

The Welcome Table

Sunday, November 7, 2010
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UU Church of Concord, New Hampshire

Reading “The Ethics of Eating Local are Complex,” adapted from *Ethical Eating: food and Environmental Justice*

Available online at <http://tinyurl.com/eth-eat>

“Many environmentally-minded people seek to reduce their personal impact on the earth through eating sustainably. But the issues involved are complex, and sometimes counter-intuitive. Take “eating locally.”

Locavores center their diets on food grown within a 100-mile radius of where it is sold and consumed. On the one hand, “eating local” keeps consumer dollars in the local community, which strengthens not only the local economy but also relationships among neighbors.

It channels more money directly to farmers, as less money is spent on processing, transport, marketing, and intermediaries along vegetables’ typically 1,500-mile supply chains. Shorter food routes put less carbon into the air, thereby reducing global warming.

“Yet eating locally may not be as beneficial as it may seem.

In eating locally, one can subsidize factory farms, pesticide-intensive crops, and farms with exploitative labor practices, all of which can be local.

If you compare the environmental impact of organic tomatoes raised in a local greenhouse to tomatoes shipped from a distant area with a warm climate, you’ll find that local tomatoes can use up twenty percent more resources, because of the energy inputs greenhouses requires.

And it gets even more surprising.

Driving an average car just three miles to and from a farmers' market releases as much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere as shipping 17 pounds of produce halfway around the world.¹

“So what does this mean for those who take the ethics of their food choices seriously?”

Here ends the reading.

Sermon *The Welcome Table* Rev. John Millspaugh

So many mysteries surround food.

Food is substance of this planet we take into ourselves, which becomes *part* of us, and fuels not only our movements, but our consciousness itself.

Of all the ways we relate to nature, eating is one of the most intimate.

So many mysteries surrounding food; so many paths we could embark on.

Here, now,

is the food mystery that I chose to begin our considered reflection.

A man walks into a doctor's office.

He has a cucumber up his nose,

a carrot in his left ear and a banana in his right ear.

“What's the matter with me?” he asks the doctor.

The doctor replies, “You're not eating properly.”

Well, that was a food mystery easily solved.

But other food mysteries are more difficult to comprehend.

For example, if you were to eat equal amounts of pasta and antipasti, will you end up just as hungry as when you began?

Was Woody Allen right
when he said the food in New York restaurants has two big problems...first, it
tastes terrible, and second...such small portions!
And finally, why is it that a typical American breakfast asks for only a day's effort
from the chicken, but a lifetime commitment from the pig?

Hmm, people didn't like that last joke as much. It wasn't quite as comfortable.
We joke about food because we take questions about food so seriously:
what food to eat, how to eat it, what to say before eating it,
and who to eat it with.

I grew up Methodist in small towns of Minnesota and Missouri,
so I ingested whole the Methodist codes about eating.

First was the unstated rule about **what** to eat.

The rule seemed to be: eat casseroles, hot dish, potato salad,
and Jell-O with little wrinkly bits of fruit quivering inside.

More importantly, an explicit food rule was the commandment to say grace, to
express gratitude for creation and the many hands
that brought its bounty to the table.

I sang a simple grace from age two to age eighteen,
either out loud with my family, or silently to myself when I was with another
group: "God is great, God is good, and we thank you for our food, Amen." These
unquestioned codes were just part of the air I breathed; I didn't question them, and
they served me well my first eighteen years of life.

But you and I have become aware in the past few decades
that our choices around food are much more complex
than anything we were taught as children.

For me, that realization dawned
when I arrived at Macalester College in St. Paul.

Three things happened.

First, I encountered all sorts of bizarre food in the school cafeteria I had never

before seen.

Not *normal* food like I had grown up with.

Not tater tot hamburger casserole and macaroni beef sauté.

No, these were strange foods with names like hummus and falafels,
lentils and samosas, tortellini and tetrazzini, and hobak jeon and bibim bap.

Macalester drew students from dozens of countries,
and its cafeteria reflected its broad reach.

I was initially put off by all the culinary variety,
but as I ventured into unfamiliar territory, plate by plate,
I fell in love with food all over again.

My only unhappy eating experiences were on days when, in honor of this or that
British holiday, the cafeteria served British food.

Since I am of British descent, I can say I came to understand Martha Harrison's
speculation that "what motivated the British to colonize so much of the world
[was] that they were just looking for a decent meal."

Second, not only did I encounter an incredible variety of food,
I encountered with an incredible variety of
moral and ethical teachings about food.

Majoring in world religions,

I learned about the overwhelming attention given to food in all world traditions,
and the conflicting codes those religions developed,
based on differing concerns.

Some, like Hinduism, focused on taking good care of your body,
treating it as a temple,

resisting temptations to pollute that temple for the sake of passing pleasure.

Some like Islam placed emphasis

on holding political structures accountable

for equitable food distribution, and commanded the well-to-do
to provide alms and food to the hungry.

The Hebrew Bible instructs
those who grow food set aside portions of their crops for the poor,
declares that without such
deliberate acts of social and economic justice,
our religious rituals are empty.

Some religious edicts sought to ensure the welfare of animals
used for agriculture,
such as Buddhist teachings that animals raised for food deserve compassion as
much as any other creature
that walks on the ground or flies through the air,
or the Jewish law that states that Sabbath codes
can and must be superseded to alleviate the pain of living beings.ⁱⁱ

Other wisdom focused on reverence and care for the earth,
like the indigenous traditions instructing us
to not take any more from the earth than we need,
and not waste any portion of what we take.
These hundreds of religious teachings about food
threw into questions the adequacy of the Midwestern Methodist assumptions I had
been raised with.

The third thing introducing me to the complexity of food through the volunteerism
of some individual I'll never know,
who will never know the effect he had on me.

At an Earth Day concert

I saw a man holding a poster listing 88 facts about animal agriculture.

Each fact was stunning.

It stated, and I later confirmed, that animal agriculture contributes more to global
climate change than the entire transport sector.

Did you catch that? Transportation—

cars, trucks, railroads, airplanes, the entire shipping industry—
is often considered the biggest contributor to climate change,

but animal agriculture contributes far more.
A recent United Nations report confirmed it.ⁱⁱⁱ
So every time we buy meat, eggs, or dairy, we subsidize climate change.

By presenting this fact to me at the right moment,
a solo activist with one poster changed my entire outlook on food.
He made very clear to me that eating lower on the food chain is tremendously
beneficial for the planet.
I had to face the question, “Why would the preferences of my palate,
which morally speaking are relatively trivial,
outweigh the scores of harmful effects of animal agriculture
on the most vital interests of our planet and future generations?”

I didn't want to change.
I liked the food I was accustomed to.
I didn't mean any harm.
I was “just looking for a good meal”...like my British ancestors.
Yet, just as their conquest led to untold damage lasting for generations,
in my own pursuit of a good meal I was perpetuating some of the worst social and
environmental ills affecting the planet in my own era—
climate change, land degradation, air and water pollution,
loss of biodiversity.
So as you might imagine, those fifteen years ago,
I became vegetarian.
Not only vegetarian, but *religiously* vegetarian.
Not only religiously vegetarian, but **righteously, evangelically** vegetarian.
I was sure **everyone** should be vegetarian, and boy, was I righteous.

My fall from vegetarian righteousness happened thanks to my meeting a Latina
activist named Lauren Ornelas.^{iv}

So often, we try to learn about the issues we care about
by talking with people whose perspectives are compatible with our own.

But often we learn the most through authentic encounter with people whose perspectives differs from ours.

I met lauren at an environmental conference,
and she graciously listened to my perspectives
about eating lower on the food chain.

Then she told me about her urban Latino neighborhood
in California's Bay Area,
which is full of liquor stores and quickiemarts,
but completely devoid of healthy food options.

Residents could walk a few blocks in any direction to buy beer, cigarettes, hard
liquor, or Twinkies™,

but would have to get in a car and drive for several miles to White neighborhoods
if they wanted to buy unfried and unprocessed meat,
let alone a fresh vegetable.

Ironically, some of those Latinos and Latinas spent their days
picking vegetables in the fields to the east of the Bay,
harvesting fresh, healthy produce for distribution throughout the Bay...
but not to their own neighborhood.

lauren was working to bring a small grocery to the neighborhood,
and to create a community garden
so residents could enjoy healthy, organic food.

As I got to understand lauren's important work,
I realized people struggling to put food on the table
have enough to worry about just in getting healthy food
that they don't need some White guy
badgering them about eating low on the food chain.

Not only that,

but **my** eating habits at the time
contributed to **their** health problems and even fatalities.

How? At the time, the produce I bought was mostly conventionally raised.

That is, it were grown on farms that routinely expose field workers to toxins and inhumane conditions; in the United States in 2007, conventional agriculture had the second highest fatality rate for on-the-job deaths.^v

Through getting to know Lauren's lens on agriculture, I learned that issues around food are rarely as clear-cut and obvious as they seem. Ethics are not universal truths we can discover for ourselves and apply to everyone else. Ethics not only *apply to* but also *emerge from* social, economic, and political realities, and so they will differ for all of us, depending on our social location.

I learned humility. I learned that like any other aspect of the religious life, our relationship with food isn't about righteousness, but about being open to learning. It's not about perfection, but about taking the questions seriously, caring enough to take the step or two that feels most approachable, and cultivating the will to keep on doing better.

I grew up not thinking much about the ethics of food, not caring much, just sticking to my habits, not considering the questions. Later, I went from **that** extreme—not caring—to the other—righteousness. Too often, when it comes to matters of ethics, Unitarian Universalists like me find ourselves at one extreme or another. On one end is righteousness, thinking that our own particular perspective covers what everyone ought to be doing, and *would* be doing if they understood the issues as well as we did. You can be righteous about eating local, or organic, or fair trade, or low on the food chain, and I've even met some people who seemed to be

righteous about drinking only Starbucks coffee.

At the other extreme from righteousness is apathy and willful ignorance.

Where you find the questions and issues involved in an ethical question

so daunting that even though you **know** they matter,

you just refuse to let them get any kind of **grip** on you.

A little boy asked his mother what the difference was between ignorance and

apathy, and she replied, “I don’t know, and I don’t care.”

Righteousness on one extreme,

willful ignorance and apathy on the other extreme.

What’s the middle path?

I’m beginning to believe the middle path involves holding close to humility.

I think of Universalist minister Clarence Russell Skinner,

who said that our current comprehension

“is not a tombstone marking the resting place of truth,

but is rather a milestone on the long arduous journey to the truth.”^{vi}

Humility and openness to learning. What do they look like in practice,

When it comes to mindful eating?

Well, a lot of fun actually!

If you’re skeptical, you can look at any of hundreds of UU congregations that have been taking up this conversation in the past couple years.

Any of the **hundreds** of congregations. You see,

Every other year Unitarian Universalists from across the country gather for our big

national conference and choose an issue they invite all congregations

to explore for four years.

Some of those issues in recent years have been peace-making,

climate change, civil liberties, and interfaith cooperation.

But this past summer, delegates selected

“Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice.”

As one attendee commented,
 “I voted for this issue because it’s not an abstract,
 but something I can really do something about, three times a day.
 And I look forward to discovering new things about food and where it comes from,
 at potlucks, on field trips, and maybe even in chocolate communions.

Imagine what it would be like to engage in this exploration
 at First Parish over the next couple years.

Trying one another’s favorite foods,
 asking “Why do you make the food choices you make?”
 , and sitting at one another’s feet in humility.

Imagine taking children on a field trip to a nearby organic farm,
 complete with a tour, a conversation with the farmer about the challenges
 she faces, samples of the farm’s produce, and a few seeds to plant at home.

Imagine an fair trade advocate (or other issue advocate) leading a group of the
 congregation’s shoppers through the aisles of a local grocery store,
 explaining products’ origins and the future we vote for when we buy it.

[Imagine a summertime garden on the property here]

Imagine visiting the cows, pigs, chickens, and goats
 living just around the corner at a farmed animal sanctuary.

Did you know there’s one in just about a twenty minute drive from here?

And imagine taking all that we learn as individuals and as a community and
 feeding it into the national process, so that your discoveries
 become part of the accumulated wisdom of Unitarian Universalists everywhere.

Our new national conversation about food and religion
 can bring us to a better understanding of what it means to live out our Unitarian
 Universalist values.

But as we begin, it’s important to remember the words of Hungarian Unitarian
 Francis David, who lived from 1510 to 1579

but whose wise words still reverberate today:

“We need not think alike to love alike.”^{vii}

This process of exploration
 will not be about coming up with one solution for everybody.
 It sets a welcome table where all perspectives are invited,
 and all people and all creation are cherished.

The idea of the welcome table began in the Jewish tradition of the Seder table,
 which leaves one seat empty for Elijah or the stranger.

In the Christian tradition,
 the welcome table began with Jesus
 dining with prostitutes, tax collectors, lepers, and other social outcasts,
 you know, *those* people,
 people we might be nervous to share our dinner table with today.

Jesus' critics understood
 that when he sat down and ate with society's outcasts,
 he was doing something radical, something dangerous to the status quo.

When you invite "*those* people" to the table, "*those* people"
 aren't "*those* people" any more.

They are "my people," "our people," "us."

During the long decades of slavery in this country, enslaved people, understanding
 the power of the welcome table,
 composed a hymn with which we'll end this service,
 a song imaging a heavenly reign of justice and freedom,
 where all are welcomed as equals.

In our Unitarian Universalist tradition,
 what would it mean to set the welcome table?

Literally what food would you lay if you knew a migrant laborer
 or farming family
 would be joining you for the meal?

Would you choose food harvested by workers paid less than a living wage, whose
 work exposes them daily to carcinogens? Surely not.

What would it mean to set a welcome table,

where not only you and your family
would feel welcome and cared for by your choices,
but workers too would feel their inherent worth and dignity respected,
and the earth, the birds of the air and the beasts of the field,
and all those affected by our choices
would feel part of the beloved community?
What would your home table look like if it were truly a welcome table?
For myself, if I'm honest, I admit I don't
I don't know a whole lot about the **answer** to that question.
But I know how to **ask** that question.

In community.

And I know why we're asking the question, even if we arrive at different answers.
So that someday we can look at the tables spread before us in our own homes and
say,

“This expresses my values and my spirituality, my compassion, my respect,
my reverence for the Earth, and reinforces them,
brings me back to my spiritual center, three times a day.
Imagine what it would be like to experience
at least some taste of grace at every meal.

But of course, you don't have to imagine any of this.

You just have to step forward after this service say that you are interested.
Talk to Rev. Leuchtenberger, who is already thinking about how to plan some of
these activities.

If enough join the exploration, it will be a lot of fun.

But fun as it will be, it's more than fun.

It has serious implications.

Whether or not *you* participate matters.

Not just for you, but for all of us,

and for people around the world that you will never meet.

Eating is a daily human delight with worldwide implications on issues Unitarian Universalists deeply care about: the environment, immigration, labor practices, climate change, animal protection, fair trade, world hunger. With varying degrees of awareness, these are issues in which each of us is already involved. The new president of the UU Service Committee, Bill Schulz, has been quoted as saying to UUs, “We must hold the whole world in our hands.” Well, every time we pick up a piece of food, we already do.

We like to think that what we eat is our own business, having only to do with our personal finances and health. But as we sang today, “Our world is one world, what touches one affects us all.” In our infinitely interconnected natural world, there is no such thing as an isolated event. So just as it matters what we *do*, it matters what we *eat*. It matters where our food comes from, how it is grown and harvested or slaughtered. It matters that eating less meat in your diet would make more of a difference for climate change than would switching to a hybrid car.^{viii} It matters if the food we are eating was harvested by people being paid less than a living wage. It matters if we pay money into a system flooding ecosystems with pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides. Nothing is an isolated act.

And also...

It also matters that eating is one of the most intimate and most pleasurable of human experiences. It matters very much that eating with friends and fellow congregants is fun and a way to get to know each other better, and a delightful way of learning from each other’s experiences and wisdom.

It matters that the food we eat becomes a living part of us.
 After all, you are what you eat. And not only that, but **we** are what you eat,
 and **you** are affected by what **I** eat,
 and **what** we eat can make a better society
 not only here but throughout the world.
 So I close with the words of those famous philosophers
 known as the Beatles, “I am me and you are you and we are all together.”^{ix}
 Amen, blessed be and goo-goo-ga-jub.

* **Closing Hymn # 407** “We’re Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table”

* **Closing Words** by V. Emil Gudmundson

And now, may we have faith in life to do wise planting
 that the generations to come may reap even more abundantly than we.
 May we be bold in bringing to fruition
 the golden dreams of human kinship and justice.
 This we ask that the fields of promise become fields of reality.

ⁱ (Andy Jones, *Eating Oil*, Sustain & Elm Farm Research Center, London, 2001, Case Study 2.
 <http://www.sustainweb.org/chain_fm_eat_asp>

ⁱⁱ Rabbi Jill Jacobs, “The concept of *Tzaar Baalei Hayim* demands that we take animal suffering seriously.” *My Jewish Learning*, available from <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/daily_life/environment/TO_Envirn_Trad_Teachings/Animals/TBC.htm>. To illustrate, if an animal falls into a deep ditch on the Sabbath, the principle of *tzaar baalei hayyim* dictates that not only must provisions be made for his or her sustenance, but one is permitted to place pillows and bedding in the dike so that the animal may ascend. Technically speaking, the latter activity constitutes a clear violation of Sabbath law, but the law is here superseded by the biblical principle enjoining that animals be spared pain.

ⁱⁱⁱ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Livestock’s Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*, 2007, available from <<http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.HTM>>. For a much more accessible summary of the 2006 report, see “Livestock impacts on the environment,” available from <www.fao.org/ag/magazine/0612sp1.htm>.

^{iv} lauren does not capitalize her first name.

^v United States Department of Labor, “National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2007.” Available from <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cfoi.pdf>>

^{vi} Clarence Russell Skinner, *The Social Implications of Universalism*. (New York: Universalist Publishing House/Murray Press), 1915, pg. 9.

^{vii} Francis David, more properly known as Ferenc Dávid, founded of the Unitarian Church of Transylvania.

^{viii} *New Scientist*, “It’s better to green your diet than your car.” Issue 2530, 17 December 2005, pg. 19. Available from <<http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg18825304.800>>

^{ix} John Lennon, “I am the Walrus,” on The Beatles’ *Magical Mystery Tour*, 1967. As cited by Meri Gibb, “‘Ethical Eating’ (excerpts),” in The Ethical Eating Core Team’s *Worship Resources Supplement*, page 28. Available from <www.tinyurl.com/WeAllEat>