

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: The relationship between food, money and health and why food for all is common cents

Slide 1



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THE \$120 FOOD CHALLENGE
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I've been asked to speak with you today about the relationship between food, money and health and I confess when given this topic I blanched. For one thing, we are a switched on food culture and have been for at least the last forty years. That's at least two generations of people around the country who eat a greater variety of foods than ever before and who enjoy better education and economic stability than at any other time in this nation's history.

So to the public eye at least, as a nation we know we can eat well. We know from a tsunami of information from cereal boxes to cooking shows the mantra of fresh is best, of local and seasonal, or of Two and Five. We are in love with food, with celebrity chefs and cooking shows,

with food blogs and cookbooks. We take photos of our meals and put them on Facebook, a humble brag that tells our friends that we are switched on, in tune with ourselves, loving life, winning.

And yet, our relationship with food is dysfunctional. Our disconnect is vast.

While we know we *can* eat well, in reality (and in private) we admit we should be eating better than we do. We have never had greater access to healthy foods and yet we have an obesity epidemic. Our under twenty five year olds are digital natives but don't know where their food comes from. They reheat food but don't cook it from scratch. The irony of living in an information age is that we have dumbed ourselves down. We don't foster enquiry about the food we eat, not even to chat with our butcher or greengrocer. Instead we Google it. We have forgotten old wisdoms.

SLIDE 2: Woolworths bread



We have handed our purchasing power to two retail giants who don't take their cues from us, the consumer, at all. Instead, they tell us what we eat and when we eat it, what farmers will grow or produce,

regardless of the time of year and then they tell us they are purveyors of the freshest food around.

In this pact with the devil, we have sold our souls in an endless hell of two-for-one specials and cold-storage apples and two week old eggs. We buy so-called fresh bread that has been prepared and flown in from Ireland. We drink bottled water with use-by dates and eat hidden salt in breakfast cereals and we endure confusing and capricious labelling.

Above all, we have a Drive-thru mentality and not just for food. We want it NOW, whatever it is: A perfect house and garden, a reality show lifestyle, a radical makeover, instant entertainment, instant gratification. Despite this nation's aspirations, the lowest denominator of our food culture is this: It must be fast, easy, cheap, healthy and above all, it must feed our need to feel good about ourselves.

We haven't just forgotten how to cook. We have forgotten how to eat and how to shop and, like a heathen in church, I would argue that we have forgotten how to live. Instead we are unconscious, asleep. In setting goals, we look for external indicators of success rather than internal feelings of wellness. We live an unexamined life.

Our experiences inform our eating, cooking and purchasing choices. So if your cooking skills are limited and/or your food awareness is already compromised by the pernicious interests of big retailers, what hope does your health have when you are poor as well?

I think you can probably hazard a guess. In acute poverty your inclination as a parent is to feed your children first while you go hungry. Then it becomes one basic meal a day. In today's Austerity Measures Britain, doctors have now taken to asking their patients if they are on welfare,

such is the impact of poor diet on physical illnesses and generalised malaise. But poverty has a terrible knock-on effect not just on physical health but on mental health. Anyone who has ever experienced retrenchment knows: our social life is the first thing that suffers. In an effort to live within our frugal means, we not only buy generic food, but we close the door on our friends. We don't admit to others we are doing it tough.

We are so disconnected from what it means to live a fully rounded out life that we only think of good times with GOOD food; we associate a rich life with a good wage; we tell ourselves that success comes from tangible objects and measurable assets. Most distressing of all, we compare ourselves to others.

In this country we have on an almost Dickensian value set towards poverty. Values are imposed on the welfare recipient, the values of middle-class aspirational voting heartland. There is a hierarchy of welfare recipients, with returned veterans at the top, closely followed by aged pensioners. People receiving unemployment benefits are the lowest of the low. We – and I include myself in this group, still - are intentionally made to struggle as part of a bipartisan government policy, and the Greek chorus of the middle classes joins in: We must suffer poverty until we pull ourselves out of it. Our destitution is meant to be an incentive.

No wonder we don't tell our friends.

Because we are so removed from the pared-back simplicity of living well, we suffer in silence and solitude, rather than invite friends round for a shared barbecue. This is how you might word such an invitation when you have no money. *Barbecue at our place. Bring your own meat. And something to drink. And a salad.* Amazing as it might sound to people in this room, it can take incredible courage to say this, especially if you are

the person who never says 'Take Us As You Find Us' without racing through the house and doing a quick tidy up first.

When poverty hits, our default setting becomes NO, but we miss out on what I call accidental joy. We think our misfortune is an obstacle to overcome and yes, it is that, but it's also an opportunity.

And the opportunity is this: Do you have the courage not just to plug away at job seeking and get your financial mojo back but to re-design your life from the very foundations? Are you going to use this chance to strip back all those beliefs and values and opinions and habits that do not serve you? Do you have the strength to let go and do it on your terms?

It would be easy at this point to tell you that my own financial woes came from one epically bad day at work after which I packed it all in and started a blog. The truth is that it was the culmination of a series of events.

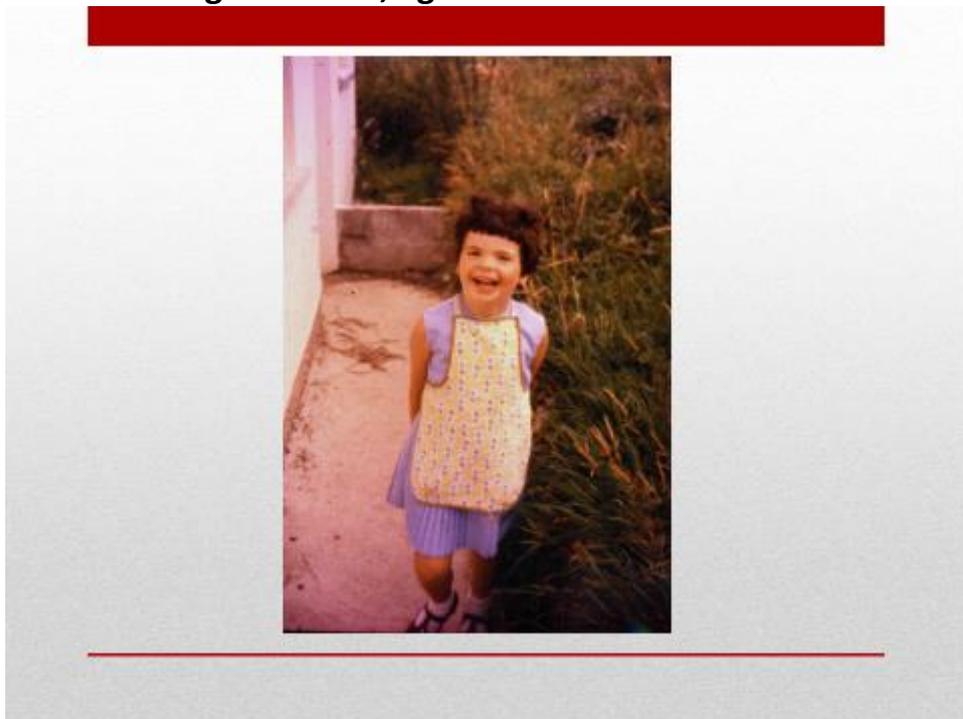
For thirty years I was beset by setbacks, bouts of depression and thwarted career ambitions and on top of that there was separation and divorce, life as a single parent and a Shakespearean rift with my family. Every plan or goal I had seemed to be formed on the back of some sort of expectation: To be a good daughter, to be an amenable wife, a helpful employee, a home owner, to have a family, to pay my taxes and drive carefully, to never wear blue and green together – I sincerely wanted these things, and yet it was always framed according to the expectations of others. My financial ambitions was disembowelled by a poverty consciousness. I could not put my own needs first. Instead, I was worried about what other people would think.

I was a perfectionist and crippled by a chronic fear of failure. It will not surprise too many people to hear that this fear of failure manifested itself into a self-fulfilling prophesy.

On the day I quit my job I had no marriage. No career. No house. Questionable health. A very small social network of friends, many of whom lived an hour or two away. No job. No savings. A complex family dynamic, to say the least.

And in this perfect storm of uncertainty and doubt, opportunity came in and I at long last found bedrock. I found the self-belief that of course had been with me all along. It seems obvious now, but at the time, I had no way of knowing that the very thing that eluded me for most of my life could be found in every kitchen I had ever walked into.

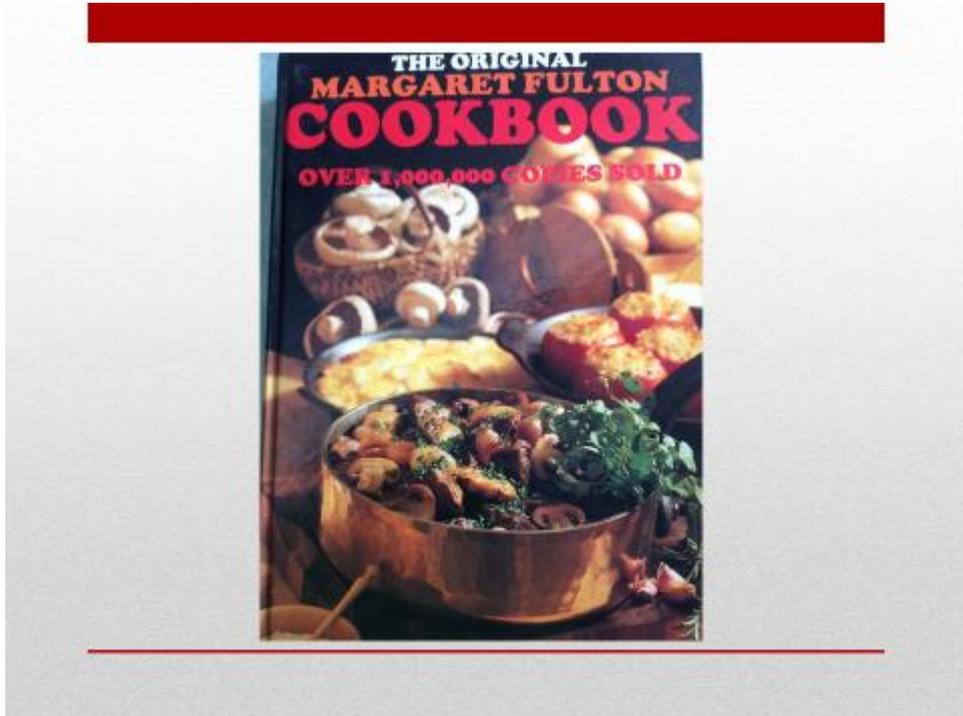
SLIDE 3: Young Sandra at, aged 5



I can't say when it was that I fell in love with cooking, but I do know it was at an early age and like many skills picked up in one so young, it had a very organic, natural feel to it.

By the time I was in Year 7, my mother had returned to full time work and would leave meat out to de-frost with strict instructions on how to start preparing it.

SLIDE 4: Margaret Fulton's Cookbook



On my 17th Birthday a friend gave me a copy of Margaret Fulton's classic cookbook – my first – and I was off and running. When my parents left town for the weekend instead of throwing a large party I would host a dinner party.

When I moved out of home, Mum showed me how to manage a household budget. She itemised every single expense I ever had and then spread them out over the columns of a ledger book. "There," she said, "now you know how much you have to save every week to pay for it every month."

Over the years that followed I applied her advice to buying groceries. Then as now, I pared it back and went shopping with a plan and a list and I cooked food in a kitchen so tiny it didn't actually have room for a

fridge. Any concerns about poverty were always offset by the prospect of a comforting and well cooked family meal.

So, in that maelstrom of poor mental health and grave uncertainty, my ability to prepare a meal was the one thing that I had not lost. Once again, as I had always done in these times, I went to my pantry and looked at what I already had on the shelves.

When I look back on that first week of the rest of my life, two things stand out. The first is that of all of my worries, this was the one I felt best able to deal with. And two was my utter astonishment that other people were interested in how I was going to complete this task.

I thought my ability to cook from scratch increasingly irrelevant. I honestly thought that the best side-effect of cooking was a deeply personal one – I cooked because I wanted to, because it was therapeutic.

Somewhat disingenuously, I thought EVERYONE knew how to do this – to budget, to plan meals, to buy sensibly, to cook it all, even if they chose not to. I never dreamt for one second that people would clamber for this old-school wisdom.

Above everything, I never anticipated how healing and redemptive this business could be. Writing about my food has been intensely healing for me. Cooking my food and sharing it with their families has been intensely healing and redemptive for others.

SLIDE 5: Recipe for Success

Recipe for Success

1. Find something you love.
2. Do it in tiny, easy to manage steps.
3. Look for the accidental joy it brings you.
4. Repeat.

My simple formula – a recipe if you will – for beating adversity is this: Find something you love. Do it in tiny, easy to manage steps. Look for the accidental joy it brings you. Repeat.

You will note there is nothing about goal setting in there, or about visualising your dreams and going after them. Instead - and this is crucial - it's about stripping yourself bare of all the expectations of others, of reducing it down to one small thing, one small achievement each day and celebrating it. By letting go of every other expectation, you can free yourself to explore what it is that suits you best. Slowly, the fog clears and the future becomes limitless. It's terrifying and thrilling in equal measure.

Over the last four years I have learned this: recovery from adversity is an act of faith. It requires self-love and bravery in equal measure. You cannot be complacent or passive. Recovery will not follow a prescribed course nor will it always give you the outcome you seek. But by going back to these basics, over and over, recovery from adversity is not only possible, it will free you from the prison of other people's expectations.

And it is likely to give you something far better than anything you can imagine for yourself.

SLIDE 6: Me and Margaret



So to the issue at hand. How do we break down the enormous and dysfunctional relationship between food, money and our health into small steps? How does my simple formula work?

Cook good food simply. Tackle it in easy and small steps. Look for the joys, especially in how it connects you with others. Repeat.

For those who haven't read my book or don't follow the blog, here then is my advice for making the most of the limited funds you might have and getting the most out of the food you cook.

SLIDE 7: pantry



Organisation is the biggest skill you will need so ...

Do a pantry inventory and use up what you have first

SLIDE 8: My Shopping Rules

My Shopping Rules

1. Have a list
2. Have a Plan B
3. Go round the outside
4. Generic is your friend
5. Look DOWN
6. Gather your friends together

Menu plan

SLIDE 9: Hidden Money

Hidden Money

1. Do an inventory of your pantry, fridge and freezer
2. Use what you have before you buy more
3. Leftovers are sexy
4. Preserve, preserve, preserve
5. Portion it out

SLIDE 10: I'm not eating That! (Or the Ugly daikon)

I'm not eating *THAT!*



1. Buy in season (and everything has a season)
2. Meat-free meals is not the end of civilisation
3. Ugly is beautiful
4. Flirt with your butcher
5. Ask for what you want
6. Learn from your Nanna (even if she's on YouTube)

Whenever I worry these principles of eating well and living well are a little old fashioned, I usually get validation from unexpected areas. An

email will pop in telling me how the simple act of sharing a home cooked meal has brought them back from the brink of nervous breakdown. Readers have shared their triumphs, from overcoming their fear of cooking, to staring down a difficult mother-in-law, to finding a measure of peace at a time of tremendous upheaval.

It is a series of small triumphs, and of communion. A simple gathering, TV switched off, eating simply prepared food, eating slowly, talking often, is the single biggest weapon you can use towards improving your health. It's as effective as yoga or meditation. It is the single endorsement I can give you: Choose food wisely, cook it with care, share it with others.

As educators and health workers and leaders in your community, I encourage you not just to promote the health aspects of good food, but to counsel its inclusion as a social event. Food SHOULD connect us all by bringing everyone to their rightful seat at the table, and not just those happy families in advertisements. I commend it to you, with my compliments.