

## Dare to Be Generous: Green Reflections from the CalFresh Challenge

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I am a foodie; a rookie connoisseur of ivory confections and frothy infusions, a borderline gourmand, a voracious lover of wholesome sustenance. The more expensive the final plate, the better the final flavor.

For a time, this was my truth and the reality that my palate and I unequivocally stood in—correction: luxuriated in—as we mandered through the aisles of health food store x, y and z. Much to my wallet's vexation, I often spent more than I should have, without a shadow of a doubt that I would still be within my weekly food budget. In actuality, I had no food budget, and upon perusing my shopping receipts, my friends shared concordant feelings each time: flummoxed and tongue-tied with a pinch of alarm and a dash of panic.

I could not share those nonplussed reactions, though. I wasn't being imprudent with my money; I was just doing what I knew to be best—in fact, at times when I even realized I spent too much, I wished I was a little more unwitting in environmental issues and a little less contemptuous with others who didn't share my outlook on the sustainability of food. I felt as if experience through Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms and an internship through Golden Fleece Farm taught me too much. I cast a shadow on supermarket chains and their monolithic plantation providers. I ostracized and spurned anyone who wasn't on the same page as me in *Farmacology*. Not to mention, my green education inculcated a sense that everything I was doing in health food stores was right: supporting local. And I still believe that is true. I was proud when I returned home with my hefty, eco-friendly shopping bags, eager to show off what I had bought. I relished in the dishes I prepared—some divine, others too earthly (usually because dirt adhered to my potato skins). Supporting local and buying organic was my expression of a statement I repeatedly said on the farm, "Once you know better, do better." *So what*, I thought to everyone's reaction, *this is how I want to spend my hard-earned cash*.

Discernably, I skyrocketed above my weekly "budget," but managed to get by because I toiled throughout the year. Yet, as the summer's close loomed and the move to The Golden State was complete, my estival savings were no longer replete with the comma between the hundreds' and thousands' place I had worked hard to place there. And it was only getting lower, forcing me to think differently about my routine health food store field trips I treasured. Accepting the position as a Community HealthCorps Educator, I came to realize that I was no longer an employee; I was a member. I was no longer working in my community; I was serving for my community. I was no longer receiving a salary; I was receiving a living stipend, an allowance to get by. For me, this brought out an ultimatum I was unprepared for when I was asked the question, "Could you or could you not feed yourself three nutritious meals a day with only \$5?"

The reality is that the average assistance for a CalFresh beneficiary in California is \$5 per day. Let me reiterate: *per day* is not the same as *per meal* (that, by the way, is about \$1.67).

CalFresh, the Californian name for the Food Stamp Program, is a federal food program that helps community members procure enough food each month when they can't quite make ends meet. For many working families, children and seniors, getting enough food on the table is a real challenge. Thousands in Mendocino County subsist on this aid for themselves and their families, while some families survive entirely on the food acquired through their CalFresh benefits (budgeting, on average, \$35 per week). Whether due to a minimum wage job, job loss, health issue(s), or simply bad luck, local families are income-eligible for CalFresh, providing them with the financial resources to purchase groceries and fuel their lives. In every sense of the phrase, CalFresh creates stronger, healthier communities.

This October, Food for All Mendocino, an alliance aiming to check hunger, is working with community partners to recognize and celebrate the federal food programs in place that support our local populace. Thus, the CalFresh Challenge was born from the subsequent query: Could you live on such a food budget for five days? Here are the main guidelines:

- Each person should spend up to \$5 for food and beverages each day during the Challenge period. All food purchased and eaten during the Challenge week, including dining out, must be included in the total spending.
- During the Challenge, only eat food that you purchase for the project. If you eat food that you already have at home or that is given to you by friends, family or work, account for it in your CalFresh budget.
- In a daily journal, keep track of food spending and take notes of your experiences throughout the week.

I would be lying if I said I decided to take the Challenge without much hesitation. I liked to exercise, I enjoyed eating a large wholesome meal afterward, and I preferred to let my food procurements ebb and flow. I did not want to think about each meal's specific cost. My total food prerogative was at stake. Could I say goodbye to pistachios? Prosciutto? Cultured coconut milk with the works? My diet was already so restricted because of my newfound food allergies (soy, corn, peas, oranges, peanuts, walnuts, almonds, hazelnuts, and sesame). Additionally, and clearly because I wanted to further push myself, I also started to slowly cut out gluten and dairy (even though I was not allergic) because I noticed that I genuinely felt better and my skin cleared up and never looked better. I listened to my body and responded with care, appreciation, respect and discipline. Money was not once factored into my health and well-being—only the food was. I completely disassociated food from its cost. This, above all, is what people do not see after the damage is done. Instead, they see a perceived, young and reckless health food aficionado boasting about his impact. I knew I wasn't perfect. But at the end of the day, what I tried being was *real* and what I tried undertaking was *doing better* for my health.

Regardless of the five-day hassle and my nutritional prerogative, I accepted the Challenge with the backing of my housemates and program coordinator. Yet, as the Challenge week neared, I naturally began to chew over how I could bypass the rules. *I've been meaning to begin that three-day herbal cleanse*, I thought.

And then I thought again.

The privilege that went behind me thinking that left an unsavory taste in my mouth. Here I was contemplating side-stepping the rules, so that I wouldn't have to know the reality that is for so many. I felt disgusted with myself. I surely was not raised to be an apathetic individual who shirks responsibility and cuts corners. I would be remiss in my capacity of appreciating and empathizing with others in my community if I did not seriously take on the Challenge. To me, the thought was an indication that I may have been imprudent all along—not just with my earnings, but with my cognizance and with my sympathy. I wasn't planning on doing what I knew best. *Maybe my wish to be more ignorant was ostensibly coming true?* As this rhetorical question struck a chord within me, I wholeheartedly recommitted myself to the CalFresh Challenge because I quickly recalled that ignorance did not form a part of my happiness.

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October 19, 2015. The CalFresh Challenge begins.

“Practice what you preach,” is a saying I've heard all my life. Only recently, though, has it stung me with tenacious significance. My role as a HealthCorps Educator has me in elementary schools coaching students on nutrition (the way I wish I would have been taught at that age by someone I looked up to). Hence, if I underscore the importance of avoiding cheap junk food, I better go above and beyond in that evading ability. Outside of the classroom and my instruction, if I only have \$5 a day to energize my conversations, I better ensure that I'm not a cent over because I don't have that penny. The Challenge question soon became, “Could you practice what you preach on such a limited budget?”

Given my track record, I was told that I should try to financially plan out my meals for a few days a week before starting the Challenge, just to get a sense of the difficulty (even though I already knew what that entailed per meal). Because I did not have the luxury of not being on a HealthCorps budget, I already struggled with my CalFresh benefits. That was training enough, but also the push that transformed me into the most opportunistic and savvy eater. If anyone offered me lunch, I never declined. If I came across a 12 ounce bottle of coconut oil valued at \$1.95 (which I did via an online promotion), I bought the jar with glee. Coupons were diamonds in the rough. Dinners rapidly divided and what remained was reconstructed for the next day's lunch. Shelf life extended. Grass-fed lamb shanks were ounces of gold masquerading as meat.

As I picked the last remaining figs, the garden in my backyard started to mean the world to me. The persimmons could not ripen fast enough. Everything had weight and precious value.

When I attended community events, I felt sick to my stomach when I saw acquaintances or strangers “forget” the food left on their plates (and watched as it was briskly trashed thereafter). This is not to say that I hadn't felt that way before—especially with regards to composting—, but I guess I was never hungry enough to feel nauseated when I caught a glance of food plopping into plastic bag after plastic bag. You can only observe this so many times before you go mad.

And “mad” I went.

Much to my chagrin, I consumed a co-worker’s forgotten lunch that had been trashed at a local health fair. I was embarrassed and I could not look her in the face later that day to tell her I had done so. When I saw her, I realized that shame that I was holding onto was turning into anger, and it wasn’t directed towards anyone but myself. *If I were to practice what I preach, I contemplated, I should be proud of myself, not mad, for doing what I did.* What shook me the most was how it took so much “courage” to do something so mundane and pitied. In an instant, I had relearned how to pick up food in a different manner than I had been taught at home, twenty-some years ago.

Hunger makes you think differently and act in ways you wouldn’t necessarily want to. Going mad and being mad were novel feelings that shaped my quiet introspection. And the more I thought about it, the more proud I became. Thrilled, even. I had the energy and brainpower required to express myself in the words you are reading now.

Little to my consternation, trivial problems I heard in passing (such as “I can’t find the right boots to match with my new Coach purse” or “the temperature outside is terrible!”) began to smart more than I was used to. It wasn’t that I was wallowing in my own budget misery, too upset to notice others’ concerns, but it was that I was too self-conscious to state my problems. *Why bring others down with my woes?*

As I educated elementary school children on the importance of having a healthy, balanced plate during meals, I found myself eating small amounts of material marketed as food that I knew was not healthy for me (so that I would not go hungry). *Why tell anyone that I was being stung by irony? Why couldn’t I even admit to myself that I was not practicing what I preach?*

More often than not, I sat in silence. Once in that stillness, you have the time to think and reflect in imagined serenity. I have to wonder, when I was carelessly spending and eating throughout college, if I was thinking or reflecting at all...

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There came a time when I knew I needed help, and I was reluctant to believe that there was no one I could turn to. By entering into this lifestyle and accepting that reality (or, better put, the reality of the CalFresh Challenge Guidelines), the aloneness of it all hurt the most. I could not put a moratorium on the desperateness I felt, nor could I believe anyone who depends on the CalFresh benefits alone could ignore it either.

Ukiah is particularly lucky, however, in that it has Emergency Food Assistant Programs (EFAPs) such as the Food Bank, Plowshares and other organizations that get together and provide food for low-income or homeless individuals. Midway through my Challenge, I decided to lunch at Plowshares, a community of 155 volunteers and six staff that are the force powering

and nourishing Ukiah's growth. They plant, grow, cultivate and produce two hot nutritious meals each weekday for as many as 100 hungry community members per meal.

Again, it was never my intention to elude the guidelines, but I needed help; and although attending EFAPs was not in the rulebook, Plowshares had a meal waiting for me—prepared with faith, hope and concern for their neighbors. No questions asked. It is a valuable resource that should be utilized by people who truly need it. Here, I accepted the reality that, whether or not this EFAP broke the guidelines, I could not warmly live on \$5 per day. Ramen, a staple commodity during exam time, crackers, and other affordable food items containing my food allergies surreptitiously filtered back into my diet. This was another reality I wasn't prepared for: I truly could not eat what was best for me, yet I could not nit-pick ingredients because I was much happier full. It would be insolent to complain when I am surrounded by EFAPs that give all the time. Covelo's food distribution, Ukiah's Food Bank equivalent, only gives out food only once a month; and compared to my counterparts across Mendocino County, in Point Arena and Laytonville, for example, many people do not have these resources or the transportation necessary to get them to these thriving centers. Even when you do live in EFAP hubs (Ukiah, Willits or Fort Bragg), you still may not have the transportation or ableness to get yourself or your family there. This weighs heavy on a lot of citizens.

I realized two things sitting in front of my meal at Plowshares. I didn't know how much the meal cost, and I did not factor it into the day's \$5 quota. What I learned was far more important than any calculation I could have conjured up, and that was: dare to be generous. You never know what someone has gone through or goes through on a continual basis, but thoughtful generosity spread to everyone around you makes community stronger and healthier. That aura of positive energy is not unlike the feeling I get seeing the fruits of my labor—quite literally, seeing something I planted grow to fruition and cooked to perfection in an honorable dish. We learn that sharing is caring at a very young age, but I think this has to be reinstilled when we are challenged the most. I acutely noticed the individuals who, quite randomly, provided me with food and vividly remembered how that made me feel. I've never wanted to be more generous than when I had nothing to give. I wanted to reciprocate. The desire to be generous took hold of my theories and consumed me.

The second thing I learned—but inherently knew from the beginning of the Challenge—was that we have to return to the pure soil our ancestors were raised on. Because, quite frankly, I don't think we have a choice anymore.

You see, for the CalFresh Challenge, it all comes down to money. So, how on earth could the thought of money not consume me each and every meal? I brooded over this for days. Each thought brought me back to what I know best: The Environment. To my core, I know we have a duty and responsibility to green the world, to develop and expand the colors of our gardens above and below the ground to, at heart, spread that same generosity terra firma extends to us. I was happy reaching for a ready-to-pick fig in the garden, and I did not focus on expenditures because they didn't really exist; in the market, price is ever extant. The question is not *why become a conscious planter*, but *when*. The time is now. And if we don't have the

opportunity or ability to grow a tiny farm of our own, we must come together to create community gardens in the same way that Plowshares has done to make thousands of meals for all who need. This generosity is felt and is powerful and is attainable.

Food Log	Daily Cost	Comments
<p><b>Day 1*</b></p> <p><u>Breakfast</u> – Oatmeal w/ Cinnamon and Golden Delicious Apple</p> <p><u>Lunch</u> – Egg Salad (w/o Bread), Fig Bar, Raisins and Pistachios</p> <p><u>Dinner</u> – Ramon w/ Roasted Carrots and Peppers</p>	<b>\$4.93</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Oatmeal breakfast = \$0.25.</li> <li>Co-workers celebrated a birthday in the office with homemade cupcakes, driving up the daily cost (my estimate may be to conservative).</li> <li>All apples are handpicked.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 2*</b></p> <p><u>Breakfast</u> – Oatmeal w/ Cinnamon and Golden Delicious Apple</p> <p><u>Lunch</u> – Catered Lunch at the Hillside Health Center (Walnut Apple Salad and Tuna Sandwich)</p> <p><u>Dinner</u> – Spaghetti Squash w/ Olive Oil and Veggies</p>	<b>\$11.25</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Found out the cost per person of the lunch after consumption, which sent me reeling (~\$9.58). What I thought saved money was actually significantly more.</li> <li>Normally don't eat tuna for environmental reasons, but ...</li> <li>Co-workers celebrated yet another birthday in the office with a store-purchased cake.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 3*</b></p> <p><u>Breakfast</u> – Oatmeal w/ Cinnamon and Golden Delicious Apple</p> <p><u>Lunch</u> – Egg Salad (w/o Bread), Fig Bar, Raisins, Pistachios, and Cookies</p> <p><u>Dinner</u> – Spaghetti Squash w/ Olive Oil and Veggies</p>	<b>\$4.15</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I have cut out all teas from my routine to stay on budget. This is saddening to me.</li> <li>Third day in a row in which I've eaten things I know I'm allergic to.</li> <li>Thought: Why didn't I check out the "about to expire" food items at the grocery store?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 4*</b></p> <p><u>Breakfast</u> – Oatmeal w/ Cinnamon and Golden Delicious Apple</p> <p><u>Lunch</u> – Plowshares Meal</p> <p><u>Dinner</u> – Spaghetti Squash w/ Olive Oil, Veggies and Salad</p>	<b>\$2.07</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I was planning on having salmon, but I don't have enough egg salad left to ration for two more days. Thus, I cannot cut my lunch allotment in half to have salmon.</li> <li>Thought: I have no motivation to active my gym membership for the year with my housemates.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Day 5*</b></p> <p><u>Breakfast</u> – Pesto Rice w/ Veggies</p> <p><u>Lunch</u> – Egg &amp; Potato Burrito and Golden Delicious Apple</p> <p><u>Dinner</u> – Leftover Pesto Rice w/ Veggies</p>	<b>\$4.34</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Confirmation that everything is cheaper when you made it yourself from scratch: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Egg Burrito – \$3.00 for only 1 serving</li> <li>Pesto Rice - \$4.02 for almost 6 servings</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

\*Water was taken at every meal, but I could have spiced things up by adding fruit or vegetable-infused waters (mint, citrus, cucumber or strawberries, for example) and would have still been within budget.

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While eating on a food stamp budget for just five days cannot come close to the issues encountered by low-income families month after month, the CalFresh Challenge has given me a new perspective and greater understanding of what assistance and generosity means.

As for the oh-so ubiquitous question, “Could you feed yourself three meals a day with only \$5?” The short answer is yes, probably. However, “Could you feed yourself three *nutritious* meals a day with only \$5?” I would argue one could most likely not, at least not 5 consecutive days, based on the guidelines of the Challenge. The rules of the Challenge were not hard and fast, but the ultimate goal was to provide an opportunity for people to think carefully about the cost of food as low-income families must do every day. The issue I had was with the second guideline, which stated, “During the Challenge, only eat food that you purchase for the project. If you eat food that you already have at home or that is given to you by friends, family or work, account for it in your CalFresh budget.” This assumes that not only is one alone with no support system (aka no community), but that one is incapable of utilizing the land as well. Therefore, I could not find it in my heart to reject food offered to me because of a fixed figure and I refused to include “the costs” of fruits that I picked by hand in my backyard.

Yes, what I picked had value and weight, but it was of a different, much more valuable worth. And for that, I understand I am one lucky man.