# **WN** *Columns*

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## **WN** *Here I am*

## A jolt to the system…



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*Vielsalm and Brussels, Belgium*. Hello, readers of *WN*! Here I am, wishing you a healthy and productive year. Like so many of us I have been swamped with work leading up to the end of 2015. It's true that those who love their work never work a day in their lives, but not true that those who love their work get a couple of extra hours tacked on to each day. Does anyone know how to check e-mails while sleeping?

Aside from my normal projects and research for my Masters programme, I am deeply invested in this issue of *WN*. In addition to this column and editing the reporting by Shruti Ravindran and Manipadma Jena on *land wars in India*, I have compiled the *very grand finale of our Visions series*– a piece over a year in the making – celebrated in an *accompanying editorial.* So I wish you happy reading of my writing and other contributions. As always, I am eager for debate and feedback. Please write in to wn.letters@gmail.com.

Given my current location in Brussels, I end this issue's column with thoughts on the implications of the terrorist atrocities in Paris on 13 November. But I start by giving thanks with traditional meals here with my Belgian family in the Ardennes and continue with observations on the politics of climate disruption as a response to the summit in Paris that took place from 30 November to 11 December.

*Food culture. Meals: Feasts*

# Giving thanks away from home



*Here I am (centre, between my super-handsome boyfriend and his mother) with my other family in the Belgian Ardennes. We are all about to enjoy a traditional US Thanksgiving meal together*

We public health and nutrition professionals think and write a lot about food and health at population level--usually in a rather abstract style. The result is we, as a field, are less concerned about community nourishment and social and family well-being at a human level. I have written a number of pieces for *WN* where I discuss the loss of quality to the dominant quantitative approaches in public health nutrition.

Last June, I wrote a *guest editorial* where I pointed out that nutrition students are taught to focus on the ever-more intricate examination and analysis of numbers. This distorts meaning into over-simplified realities while learning essentially to ignore broader psychological, social, cultural and environmental aspects. In our last issue, *I co-authored an editorial* with Isabela Sattamini, Sara Garduño-Diaz and Maria Alvim, also members of the *WN* editorial team, where we discussed the 2015 *Global Nutrition Report* and pointed out one of its shortcomings: relentless emphasis on percentages, statistics and numerical trends. These number-driven approaches to the emotional, social, cultural, political and environmental realities of nutrition are inadequate.

Here, I focus on the neglected social and cultural aspects of food. In his contribution to *WN's Visions* series José Luis Vivero Pol says:

> And yet people see food differently, as endowed with many non-economic dimensions: food is a vital need, a cultural pillar, a human right, an Earth's gift, as well as a good to be sold and bought. Non-economic dimensions also include cooking and eating together, and memories associated with flavours and tastes and sharing food with strangers and guests.

So to capture the *meaning* of nutrition beyond and above its biophysical contexts, here I share my experiences of celebrating wonderful times of the year feasting in Europe with my new family and friends.

The time of year from Thanksgiving through Christmas and New Year is complicated for me since I relocated to Belgium two and a half years ago. Figuring out which holidays to spend on what continent and with which family is one issue. Another is that while traditional meals play a special role in making a holiday complete, in my new European home I often have been unable to recreate the culinary circumstances I grew up with in my native US. Traditional holiday meals and their embodiment of friendship and community take different forms in every culture... I am learning! Here are some of my experiences.

### *Christmas in France*

I spent my first Christmas away from home in 2014 in Alsace, France visiting the *marchés de Nöel* with my Belgian family. We celebrated with gifts and dinner on Christmas Eve, a tradition I am used to as my paternal grandparents were European. What I missed though was my favourite German meal, *rolladen*, a kind of pot roast thatmy *oma* (grandmother) was famous for, although my Aunt Heidi is a close second, and a *smorgasbord* of smoked Norwegian fish for dessert.

Alsace was very different. I partook of a different Christmas Eve tradition: frogs' legs cooked in a garlic-tomato sauce. On Christmas morning, although I was FaceTimed in for gift opening with my family in New York, I missed out on our yearly bacon-and-egg breakfast in pyjamas. And while my mother's side of the family was indulging in an Italian-American Christmas Day meal of all sorts of *antipasti, manicotti*, lasagne, and pasta dishes that I first helped my grandma prepare and cook twelve years ago, I was tucking into wild venison roast.

Christmas in France with Belgians was novel, familial and delicious. It felt like a holiday in every traditional sense, but there was something less Christmas-y about a holiday that was not spent cooking and eating my traditional US annual feasts.

Since my *oma* passed away in 2011, our continuation of cooking her most beloved dish has both kept aspects of our Christmas traditions and her memory alive. My twelve hours of preparation with my grandma to feed our 40-person family means more to me than any gift under the tree possibly could. Holiday meals in my US family, like so many others, are less about the food itself, and more about the love, togetherness and conviviality that are ritually put into the occasion of the feast.

### *Giving Thanks in Belgium*

Thanksgiving in the US in late November is our holiday to give thanks for all our blessings in the presence of loved ones. The feast dates back to the first European harvest in New England in 1621 and is meant to symbolise our relationship with the indigenous peoples (or that part of the relationship before the land-grabbing, disease-spreading, massacring, and other matters we like to forget).

Luckily for me, Belgians love Thanksgiving. After lifetimes of watching Hollywood films, the holiday has gained appeal for them. The signature roast turkey and its supporting cast of mashed yams, bread stuffing, green beans, cranberry sauce, and pumpkin and apple pies are just as well-known as any classic film here in Belgium. In 2015, I held three dinner parties for a total of thirty very star-struck people, plus I baked an extra apple pie and twelve mini-loaves of pumpkin bread. I even had to turn several requests away.

I 'give thanks' that my family and friends here in Belgium are more than happy to partake in what is an important holiday feast time to me. But there are cultural differences... Belgians just don't seem to understand the all-American concept of 'you eat until you hate yourself'. They also insist every year that I cook too much food – but in the US an objective of Thanksgiving is to continue to gorge on festive leftovers for a week!

### *Customs and culture*

I would have also thought that after four Thanksgivings together, my boyfriend would understand that we in the US don't make pumpkin pie because people like it (they don't). We make it because it belongs on the table. These misunderstood subtleties of American festive culture make us all gathered together in Europe laugh, and open up opportunities for dinner guests to share customs in their own culture, which promotes deeper understanding of one another.

Making a Thanksgiving meal is long hard work. Without help, I can be in the kitchen for well over eight hours in preparation. I usually refuse all offers of help, because as a foreigner, it fulfils me to offer loved ones a traditional home-cooked meal from my own country.

This all brings me back to José Luis Vivero Pol's splendid statement quoted above, and the wider concept of nourishment that we, the *WN* team, feel captures the real essence of nutrition. Food is indeed a 'cultural pillar'. With holidays abroad, it is the vehicle through which I am able to share important aspects of my culture and myself with loved ones both at home and abroad while experiencing where they come from and who they are. Food from feasts and other holiday meals nourishes more than bodies. It also affects and enriches ritual, cultural identity and personal and social relationships, exactly as set out in *the new official Brazilian food guide.*

Nutrition is so much more to people, families and societies than adequate calories, protection against deficiencies and fuel for economic development. Nutrition in the full sense of nourishment is an originator and driver of cultural, social and personal growth. These important realities of nutrition and human well-being cannot be captured by reductive quantitative analyses, but they are at least as important as its biochemical aspects. It is high time that research, policies and programmes concentrated on nutrition as a whole in all its glorious complexity and variety. The founts of knowledge and wisdom must also include the people who grow the food and prepare the meals. Now, this emancipated woman goes back to the kitchen!

*Climate disruption*

# The rights of the planet



*Post-Hurricane Sandy ruins at the New Jersey Shore, US. This popular weekend resort for New Yorkers was devastated in the type of freak storm that is a growing symptom of climate disruption*

The scope of public health nutrition has become wider and wider. It is now agreed that the most ominous impact of climate disruption is on food systems and global health. It is well known that a prime cause of climate disruption is the mass production of meat, meat products, and feed for animals--which involves vast destruction of forests and savannahs. Other adverse effects include flooding and famine, increases in food prices, and decrease in food availability and security. There is additionally little serious doubt that one symptom of climate disruption is increasingly violent storms, which also wreck farmland.

Nearly all scientists support common-sense evidence and attribute the more frequent and most violent storms to climate disruption. It is widely accepted that effects such as those mentioned above release excess CO2 into the atmosphere and prevent soil from capturing atmospheric carbon. High levels of CO2 in turn trap heat in the atmosphere, thus creating a 'greenhouse' effect. Over the past 30 years, average temperatures have been increasing across the globe. The decade from 2001-2010 was the hottest recorded since reliable records were established in the late 1800s.

So I had plenty of reasons as a professional as well as a citizen to join in the global march for the climate in Paris, France on 29 November. I believe that the more we professionals act as citizens and activists, the better. The march was planned to be in preparation for the 2015 climate change 'Conference of Parties' (COP 21) held in Paris from 30 November to 11 December. This conference aimed to achieve a universal binding agreement on climate for all nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions so as to limit the global temperature increase to 2°C above pre-industrial

levels. Unfortunately, both the Paris march and the replacement event in Brussels were cancelled after the dreadful attacks in Paris (and see below).

### *Freakish symptoms*

Hurricanes have become more of a menace in many parts of the world. A few weeks before the Conference of the Parties, on 22 October, news broke that Hurricane Patricia, the strongest-ever recorded hurricane, was set to hit Western Mexico. Exceptional atmospheric conditions, including warm waters as the result of an unusually powerful *El Niño* phenomenon, fuelled the storm into becoming the second fastest-ever recorded hurricane intensification. Winds shot up from 96 kilometres an hour to 270 kilometres an hour in just 30 hours, making the category-5 hurricane the strongest landfalling one on record.

Upon hitting the coast of Mexico on 23 October, the country's mountainous landscape interacted with the hurricane, reducing it to a tropical depression within 24 hours of landfall. While the hurricane itself hit Mexico, its associated flooding and rainfall also impacted hundreds of thousands of people in Central America, including Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Hundreds of homes and farms were destroyed and thousands damaged. Total damage is estimated at $US 200 million.

Michael Mann, a climate researcher at Penn State University, summarises the agreement of the great majority of specialist scientists, saying

> As ocean temperatures continue to warm as a result of human-caused climate change, we expect hurricanes to intensify, and we expect to cross new thresholds. Hurricane Patricia and her unprecedented 200 mile-per-hour sustained winds appears to be one of them now.

Hurricane Patricia is one of a number of 'freak storms' ravaging parts of many countries. In November 2013, Super-typhoon Haiyan devastated the Philippines, Micronesia and Palau, Southern China and Vietnam, with 196 kilometre an hour winds that killed over 6,300 people in the Philippines alone. The UN estimated 11 million people were affected by Haiyan and international agencies costed economic impact at $US 14 billion.

Hurricane Sandy affected my community and my family. In late October 2012, it tore through the East Coast of the US, including my native Long Island. The day after the storm, my sister and I drove past overturned vehicles and stranded boats in the road to pick up my father. He had been working on a rental property when his truck was submerged in salt water and blocked in by four stray boats the night the hurricane hit. At the time, our family had owned the property for 25 years with never a single flood. The same day, we travelled streets by canoe to check on my grandmother's waterfront house and found the first-storey windows had been crushed in by rising tides. Total damages from the storm were assessed at $US 128 billion.

The devastation and helplessness I saw in one of the most affluent areas of the US after Hurricane Sandy – destruction of homes, closing of schools, loss of electricity

for months, emptying of grocery stores, waiting on lines for gas for tens of hours and constant presence of military and humanitarian aid -- gave my community plenty to think about. It gave many of us an idea of the havoc these disasters, in part caused by human-made climate change, cause in the most vulnerable parts of the world.

### *World food and health*

Between 1980 and 2009, disasters like those described above have increased by 80 per cent and now jeopardise the lives and livelihoods of over 200 million people a year. Climate disruption's most dramatic manifestations right now are freak storms, but more is in store. Here I emphasise the impact on world food systems and global health.

The World Bank recently estimated that 100 million more people could be thrown into poverty as a result of climate disruption. Among other reasons, this is because crop failure, desertification, increased incidence of infectious diseases, and forced displacement will make the lives of vulnerable families, societies and populations almost and often literally impossible.

For example, crop failure ruins the livelihood of already-impoverished farming communities. Where social safety nets do not exist, crop failure means no income. This perpetuates poverty and its associated illnesses and multi-generational effects. Crop failure also means less supply on the food market, which drives up prices. This can put food out of economic reach for the most vulnerable. For many of the poorest people in the world, owned land is their only financial asset; when climate disruption renders their land unproductive or unliveable, they have nothing. Changes in climate also drive disease vectors. This causes increases in illness, lost productivity, and higher health care bills for already impoverished communities -- an impossible situation.

The greatest burden caused by climate disruption is borne by those who have contributed to it the least. For example, in the small African country of Eritrea the average citizen has a carbon footprint 200 times smaller than that of an average US citizen. But the damage done by climate disruption will be much greater in Eritrea. Droughts and floods will jeopardise subsistence farmers' yields. Rising sea levels will cause contaminated and undrinkable groundwater. Hotter temperatures will promote the spread of malaria. And Eritrea has almost no resources to mitigate the damage done by climate disruption.

### *Unsustainable development*

In the face of these impending disasters, the United Nations and its member states has issued what is generally agreed to be good news with the launch of the 2016-2030 *Sustainable Development Goals* last November. These seem to take into account the urgency of environmental crises. And yes, looking through the report, I found that eight of the 17 Goals uphold the health of the environment.

Yes, the UN and its member states have stated that they are committed to ending poverty and hunger for all, while promoting sustainable agriculture, responsible use of marine resources, and taking 'urgent' action to combat climate change. Its goal of promoting 'sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all' aims to 'decouple' economic growth from environmental degradation – and thus combat climate disruption.

Unfortunately though, the Goals do not allow for the mother and father of all political and economic paradigm shifts needed before they can truly be achieved. Reports, declarations and other initiatives of the UN, its agencies, and other established organisations continue to reflect a bankrupt ideology where economic growth – meaning more exploitation of natural resources, more inequity, and more corporate sales and profits – are considered essential and not questioned. Take, for example, the World Bank's 'value added per worker' index, which assigns value to an agriculture systems in relation to how mechanised they are. This was the system chosen to classify and evaluate food systems in the *2015 Global Nutrition Report*. There is no attempt to give value to the non-monetary, cultural or environmental value of people-intensive systems of agriculture.

The Goals even call for a sustained increase in industrialisation, which is absurd, for this is the cause of climate disruption. Being a reasonable person who cares about humanity, I can appreciate the job- and wealth-building logic behind continued industrialisation. But being a reasonable person who also cares about the future of humanity and the planet, I understand the over-riding need for a new model of 'development' where never-ending economic growth and industrialisation are not seen as the way to lift the global victims of an exploitative economic system out of poverty. In theory, the Goals are beautiful and inspiring. But any plan for 'development' that depends on industrialisation as its driving force is innately unsustainable.

### *Duty to act*

The ways of life of those of us who live in wealthy countries are taking land, food, health and well-being away from those who already have less (and often far less) than we do. This has always been true. If consumption and pollution continue to rise and promises to change are supported by no concrete action, the lives of a high proportion of people – maybe most people – in future generations will be made miserable. All citizens have a moral obligation towards humanity and all other living species, to combat climate disruption. Pope Francis in his 25 September speech at the UN in New York got it right:

> It must be stated that a true 'right of the environment' does exist, for two reasons. We human beings are part of the environment. We live in communion with it, since the environment itself entails ethical limits which human activity must acknowledge and respect ... Any harm done to the environment, therefore, is harm done to humanity.

*Ethics. Violence*
# Atrocities



*A blood-chilling holiday image. Belgian military patrol the picturesque Grande Place, where I usually FaceTime my family during this season to share the beautiful decorated location with them.*

I have never been physically hurt by violence, but I have been touched twice by its extreme form of atrocity. These times have made me reflect on various types of violence and atrocity in our world and how to confront them in our professional and personal lives.

The days following the 13 November 2015 shootings in Paris were tense where I live in Brussels, which is also the political capital of the European Union. The weekend of the attacks, two of the implicated gunmen were discovered to have been living in Molenbeek, the Arab quarters here. On 16 November, three European Parliament buildings were evacuated following a bomb scare.

The entire week was filled with increased police and military presence throughout the city, especially in the European quarters. Brussels was locked down early Saturday morning, 21 November, citing 'serious and imminent' Paris-style terrorist attacks. The Belgian authorities launched an all-out manhunt for Salah Abdeslam, the only surviving gunman in Paris who is thought not to have detonated his suicide belt. They thus shut down malls, cafés, public buildings, universities, nurseries, schools and the metro system to free up police power and minimise security risks. Normal life was put on pause until Wednesday 25 November with gradual reopening ofthe metro system, and the *Bruxellois* went back to work and school.

During this period I was out of Brussels with my Belgian family in the Ardennes, the site of the Battle of the Bulge, which was the final massive battle between Allied and German armies in 1944-1945. This battle resulted in over 100,000 military casualties, involved mass murders committed by both sides and caused even more dreadful

damage to the people and land of the veteran war grounds (the Ardennes were also a battleground in 1914 and 1940). The people of the Ardennes know a lot about insecurity, violence and atrocity; there are plenty *ardennais* still who lived through the Battle of the Bulge. Many of them lost family members, friends and neighbours, and livelihoods. It felt like an apt place to be.

### *Time for courage*

On waking up on 14 November to the news in Paris, I was bound to process the events as a child of the events on 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington. I decided not to be afraid (if only fear was as simple as making a decision) because I hadn't died or been injured between 2001 and 2013 while all the time living in Long Island just outside New York City. Refusing to live in fear now is for me and others in Brussels a personal act of resistance towards extremist groups who are determined to terrorise those of us who come from or live in Europe and North America.

So once back in Brussels, I continued to take the metro to school, meet friends in public places and enjoy football matches at my usual bar in the tightly-guarded European quarters(well, I enjoyed the local beer and the company… the football was for the boys!). I bought a Thialys train ticket to Paris two days after the attacks to attend the demonstrations for the climate change conference. I was not going to be intimidated into avoiding terrorist targets like public transportation. After President François Hollande banned the Paris demonstrations, I arranged to join a replacement event in *Grande Place* (pictured above) in Brussels. But this too was cancelled by official order.

The sense of living daily life as an act of resistance has given a new meaning to otherwise run-of-the-mill activities. Morning commutes feel less of a chore and more of an act of citizenship. Meeting friends for coffee on a public terrace feels empowering and defiant. Taking the scenic route to the train station from the bus stop to watch tourists enjoy famous city views is now a small act of courage. Tweeting pictures of cats is a witty makeshift civilian war strategy.

### *Time for reflection*

This experience, and recollections of 9/11 and everything that followed that atrocity, has made me think about living in a world whose citizens have seen many daily activities in a new light: as acts of resistance against all sorts of violence.

Terrorism is the form of extreme violence that dominates official policy and media headlines in those countries that are threatened. But there are many other evils in the world that cause unnecessary poverty and misery, disease and death on a colossal scale, and therefore deeply affect public health and nutrition. All professionals – and all citizens – should become more sensitive to such forms of violence.

I feel now more than ever that when customers are in a supermarket or butcher shop, they should make a point of refusing to buy meat that is not up to attested

standards of humane treatment of animals and environmental conservation, and state this to the manager of the shop. I suggest that we all make a habit of posting articles on the structural causes and violent effects of climate disruption on Facebook and any other social media we use. When we believe that mega-chain stores like discount grocery and fast food outlets disrespect their suppliers and employees, we should denounce them. When we learn about land-grabbing in impoverished countries, we should identify those responsible and use social media to denounce them too. And we should act in all the ways we can personally, as family members and as citizens to confront and check the increase in production and consumption of ultra-processed products with their appalling effects on obesity and diabetes.

The world suffers multiple forms of atrocity. All policies and actions that perpetuate or increase suffering, poverty or violence should be confronted with cool analyses and also with rage. The current dominant 'neo-liberal' ruthless form of capitalism in which governments have set corporations free to ravage food systems all over the world is not the same form of violence as terrorism, but is just as damaging – or more so, many may feel.

It is right to encourage and celebrate the everyday fearless acts of citizens in Lebanon, Syria, Tunisia and many other countries, as well as those in Paris and Brussels, that are attacked by terrorists. This helps to know what being a citizen means in an unstable and insecure world. But I also suggest there is an even bigger issue here: this is a good time for everybody to act as citizens in the face of all other forms of violence and atrocity, small and large, that may affect them, their communities, their countries, or the people of other countries.

I believe too, that a blatantly unfair dominant world system in which weak and vulnerable populations increasingly suffer, breeds rage and extreme actions, including violence and atrocity. Let our actions help to make the world a fairer and safer place.

## Status

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