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Speaking of Faith®
with Krista Tippett

The Ethics of Eating
TRANSCRIPT

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KRISTA TIPPETT, HOST: I'm Krista Tippett. Today, "The Ethics of Eating," with author Barbara Kingsolver. In her new book, she describes an adventure her family undertook to spend one year eating primarily what they could grow or raise themselves. Barbara Kingsolver turned her life towards questions many of us are asking: How can my family's daily routines really affect climate change? What would we need to sacrifice in order to do what is right? And what might we gain?

MS. BARBARA KINGSOLVER: I think what surprised me the most is that we didn't really miss anything. We went into it probably thinking too much about what we were not going to be able to have. But when we changed our thinking and started every meal with the question, 'What do we have? What's in season? What do we have plenty of?' — it became really a long exercise in gratitude.

MS. TIPPETT: This is *Speaking of Faith*. Stay with us.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: I'm Krista Tippett. This hour, author Barbara Kingsolver on the longings and lessons behind her new book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. It's about a year her family spent eating primarily what they could grow or raise themselves. We'll explore her conviction that we can all find greater pleasure and influence the grand environmental crises of our time through our families' food lives.

From American Public Media, this is *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. Today, "The Ethics of Eating: A Conversation with Barbara Kingsolver."

Barbara Kingsolver is the author of celebrated works of fiction and nonfiction, which mingle an artistry with words, training in evolutionary biology, and a love of the natural world: *The Bean Trees*, *High Tide in Tucson*, *Animal Dreams*, and *The Poisonwood Bible*, Kingsolver's epic 1998 novel about post-colonial Africa.

Animal, Vegetable, Miracle, written in conjunction with her husband and elder daughter, is her first full-length, nonfiction narrative. It opens on a May day in Arizona, where Kingsolver had spent half her life, and her children, the whole of theirs. But after three years of successive droughts, she writes, while people elsewhere debated how seriously they should take global warming, she felt she was staring it in the face. "Away went our little family," she writes, "like rats leaping off a burning ship."

They drove across the country and moved into a farm in southern Appalachia where they had long spent their summers. And on land that could feed them, as Kingsolver tells it, chapter after chapter, month by month, they embarked on an odyssey of planning, planting, cooking, storing, freezing, and harvesting both plants and animals.

In some contrast to Kingsolver's other recent works, she explores her newfound aspiration to sustainable eating more as a citizen and mother than as a wordsmith and scientist. She asks questions many of us are beginning to ask: Where does my food come from? Is it really nourishing? And what is the environmental cost of my choices? I wondered, as we began to speak, whether a spiritual sensibility has formed Barbara Kingsolver's life and her writing.

MS. KINGSOLVER: I would say that I was raised with very strong spiritual values. And that means, as opposed to material values, understand that spiritual matters are always more important than material things as long as you have enough to eat.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MS. KINGSOLVER: When you don't, then material things matter more than anything, I guess.

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MS. TIPPETT: Right. Right.

MS. KINGSOLVER: But we did. And I was raised in a rural place where a kind of a community standard of giving and being responsible to one's neighbors was really the most important thing. And it seems to me that every book I write really returns to that, the question of how an individual can be one's self and still remain conscious of one's debt to the community.

MS. TIPPETT: Hmm. I am intrigued, in this context, of your love and knowledge of the natural world. You became an — you studied evolutionary biology. You did spend two years in Africa when you were a girl.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It was a bit less than that.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

MS. KINGSOLVER: I always say I went to Africa instead of second grade.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. And, OK, well, let me just, you know, say, for example, last year, I interviewed Wangari Maathai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize, who is a great Kenyan environmentalist. And she talked to me about drought and encroaching desert. And I think that those very dramatic manifestations of whatever is happening to climate in our time we think of as happening in a place like Africa. But you, in fact, the story you tell in your new book begins as you are leaving the American desert of Tucson.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Yeah, in Tucson, Arizona.

MS. TIPPETT: And, in fact, what we think of is a very successful American city.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's true. People are moving to the Sun Belt in droves. But I was becoming increasingly conscious of it, of my city as something like a space station because every unit of food that people consumed there had to be moved in from some place else. The water was moved there from somewhere else. It didn't exactly belong to us in the most biological sense. And I didn't feel comfortable with that.

We moved to southwestern Virginia for a lot of reasons. It's very near where I grew up in Kentucky. We were really coming home. But when we made this move, we were very conscious of how we were going to a place that could sustain us in a different way. And we undertook this project to try to attend to our local food chain.

MS. TIPPETT: But, you know, you tell this story — in between your story, you tell this story of how we, as a culture, got to this place that we don't live on food that is grown around us, and that we've even lost our — we don't even know that.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Yeah. We've forgotten even to ask the question, 'Where did our food come from?' It doesn't even seem to bother us that most of our food may have come from China or Argentina or a combination of the two, meld together in some third location, that so much of our food travels great distances to reach us, using an enormous amount of fossil fuels, while, at the same time, we're turning our backs on the farmers who may be struggling to survive in our own region. We're not doing it on purpose.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. We don't even know what we're doing.

MS. KINGSOLVER: We've forgotten how to think about it. We've forgotten even how to ask, how to look for what's in season at this moment.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, I think it was interesting to me to hear that this practice of eating fruits and vegetables that were grown in faraway California was originally, you know, a luxury for very rich people, right? That they might have, I don't know, an orange at their dinner table.

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MS. KINGSOLVER: Yeah. It was like a party trick to produce lettuce in the middle of a winter in the Midwest. Just a handful of people could afford it. And it was probably considered bizarre by the neighbors, who were much more sensible. And to tell you the truth, humans, for all of history until right around the time of World War II, have eaten locally, a local organic food that was produced sustainably. That's a normal way to eat. And it's kind of funny that, in just a couple of generations, we have come so far from that, that returning to it is something special that has a name.

MS. TIPPETT: What is that name?

MS. KINGSOLVER: Yeah, eating locally, just — or locavores we're called now. It's funny, when we began this project, there wasn't any name for it, but…

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm. Well, you know, here is an irony I would articulate. As you say, you've written a book about spending one year with your family, doing something that feels astonishing and even privileged, right?

MS. KINGSOLVER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, like — the time that you had, the space in your life, the security, the choice to move to this other home, and yet you're writing about something — you're writing about a way of living that, as you say, is the way human beings lived forever. And I suppose most people in the world still live as a matter of survival.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Mm-hmm. Yeah, and so it's pretty funny that in our culture, it's…

MS. TIPPETT: Very exotic, what you did.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's — well, it is. I mean, it's so normal what we did. But there's also a kind of bias in our culture that eating organically and this local cuisine thing is elite. So it's really returning to what's normal for humans if we can regain some control over our own communities.

MS. TIPPETT: Author Barbara Kingsolver. I'm Krista Tippett and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, "The Ethics of Eating," one of the overarching themes of Barbara Kingsolver's latest book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. Here's a reading from her chapter about the month of July.

READER: "By mid-month, we were getting a dozen tomatoes a day, that many cucumbers, our first eggplants, and squash in unmentionable quantities. A friend arrived one morning as I was tag-teaming with myself to lug two, full bushel baskets of produce into the house. He pronounced a biblical benediction. The harvest is bountiful and the labors few. I agreed, of course. But the truth is, I still had to go back to the garden that morning to pull about 200 onions, our year's supply. They had bulbed up nicely in the long midsummer days and were now waiting to be tugged out of the ground, cured, and braided into the heavy plaits that would hang from our kitchen mantle and infuse our meals all through the winter.

I also needed to pull beets that day, pick about a bushel of green beans, and slip paper plates under two dozen ripening melons to protect their undersides from moisture and sow bugs. In another week, we would start harvesting these along with sweet corn, peppers, and okra. The harvest was bountiful and the labors were blooming endless."

From Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

MS. TIPPETT: Barbara Kingsolver and her family supplemented what they could grow themselves with organic produce, when possible, from the farmers' market. She refers often in her book to the "hidden costs" of cheap supermarket food and fast food. I asked her to explain the basic understanding she has gained of why those costs don't turn up in our grocery bills.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Because you're paying for them on a different tally, mostly through your taxes. The farm bill, which is renegotiated every five to seven years and, in fact, is being renegotiated right now, sets food policy in our country. And it gives billions and billions of dollars of subsidies to mostly producers of

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commodity crops — wheat, corn, and soybeans that get turned into things like high-fructose corn syrup and feedlot grain for cheap hamburgers. So our policy that we vote for, that we ostensibly support through our elected legislators, makes this kind of food, makes it cheap, while organic growers have to pay out of their own pockets for their certification and their oversight.

MS. TIPPETT: OK.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Meanwhile, it's absolutely true that many people have extremely limited food choices in this country. And I do know that there are large urban areas where people's only grocery option is a convenience market. But for those of us who do have other choices, who can go to the farmers' market, find local farmers, reward them for bringing in their produce, we improve the odds that more people can afford it and that it will expand into other areas. In a city near where I live, for example, there's a vegetable book mobile, essentially…

MS. TIPPETT: Really?

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's a farmers' market on a school bus that drives around in the low-income neighborhoods and sells vegetables at a very reasonable cost. So if we wanted, if we support it, these things can change.

MS. TIPPETT: Hmm. You, obviously, went into this with a tremendous amount of knowledge and planning. You'd always been a gardener. You knew about farming. And you're a scientist. But I wonder — you write about the year in great detail in the book — but I wonder if you could just say, you know, what surprised you the most about the experience when you were actually living it?

MS. KINGSOLVER: I think what surprised me the most is that we didn't really miss anything. We went into it probably thinking too much about what we were not going to be able to have, you know? 'Oh, my goodness. No strawberries in January.' But when we changed our thinking and started every meal with the question, 'What do we have? What's in season? What do we have plenty of?' — it became really a long exercise in gratitude. It was so much fun and it was so reinforcing to the culture of our family.

I think in our culture, we generally lack strong regional traditions of food that tie us to our place and our people. You know, specific food traditions as they have in Italy, for example, or in India or Mexico or — we seem to be a little at sea in this country, as a result, when it comes to food rules. And we're behaving as if we're in search of some kind of food Leviticus to save us from this sinful roil of cheap fats and carbohydrates.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Right.

MS. KINGSOLVER: I mean, honestly, I mean, if you look at the bookstore shelves, they're crammed with diet books.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes. And I wanted to note this that it's right, when we talk about correcting this knot we're in of addressing obesity and all of that, we talk about replacing bad habits with habits that are good for you.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's the language of sin.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's as if we are afraid of our food.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Right.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Which is reasonable enough because we don't know it. How can we trust it if we don't know what hemisphere it came from?

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MS. TIPPETT: But, you know, that in the arena of food, the ethical choice is also the pleasurable choice.

MS. KINGSOLVER: In this case, it is. I really, I'm really in favor of throwing out this language of sin and talking about being bad when you're sitting down to a good meal because…

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: …the ethical choice of supporting your local farmer also tastes better.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MS. KINGSOLVER: And it does involve cooking, but that's also such a wonderful thing to come home to. I think that the planning of beautiful meals and investing one's heart and time and their preparation is the opposite of self-indulgence.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm. And you know that delight in cooking — the art of it and the pleasure of it — come through so clearly in your book and, right now, in your voice as you're talking about it. But for me, where — what that touches on is another drought in American life. And that is the drought of time, right?

MS. KINGSOLVER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: I mean, it sounds to me like you — I know, I know you are probably writing, but you were really able to be present to your garden, to your home, to your family, to that lifestyle, and that is something that feels unattainable to me, and I think a lot of people who just feel like — we're just working and juggling children is, is tricky.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Well, you know, I was doing that too. I've, I have been a working mother for 20 years…

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: …so I don't remember any other way of being an — I'm, I didn't really, you know, I didn't write about writing in the book. But I'm at my desk pretty much eight to five every day like so many other people. I do have an easy commute, there's no doubt.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. KINGSOLVER: But my work life is profoundly consuming and often difficult and frustrating. But it's so interesting to me when I'm in Europe and spend time with my Spanish friends or Italian friends, and they are working people too. They're women who are working in offices or, you know, they're editors or are laboratory scientists.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: And as soon as they're out of work, they head straight for the market. And they go down to see what fish is — has come in or what greens do they have now at this season.

And even at high-powered business lunches with editors in France — this has happened to me so many times — these women in their fashionable shoes and business suits will stray from post-colonial literature over to the subject of mushrooms. And, you know, and there's no shame in their enthusiasm for cooking. They feel that cooking for their families is a really important part of who they are. This, I think, is that, at the heart of the problem for a lot of us, anyway, I think I belong to the generation of women who grew up thinking that walking away from the kitchen…

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

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MS. KINGSOLVER: …was walking away from some kind of slavery, you know? It's how we think about it.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes, you're right. If we thought of cooking as this great pleasure that we could look forward to at the end of the working day, I suppose that would change it.

MS. KINGSOLVER: If it — if we look at it as family time, as entertainment, as a spiritually enlightening even, you know, if we look at it as a destination rather than a rock in the road…

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

MS. KINGSOLVER: ..I think we would do more of it. And not every day, maybe not on Monday nights, OK, but definitely on Saturday.

MS. TIPPETT: Author Barbara Kingsolver speaking about her new work of nonfiction, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.

MS. TIPPETT: You know, I think I found one of the most moving chapters of the book when you describe harvesting the meat, as you say.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: Because you're not just talking about growing vegetables, you also raised turkeys and roosters and killed them and, as you say, you know, you tell a story of "at dusk sitting down to feast on cold bean salad, sliced tomatoes with basil, blue potato salad, and meat that had met this day's dawn by crowing."

I mean, that is a part of what we eat, I don't know, even of just the fact of life and death that we, American consumers, are very removed from. Tell me what — when you say there's a big difference between talking about harvesting meat and the way we normally think about the meat we buy.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Yeah. I used to think it was a euphemism to use that word "harvest."

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: I don't anymore. And it's — it's funny, just now, I, I reacted a little oddly when you said, "You raised chickens and then killed them." That, that word, if you think about it, the way we use it is murder, a homicide, you know, an intentional murder…

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah. Well, we talk about slaughterhouses.

MS. KINGSOLVER: …well, or we say, 'Oops, I killed my African violet.' It — suggests some accidental or intentionally mean-spirited act. Harvesting…

MS. TIPPETT: We're back at sin again, aren't we?

MS. KINGSOLVER: Yeah, we are. Whereas harvesting a rooster is allowing this animal to achieve its final glory. I really enjoy seeing my turkeys out on pasture, foraging, you know, living under the sunshine, living lives of essential turkeyness. If I'm going to eat an animal, I want its life to have had some dignity, some, you know, poultry joy, because I do believe there is such a thing. Turkeys don't want to live to be 100 years old. They don't want to know their grandchildren. Believe me. They couldn't pick their grandchildren out of a lineup. I know this for a fact.

MS. TIPPETT: Now, in the chapter in your book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, where you describe the day in which you harvested the animals, news was coming in of Hurricane Katrina.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: And I wonder how you experienced and kind of processed the larger implications of those

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events perhaps differently because of that experiment you were conducting and living sustainably.

MS. KINGSOLVER: I think so much all the time about the effects of our consumption contributing so much to global climate change, which is beginning to pound at our shores and the shores of many other countries. But we're not — we haven't felt the damage yet so much here, but we began to on that weekend. And it really felt like — it was such a great sadness because it felt like this terrible coming home to roost. It seems to me, in this country, we have yet to assign any moral value to the over-consumption of the world's limited resources. It seems like…

MS. TIPPETT: To our over-consumption.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Yeah.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: To, to — if you can afford it, it's OK to use it. That seems to be the only rule. There are many, many paths toward finding a better and more sustainable way to live in the world. Some people do it by giving up meat. I, I did it by giving up bananas because when I think about all those fossil fuels that are burned and a refrigerated cargo hold to get that stuff to me, that didn't seem cruelty-free to me.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: I wanted to find another way to live that would brighten the prospects of my children's time on this earth.

MS. TIPPETT: Hmm. I mean, here's something you wrote of Hurricane Katrina happening in the middle of this year. You wrote that, "Analysts of current events were mostly looking to blame administrators. Fair enough. But there were also, it seemed, obvious vulnerabilities here. Whole populations depending on everyday, long-distance lifelines — supplies of food and water and fuel and everything else — that are acutely centralized. That's what we consider normal life. Now nature had written a hugely abnormal question across the bottom of our map." Say some more to me about what that abnormal question was.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Well, the question is do you think you can keep doing this without paying some kind of a price?

MS. TIPPETT: Author Barbara Kingsolver. This is *Speaking of Faith*. After a short break, more stories behind Kingsolver's new book and her conviction that we can find greater pleasure and influence the grand environmental crises of our time through our families' food lives.

Producing an hour of radio is an artful and sometimes ruthless process of editing. Here's your chance to hear my conversation before the edits. Visit speakingoffaith.org and download the MP3 of my full interview with Barbara Kingsolver. Our companion Web site also features other listener stories and how they're approaching the ethics of eating in their daily lives. Look for the link "Your Voices, Your Stories" and share what you're doing. Discover more at speakingoffaith.org.

I'm Krista Tippett. Stay with us. *Speaking of Faith* comes to you from American Public Media.

[Announcements]

MS. TIPPETT: Welcome back to *Speaking of Faith*, public radio's conversation about religion, meaning, ethics, and ideas. I'm Krista Tippett, today exploring the ethics of eating with author Barbara Kingsolver. Her latest book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, recounts a personal adventure with her husband and two daughters to live on what they could raise and grow themselves for one year. Kingsolver approached

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this challenge primarily as a citizen and a mother. She's written several previous works of fiction and nonfiction that draw on her training as a scientist and her passion for socially responsible literature.

Here's an excerpt from *Small Wonder*, a book of essays Barbara Kingsolver published in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks.

READER: "Something new is upon us and yet nothing is ever new. We are alive in a fearsome time, and we have been given new things to fear. We've been delivered huge blows but also huge opportunities to reinforce or reinvent our will, depending on where we look for honor and how we name our enemies. The easiest thing is to think of returning the blows. But there are other things we must think about as well, other dangers we face. A careless way of sauntering across the earth and breaking open its treasures, a terrible dependency on sucking out the world's best juices for ourselves — these may also be our enemies. The changes we dread most may contain our salvation.

MS. TIPPETT: Now I'm looking at the sweep of your writing over, say, the last 10 years. It seems to me that that September 11th also kind of formed the sense of urgency that you have now. You talked then about the prideful wastefulness, our prideful wastefulness as a nation. I think you just described that in more detail.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Sometimes I think it's prideful. Sometimes I think it's just clueless. I mean, no — and — I mean that to describe myself as much as anyone. We don't have a clue sometimes about how or what we are wasting. It's so easy for us to have, for example, foods that were grown on the other side of the world and brought to us, without any idea who grew it, who worked for what low wage to harvest it, who had to breathe pesticides in order to put it on a truck. You know, those questions have — a curtain has been drawn over the whole process so that we've come to look at our food as a product. It isn't. It's, it's all...

MS. TIPPETT: Those are moral questions.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's all a process and those are moral questions. If we care to draw back the curtain and look, it isn't all bad news. I think the subject of food seems daunting because there are so many different questions, so many different problems. And that's something that really compelled me about writing this book. I love to start with a huge unanswerable boggling kind of question and see if I can whittle it down into the shape of a really good yarn. You know, I just love to see if I can give it a plot and make you laugh all along the way and maybe make you cry at the end, and create something that will invite you in. And then when you're finished and you close the book, maybe you'll step out into the world in a slightly different way and ask your own questions and answer the questions in your own way.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm. You know, you note this, this fact of human life that, in a sense, we experience the crises of our time to be completely new and original and uniquely catastrophic.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Oh, yes.

MS. TIPPETT: Right?

MS. KINGSOLVER: And it's never been as bad as it is right now.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, it's never been as bad as it is.

MS. KINGSOLVER: I think it's not true. I mean, certainly, the environmental picture is bleaker and scarier now for humans than it's ever been before. But in almost every other way, we keep getting it a little more right. And I — when my kids feel gloomy about the headlines or, you know, sort of what kind of a mess humans have made of their own relations, I say, 'You know what? When I started first grade, the black kids weren't allowed to go to my school. They didn't even have a school. They had — they went to a church up the hill. They were — our schools were segregated in second grade.' And we can't even imagine those things now.

MS. TIPPETT: Right, within your lifetime. However, I think that the part of the problem now is we know so much. We see these pictures and these pictures of other — of our own crisis maybe we've helped to cause and other crises and disasters and tragedies and terrible headlines, and they come into our living rooms.

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They come straight into our heads and, you know — there is a sense in which I think the information we have can also debilitate us. You know — you're saying that we are getting some things right, that we've never known so much ecological catastrophe as we're learning now. You know, how do you think about that and how people should live with the enormity of this knowledge?

MS. KINGSOLVER: Well, I have no idea how they should live. I wouldn't tell anybody else. I know for myself, I need to consider hope to be a renewable option. If I ran out of it at the end of the day, well, then, when I get up in the morning, I put it on with my shoes. I don't have another choice because I have kids. And when my teenager, well, she just turned 20, when my older daughter sometimes confides in me that she's worried her generation won't be able to fix this big environmental damage, I say, 'You know what? It's not up to your generation. It's up to mine.' We have a now-or-never kind of problem on our hands. And it is scary. It is overwhelming right now because we're really getting the bad news.

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

MS. KINGSOLVER: We've had the privilege of ignoring the past…

MS. TIPPETT: And listening to the bad news.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Yeah. We have a tendency to, oh, well, you know, blame anybody but us, especially the government, and say, 'Well, the government needs to fix this.' Well, here's the trouble. The government is us. We, we have the laws that we allow, that we're willing to put up with. We're terrified of sacrifices, it seems. We're really afraid of giving up the things that we're accustomed to. This is why I felt that an experiment like ours, my family's, in which we really tried to find a sustainable diet for ourselves for one year, was a wonderful exercise to discover that, in fact, we can live with what people would call less. It turned out to be not less but just different and wonderful. And I think that in order to accept limits at a legal level, sort of imposed at the national level, we are individually going to have to experiment with limits that we impose on ourselves personally and find…

MS. TIPPETT: Right, starting with ourselves, starting with our own little lives.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Starting with ourselves. Right. Starting with out own little lives and discovering that we can live in a different way. I think this is incredibly empowering in. It allows us to take the next step of as a community saying, 'Yes, we will give up some things in order to make the world a cleaner, survivable place.'

(Sound bite of music)

MS. TIPPETT: It seems to that in your work, one thing you offer as an antidote, if you will, to despair is simply perspective. You know, you have this sentence: "Wildness puts us in our place." And you know, with that in mind, my favorite passage in *The Poisonwood Bible*, which is your novel about a missionary family in post-colonial Africa, is where Adah Price — do you say her name like that? Adah?

MS. KINGSOLVER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: OK. Well, she is raised there and then becomes a scientist and goes back to Africa.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Mm-hmm.

MS. TIPPETT: And there's this section — I'm going to just read a little bit of it — where she is looking at the natural world in Africa. She says, "As a teenager reading African parasitology books in the medical library, I was boggled by the array of creatures equipped to take root upon a human body. I'm boggled still, but with a finer appreciation in the partnership. Back then I was still a bit appalled that God would set down the barefoot boy and girl dollies into an Eden where, presumably, He had just turned loose elephantiasis and microbes that eat the human cornea. Now I understand, God is not just rooting for the dollies."

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MS. KINGSOLVER: I think that's true. We, we think we're so smart, we humans, you know, we're just top-heavy hominids walking around in shoes, thinking we own the place. And then, what do you know? We discover that we are animals, indeed, subject to the same biological laws as, as everything else, subject to the same physics. Yep, gravity still applies to us. If we trip, we're going to fall down. I happen to think it's also a wonderful place to be as a creature among creatures. I think one of the most glorious things about doing something as simple as going to the farmers' market or going to a you-pick operation — going to visit a farm and picking your own food — is to realize that it's a really wonderful thing to be an animal living in a habitat, being a part of a food chain. There's this enormous comfort in belonging to a cycle and to see that food isn't a product but a process. This terror of the unknown becomes much more manageable when we accept that, yes, we are our biology. We really are what we eat. And it actually really tastes good.
MS. TIPPETT: Author Barbara Kingsolver.

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is *Speaking of Faith* from American Public Media. Today, Barbara Kingsolver's perspective on the ethics of eating.

Here's a reading from the final chapter of her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, as she reflects on the trade-offs of her family's year of eating locally in terms of consumption, land, and cost.
READER: Altered routines were really the heart of what we gained. We've learned that many aisles of our supermarket offered us nothing local so we didn't even push our carts down those, frozen foods, canned goods, soft drinks. Yes, that's a whole aisle. Just grab the Virginia dairy products and organic flour and get out was our motto, before you start coveting thy neighbor's goods. The biggest shock of our year came when we added up the tab. We'd fed ourselves organically, and pretty splendidly we thought, on about 50 cents per family member per meal, probably less than I've spent in the years when I qualified for food stamps. Of course, I now had the luxury of land for growing food to supplement our purchases. But it wasn't a lot of land; 3,524 square feet of tilled beds gave us all our produce. That's a 40- by 22-foot spread per person. Without rationing, skipping a meal, buying a corn-fed Midwestern burger or breaking our vows of exclusivity with local produce, we lived inside our own territory for one good year of food life.

From Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*.
MS. TIPPETT: You know, I'm comforted you do confess somewhere that like every other adult you know or most other adults you know, you do have your own worries and that you — have a tendency to feel like a jerk for falling short of absolute conversion. I'm comforted. I think your book kind of sets up a model that feels daunting to me as a reader, and that might feel daunting to others. Are you having that reaction or experience?

MS. KINGSOLVER: I'm sorry. No, I didn't — we didn't really — it wasn't that hard. And we didn't strive for any kind of purity.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: And it's funny that before people read the book, they say, 'Oh, well, weren't you tempted to cheat?' And, 'Oh, what are you eating on book tour?' And you know, stuff like that. Well, there is no cheating. This wasn't an exercise in purity. We decided to do things like get fair trade coffee. We did get some things from outside of our community because we wanted a happy life. We thought, if we can keep 95 percent of our food dollars inside our own community, how wonderful would that be? It's — and so — and we didn't want to tell a story that other people would look at and say, 'Oh, how heroic they were. I could never do that.' I didn't really, of course, imagine anybody — else do exactly what we did.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: I mean, we're, we're sort of crazy. We have a huge garden. And frankly, other gardeners are crazy too.

MS. TIPPETT: Right.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's — I think it's in our DNA. But on the contrary, we wanted to do something that really

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seemed doable in some part. So it surprises me that I very frequently encounter people sort of beating themselves up, saying, 'Oh, well, I have to have, you know, sometimes, raspberries in January.' Well, that's fine as long as we can begin to understand that it's an indulgence to ask someone to fly raspberries to us in an airplane, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: Right. Well, for me, you know, that's not what's feels hard to me. And I think like a lot of people, I'm, I'm becoming gradually just more conscious of this. And…

MS. KINGSOLVER: Uh-huh.

MS. TIPPETT: …you know, in fact, not desiring raspberries out of season or peaches in February.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Because they're horrible.

MS. TIPPETT: It, it — yeah, they're horrible.

MS. KINGSOLVER: In fact they're mushy.

MS. TIPPETT: Right. It's more the incredible dedication, you know, the totality of the effort you made.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Well, in part. Like give me an example because I, I mean, I didn't think we were that dedicated.

MS. TIPPETT: Well, it's just that you've really handed your life over to this.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Well, we really didn't. I only wrote about — I mean, of the million things that happened to us in that year, most of them didn't go into the book, you know?

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Our dog died, for example, or, you know, and I broke my leg.

MS. TIPPETT: Yeah.

MS. KINGSOLVER: You know, all kinds of things happened that I didn't write about — because, for one thing, they're not — they belong to us, but mainly, they're not relevant.

MS. TIPPETT: Your daughter went away to college, that's also something that…

MS. KINGSOLVER: Exactly.

MS. TIPPETT: …she kind of tucks into — almost an aside. Uh-huh?

MS. KINGSOLVER: Right. And frankly, that was a huge…

MS. TIPPETT: Yes.

MS. KINGSOLVER: …component of our emotional landscape. But this isn't really a memoir.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: This is a story about finding a certain path home. And so as a writer, I, I'm very disciplined about looking at the landscape of facts and picking out the ones that really move the story forward.

MS. TIPPETT: All right. Well, no, I get that. But I, I do think there is something edifying in that — and you

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know what you're saying is you, you did this — I mean, I really do think this was an act of discipline and an attempt to look at the ethics and morality of food as well as, you know, this great — the great irony we talked about as well, that when you — that the ethical thing to do with food is also pleasurable. But you're also saying that life went on and life had its pitfalls and foibles.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Sure, it did.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: Sure, it did. And what we were really looking for without knowing this is a paradigm shift. And that always takes discipline in the beginning.

MS. TIPPETT: Mm-hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's just like taking a marriage vow or something, you know? In the beginning, you stand up in front of, you know, God and everybody and you say, "Forsaking all others," and you talk about how everything's going to change. And at first, it might feel rather strained and artificial. Ultimately, it simply becomes your life. And you don't sit around thinking about, 'Oh, well, when I was single, you know, I didn't have to pick up my shoes,' or whatever. That's how it was. We kind of made these vows. We are going to look really hard for a different way to eat. And so that meant on the first Saturday of the farmers' market — even though it was snowing, it was horrible day outside. I really would like to have just curled up with a book. But we said, 'Well, no, we're going to do this thing. And there's almost nothing in the pantry, so we have to do it.' That was forced, and it was so rewarding. We found so much more there than we expected. And that's the day right away that I understood that sometimes, you have to push yourself into a new way of thinking to get to a place where you want to be, that's very comfortable that doesn't even feel like work.

MS. TIPPETT: Hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: It's just a shift. You know, momentum in our habits can be enormous. And sometimes, it's just takes some sort of a formal vow to get us from one kind of thinking into another.

MS. TIPPETT: Hmm.

MS. KINGSOLVER: And then it's easy. I'm telling you, it wasn't that hard.

MS. TIPPETT: All right. I'm listening.
MS. TIPPETT: Barbara Kingsolver's book is *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*. She's the author of other works of fiction and nonfiction and a recipient of a National Humanities Medal. She lives with her family on a farm in southwestern Virginia.

This summer, I have begun to frequent the farmers' market for the first time in my life. I planted a vegetable garden, made pesto from basil I grew, tossed my own homegrown lettuce, and watched tiny green tomatoes bud with a rapture of an expectant mother.

I'm very aware that the details of my life, including the northern climate of the place I inhabit, limits my ability to follow Barbara Kingsolver's experiment in totally local eating. But she did achieve what she describes as her aim as an author. She got me thinking and acting incrementally differently.

Many of us are asking new questions about the food we eat. Where does it come from? Is it nourishing in body and in spirit? Are my choices helping others? Go to speakingoffaith.org and contribute your perspective and experiences on the ethics of eating. Look for the link called "Your Voices, Your Stories" on our homepage and hear what others are saying as well. Our companion site also includes my entire conversation with Barbara Kingsolver. And sign up for our e-mail newsletter and podcast, which includes MP3s of current and past programs. Listen to *Speaking of Faith* when you choose. Discover more at

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