

Sermon

“What Can’t You Eat?”

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*But we have only begun to love the earth. We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.
How could we tire of hope? – so much is in the bud.*

-- from “Candles in Babylon,” Denise Levertov

“What Can’t You Eat?”

My reflections this morning have, as their genesis, a moment a few years ago when I interned with the Long Island Multi-Faith Forum. This Forum is comprised of representatives of 12 different religious traditions – the Christians and Jews are there, of course, but so are the Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. There are Sikhs, too, and Jains, Native Americans and Ba’hais. Oh, and Unitarian Universalists! We’re there, too. A brave, eclectic band, drawn together by a sense that all have much to learn from one another.

You can imagine some of the challenges faced by such a diverse group, but one very significant one was – can we all eat together? Like most of us who spend time in faith communities, Forum members understood that food goes hand-in-hand with talking, socializing, getting to know one another. But – could we find a way to do that?

The problem actually started with the question, “who’s fasting right now?” Is it Ramadan? The birth of the Bab? Yom Kippur? We needed to know everyone’s holy days and holidays, and the restrictions they imposed.

But it went on. Kosher, of course, for the Jews. No alcohol or caffeine for the Muslims. Most Hindus are vegetarians, as are most Buddhists. So could we at least all settle on vegetables? Well, then there are the Jains, who don’t eat even fruits and vegetables when the plant itself – and the surrounding micro organisms around it - must be killed. So, no root vegetables, like potatoes, carrots and onions. The list was getting short.

Then someone paused, looked at me, and asked “well, what about you Unitarian Universalists? What don’t *you* eat?”

It was a good question. I didn’t have a good answer. I mean, I had my own thoughts – and practices – about what to – and not to – eat. But were those “UU?”

At the time, the congregation I served was struggling mightily with the subject of food. There were a handful of vegans – those who don’t eat any animal products – while most of the congregation identified as omnivores. “I can’t be at a pot-luck dinner where meat is served,” said a committed vegan. “I won’t be browbeaten into feeling guilty for my BBQ ribs,” countered an equally committed omnivore. Both groups pointed to our UU principles to support their positions, but the principles led them in opposite directions.

Until that question from the Forum members, “What don’t *you* eat,” and my experiences with the vegan-omnivore conflict, I never imagined that my own food choices – and the reasons behind them – might have a *religious* dimension. But thus started a journey of reflection that is getting

increasingly complex and interesting, and deepening my own understanding of Unitarian Universalist spirituality and ethics.

I first stopped eating meat when I was 19 years old, purely because of finances. I was working at a summer theater where my pay was \$200/month. Rent was \$100/month. That left \$3.57 a day for everything else. Meat was a luxury, so I simply didn't buy it.

My nascent vegetarianism got a boost when I returned to college that fall. The school had instituted a "vegetarians only" dining room. It was small, and quiet. There was no gray "mystery meat." In fact, there was food with color and flavor! To this day, I cook one of my favorites from that time, acorn squash stuffed with apples and walnuts, glazed with maple syrup.

Once I stopped eating meat, I didn't miss it much. Life rolled along. Then I read Frances Moore Lappé's groundbreaking book, *Diet for a Small Planet*. Her data about how much protein was contained in the **grain** that was fed to animals – so that those same animals could then become our protein – really struck me. Her case - that the developed world was ransacking the developing world with this practice – woke me up. Her counsel - eat the protein *before* it is meat - made so much sense to me. Now I see that as the first turning in raising my own food consciousness. It wasn't all about what I could afford, or not; what tasted good to me, or not. It was about what I chose to consume being a part of the world-wide web of existence, and what part did I want to play in *that*?

Though I had stopped eating red meat, I continued to eat fish, which was (back then) both affordable and outside the grain-to-animal food cycle described by Lappé. Fish were wild. They ate what oceans or rivers gave them, not what humans fed them. (Remember, this was back in the 1970s – much has changed.) But something else "clicked" with me about fish. I grew up near the Connecticut lakes. My brother and I loved to go fishing. I did it all, probably just to show my older brother that I could – dug the night crawlers, baited the hook, landed the perch or pickerel, knocked them out, threaded them on the line, even gutted them – and of course, ate them. I had a direct relationship with fish as animal to food. Even if I now bought my fish at a market, I could still recall the experience of fishing. Maybe I didn't catch and kill *this* fish, I'd think, but I had, and I could again. This made me feel, well, somehow honest, authentic, even though I was technically relying on someone else to do the dirty work on an ongoing basis. I'd never even witnessed the killing of a chicken, never mind killed one myself – and the same for cows, lambs and pigs. Something inside me told me, loudly and clearly, that until I did, I shouldn't eat them.

Now I knew that my "food principles" – to eat lower on the food chain in order to maximize the protein available for all, and eat what I myself would be willing to hunt, kill and prepare – I knew these principles were full of loopholes, inconsistencies and gaps. Nonetheless, they served as a modest entry point into the vast maze of the modern food industry. They easily kept me away from fast food joints. I found most of what I wanted in a grocery store by traveling its perimeter – dairy, vegetables, fish, a few staples. I might even attribute my relatively good health to this way of eating. But considering these principles more recently, I've found them to be too minimal. And I've had a yearning to see them more directly connected to my religious, or spiritual, life.

In exploring these questions, I have enjoyed immensely Barbara Kingsolver's book, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, a memoir of her family's efforts to "eat local" for a year, both what they produced themselves on their Virginia farm, and also what they bought from local producers. The book is a thoughtful reflection on this country's critical need for a "positive food culture" – one that honors local traditions and conditions; is healthy and offers justice to people, plants, animals and the planet as a whole; and minimizes the use of non-renewable resources. Kingsolver names this a **spiritual** task as she writes:

Our culture is not unacquainted with the idea of food as a spiritually loaded commodity. We're just particular about what spiritual arguments we'll accept as valid for declining certain foods. Acceptable: it's prohibited by a holy text. Set down a platter of country ham in front of a rabbi, an imam, and a Buddhist monk, and you may have just conjured three different visions of damnation. [But] generally unacceptable [arguments]: environmental destruction, energy waste, the poisoning of workers. Is it such a stretch ... to make moral choices about food based on the global consequences of its production and transport? [Unfortunately], the conspicuous consumption of limited resources has yet to be accepted widely as a spiritual error, or even bad manners.

For me, this book by Kingsolver (and her co-authors, her husband Steven and daughter Camille), as well as Frances Moore Lappé's *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet*, and Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* are helping me explore more deeply my two "food principles," and also to understand the spiritual aspects of food beyond that question "what can't *you* eat?"

It has me looking to our Unitarian Universalist principles for guidance, but realizing that they contain starting points, not answers. Here are just a few questions that seem, to me, to call us to find a spiritual basis for the choices of the food we eat:

How do I express my gratitude for the elements of sun, earth, water and air that conspire to feed me?

How much do I really know about the welfare of the farmers, field workers, packers, shippers, truckers and supermarket workers who are responsible for the food that arrives, season after season, nearly on my doorstep?

How is it that food is so plentiful – and becoming moreso – the world over, and yet there are those that go hungry, in my own town, across this country, the world over?

What are the benefits – and what are the costs – of looking at my dinner plate and seeing there the products of the world, sometimes from thousands of miles away from where I sit?

I wish we had time to really dig into all these questions, but this is a vast topic, and our time together short. So let me suggest a few ways that each of us might approach the subject of what I grandly call "the spirituality of eating," or perhaps, more modestly, "ethical food."

The first step is mindfulness. It starts with thanksgiving for what we have, for the bounty before us. This might be a moment of grace before a meal. But mindfulness could also be a moment of meditation on a question – such as, where does this food come from? How was it produced? Who helped it to get to my table? Steven Hopp tells us that each food item in a typical U.S. meal has traveled an average of 1,500 miles. *Each food item in a typical U.S. meal has traveled an average of 1,500 miles.* Talk about food for thought! It might take a world almanac, the world wide web, and a few science textbooks to really work out the answers to our meditation questions ... but, as a spiritual practice, the point is to not take this food before us for granted. It is the product of ancient and wondrous processes, of strangers and neighbors. And without it, we perish – quickly.

The second step is to take the mindfulness about what we have, and ask some tough questions generated by our principles. For me, the most important UU principles for this task are “justice, equity and compassion in human relations,” and “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Regarding food, the four questions I would ask are:

Are the fruits and vegetables being grown sustainably? That is, will the air, water, and soil where they are raised be healthy enough for our children and grandchildren to eat well, perhaps even better than we do?

Are the farms, processing plants, packing operations and transportation companies that brought the food to us worker-friendly? If we “peeked behind the curtain,” would we find workers being justly treated and paid well?

Are the operations related to getting the food to our tables fuel-efficient? In this country, agriculture consumes 400 gallons of oil per year per citizen, an enormous drain on what we know is a non-renewable resource.

Finally, is the food on our tables cruelty-free? If we do choose to eat meat, has the animal had a quality of life that it deserves as a living, breathing sentient being? Has it been treated with respect both in its living and its dying?

I don’t know about you, but if I asked myself these questions about each and every one of the foods at my meals, I could not offer very satisfying answers.

It’s easy to get overwhelmed by how far away we are from an ideal relationship with our food. But that’s another reason that I’ve so enjoyed my study of this subject. There are a lot of people advocating for, working at, and accomplishing a new direction. Call it a mission, a movement, a migration – call it what you will. A growing number of people are calling for ways to eat more healthily, sensibly, and locally - and for people everywhere to reconnect with where their food comes from, how it gets to their tables, and the miracles that involves.

Even so, it’s logical to ask – given the nature of agribusiness, can any such movement make a difference? As a partial answer, consider this – if every U.S. citizen ate just one meal a week (**any** meal) composed of locally and organically raised meats and produce, we would reduce our country’s oil consumption by over 1.1 million barrels of oil **every week**.

Small changes make a difference.

In my reading, I've learned about land reform in Brazil led by small-scale farmers tilling the soil on farms they never thought they would actually own; an abandoned school playground in California remade into the school's own "kitchen garden," inner-city students as both the farmers and the cooks; and farmers in Virginia raising organic mushrooms and small livestock on land that formerly grew only tobacco.

And this story, so close to where I live, appeared in the newspaper, *Newsday*:

Samantha walks along a row of collard seedlings that promise new life. The late-summer sun glints on the razor wire curling atop the high chain-link fence. Samantha smiles as she comes to the watermelon patch at the end of the row.

"I look at the watermelons and think, 'I did this,'" she says. "The ground was hard like a road. But I turned the soil, I added manure. I had a migraine, and my back hurt for a week. But look what happened."

Hope and watermelons grow together in the garden at the Suffolk County Correctional Facility in Riverhead where Samantha and nine other inmates are finishing a ... course called "The Kitchen Garden." Samantha is 26, a single mother ... with a 10-year-old daughter. She's been in jail for the last four months, awaiting trial on a conspiracy charge involving a drug bust ... "Sure, I look up and I see the razor wire," she says. "But I also see birds and blue skies. When I was home, I didn't notice nature. I do now."

The article goes on to describe the graduation ceremony for the women who have completed their course. Samantha stands at the podium.

"I've never spoken in public," she says. "But I want to tell you that I learned something through weeding. The weeds run really deep, but the roots of the fruits and vegetables can get pulled out so easy."

"That's the way it is out in the world. Negativity runs deep. The good things need to be tended daily. The weeds will take over if you let them. You can't let them - or there goes your garden of life. I learned this here, in this garden."

When it comes to food, I'm with Samantha – negativity runs deep. The good things need to be tended daily. What better way to do just that, than for your food and your spirit to be in harmony?

[References: Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (HarperCollins, 2007); Irene Virag, "Gardening Helps Inmates at Suffolk County Jail," *Newsday*, Sunday, September 16, 2007.]