me, and, overwhelmed by this display of affection, tears mingle with the rice in my throat and make a meal I will never forget.

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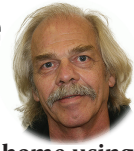
Homegrown in the Zone

by Hendrik Beune



Growing your own food at home using permaculture principles

Growing food at home is easy and good for you. Most store-bought foods come from afar, spend considerable time in transport and storage, contain herbicides, pesticides or other contaminants, and lose about eighty percent of their nutritional value. And for food-lovers, know that homegrown food tastes better!

Growing your own food is lighter on your wallet. Did you know that because of spoilage, over fifty percent of all food in stores is wasted before it is consumed? This spoilage results in higher prices—which isn't your first choice, I'm sure!

Growing your own food is also good for the environment. There's no packaging to dispose of, no large expenditure of fuel and energy used for transportation and cold storage, and no unsound practices of industrial agriculture.

More than anything, you may find it extremely satisfying to grow your own food. It is a pleasure to watch what you've planted grow beautifully. Once the food has grown enough to eat, you are free to pick it whenever you need it. I find it tremendously satisfying to be able to go to the rooftop and obtain what I need, especially when I am low on money and food. And being involved in such a healthy and low-cost lifestyle, you will feel better about yourself!

Permaculture is a way of growing food efficiently while simultaneously living in harmony with the environment. It works with the patterns and rhythms of nature, rather than imposing man-made artificiality. It is a revival of food cultivating techniques that have served us well for thousands of years. In the transition movement towards sustainable communities, permaculture has become the new and preferred way of growing our food.

Permaculture design aims to find harmonious solutions to the problems we experience, using an ecological systems approach. Careful observation is essential and small adjustments will ultimately perfect the design. Growing your own food such as fresh herbs, lettuce, and salad greens and buying locally grown foods would be examples of harmonious permaculture design choices.

To help us understand and work with nature, permaculture recognizes zones (areas around you) and sectors (climatic factors and directional influences). Permaculture starts with your inner self (Zone 00), extends into your home (Zone 0), onto your doorstep and nearby garden (Zone 1), into the orchard and food forest (Zone 2), onto the farm (Zone 3), into the managed woodland (Zone 4), and finally, to the wild untouched yonder where we try not to have any influence at all (Zone 5).

Sectors are the microclimates we experience, influenced by sun, wind, rain and the seasons. It also includes sources of pollution and irritating factors such as noise or bad neighbours and for that matter also good neighbour practises and influences, such as sources of beneficial insects (eg pollinators), animals that perform in integrated pest management (IPM) or even a locale where song-birds

may sit and please us with their sound. Learning patterns and sector influences will teach us how to use micro-climates to our advantage for growing many different kinds and varieties of food.

For the urban grower, permaculture can be practiced most easily in Zones 00, 0, and 1. Zone 2 could be a nearby community garden where we might cultivate produce, fruits and berries, that don't need our constant attention. Zone 3 might be the farmers market where we buy local seasonal foods that we cannot easily produce ourselves, such as eggs, dairy products, honey or meat. We may like to assist a farmer by purchasing a share early in the season for the production of this food. Zone 4 might be a national park where we might harvest mushrooms, wild berries and interact with wild animals and nature.

Permaculture in Zone 00 is about keeping yourself healthy (spiritually, emotionally and physically) through good nutrition and healthy practices.

Permaculture in Zone 0 concerns the housekeeping practices in our home. Living by permaculture principles in Zone 0 might mean that we compost and recycle, that we use renewable energy sources, or eliminate waste by buying products with low-packaging in mind. Growing sprouts, herbs and micro-greens inside our home is permaculture in Zone 0. So too is preserving/canning food and using natural fermentation techniques to nutritionally enhance food. Permaculture in Zone 0 means that we are community minded and think of sharing resources (tools, skills, meals) with our friends. We are considerate neighbours and make a happy home. And perhaps we are fortunate enough to have the means to choose a well-constructed dwelling using materials with a low environmental footprint.

Zone 1 is that area which we visit every day or maybe several times a day, our doorstep so to speak. It could be our window sill, balcony, or the garden-patch nearest to our home. Here, we would grow things like herbs and salad greens that we may need on a daily basis. Also plants and vegetables that may need the daily attention of watering are best grown in Zone 1. Vegetables that are easily grown locally should be produced close to our home, no further away than a local farm (Zone 3), but preferably in Zone 0, 1 nor 2, and certainly not imported from far away regions, such as California, Mexico, or Asia, as is currently done.

As an apartment-dweller, Zone 1 is my rooftop patio. Our patio was surrounded

illustration of Permaculture Zones 00, 0, 1 - by Jason Sit

by a rose garden, planted in poor quality soil. Last year, near the end of summer, my neighbours and I hauled in some free compost, that was made available to us by the City and the Hastings Urban Farm across the street. We obtained seeds, nursery boxes and expert advice from a very helpful local store called "The Homesteaders Emporium". In no time, we transformed our rose garden into a beautifully productive winter-garden that produced brassicas (kale, broccoli and cabbages), spinach and herbs throughout the winter.

Living in the city, it's quite possible to grow sprouts, herbs and micro-greens inside your home in permaculture Zone 0. Using your balcony, window sill, kitchen counter, or even inside a cabinet using indoor lighting, plants and herbs can be grown and harvested right throughout the year. If you don't have access to a Zone 1 yard, garden, or rooftop, then there are allotment gardens in the community available. Or, you can offer to manage a neighbour's garden. Nowadays, most apartment buildings are fitted with rooftop gardens that can be managed communally to grow food.

If you are interested in gardening, spring is definitely the time to start. But also know that gardens can be started most times of the year. Visit your local gardening specialist or seed bank for advice. They usually have seed-catalogues available for you to take home and peruse. You can make your selection of what to plant, based on the available growing conditions and the specific qualities that you are after.

I hope that you will become as enthusiastic as I have about growing your own food and living in a more sustainable way. There are many things that happen in our world that could upset us. But gardening, connecting and living in harmony with nature, getting your hands in the dirt, and watching beautiful things grow can be a healing experience. Preparing a good wholesome meal using home-grown ingredients makes you happy and sharing with your neighbours creates community and spreads happiness around you. Give it a try, it's most definitely worth the effort!

"A society that has more justice is a society that needs less charity."

-Ralph Nader, activist, author, speaker, and attorney (b. 1934)

photo by John Prentice

Just Don't Call Me Banana Boy

by dm gillis

I sit on the edge of my bed reminding myself that I'm an artist, that my path normally leads to later awakenings. It's the last Wednesday of the month, and way too early. I mean, it's still dark out, baby. But this is the morning I'm dispatched on behalf of the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House on what we call the Banana Beat, and I have to get to the NH by 7:30.

By 6:30, I'm out the door and on my way. I live close to Lost Lagoon, near Stanley Park. It's a fifty minute walk to the Neighbourhood House. So, I've got to move.

As I walk, I'm struck by contrasts. Up the hill from the park and along the Robson Street strip mall, with its unrestrained retail ballyhoo. Then through the downtown financial district, where traders have been at work for hours driving the economy into the toilet. And finally into the Downtown Eastside where the free-enterprise binners' mall, out front of United We Can, is in full operation and generating actual wealth. And there's already a line-up at Pigeon Park Savings.

It's the hungriest morning of the month in the hungriest neighbourhood in the city. And there are line-ups everywhere. Folks are patiently waiting at local offices of the BC Ministry of Social Development for their income assistance and disability cheques. Later, they'll wait in line to cash them. I know their stomachs are growling as they queue. It's been a month since their last cheque. That's where the Banana Beat Team comes in.

> "The DTESNH has distributed approximately 77,200 bananas, one at a time, on the mornings of cheque issue, to hungry people."

Yesterday, Cate, my Banana Beat co-worker, and I spent the afternoon with a dedicated group of volunteers. We separated several hundred bananas and re-boxed them. (Placing them back in their boxes, wrapped in plastic, helps

them to ripen to perfection overnight.) This morning, we're taking those bananas out of the boxes again and putting them into our signature yellow shopping carts.

Shortly after 8:00 a.m., we're out on two different routes, one down Hastings Street and one down Powell Street, with a gaggle of staff and volunteers distributing bananas to people in the above mentioned line-ups, and to anyone else on the street who wants one. That could mean you.

remainder. Since 2007, the DTES NH has distributed approximately 77,200 bananas, one at a time, on the mornings of cheque issue, to hungry people in the DTES neighbourhood.

No one has to line up for a Banana Beat banana. People are invited to help themselves, and take one for a friend. And with each piece of the pasty fruit comes an invitation to visit and participate in inclusive and participatory programs at the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House.

photos by dm gillis

Banana Beat is one of the founding programs of the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House. It began in 2007. The organic, fair-trade bananas come our way via Whole Foods, twelve cases in all each month. Eight of those boxes are generously donated by Whole Foods, and the Neighbourhood House purchases the

So just think of that when you see me next month at Hastings and Main, handing out bananas. But think twice before you call me Banana Boy!

Food Scraps Drop Spots

Compost for Local Gardens

by Linda Lawson

Maris Pavelson feels good at the end of his shift at Gordon Neighbourhood House (GNH), staffing the Food Scraps Drop Spot on Tuesday evenings. Not only is he helping to reduce the greenhouse gas methane that is created by food rotting in the landfill, but the food scraps he collects are trucked out by local recycling company Recycling Alternative to be made into nutrient-rich compost for local gardens.

"But most of all it's fun," he says. "I wouldn't do it if it wasn't fun."

GNH launched their 10 am–12 noon Saturday Drop Spot in November, 2011 in partnership with Recycling Alternative, the West End Neighbourhood Food Network (WENFN), and the Vancouver Farmers Markets. While the City of Vancouver offers curbside food scraps pick-up and composting service to single-family resident homes, until the Drop Spots were launched the majority of West Enders and others who live in condos, apartment buildings, and co-ops were left out—half of the city. Randy Helten of WENFN estimates that the 45,000 people living in the West End alone produce around 27 million kilograms of food waste a year.

The first pilot project Drop Spot began in August, 2011 at the West End Farmers Market, initiated by Recycling Alternative and the Farmers Market, and funded by a $10,000 Greenest City Fund grant from the City of Vancouver. It was instantly popular, as nearly 200 people dropped off their organics on a busy Saturday.

> "With nearly 30,000 drops to date, the Drop Spots have diverted 200,000 pounds of food scraps otherwise destined for the landfill, helping make Vancouver a greener city."

"When we were wrapping up the first pilot," people were asking us, "What are we going to do when you close the market?" says Louise Schwarz, co-founder of Recycling Alternative. The perfect partner to pick up the slack was Gordon Neighbourhood House, a mere two blocks from the West End Market site at Nelson Park. "GNH is a natural place for people to come to bring their food scraps," says Samuel Mickelson, Community Initiatives Supervisor.

Even with the introduction of a $2 donation that pays for transportation, delivery of the food scraps to Enviro-smart Organics composting facility in Delta, and the disposal fee, the Saturday drop spot at GNH was a success. So much so that a second day was proposed; Tuesday evenings from 6-7:30 began in 2013. Together they receive up to 150 drops per week.

For Maris, life in the trash trenches includes checking for banned substances such as cat litter or Styrofoam, noting each dropper's postal code to see how far they have travelled, offering hand sanitizer and paper towels to those soiled by their exertions, and engaging in conversations related to recycling and

our local food cycle.

Currently there are six Drop Spots: the West End, Kitsilano, and Trout Lake Farmers Markets run in the summer; GNH and the Winter Farmers Market at Nat Bailey stadium take over in the winter; while the West End Community Centre operates year-round. This schedule will continue past the Metro Vancouver ban on all organic material going to the landfill in January, 2015, as Schwarz thinks it unlikely the City and independent contractors will have organized curbside collection of food scraps for all Multi-Unit Residential Buildings by that time.

With nearly 30,000 drops to date, the Drop Spots have diverted 200,000 pounds of food scraps otherwise destined for the landfill, helping make Vancouver a greener city.

No wonder Maris Pavelson enjoys his work as a GNH Drop Spot volunteer. Z

A Feast In An Indian Slum

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Months later, back in Vancouver, that little sack of *murri* remains unbidden in our cupboard. With the wealth of kale, pita, hummus, quinoa, spaghetti, pizza and sushi around me, the puffed rice I once enjoyed with my friends now seems bland and dry, like wood shavings I have to force down my gullet. Without the familiar faces of Ashima and her family, *murri* has lost its appeal. And that's it, I realize. For food to be truly nourishing, be it in a slum, mansion, or condo, it needs to be shared in the company of friends. Z

photo by John Prentice

Journey to Community

by Lance Lim

It's 7:00 am and my head feels like an iron post rigidly affixed to the pillow and unable to turn to the right to view the alarm clock. I lie in bed zombie-like, unsure if I am asleep or awake. But as the soft neutral morning light enters through my windows, the sounds of birds enter my mind and slowly the veil of my sleep awakens.

"Dad, it's time to wake up! You have to bring me to school!" Crunch, and thud! The weight of 60 pounds of living flesh drops on my body as my son Robert gives me his morning embrace. I reciprocate by hugging him back and we both get dressed and embark on our adventure. It's Friday, so our journey will take him to school and take me to the Strathcona Backpack Community Kitchen.

I struggle to get my cane and keys as we make our trek up our neighbourhood from Princess to Union intersection. I am keenly aware of not crossing paths with the cyclists who stop for no one. I have had many a near miss from cyclists

> **"What I truly received was a sense of value, love, and community.**

who had their sights locked onto me while attempting to cross the street.

At 8 am, Robert and I arrive at Strathcona Community School. Like most parents, I come early to take part in the community centre's free breakfast program. As we enter we greet, and are greeted, with friendly smiles and words: "Good Morning, so nice to see you again." We reserve our chairs and proceed to come to the front counter to get breakfast. Breakfast consisting of toast, a hard-boiled egg, orange juice, milk, and coffee is available to anyone wishing to participate. As the morning bell draws nearer, the morning rush and line up for breakfast increases.

After breakfast, I bring my son, who is nine and has special needs, to his class. Once more, his loving affections, this time in the form of a farewell hug, means that I have

to brace myself and try to stay steady on my feet.

From his school, it's a short two minute walk to Strathcona Community Centre where I participate in their Backpack Community Kitchen. The kitchen runs once every two weeks. It is my opportunity to gather amongst other parents to plan, cook, and share meals together.

The facilitator of the community kitchen, Lorraine Holubowich, offers us the gift of her calming presence as she serves us tea. Her presence grounds us as we all begin to wash our hands, get our aprons on, and prepare to work together. I feel enriched by all the parents, most of whom come from different ethnic backgrounds. Our collective age almost matches our collective wisdom through sharing our life stories while cooking. We are amazed by our communal tips and cooking skills.

As we come together on a bi-weekly basis we are learning not just recipes, but how to work together, to meet a timeline, to share our talents, and to sample and bring home tasty dishes which we pack to feed our families. I discover and develop confidence in learning new dishes and sampling a fusion of food.

What I came for was initially a chance to save myself some time and money, but as well as that, what I truly received was a sense of caring, love, and community. I was not just cooking, but making and sharing a meal with a new family. I learned that while food was an instrument, it is the connections I have made while participating that will long last whether I continue or not to participate in the community kitchen.

Homelessness

poem by Janice Jacinto

In a sea of beaming souls, millions of lives dead, and many left out in the cold. It's brave to face the beauty and the shame, homelessness, you are forced to taste the rain.

And all along, we were certain to face our individual struggles; in a world so big, we only move by the hustle. And between these walls, something is beautiful: we are still blessed with health, from our own hands down to our cuticles. As bright as the moon is, we are still left in the dark, but like stars, we dart diamonds from the heart.

We are all in the same ship, the same struggle, whether it is big or small, loud or subtle. In spirit and courage we can survive these currents of strife, through the cycles of despair, we shall give birth once again to life.

Red Lentil Soup

by Marco Torres

Red lentil Soup (4 portions)

1 cup of Red Lentils (canned)
1 cup of chopped onions
1 cup of chopped carrots
1 cup of chopped celery
Black pepper
Salt
Cumin
Coriander
4 cups of Water

Directions:

Fry the chopped vegetables with olive oil until the onion gets transparent. Add the lentils and the water and let it boil for a few minutes adding the species little by little until you have seasoned the way you prefer. Then blend the mixture and serve with a wedge of lemon on the side and add a few drops of olive oil on the soup. Enjoy.

I finished a bachelor's degree in Mexico in Communications and Techniques in 2006. In 2008 I started working in the tourism industry at the Guadalajara Airport as a Passenger Service Agent. I came to Canada in 2009 with the intention of improving my English skills and also of witnessing the Winter Olympic Games. In 2011, I returned to Vancouver to become a restaurant manager for Nuba Restaurant Group, where I currently work. I have completed an English program at VCC and my ultimate goal is to become a journalist and write for the local media.

Hives For Humanity

article and photos
by Harreson Sito

The Goddess appears in many forms. Today, my volunteering with the Zine has reconnected me with my love of bees and has taken me to Hives For Humanity (HFH), held at the Hastings Urban Farm. Here, less than sixty feet away from the chaos of Hastings Street and the sirens of ambulances, are two hives of honey bees (*Apis mellifera)*. The Goddess takes the form of their beekeeper, Sarah Common, a young woman working for the bees in the DTES.

On this sunny spring day in May, I arrived after the official 2pm start of today's session, so things are already in progress. Sarah beckons me to don a mask and join them at the front of the hives. I slip on the mask as if I were putting on an extremely short hoodie, protecting only my face and neck.

These sessions are invitations to the community to come learn about and interact with the honey bees. Three women have come today to participate, while I come to observe. We watch Sarah demonstrate how to be safe around the bees. "In order not to get stung, you have to be calm, make no jerky motions, and let go of the past and the future... just be here in the present moment with the bees." Eckhart Tolle, the spiritual teacher who advocates being in the present moment, would be proud.

Then she invites them to have their own personal experience being a beekeeper. Gently, they lift and remove the roof of one hive to reveal slats of wooden frames and a few bees crawling around. As a frame is carefully and slowly lifted, we get an intimate view of the bee colony: now we can see hundreds of bees busy working, with their own unique mission and purpose to fulfill. With each frame, there are hundreds of honeycomb structures filled with pollen, honey, propolis, or larvae of future bees. A new hive starts out in this man-made wooden home with five frames. And within less than a year,

Sarah inspecting the health of the hive

it may grow to ten. Somewhere among these two hives and multitude of frames is the matriarch of this colony, the Queen bee. Sarah is looking at each frame to gauge the health of the hive and also to see if she can spot the Queen and see how the Queen is doing.

Sarah empowers the participants to get hands-on, if they choose to. Stepping

away from directly assisting, she supervises as she watches these first-timers carefully lift a frame and inspect it. Sarah points out where there is honey, or pollen, or eggs, or larvae, or where there is an anomaly that needs some tending. One anomaly is a superfluous honeycomb structure that is growing past the boundaries of a frame. She places the frame back into the hive, reaches for the smoke device hanging on the wooden fence nearby, pumps the bellows and it's quite a visual delight to watch waves of calming smoke seep into the hive. Then, she takes a metal tool and removes the excess honeycomb structure off the frame in order to help the bees focus their energy most effectively.

One woman has been standing in the background all this time while the other two were lifting and inspecting frames. Sarah lovingly invites the woman to hold up a frame herself. The woman hesitates for a split second and then slowly takes hold of both edges of the frame that Sarah offers her. Sarah lets go and the woman lifts the frame up to get a better look at the bees. Sarah points out the eggs and larvae and gives the frame a gold star for health. The woman had the frame in her own two hands for only a minute, but nevertheless, she has her own experience of being a beekeeper!

> "I didn't realize that I feel also that they know us. The bees recognize our scent and our faces because we regularly come into the hives. They know who we are. I didn't realize that they have a visual memory."

After all the frames of one hive are inspected, they are placed back and arranged so that there is a two-bee space in between adjacent frames. This allows one bee on one frame to be back-to-back with another bee on an adjacent frame and not have a feeling of being crowded (unlike rush hour on the skytrain!) This is their home, so beekeepers must be considerate of maintaining the bees' natural inclination for harmony, order, and purpose. The roof is replaced and Sarah calls for a short break before the next hive is inspected. The protective masks are lifted back so people can view each other without a veil.

Sarah answers the participants' questions during the break and then it is time to inspect the second hive. I notice that one of the women feels safe enough around the bees not to put her mask back on. Wow, I am impressed! That person must have been a beekeeper in a past life!

The same process of inspecting and looking out for signs of the health of the

hive applies to the second hive. After all the frames, Sarah says that she didn't see the Queen. I feel a little disappointed—I was so wanting to see a Queen bee!

Sarah tells us that the Queen only flies away from the hive twice in her life: once when she is a virgin and goes to get mated, and then when the hive is strong enough to divide into two. The hive doesn't look completely full, so I guess the Queen is still on the throne here. So I will have to wait another time to see what the Queen looks like.

After the session, I get a chance to ask Sarah some questions. I find out that even though her mother Julia has been a beekeeper for more than thirty years, it's only been these last three seasons that Sarah has also been a beekeeper herself.

What motivated her to start was a desire to spend more quality time with her mother and a desire to offer the DTES residents another reason to come to the Hastings Folk Garden (HFG).

To prepare herself to bring bees to the HFG, Sarah mentored under her mother for a year. After the mentorship, she and her mother bring a hive, named Elizabeth, to the HFG. Within the frames of hive Elizabeth, is the Queen bee and thousands of worker bees.

Sarah didn't know what was going to happen, or what people's responses would be, and wasn't sure if any honey would be produced. But the results surprised everyone. People came out, made a commitment to be responsible for the welfare of the bees, and hive Elizabeth blossomed: She produced forty litres of honey that summer, twice the amount of a typical hive on her mother's farmland in Tsawwassen.

From that initial hive, Hives for Humanity has spread to rooftops, community gardens, non-profit societies, markets, and private backyards. Today they have seventy hives under their wing.

Sarah tells me that the natural drive of a bee colony is to get strong enough so that they can split into two in order to further that genetic pool that is represented by that hive—half goes off to make a new home and half stays. "But we change that drive so that they build honey and excess honey instead of putting their energy into dividing. Because when they divide, half the hive leaves, then they have to put all that energy into building the population up again. So we don't let them swarm, and then that population can make honey instead of having to build up the bees again."

HFH uses the proceeds of the excess honey for the operating costs of the organization and to carry out their mission, which is to enhance community and connection to nature through apiculture. In the process, HFH also hopes to build self-worth in individuals and pride in the community.

As a practitioner of mindfulness for several years, my ears perk up as she continues: "You have to be focused when you're beekeeping. You can't be chatting and you can't be distracted or fidgeting, or thinking about something else because you will get stung ... or you will hurt the bees. So we keep very calm, almost as a way of meditation. So the beekeeping becomes therapeutic because it is meditation."

In some Japanese Zen traditions, if a practitioner is demonstrating sleepiness or a lapse of concentration, they get whacked on the back with the *keisaku*, a flat wooden stick. This would be the Buddhist equivalent of getting a bee sting!

The success of Elizabeth is largely due to the commitment and dedication demonstrated by the DTES residents who come out. In this time of great need for men to stand up in support of the Goddess, one such steward is Jim.

Jim, beekeeper ambassador, at Hasting Urban Farm

Sarah says that Jim is an ambassador for the bees. He has been involved since June 2012 when hive Elizabeth was first brought to HFG. Jim is a peer mentor at the Drug Users Resource Centre. He is also the person who saw the potential of the project to help himself and his fellow DTES residents.

Jim tells me that he knew a bit about bees before hive Elizabeth came to HFG. But he learnt an incredible amount on top of what he already knew. He says to me: "They're such amazing creatures. I like working with them." He continues, "I didn't realize that I feel also that they know us. The bees recognize our scent and our faces because we regularly come into the hives. They know who we are. I didn't realize that they have a visual memory."

Sarah ends our time by saying, "Basically we're social beekeepers. So we bee-keep very slowly and very calmly. The purpose of Hives For Humanity is to engage people in their community, and get them connected back to nature and connected to each other." In this time of frantic, ungrounded activity and disconnection, taking care of the bees might be the solution to save ourselves.

"If only I could so live and so serve the world that after me there should never again be birds in cages."

- Isak Dinesen (pen name of Karen Blixen), author (1885-1962)

DTES NH Programing Information

From Carol White, Executive Director

We embrace all in our community with a welcoming space. A sampling of our programs include:

- Community Drop-In - community skill building and engagement
- Family Drop-In - a hive of family focused initiatives
- Chinese Elders Community Kitchen - leadership for grandparents and/or parents
- Children's Community Kitchen
- Aboriginal Community Kitchen - weekly, fun, spirited and culturally appropriate
- Indian Residential Schools Survivors' Support Group - restorative justice
- Mobile Smoothie - teaching blender nutrition
- Urban Agriculture - food growing in the city
- Banana Beat - a nutritionally dense food outreach

We wish to work effectively within our community to create programs that are innovative, creative, and flexible. We invite new ideas that originate from our neighbours to create self-directed program opportunities—bring us your ideas.

From Haenna Blusch,
Program Lead: Community Drop In,
Community Kitchen
and Right to Food Initiatives

Community Kitchen is back! Every Monday from 12 to 2pm. The focus of the program is on bringing the people from the DTES together, cooking healthy food and having a nice lunch after. Registration is required.

Are you a father? We are offering a new program providing fathers in the DTES with the chance to meet one another. The focus on this program is on sharing knowledge and skills about being a dad. Weekly on Mondays.

The Tuesday-Prep-Group happens every Tuesday from 7pm - 9pm in our Neighbourhood House. The focus on this group is to prep food for the busy Wednesday Community Drop-In.

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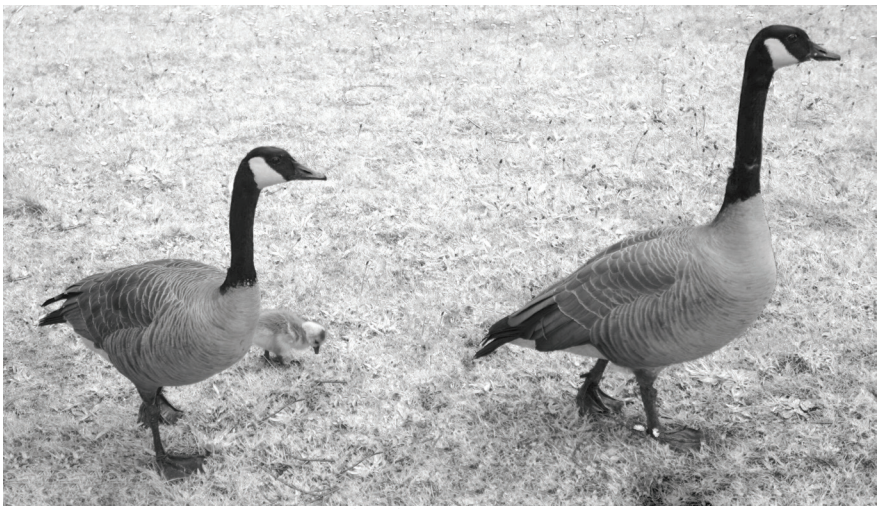

photo by Harreson Sito

Be Part of Zine Family

Interested in contributing ideas, articles, poems, illustrations, artwork, or photographs to the *RTF Zine*? As a community partner, we are deeply interested to hear from you and what you feel is important for the DTES. Find us online at http://rtfzine.org or let us know who you are at zine@rtfzine.org

The Right to Food Zine relies on generous donations from the community to produce each issue. If you like what we are doing and want to show your support by making a donation to the zine, please visit our website http://rtfzine.org

Artwork on front and back cover, and inside back cover by Janice Jacinto


RTF