

Vignette

It's been about a month since school shut down. I'm sitting in my room, like I have been every day since we left class early. This time, I'm trying to find a new show to escape into, but I'm failing because I've been on a month-long boredom-fueled Netflix binge. I scroll through the "Recommended" section.

My phone rings. It's my mom, so I pick up.

*"Hey love, what are you up to?"*

I look down at the TV remote in my hand.

*"Honestly, not much. Why, what's up?"*

*"Well we're getting really swamped down here with curbside-pickup orders, and I was wondering if you'd want to come help out?"*

I sigh, rolling my eyes but eventually coming around. I wasn't going to find anything new on Netflix anyway.

*"Yeah, I'll come down in a minute."*

—

About an hour later, I'm pushing a grocery cart around an old bank, now filled with shelves of pasta, canned tomatoes, fresh vegetables and hand-made chocolate. Inside the cart, laying flat in the metal grate bottom, lays a piece of printer paper with an email printed out. A highlighter and a pen clank together as I hit a small bump in the linoleum floor and come to a stop at the feminine hygiene section. I pick up a package of cotton tampons, put them in the cart, and use the pen to cross those items off of my email list. I move to the next item.

The process continues until my cart is full and my piece of paper is illegible, covered in pen and highlighter marking what I could find and what I have to suggest replacements for. I prepare to call the customer back, to let them know that “unfortunately, we’ve run out of toilet paper. Yes, I know we advertised on Facebook that we have shelves still full, but that was about three hours ago. We’ve received a lot more orders for it since then. We have some baby wipes instead?”

Getting in line to ring things up, I take a moment to breathe and take stock of my fellow volunteers. In line with me, I see two older hippie women in their 60’s and 70’s, a college-aged boy studying management and finance at a local state university, and a pair of farmers who stopped to help us during the rush after they delivered their produce order, all masked to the nines and distancing from each other. At the cash register, my mom, the store manager, rings up the carts full of groceries, processes the transactions with the customers over the phone, and staples the emails and the receipts to the outside of their paper bags.

I realize in this moment how cool it is to be us. In a weird, unforeseen, unfortunate period of time, where the world is forcing everyone apart, we are here together to support our neighbors. All of us, in our own way, are contributing our time to be there for the community we live in and love. We’re all so different, but we care so much. I realize that that’s all that matters: we care, and therefore people can be fed. I sit in this feeling until it’s my turn to be rung up.

## Analysis

I know I'm supposed to write about myself here. Honestly, I struggled to find a way to relate my identities to my experiences. Despite being so immersed in the food-access work in my area, I find it difficult to find a specific story that highlights all of me equally. I'm white, queer, assigned-female-at-birth, and from a lower-income community in Western MA. I'm a student at an institution of higher education, and I pay my own tuition through having two campus jobs and a series of internship-like opportunities. I'm an older sibling, a partner, and a community member. All of these experiences make me who I am. I could go on and on about my specific experiences, how they make me who I am.

I've been raised to put food high on my list of cares and priorities. Coming from an Irish, Italian, French Canadian blend of a family, I was raised around nourishing and satisfying food. My mom, the current manager and co-founder of my town's food co-operative, established the co-op when I was younger than 10 years old, so I've grown up with the co-op acting as a sibling of sorts. Working in the store, I've made an impact on people from my area, packing their food shares and stocking their shelves. All of these experiences around food leave me with a complex relationship regarding the passion I have for the work still left to do. It feels dishonest to attempt to display connections between my love for feeding people and the rest of my identities, because they really don't have any. The only thing I can think of as a tie between myself and my passion is the way I was raised to see the inherent value in caring for other human beings, regardless of who they are.

The great equalizer in my line of work is hunger, something that impacts every single person on Earth from their first day to their last. Some people have an easier time satiating that hunger, through access to nourishing, healthy and tasty food. But others, like many from my community, struggle to various degrees to gain and keep that access in a sustainable way. Though my home town has made significant strides to strengthen our resilience, we still have noticeable holes in social services, the most notable to me being in the food system.

I struggle to connect my experience of this side of my community to my own identities, because there are so many nuances to food access and insecurity. To purely write about myself as a part of the struggle leaves out my work and professional step-ups. To write about myself as part of the solution simplifies me to the role of “co-op team member”. However, there is power in being someone who can participate in food-access work from an organization’s point of view. My life experiences, though contrasting to my work, in an interesting way energize me to work as an asset to my work.

## Theory of Understanding (2024)

### How do we make sense of the world?

I make sense of the world through thinking about what I've seen, heard and felt in relation to what others say they've seen, heard and felt. I make sense by relating experiences, and through that process, I can start to notice similarities or differences in experience and their outcomes. By relating, I more mean sharing; the relating comes in the feeling that comes out of revealing a part of yourself to someone who reciprocates with their perspective in turn. Storytelling primarily allows us to show who we were and how we were impacted by a part of life, but it also allows for others to absorb that and make reflections in their own life.

### My lived experiences with food access:

I grew up in a small town in Western MA, and ever since I was young, we haven't had a grocery store. Less than ten years ago, a SuperWalmart with a grocery *section* was built, but to get to a grocery store, people in my town have to travel to the next town over. However, there are farmers and farmer's markets, food banks, and the food co-op that I'll be centering my project around. The source of my motivation lies in the public's understanding of these resources, and therefore how they use them.

Take the co-op for example. The Quabbin Harvest Community Food Co-op is a member-owned co-operative focused on food access. Together, through working with local farmers and community organizations, Quabbin Harvest is able to support community members of all socio-economic standings in accessing more affordable food. One main way this work happens is through the HIP/CSA farmshare program (Healthy Incentive Program, Community Supported Agriculture.) Individuals and families in the community with EBT balances are able to sign up for a variety of either weekly or bi-weekly food shares (boxes of fruits or vegetables) using their HIP balance. HIP is what's known as a "hidden benefit" of the EBT program (a

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Massachusetts food-access initiative), where each EBT user is automatically given an additional balance, budget-dependent on family size, of money solely for the purpose of buying fruits or vegetables.

This is where things get confusing, and where I find one of my sources of motivation for my project. There are so many moving pieces to this puzzle, I find it hard to explain to prospective participants looking to learn more. Because this program is tied to government funding, there can be hesitancy in joining a program that one doesn't fully understand. Additionally, this program gains major traction with new participants through word-of-mouth information: if the correct or full set of information isn't presented at the start, a new participant may sign up with different expectations. This lack of educational clarity is something that stands as a barrier between the low-income eaters in my town and their next meal. I find the theme present in how people perceive the co-operative as a whole as well; . It deeply frustrates and saddens me that people will feel and therefore be excluded from accessing this vital resource.

My family and I have existed on varied levels of financial security my whole life. I've seen my father come home with more than enough to support my stay-at-home mother, my brother and I. But I've also seen times where we needed to make hard decisions. We do our best, and my parents try to hide it as much as they can, but I know that there have been moments where we've had to plan thoroughly about where our dinner will be coming from. Although I've never gone to bed hungry, I know that food is a thing we're conscious about, and so I think about it all the time. These programs mean something to me, because I've watched close friends and family experience hard times and use them to survive. I know that it would only take one emergency trip to the hospital, or one overdue student loan payment's interest, and my family would need to consider enrolling in these programs as well.