

EATING, ETHICS AND COMMUNITY

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FIRST PARISH IN FRAMINGHAM UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

READINGS

‘Were I to Teach a Course on God’

By Nancy Shaffer

Were I to teach a course on God
I would begin with a plate of persimmons-
the sweet, crisp kind, the ones more
orange than red: the hard squat Fuyas
I eat each November morning on hot
wheat cereal with almonds.

I would slice the persimmons gently
across their fat centers, then hold them
out. See the star shape? I would
offer them, so all might wonder.

I would slice brown Bosc pears
straight down their middles,
so the threads of each stem
trace wispily down to that rounded
place where dark seeds lie, tear-shaped
and wet in white, firm flesh.
I would hold these halves
silently forward, their bottoms smooth
in the curves of my palms.

I would teach God with the plates of pomegranates,
both before they were opened and after.
I would bring wet washcloths,
we would bury our faces and eat:
all that luminescent purple-red.

those clear-bright kernels fitted in tight rows

on small and tumbling hills-
and all that juice, so easily broken, sweet
and pucker at once. We would say nothing.

I would teach this way:
with plates of fruit, a knife,
many washcloths. With my eyes
very large, my mouth mostly silent,
so all might eat.

SERMON

Every human organization-every school, every family, and every congregation-must inevitably, face the same great question...It's the question that confronted Moses, after the Hebrew children fled from Egypt into the wilderness. In India, the Buddha reflected on the great question, after he found enlightenment at Benares. Mohammed heard the same question, when he was with the people of Mecca and Medina. Jesus of Nazareth stopped in his great work, to answer the question. The same question was heard in Plymouth, in the 1620s.

Always it is the same religious question. And it comes back to challenge Unitarian Universalists. Sooner or later, somebody in the back row will raise his hand, to ask, "When do we eat?"¹

Eating is personal and essential and primal and communal and complicated. In our tradition, no one will tell anyone what they should or should not eat. Ours is a religion of freedom for the individual in how we live, what we believe, what is on our table when we sit down. But this freedom comes with some principles to guide us should we choose to embrace them. For one, we covenant to "affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning". And, we affirm and promote "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Today more food for thought about the way we affect all life by the decisions we make about food.

Periodically at the national meeting of Unitarian Universalists called General Assembly a Study/Action Resolution is chosen. In 2008 GA selected "Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice". The idea is that between 2008 and 2012, congregations will take a look at all of the issues related to Eating and Justice. Many of you here were doing this even before the resolution by showing films and having discussions, by starting a 'Fair Trade Coffee' Program, by teaching our 6th and 7th graders about the disparity of accessibility to food between different regions of the world, by measuring waste (or ORT) at potlucks...and the like.

¹ The Rev. Robert F. Murphy, UU Fellowship of Falmouth, MA, 12/2008

Today we continue the conversation, the exploration

Eating in America. Oy vey!

For many people, for many families, eating is a rushed event that is squished in around the edges. A majority of people between the ages of 18 and 50 eat in their vehicles one fourth of the time, I read somewhere. Industrialization has coached us to expect things fast and easy and cheap, and therefore has brought much more processed food into the mix. Because of this the cost of sweeteners and fats has gone down 20% since 1980, while the cost of fresh fruits and vegetables has gone up 40% in the same time. We spend about half as much of our income on food as we did in 1960, but we're spending three times as much of our income on health care. Because we are used to having any food we wish in any season, much of the food we eat comes from places far away. Americans consume about 400 gallons of oil a year per person for the food we eat. If every American was to eat just one meal each week that was composed of locally and organically raised foods, we would reduce our country's oil consumption by over 1.1 billion barrels every week.²

Many of us have lost touch with the profound nature of eating...how it matters so much what and how we eat, to our body, mind, emotions, spirit.... and to the care of the planet. Everyone eats, but how many of us have taken time to understand what it means to be an eater? When you think about it, each time we eat we make a commitment to continue to live. "Food is the soul's earliest experiences of miracles. A crying baby is transformed into a calm and satisfied one with a little mother's milk. And a miserable child can change into a creative, playful force with a helping of the right food. Children eat naturally and spontaneously, without fear of what should or should not be eaten. They have their preferences, but unlike adults they experience little guilt and make no judgments about the eating habits of others. Children eat because they enjoy eating."³

Isn't it true that we can get to relating to food as the enemy or as something to be controlled, or we are simply unconscious about the whole endeavor? At least that has been both my observation and my experience. We can use it to fill a void, or to escape a feeling, or to impress others, or any number of things that arise from fear rather than joy.

The word 'enjoy' appears in the official dietary guidelines issued by the government of Britain, South Korea, Thailand, and Australia. Norway comes right out and declares, 'food and joy = health.' The United States dietary guidelines, faithful to our Puritan roots, say nothing about enjoyment. Some studies have shown that people get more out of a meal nutritionally when they experience pleasure in the process. In one study, Swedish and Thai women were fed a Thai dish that the Swedes found overly spicy.

² UUA website resources

³ Mark David, *Nourishing Wisdom*, Bell Tower Press, 1992 p. 6

The Thai women, who liked the dish, absorbed more iron from the meal. When the researchers reversed the experiment and served hamburgers, potatoes, and beans, the Swedes, who like this food, absorbed more iron. Most telling was a third variation of the experiment, in which both the Swedes and the Thais were given food that was high in nutrients but consisted of sticky, savorless paste. In this case, neither group absorbed much iron. Similarly, studies of dieters find that those who regard pleasure as unimportant in their food choices enjoy their meals less and are likely to be dissatisfied with their bodies and exhibit symptoms of eating disorders.⁴

Experiencing food as pleasurable requires a slowing down and being present when we eat. Actually sitting at a table! Giving thanks. When we can, eating with others and enjoying their company. Conversation and communion. I have a cartoon hanging on my refrigerator of a haggard looking man, unshaven, slumped at the table with an empty bowl in front of him. He is saying to his wife: "I remember opening the can, and I remember washing the pot, but I don't remember eating the chili."

Mindful, pleasurable, eating t can connect us with all of life three times a day! One winter, I received a basket of tangerines for a present with these words from Thich Nhat Hahn attached:

One day I offered a number of children a basket filled with tangerines. The basket was passed around and each child took one tangerine and put it in his or her palm. We each looked at our tangerine and the children were invited to meditate on its origins. They saw not only the tangerine, but also its mother, the tangerine tree. With some guidance, they began to visualize the blossoms in the sun and the rain. They saw petals falling down and tiny green fruit appear. The sunshine and the rain continued and the tiny tangerines grew. Now someone has picked it and the tangerine is here. After seeing this each child was invited to peel the tangerine slowly, noticing the mist and the fragrance of the tangerine, and then bring it up to his or her mouth, and have a mindful bite...in full awareness of the texture and taste of the fruit and the juice coming out. We ate slowly like that. Each time you look at a tangerine you can see deeply into it. When you peel it and smell it, it is wonderful. You can take time eating a tangerine and be happy.⁵

For those of us in a life situation where we have enough (and often too much) to eat, slowing down and enjoying our food with gratitude is a good first step. Then, we might begin to be more aware of the nutrients that we are or are not ingesting. Nutrition is important, but it seems that it has become so attached with the fear of aging and of dying. It seems like if you live long enough, everything bad is good again. Carbs are good. Carbs are bad. All fats are bad. Some fats are essential. (As I take that huge omega 3 capsule every day, I sometimes hope that its healthful efficacy will be disproven soon!) And, there is lots of judgment and guilt around what people see other people eating. Of course, good nutrition is something for which to strive..but it won't help to become food fascists. When my son was small I took him to a

⁴ *The Gospel of Food*, Harry Glassner, p. 1-2

⁵ *The Mindfulness of Peace*, Thich Nhat Hahn.

birthday party for one of his friends. The cake was so healthy (no sugar, no fat, no eggs, no gluten)...and no taste. Nobody ate it!

There is a wonderful scene in Woody Allen's movie *Sleeper* where he wakes up after two centuries of suspended animation. The scientists who have brought him out of his long sleep explain his plight, and one of his first questions he asks is, 'Where are all of my friends?' He is told that his friends are dead, to which he replies with his classic forlorn and quizzical look, "I don't understand it; they all ate organic rice. "

No amount of organic nutrition makes us immortal. What nourishes is more than the rice, more than the nutrients, more than the absence of artery-clogging, more than smooth skin or fooling the age-guessers. It is the awareness, the community, the making sacred of the meal, and, finally, the strengthening of ourselves for joyous living, and, ultimately, the focus on what we intend in our lives from the strength we receive.

Change is a process, to be sure. But, we change not for ourselves alone. We eat to live. Why do we live? We live not for ourselves alone.

We take in nourishment of body to simply to live, yet, we can eat too, as a mindfulness practice to help us remember that not one atom of life is separate from the whole. Or, we can enjoy our food with love and gratitude to strengthen ourselves for the service we long to give, a natural outgrowth of the spiritual journey.

Many of you may know a lot about the food production system of this country. I knew, sort of, before the last few weeks but I knew in dribs and drabs...which is the way denial works. But in preparing for today I learned more fully, saw more of the total picture. This has catapulted me out of denial about what a mess we have created as we have industrialized and corporatized our food production system. I read two of journalist Michael Pollen's books, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and *In Defense of Food*. I watched the documentary *Food, Inc.*⁶ It was almost too painful to watch...a telescoping of what the nature of our national food production system is... and a ruggedly fast shot out of the land of denial.

Yet, I am of the mind that denial is not a blessed state, and I invite you, if you have not done so, to begin, to educate yourself about the system that puts much of the food in our stores. We are not here for ourselves alone. Each part is related to every other part. Knowing the history of what we ingest, who it helps and who it hurts, what is put in our food to make it appear healthy when it is not, learning how the animals and the earth are treated... knowing these things has to be part of our awakening.

The fact is the way we produce our food has caused irreversible environmental damage; has created insupportable food chain; A little history of food policy that has brought us to this place. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935, the law that provided most US workers

⁶ <http://www.foodincmovie.com/>

with the right to collective bargaining, excluded domestic workers and agricultural workers, and by implication small farmers. This was an instance of *realpolitik* for the Roosevelt administration, since it needed to keep southern, plantation-owning Democrats in the coalition. But the compromise had a couple of disastrous consequences.

First, since the 1930s a sizable number of African Americans were domestic servants, agricultural laborers, or small farmers, the compromise postponed the civil rights movement for another generation. It also insured the suffering of millions of migrant workers to this day, despite the best efforts of people like Caesar Chavez.

Second, the compromise insured that farm workers and small farmers would have no voice in government policy concerning agriculture. The consequences of THAT killed the family farm, damaged the environment, and is now killing the US population with bad food laced with corn derivatives.⁷

Here are some other things to know about:

~When you go into a grocery store you will have hundreds of different choices, many brands. Did you know that basically all of those choices are brought to you by five multi-national corporations?

~ Laborers in some of these huge factory farms are not well protected from disease or given benefits or warned of possible health hazards. When local poor people get sick and cannot work or begin to refuse to work in these conditions, companies look in a hundred mile radius to hire people. When this source is dry, companies hire men and women from Mexico, many of them undocumented. The film shows a bus hired by a large company that goes into Mexico to pick people up. The government looks the other way, as long as the companies allow a certain percentage of their workers to be deported every year. No charges are brought against the companies who do the hiring.

~Did you know that most small farmers can only farm because they have contracts with the big corporations and that the focus is on faster and bigger and more production. The way in which animals are treated in order for this bottom line to be served is often shocking and violent and unclean and in no way respectful of the holiness of the life web. Corporations set the rules for farmers based on increased production and profit. Things like requiring chickens to be kept in coops without sunlight. Things like growing chickens in 45 days instead of 3 months with growth hormones...so rapidly do they add girth for our love of breast meat, that they often cannot stand up. Things like feeding cows corn because it is cheap and does not require grazing.... corn that is subsidized by the federal government...corn that makes cows sick and in whose compromised digestive tracks e-coli grows.

~And, in spite of this huge production scene for more and faster, The Department of Agriculture reports that 10% of all adults and 17% of all children in America are “food insecure”. Native Americans, African American and Hispanic households experience “food insecurity” at higher rates than the national average.

⁷ Dr. David Breeden, First Unitarian Church of Akron, 3/08

This road to conscious, aware eating can be difficult to stomach.

Yet, the good news is that choosing the food that is best for us, that makes us more healthy, is also the way that social change will happen. The good news is: there is power in the choices we make. The good news is that conscious eating of food that is made compassionately and sustainably is possible.

Let's keep talking about this and learning and encouraging one another. In the meantime, here is a short list of things we can do:

~Journalist Michael Pollan teaches this mantra: Eat food, not too much, mostly plants. Don't eat anything your great, great grandmother would not recognize. (Like that yogurt in plastic tubes with 20 ingredients that you can't pronounce!)

~Reduce transportation energy by eating locally produced food whenever possible.

~Learn about the practices of the companies you buy from and buy from the companies that are more socially just whenever you can, who treat their laborers fairly, who treat their animals respectfully, non-violently, who don't use growth hormones and antibiotics.

~Reduce food waste by buying sparingly and using leftovers.

~Eat foods as close to their original, fresh state as possible.

~Another strategy...only shop on the edges of the big grocery stores. Most everything in the middle is processed. There are more organic foods in major stores than you might imagine.

These are things we can do right away. Let us share the resources we know with one another. There are more complicated and politically laden activities that we may choose to embark upon as well as we study "Eating and Ethics".

These words are from Kentucky poet and farmer and voice for the earth Wendell Berry:

Eating with the fullest pleasure-pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance-is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.

Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants.

May we become more conscious and celebratory eaters. And, may we use the strength we derive from that nourishment in service to love and justice. Bon Appétit!