



Faculty Guide

About the Book

The son of a sharecropper, Will Allen had no intention of ever becoming a farmer himself. But after years in professional basketball and as an executive for Kentucky Fried Chicken and Procter & Gamble, he cashed in his retirement fund for a two-acre plot just outside Milwaukee's largest public housing project. The area was a food desert with only convenience stores and fast-food restaurants to serve the needs of locals. (Source: Penguin Random House).

The book, and Allen's organization, Growing Power, helped spark nation-wide attention to the connections between land, food, and community. Allen sought to break down racial and economic barriers as well as barriers between urban and rural communities. He worked to reshape the community from the ground up, providing jobs and healthy food for the community and fostering a deeper connection to the land. Thousands flocked to Growing Power to learn how to replicate urban farms in their own communities and Allen won a MacArthur Genius Award in 2008 for his work. Yet, in November 2017, the organization declared bankruptcy. Allen resigned and Growing Powers closed its Milwaukee headquarters, an ignoble end to what many hailed as a transformative urban food movement.

The book highlights many important themes. Perhaps most significantly, it calls our attention to the topic of the 2018 Nobel Conference, Living Soil: A Universe Underfoot. Allen introduces us to both the literal and metaphorical importance of good soil in his quest to transform a community from the ground up. The book highlights questions of access and equity regarding food and economic resources. It considers America's complex racial history, drawing connections between changes in food and culture and explores the disconnection of urban communities from their rural roots. The book explores the concept of social entrepreneurship, highlighting the financial and ethical tensions behind efforts to use business to promote social good.

Given Growing Power's bankruptcy, some may wonder why we selected this book. The book is honest about the challenges inherent in this project of transforming a community through food. As Allen himself notes, "all big things are created by a slow and steady accumulation of small, stumbling steps" (p. 39). We believe this to be true for all of us, including our incoming students. Success may not come easily or immediately. Failure may be more common and more public than we like. As Gustavus seeks to equip students to lead purposeful lives and act on the great challenges of our time, this book challenges its reader to question assumptions, learn from history, seek justice, and face challenges with creativity and a sense of hope.

Questions for Discussion

1. Consider where you get your food. Do you have a grocery store in your neighborhood? Do you have a Farmer's Market in your community? Is the food you have easy access to affordable? Is it healthy? Compare and contrast your experience accessing food to the experience of Allen's Milwaukee community.
2. Allen writes, "...the fate of a seed can be predicted by the health of the soil where it takes root" (p. 63). Consider yourself as the seed and your environment as the soil. What kind of soil were you growing in before being transplanted to Gustavus? What kind of soil do you want to find/cultivate/root yourself in during your years at Gustavus?
3. Allen devotes several chapters to his backstory. Allen is also open about his own failures and setbacks, including his financial struggles. He says "all big things are created by a slow and steady accumulation of small, stumbling steps" (p. 39). Do you feel that this is true? In what ways have you grown from "small, stumbling steps" you have experienced personally?
4. What does this book tell us about the importance of soil and the challenges of creating healthy soil? Does it make you pay attention to, value, or think differently about soil? What does Allen inspire you to do for your soil?

Reading in Common Events

Book Discussion & *My Earth* Sample Collection
Monday, September 3

Dirty: The Soil Film Festival
Thursday, September 20, 7 p.m.

Dirty: The Soil Film Festival
Friday, September 28 & Saturday, September 29

Nobel Conference 54
Living Soil: A Universe Underfoot
My Earth Display
October 2 & 3, 2018

Major Themes in the Book

One of the primary reasons we selected this book was because it connects to so many different topics. Below is a list of major themes, along with specific page references. This list is based on the Reading and Learning Guide for the book prepared by the Common Reading Program at St. Cloud State University.

Soil and Agriculture

Gardening:

- 58: Will's gardening duties as a child with father
- 89: Comments on gardens found in Belgium.

Compost/Vermiculture:

- 89: Compost lesson from his father as a boy.
- 117-121: Meeting Alison Cohen who introduces Will to Vermiculture. First attempt at keeping the worms alive and the beginning of the process Will creates and uses. "Black Gold"- the worm casting that became successful compost.
- 124: Foodshare Warehouse. Liquid compost
- 134-136: 187: process of gathering compost materials
- 164-165: With an excess amount of compost, they found alternative ways to market the excessive worm casting: Milwaukee Black Gold Tea and to go bags of fertilizer.

- 175-179: Will's Compost. HOW TO Section.
- 189: depletion of soil nutrients
- 220-25: compost and energy

Urban Gardening:

- 134: Environmental Challenges when trying to start an Urban Garden: Soil fertility.
- 189-190; 192: Utilizing Vertical Space to maximize the room for production.
- 194-197: Aquaponics System: Growing fish and vegetables in the same linked system.
- 198-199: "Hoop Houses"- Simple Low cost greenhouses effective for inner city communities.
- 200: edible "Potager" Garden- in Chicago.
- 220-222: Creative ways to generate heat for hoop houses: chickens. Anaerobic digester

Pesticides:

- 68: Rachel Carson: spoke on the dangers of chemical pesticides.
- 166: Pesticides effects on the bees.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs):

- 115: Explains the CSA model, pros and cons

Industrial Farming (Commercial Farming):

- 5-8: Push for farmers to plant commodity crops
- 100-101: Equipment differences: Small scale to large scale.
- 113-15: 1971, Earl Butz becomes secretary of agriculture and his policies reflect the influence of big agricultural business firms. Policies place considerable financial pressure on small to mid-sized farms.
- 143-4: Industrial farming, urban planning, and technology advancements allow for farming to be done farther away, but at an unseen cost. "to feed just one American, the industrial agricultural system requires, on average, the equivalent of 530 gallons of oil a year.
- 155-6: Industrial farming effect on price of small farms
- 223: Industrial farming cuts out the relationships and interactions with the community.
- 232-33: Commercial sales undermining local business

Small Farms:

- 19-20: Decrease in small farms from 1978 to 1992 in Wisconsin, increase on average farm size by 70 acres.
- 96: Resource for small farms: U.S. department of Agriculture's Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service
- 100-101: Income-support programs had the indirect effect of pushing small farmers off their land.
- 107: Small Farmers coming together to form a co-op.

Decline of Black Farming in America:

- 5: In 1920, more than 900,000 farms were operated by African Americans in the US. Today there are only 18,000 black people who claim farming as their primary occupation.
- 13: 1990 census, only 25 black people in all of Wisconsin operated or managed a farm.
- 98-103: Will reflects on how his early experiences at Fondy market was symbolic of black farmers in America: distrust, hurt rather than helped by the government, which he historically traced back to Union General William Tecumseh Sherman who made promises of resettling volunteers with "40 Acres and a mule" (which was later retracted).
- 98-103: government influence on decline of black farming
- 155: Average age of Black farmers is higher than general pop. Black farmers are farming later in life, the survival of small farms is dependent on transfer of farmland to the next generation and less people from this that generation are wanting to farm due to hardships witness, experience, etc.

Farm Subsidies:

- xiii-xiv, 100-103, 113-115, 144, 184, 227, 233

Food

Food Security/Access:

- 35-36: Will bringing food to areas that had limited access.

- 212: example= Mound Bayou; closes store where fresh produce available is 10 miles
- 216: Majority of food stamps being used at “fringe retailers.”
- 217: Black Community Food Security Network

Food Deserts:

- 9, 15-16, 20, 116, 147, 212, 216-17, 247
- 7-8: inner-cities it is becoming common for fresh food to be more expensive than processed food.
- 20: Closing of grocery stores in African American neighborhoods increase in processed food options.
- 35-36: Will’s solution to creating accessible food: roadside stands, working with others to set manage stands, selling mobile.
- 143-145: inner city food environment and those living on a budget (\$3.00 a days)
- 147: Roughly 30 Million households are food insecure.
- 170-171: presence of fast food vs fresh produce.

Fast Food:

- xii-xiv, 54, 143-45, 147, 170-171, 199, 238, 240-241.

Food and Culture:

- 45: Meals and sharecropping. Eating big meals at lunch so that everyone had strength for the rest of the day. Rosa Bell teaching the importance of food, making do, taking care of the family and the rituals that accompanied supper.
- 51: Willie Mae’s food legacy
- 58-61: Food and bringing people together. Will’s family culture, growing up and working alongside his brothers. Willie Mae using food as a means of bringing people together in the parks.
- 90: Hosting his first Thanksgiving. Realization that once his parents left the south, farming no longer resembled slaves work just as he now grows his own food it no longer feels like slaves work to him.
- 213: Southern Food Traditions.

Food Waste:

- 134-6: Food waste is the major reason trash needs to be collected so often. Will and Jenna from WasteCap create an alliance in attempting to decrease food waste.
- 221: “At least one quarter to half of the fresh food we crate in this country is thrown out before we can eat it”

<h3>Health and Nutrition</h3>

- xii-iii: life expectancy can be predicted based off zip code: how some areas are targeted by different organizations (cigarettes, fast food etc.). Ethnicity/race often a factor.
- 7-8: General health stats: “Nearly half of African Americans born in the year 2000 are expected to develop type II diabetes.”
- 94: Will learns about the repercussions of radiation treatment received as a kid, in the form of Thyroid Cancer (thyroid and skin cancer most diagnosed).
- 104-105: Will is diagnosed with cancer in his parotid gland.
- 144: “Costs” of unhealthy food on society. Obesity has costed \$170 billion annually
- 160-162: Study of students who have early exposure to hands on garden learning environment are more likely to increase fruit and vegetable intake. Allergies and clean eating.
- 183: Mental Health: Discussion of links in profession to suicide rates/increase in suicides for farmers (originally at the bottom of the risk list) around the farm crisis of 1980.
- 188: Fertilizer and water contamination linked to gastric and bladder cancers.
- 190-191: Sunflower sprouts: high in vitamin D, chlorophyll, protein, calcium- some credit with relieving pain to deodorizing the body.
- 211-212: Dorothy Grady Scarborough: Saw so many people coming into the hospital with illness, wanted to know what was different, believed it was food consumption. Looks and lower Mississippi River Delta, home to some of the most severe health problems in the U.S.
- Obesity: xii-xiv, 144, 212

Environment

- xxi, 21, 53, 68, 100, 123, 134, 142-43, 145-48, 179, 186-87, 188-89, 220-22, 225-27, 236.
- 136: Will's vision for the start of an ecological community: Intercepting organic waste before it goes to the landfill.
- 187: "A broad vision was taking place in my head of a new urban ecology, where a city's waste could connect to its food-producing stream and where small facilities like my own could be not only food stands but also food producers."

Race and Class

Racism:

- xii-xiii, 1-3, 37, 52-53, 55, 64-65, 74-75, 78-81, 98-103, 146, 168, 208-210, 212, 215-16

American Historical Context:

- xi-xiv, 1-4, 5-6, 8, 44-50, 57-58, 98-101, 156, 206
- 1-4: Will's mother's heritage in sharecropping.
- 6: During the movement of away from farming, the argument as to best way to self improvement.
- W.E.B. DuBois- Success through higher liberal education vs. Booker T. Washington.- development of practical skills
- 44: Chickasaw tribe enslaving African Americans after the civil war had ended.
- 44-45; 46-49: After the Emancipation Proclamation, many farmers returned to their farms and the relationship continued in the form of employee/employer. "sharecropping often became slavery under a different name"
- 55-56: "White flight" in 1905 in Ken Gar. Black community growing "on the other side of the tracks." Major differences in access: running water, sewage. Segregation.
- 78-79: Quick summary of some of the current events of the time: assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Bobby Kennedy shot, War in Vietnam.
- 146: Freedom Rides- told in reference to the life story of Jerry's Brother Arnold.
- 168: "Redlining" Real-estate agents systematically denied housing to people of color.
- 183: Farm crisis of 1980 and impact on mental health: specifically suicide rates.
- 212: Mound Bayou: Historical black town.

The Great Migration:

- xi: History of agriculture largely a history of racial exploitation. How the Great Migration (starts to discuss Will's families specific experience) and agricultural production are connected.
- 1-6:10: Will's mother's story and individual journey migrating north.
- 31-32: Milwaukee one of the last stops on the great migration. Black population grew from 7,500 in 1930 to 105,000 in 1970.
- 55-56: Note about housing. Many families traveled north and then found themselves living with multiple families in one home.
- 97-100: policies that influenced the movement of black farmers to the north.
- 212: Mound Bayou: example of the impacts of the great migration on a specific town. Historically black community and that was once thriving, and now what remain.
- 215-216: Great Migration and Detroit: Illusions of opportunity and actual struggles faced by those who answered calls for advertisements of an improved life.

Segregation and Desegregation:

- 52: Brown vs. Board of education: desegregation of schools.
- 64-65: Will's experience in his segregated school and early experiences of educational integration.
- 71-72: Will's first experience of interracial dating despite it being illegal for blacks and whites to marry in Maryland and the backlash he received.
- 74-75: Being one of two student to integrate the University of Miami program. "black favoritism" belief that black players were being accepted onto teams to satisfy affirmative action, not based on real talent.
- 76: 1976 Supreme Court ruled it legal for blacks and whites to marry.
- 80: Noticing deeper racial prejudices when he traveled farther into the south for basketball games.

Environmental Racism:

- 168-170: Sharon's history of moving to Milwaukee: redlining, Federal- Aid Highway act of 1956.
- 216: Accounts of Redlining in Detroit

Poverty:

- xii-xiv, 8, 31-32, 44-45, 64-65, 142-145, 156-158, 171, 186-187, 212

Business and Social Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship

- 108: Formation of Fondy Market co-op.
- 229-230: Compost cab.

Nonprofits:

- 112-118: Farm City Link: Will's program to reach out to schools and run educational programming
- 115: Community Supported Agriculture
- 116-17: Heifer International : Non-profit that funds projects in 40 countries: Worm Project
- 123-26 FoodShare Metro Toronto: Fish system
- 131-133: Growing Power transition from Hope working independently to joining with Will.
- 156-157: Cabrini Green & The Fourth Presbyterian Church community garden.
- 217: Black Community Food Security Network.
- 232: Lynchburg grows

Product Sales:

- 96,97,97-98,107,
- 17-18: opening of Will's Roadside Farm Market. Importance of presentation from Will's viewpoint.
- 36, 95: "Truck Farmer": a person who filled back of his pickup truck and drove it busy intersections or markets.
- 115-116: "Market Baskets" CSA inspired food baskets as a reach out to communities with limited access to fresh produce sold at an affordable price.
- 190-191: Alliance with Sysco to provide foods to schools.

Community Development

Urban Planning:

- 142-146: "The idea that people in cities should eat food grown within a few miles was not always a strange idea." Discusses the change in urban planning. Introduces Jerome "Jerry" Kaufman, professor in the department of urban and regional planning.
- 186: The benefits Will sees from bringing agriculture back into urban planning: remedy to moral, health, and as a counter to damaging the environment.
- 169-172: Walnut Way Conservation Corporation movement to transform Lindsey Heights: Block party, peach orchard, preventing new fast food restaurant from coming in, planting in the community.
- 222-226: Will talks about his success and its dependency on strong partnerships with different community businesses.
- 233-235: Dereck Cunningham, runs the non-profit Lynch-Grows. How his business benefits the community: saves the city 50,000 by providing space for composting materials, farmers market, reaches out to members of the community whom have a disabilities or special needs.
- 243-245: Growing Power workshops: Connecting community on a global scale.

Community Projects

- 34-35; 111-112: 118-119: YWCA (Young Sisters and Brothers leadership program)
- 116;126: Neighborhood house (early childhood education and childhood services)
- 131: Federal Art Project: Hopes inspiration for wanting to create some kind of community culture.
- 156-7: Cabrini Green Community Garden
- 169-172: Walnut Way Conservation Corporation

Youth Programs:

- 34-35; 111-112: 118-119: YWCA (Young Sisters and Brothers leadership program)

- 116;126: Neighborhood house (early childhood education and childhood services)
- 158-159: Youth Corps: Growing Power apprenticeship program
- 191-192: Sysco and Will partnership to get fresh produce into the schools.
- 157: Cabrini Green after school program

Additional Resources

Visit Gustavus.edu/orientation/readingincommon for additional resources.