

A Lesson in Grace from a Food Stamp Recipient

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By Rebecca Segall

After spending my summer as an intern at the Food Bank For New York City, I now know almost every statistic there is about food poverty in the city. But to understand what – beyond the numbers – that poverty truly means, I tried to put myself in the shoes of those relying on food assistance. While I did my best to be empathetic, I had a difficult time imagining such a humbling experience.

I've been vegetarian for years, and though it isn't essential to my survival, it is a big part of living the way I want to. But in a position of need, I felt I wouldn't be able to refuse any available food, especially food rich in protein. I decided that in my hypothetical life of food poverty, vegetarianism would be a necessary sacrifice.

That is, until I met Susan. On a trip to conduct interviews with people who have been helped by the Food Bank, I was surprised by how easily I could relate to a woman from Queens' earnest account of poverty. It wasn't until Susan mentioned she was vegetarian that I better understood a bit of why I could relate to her so well. After a lifetime of produce and tofu, Susan was not about to give up important parts of herself just because her circumstances had changed. To make this work, she uses her food stamps, which the Food Bank helped her apply for, at farmers' markets.

Susan not only survives but pushes herself to practice the values important to her, even if they demand a greater struggle. I admired her determination and, thanks to her story, understood the Food Bank's goal more deeply. It is not just to provide food, but to provide the means to live with dignity.

I will remember Susan, and hope to maintain my own values in the face of obstacles with the grace and perseverance that she displayed.