

Food Stamp Challenge

By Bill Menke, November 3, 2013

Co-parishioner Laurie Hilton suggested that I and the other members of the Palisades Presbyterian Church live for a week on the thirty-five dollars that Food Stamp provides, in order to better understand the challenges faced by low-income people. I thought the idea an interesting one and picked October 19-25, a week when my spouse was out of town and I was dining alone. I tried to eat more-or-less my normal diet, modified only as needed by the requirements of my low budget of five dollars per day.

I purchased most of my food at a local supermarket, in walking distance of my suburban home. I had only to step into it to learn my first lesson: about 95% of the food on the shelves is way beyond my budget! Walking by all those shelves of appealing but off-limit items was pretty depressing.

Happily, the other 5% still represented hundreds of items spread across all the major categories, so I had no trouble buying¹ enough food for myself. I was able to retain my normal breakfast and lunch menu, with no substantial changes, since they are meals where I already typically ate humbly. Only my dinner menu presented challenges, because I normally rely on expensive prepackaged foods for more than half of my evening meals. I replaced them with chicken and steak. Though I don't normally eat a lot of snacks, I had to cut out almost all of them to fit within my budget. Somewhat to my surprise, I discovered that hot drinks such as tea and coffee are actually quite inexpensive, when made in such a way to minimize wastage.

My meals were a reminder of the need for restraint. I purchased food in large portions and ate them in small, spread across several days. I had to hold to this plan, and not go back for seconds. My diet had ample portions, but little entertainment value. Here, my recent experience with dieting helped me. I had lost forty pounds during four months of a severely calorie-restricted diet. I had had a lot of practice sitting around the dinner table relaxing and reading the *New York Times* - without the comfort of munching. I ate alone and did not have to deal with

the desires of other family members and the embarrassment that I might experience in rebuffing a request for *more*.

I believe my diet was sufficiently nutritious that, had I extended it indefinitely, I would not have experienced deficiency diseases or other health problems brought on by poor nutrition. I would, of course, have varied my choice of vegetables (here rather heavy on tomatoes) as the changing seasons made available other inexpensive options. However, I concede that someone with more concern with nutrition than I might find my diet lacking in respects that they consider important.

My experiences were, of course, nothing more than an experiment. The rest of my daily activities were those of a suburban professional, not someone in poverty. During the week of my Food Stamp diet, I made many substantial purchases of non-food items. This was true even during my trips to the supermarket, where I had no qualms buying batteries, light bulbs and other household items whose cost greatly outstripped my foot budget. I did not deny myself whatever self-actualization shopping provides.

As an experiment, the experience gave me some important insights.

¹I tabulated the cost of my meals in this spreadsheet:

Saturday			
	Breakfast		
		dry cereal	0.47
		milk	0.30
		coffee	0.16
	Lunch	...	
	Dinner	half a chicken	2.50
		cheese	0.50
		tomatoes (2)	0.75
	Subtotal		4.67
Sunday			
	Breakfast		
		dry cereal	0.47
		milk	0.30
		coffee	0.16
	Lunch	...	
	Dinner	half a chicken	2.50

		tomatoes (2)	0.75	
	Subtotal			4.17
Monday	Breakfast			
		dry cereal	0.47	
		milk	0.30	
		coffee	0.16	
	Lunch	eggs (2)	0.37	
		toast (2)	0.24	
		cheese (2)	0.30	
	Dinner	beef stew (canned)	4.49	
		tea (2 bags)	0.08	
	Subtotal			6.40
Tuesday	Breakfast			
		oatmeal w/ fruit (4 packs)	0.66	
		tea (2 bags)	0.08	
	Lunch	coffee	0.16	
		eggs (2)	0.37	
		toast (2)	0.24	
		cheese (2)	0.30	
	Dinner			
		half a chicken	2.50	
		white turnip (1)	0.30	
		tea (2 bags)	0.08	
	Subtotal			4.68
Wednesday	Breakfast			
		dry cereal	0.47	
		milk	0.30	
		coffee	0.16	
	Lunch	vegetable soup (canned)	1.59	
		tea (1 bag)	0.04	
		crackers	0.41	
	Dinner	pancakes	0.50	
		jelly	0.30	
		butter (1 Tsp)	0.09	
		coffee	0.16	
	Subtotal			4.01
Thursday	Breakfast			
		dry cereal	0.47	
		milk	0.30	
		coffee	0.16	
	Lunch	coffee	0.16	

		eggs (2)	0.37	
		toast (2)	0.24	
		cheese (1)	0.15	
	Dinner	half a chicken	2.50	
		tea (3 bags)	0.12	
		cheese	0.30	
		tomatoes (2)	0.75	
		candy	0.25	
	Subtotal			5.75
Friday	Breakfast			
		dry cereal	0.47	
		milk	0.30	
		coffee	0.16	
	Lunch	pancake	0.25	
		jelly	0.30	
		butter (1 Tsp)	0.09	
		tea (2 bags)	0.08	
	Dinner	Steak	2.24	
		Onion	0.25	
		Roll	0.68	
		tomatoes (1)	0.37	
		tea (2 bags)	0.08	
	Subtotal			5.26
	Total		34.94	