During the 2013-2014 school year, I reflected on all that I had learned about food systems in Vermont through my internship the previous summer. With Vermont already such a leader in developing its local foods economy, I felt challenged in finding something new to add. I met with Brad Koehler, a local orchardist and former chef, and asked for his reflections on an idea I had for edible landscaping in low-income housing communities. His initial feedback was that everyone in VT has access to apples in season if they want them. I had to agree, and so laid that idea to rest. But we continued sorting through ideas (and apples) until we came out with a new observation: many people won’t eat foods that have imperfections and will rely on the standardization and regulation of the food industry to tell them what is safe, healthy, tasty, and generally good.

I wondered, then, if part of why people don’t give themselves good nutrition is because vegetables, fruits, and whole grains have more irregularities than processed foods. When low-income families are offered “seconds” and produce that has been gleaned, there are more irregularities and imperfections and it is less clear that the food has passed any kind of federal regulations or quality-control standards associated with a brand name. People who garden are used to sorting through less-than-perfect produce and salvaging what is good, but many people haven’t had the experience that would give them confidence to make those decisions for themselves.

The MiddSummer Lunch and Recreation Program that I had worked with the summer before already has a gardening activity, but I decided that there was room for me to expand upon these campers’ sense of trust and intuition with foods and their origins. I decided to reach even beyond the garden and bring them to the woods and fields, the birthplace of cultivated foods and what I see as the ultimate place of support, inspiration, and intuition. My goal was to empower the kids to feel at home in the woods, the fields, and the kitchen, and to give them a sense of adventure and freedom in those places that might lead to their trying different, whole, fresh, sometimes imperfect foods.

In the spring of 2014 I devoted an Independent Study to developing a set of activities to use with the campers that summer. I met with the MiddSummer directors, education experts from Shelburne Farms, the secretary of VT’s Statewide Environmental Education Programs, the executive director of the Vermont Wilderness School, the executive director of Foxcroft Farm Harvest Program, a co-president of a mentoring organization at the College, an instructor for the Middlebury Area Land Trust’s nature camp, and my advisor for the Independent Study, Marc Lapin. I also reconnected with my own elementary school teachers, a beloved counselor from nature camp, the director of the Hannaford Career Center (from my previous summer’s work), and a friend who had worked for the Keewaydin Environmental Education Center. All of these people gave me invaluable insights and advice which I incorporated into my planning. Many of them also recommended books to me, which were also very useful. Ultimately, I explicitly planned 20 activities complete with locations, materials lists, possible hazards, foreseeable behavioral issues, goals, introductions, activity plans, and follow-up activities. Activities ranged
from “getting lost” in the woods, to foraging for cattail roots, to making popcorn with various 
spice combinations.

Unsurprisingly, implementation of the curriculum ended up quite different from planned. I 
quickly found one of two problems with many of the activities that I had planned and never 
implemented them. One common problem was that some activities required materials that I did 
not have on hand, so it was hard for me to plan ahead enough to get those more complex 
activities set up. The other common problem was that I could foresee that the activity wouldn’t 
inspire kids because it was too structured or too slow-paced. When I tried to do more structured 
activities like the game “Concentration” or an observation game with hidden objects, the 
campers were cooperative but antsy to do something else. Since my objective was to empower 
and inspire them, I didn’t want to lead activities that somehow confined them.

In the first week of camp, I immediately began keeping a reflective journal on every day’s 
activities. This was one of the best decisions I made, because it allowed me to reflect on the 
successes and challenges of each day, refine my practices over the course of the summer, and 
note moments that indicated progress on my goals for the campers. Besides my raw, internal 
reflections, I also wrote a more polished 3-5 sentence report on each day.

One of my most successful days when we did roughly follow an activity plan was the day we made milkweed-flower fritters.

Six campers and I went to Otter View Park, where we ate sorrel leaves, milkweed flower buds, and clover flowers. We found and collected lots of snails, as well as a crayfish carcass! From the boardwalk, we pulled up some cattails and found that they smelled like cucumbers and were covered in goo. The white bases are edible, so some of us tried them, being careful to distinguish them from wild iris (not edible). Scott noticed wild iris has square leaf bases and Ian noticed it has a prominent central vein. When we came back to my house, Alex led the way making a simple batter, and fried the milkweed flower buds into fritters. Sophie and Lille made some pretty good ones, with salt and pepper, and Alyza made a salad with the sorrel we’d collected.

The kids were mostly very engaged, enthusiastic, and observant. We kept a list of “cool things we found or noticed,” which became a common practice on our outings. The activities directly engaged my goals in many ways: kids found minute distinctions between edible and non-edible plants; kids ate wild plants they found, both raw and cooked; kids experimented with spices and flavors and cooked without a recipe; and kids tried new foods.

One of the kids’ favorite places, to which we returned six times, was Bittersweet Falls. Though the mosquitoes could be vicious (I learned to bring extra long-sleeve shirts for the kids for bug-protection), the stream provided myriad ways for the campers to explore and discover. Since we had two hours each day, we often combined a trip to Bittersweet Falls with somewhere else, like on this day:

Alyza, Maya, Gage and Jeannie went to Otter View Park and then to Bittersweet Falls. At Otter View Park Maya spotted some birds really close, Gage found the sweet nectar in clover flowers, and Alyza and Jeannie painted each other with cattail pollen (and got Gage a little too!) From the end of the boardwalk, Alyza saw a kingfisher catch its prey right out of the water, but the rest of us were too far back and missed it. There were some tracks in the mud at the edge of the river, too, which might have been from a mink or otter? At Bittersweet Falls we were glad to be wearing our swimsuits because we got wet in the spray of the falls, and
eventually Maya and Alyza jumped all the way in to the deep pool! We found at least four live crayfish, and caught one in a ziploc bag. When Jeannie pulled it out and held it between her fingers, it flexed back trying to pinch her but couldn’t reach! Later we managed to catch a couple fish, too, and held them in our hands! Gage found a big piece of charcoal and discovered that it works like paint when it’s wet. We also saw two beautiful black and bright-green butterflies. It’d be fun to go back there!

At the end of the first week of camp, I decided to also use my journal to keep track of what I learned and noticed about the campers. I reflected, I feel like I’ve had moments of connection with each camper, and I want to remember and capitalize on those. I think one-on-one moments are very important for me in getting to know each of them, supporting them and making them feel like I’m someone they know and can trust and can go to, and I can encourage every instinct they have to learn and observe. As I get to know them individually, I’ll also be able to better predict and manage social conflicts.

Since my activity was elective, I never knew whom I would see on a given day. Over the summer 26 different campers came on my activities, but on average each only came 2-3 times. There were some campers who never chose my activity, most I saw 1-3 times, and a few came more regularly. This made the journal very important for even just remembering kids names, but also for noting who they were friends with, who they struggled with, what they got excited about, what they were scared of, and anything they told me about their interests or home life.

At the end of the summer, I drew on the reflections I had written to write a personalized note to each camper I had seen. I used my budget from the MCSE to buy each of them a Trail Around Middlebury map, and marked on it the places they had gone with me. In their personalized notes, I also enclosed the 3-5 sentence blurbs I had written for each day they participated. I hoped that the map and the notes would help them continue exploring and building on what we had done together, and it provided a sense of closure.

I grew from my Fellowship experience this summer in three major ways. First, I gained tremendous confidence in my ability to be a teacher and mentor to middle school aged children. I had felt like leading the camp activities the summer before was fairly confusing and demoralizing at times, and I was keenly aware of my lack of experience as a camp counselor, babysitter, or mentor. I was not at all sure that running camp activities was something I was cut out for, but since education is a theme I keep circling back to I wanted to try it. Whether or not my activity was wildly successful, I at least overcame my fears enough to enjoy the summer and feel real connection with my campers.

Second, I realized the tremendous importance of having time to prepare for and reflect on the actual activities. I spent the entire semester previous preparing activity plans, and was able to spend much of each afternoon reflecting and planning. If I had not also been trying to begin data collection for senior independent research, I might have had even more time to implement some of the activities that required more involved set-up and materials. If I had been spending all day every day with the campers, I do not think I would have been nearly as intentional or successful.

Finally, I learned that I love an iterative process where I can reflect, refine, and repeat. My activities were not so repetitive that each activity was the same, but the repetition was more at
the scale of, “how do I better engage these kids with the natural world?” Every day that I saw the same camper again, I got to refine how I interacted with her or him. Any time that an activity didn’t go over quite as I planned, I had an opportunity to present it a new way the next time. Through experience and iteration, I learned how many extra sweatshirts to bring for kids in my backpack, I realized that Ziploc bags were perfect for catching minnows, and I developed a system for who got to control the radio in the van. All of these little decisions could feel stressful and disconcerting when they arose unexpectedly, but developing systematic solutions that I could hone helped me feel confident and effective.