Fight For Your Food! by Timothy Hucks

The 2013 McElmurry Ethics and Society started off with a bang with its keynote speaker Marion Nestle, one of the country’s foremost voices in the growing debate of the way that food production, distribution, and consumption is politicized in the US. Nestle started the talk by framing the debate about food in this country and the intentionality with which she believes we should all eat. “I like turning students into food activists,” she joked. According to Nestle, her journey with food activism started when she and a friend began to ask each other the question: Is it ethical to urge people to eat foods that are bad for them?

Contrary to popular opinion, what you eat is not only about you. Nestle balances the idea of personal freedom with societal responsibility. She says that the cost of obesity per year in the US is a tremendous 150-190 billion dollars, and that taxpayers have to pay half of this. Because we are all stakeholders in the business of food, that makes us responsible, not only to ourselves, but to each other for the food choices that we make.

In the same vein of “it’s not all about you”, Nestle posits that what you eat is not always entirely your choice. She evidenced this by showing that in 2012, Coca Cola spent 243 million dollars for advertising for Classic Coke, only one of their many products. “The next time you drink a soda,” she says. “Remember that these companies paid a lot of money to get you to do that.” Nestle drives her point home by showing that Coca-Cola, in a report on their own products, admits, “Obesity and other health concerns may reduce demand for some of our products.” This shows that even though Coca-Cola isn’t very public about it, their products are not healthful, and can actually be harmful to the people that consume them.

 Even though people may chalk it up to myth, Nestle explains that healthy food is actually more expensive, and prices have gone down on more unhealthy foods because agriculture has changed from the way that it used to be. Farmers used to be encouraged to stop growing foods in order to increase the demands of the population, but since the deregulation of agriculture, farmers are now encouraged to grow as much as possible, driving food prices down. However, this price reduction hasn’t exactly spread to foods that are healthful. Nestle notes that while the price of fresh fruits has gone up, the prices of beer and butter have been driven down. This also relates to the advent of fast food and the perpetuation of poverty, as poverty-stricken individuals keep going to fast food establishments because of the low prices.

 Nestle says that the largest ethical issues in food production are obesity, a surplus of food; and food insecurity, the state of not knowing where your next meal will come from. What may be surprising to some is that poverty is a factor in both, and unfortunately, soda companies deliberately target minority communities and areas of high poverty. This is something that Mayor Bloomberg, of New York City, was fully aware of when he attempted to ban sizes on sugary drinks bigger than sixteen fluid ounces. The response to the attempted ban was immediate. Cartoons sprouted up branding Mayor Bloomberg as “the nanny of New York.” The soda companies went straight to work, soliciting members on Facebook and Twitter to say no to the soda ban, paying people as much as thirty dollars per hour to wear t-shirts emblazoned with the phrase “I picked out my beverage all by myself”, and ultimately suing the City of New York. In Nestle’s opinion, we as stakeholders in the food business have to regulate these unbridled expenditures, otherwise it means that these towering soda companies can spend unlimited amounts of money making problems go away, and this has disastrous consequences.

However massive of an issue food is in America, Nestle came to the talk with answers as well as questions. “You really have to be strong to avoid being sucked into the food culture,” she says. To combat obesity, she suggests eating less, eating better, and moving more. “If I could teach you one thing today, it would be that larger portions have more calories,” she says. “This seems intuitively obvious, but it is not so.”

Nestle notes that while levels of activity and inactivity haven’t changed that much, people eat more now than they used to. This is evidenced by two Coca Cola ads, one from the 1950s that describes sixteen ounces as big and well enough to serve three people; and one from 2013 that describes their sixteen ounce Coke as still “small”. “Really good advertising is invisible,” Nestle says. “It’s music, it’s fun, it’s…swag. And they’re not evil, they’re just trying to sell a product.” She says that the way that we can combat these problems is by taking personal responsibility, doing things that limit the power of these corporations, and teaching the younger generation how to do that as well. Among some of her solutions were eating smaller portions, cooking at home, teaching kids how to cook, growing food, and buying local foods.

When asked whether or not she thought that eating meat was ethical, Nestle replied, “I must confess that I’m an omnivore, but I’m very fussy about what I eat. I don’t eat industrial meat,” echoing her belief that we should all eat intentionally. Nestle concluded the talk by reiterating the idea of social responsibility, saying that we can start by changing food in schools, limiting marketing to children, putting caps on spending for food corporations, and using our political power to become involved. “Vote with your fork,” Nestle says. “Better yet, vote with your vote!”