

Harvest Exchange Ritual Service
All-Ages Sunday, August 15, 2010
Roger Jones, Family Minister
UU Society of Sacramento
Hymns: #349, #201, #21 (in *Singing the Living Tradition*)

Reading and supplemental material:

Unison Grace
by Jan Evans-Tiller

Bless our food,
Bless our friends,
Come, Spirit, be with us.
May our hearts fill with peace,
Let your presence surround us.
Spirit of Love, may you bloom and
grow.
Bloom and grow forever.
Bless our food,
Bless our friends,
Bless our lives forever.

Two USS Family Graces

#1
We are grateful for all our gifts
We are safe, calm, and patient
We trust in the process of life
Peace and harmony fill us and
surround us
All is well. Amen.

#2
Earth who gives to us this food,
Sun who makes it ripe and good,
Dear Sun above and Earth below,
Our loving thanks to you we show.
Blessings on our meal, our friends,
our family
and on us, and may peace be on
Earth.
Blessed be.

Sermon

{brackets show parts left out of the spoken version of
the sermon—as kids were present}

For human beings, food is more than a simple matter of survival. The act of eating is stuffed with complexity greater than that of any gourmet recipe book. It's a matter of identity, geography, culture, social class, and economic relationships. Frances Moore Lappe writes: "Food is our most primal need and our common bond to the earth and to each other."ⁱ

Eating is a matter of spiritual significance too. It plays an important role in many religions, with a variety of rules and ritual observances about food and beverages. In many Jewish homes, for example, families gather at the dinner table on a Friday night for a meal to honor the start of the Sabbath, with the lighting of candles and chanting of prayers. The highlight of the Jewish Passover week is the Seder, a ritual meal.

In the Muslim world, the holy month of Ramadan began on Wednesday last week. Ramadan is a fast, a whole month of self-discipline, which includes not eating during daylight hours. The fast is broken with a meal after sunset, called *iftar*. The White House held an *iftar* the other night to honor guests from the Muslim community. When the month of Ramadan concludes, there's an enormous feast to break the fast for the final time. It's called the *Eid al-fitr*.

Roman Catholicism has a tradition of fasting and not eating meat on Friday in the Lenten Season. The yearly calendar is filled with feast days named after saints and holidays. In terms of rules, both Islam and Judaism prohibit eating pork. Hinduism shuns beef. Many Seventh Day Adventists and Buddhists are vegetarians. Mormons avoid alcohol and caffeine.

In Unitarian Universalism, however, the only regular food rituals I

can think of that bind us together are 1) coffee hour after church and 2) potluck suppers. Yet many Unitarian Universalists do have mealtime rituals at home: a moment of silence or words of grace, closing the eyes or looking into one another's eyes, holding hands with guests, or a simple bow to the food on the plate. Furthermore, many UUs make intentional choices about the food we order, serve, and eat. Some are vegetarian, some are vegan, some eat locally-grown food in season, and some eat only certified organic food. To be sure, many of us do eat poultry, meat or fish. Some UUs even eat *gold fish!* Of course, I'm talking about the little crackers we have as snacks in Religious Education. Some of us buy Fair Trade chocolate, and after church we serve Fair Trade coffee here.

Several years ago in a previous congregation I invited a church member to share the pulpit with me and give a vegetarian's testimony. In her part of the sermon she spoke about her ethical decision her to stop eating meat. She spoke of care for animals and an abhorrence of the practice of factory farming. In particular, she talked about Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations. {A CAFO is basically a crowded factory environment in which the animals have can't move around and from which they don't go out or see the light of day.} For miles around, a factory fouls the air and pollutes the water and ground, she told us. Methane gas coming from corn-fed cows adds to global warming. She reported on the gallons of petroleum it takes for every pound of meat we consume.

She didn't urge us to stop eating meat. But she did recommend that reducing one's consumption of meat by just one or two meals a week could save

a lot of fossil fuel and avoid pollution. For my half of the sermon, I spoke about eating mindfully: being aware of your experience of what you are eating, whatever it is: what it smells, tastes and feels like. I reflected on the inter-connections of consumers, farmers, field workers, truckers, restaurant owners, cooks and grocery employees. We are all dependent on one another. We human beings are also inter-dependent with animals, plants, water, soil, sun and climate. Since all our choices about food have an impact, the starting place is to practice mindfulness. But if we jump ahead with questions about what I *should* be doing, or what *you* should or should not choose, we're more likely to generate resentment than reflection.

Her sermon and mine balanced each other, I thought. And our all-ages crowd sat through it with little wiggling, whining or snoring. That night, however, I got an angry email. A mother and her child had visited for the first time that morning. She felt the vegetarian's remarks were too scary for kids to hear. Also, she was a physician, she said, and we should not encourage kids to not eat meat, for it has important proteins and other nutrients for them. Well, leaving that point aside, I don't recall anything too graphic about the sermon. It struck me that not only had this person objected to the vegetarian's testimony, but perhaps also had neglected my words about mindfulness and reflection. {That is, apparently, she did not want kids hearing that what we call "meat" used to be an animal.}

In my reply to her I apologized. We did not intend to cause distress, I said, and would be more careful in the future. She thanked me, but never came back to church.

Yes, the topic of ethics and food is a mine field—or, if you prefer no military terms, it's a field of exploding turnips.

Our UU tradition promotes respect for the right to make choices as need and conscience determine. One person's Lucky Charms and Cheetos can be as comforting as another's soybean meatloaf or another's carpaccio. We don't have a common creed here, and we don't have commandments about cooking or eating. Yet our free-thinking faith does affirm our kinship to other human beings and the natural environment.

For this reason, in 2008 delegates from UU congregations to General Assembly selected this topic for study and action: [Ethical Eating and Environmental Justice](#). As the UUA Commission on Social Witness puts it: "This is an invitation for a congregation to take a topic of concern and confront it..., learn about it, comment on it, and take action.... A study and action issue is not a statement—it is a *question*."

Indeed, the topic raises many questions about major issues of our time: hunger and malnutrition, free trade and fair trade, human labor and exploitation, animal [welfare] and human responsibility, environmental [harm] and climate change, globalization and neo-colonialism. These issues are complicated and controversial. They do merit the time that a forum or study group can give to them. If you are interested in this topic, let us know.

In recent years, church members here have held a series of Climate Circles for support and reflection about sustainability, with food as just one issue. Thanks to our Green Sanctuary team's activities toward environmental stewardship and sustainability, we have

been recognized by the UUA as a Green Sanctuary congregation. And as you can see by this bounty (of vegetables, herbs and flowers) up here, people enjoy growing things and sharing them.

After the service today you can hear Yvonne's eyewitness account of the Gulf Oil Spill and her work on the cleanup in the Gulf. Next Sunday you can drop off your used batteries and fluorescent bulbs for proper disposal. Soon we'll have a showing of the documentary "Food, Inc." And our next potluck supper will be Saturday, September 18.

For those of us who don't have time for a study group, but wish to be more intentional about our eating choices, here are some points I find helpful. One is: eat lower on the food chain. What does this mean? Well, instead of eating an eagle, for example, eat a mongoose. Instead of a mongoose, eat a cobra. Instead of a cobra, eat a mouse. Instead of a mouse, eat nuts and whole grains. Lower on the food chain. It's easy.

Next, buy food from local sources. This means that less energy goes into transporting the food. We keep more of our money in the local economy. We are more likely to buy from people who raised the food, or at least buy from a business that knows the people who raised the food. When there is a recall of contaminated meat or other food, it's usually a product that comes from a large company or distribution network, and not a single source.

But there are so many temptations to make use of a globalized food economy. Just go into Trader Joe's and try to avoid all the snacks, beverages and frozen food items flown in from afar. Of course, bananas aren't locally grown, but I love them. If I go to the

Food Co-Op and buy organic ones from South American banana co-operatives, it's better for the farm workers as well as for me. A side benefit of no pesticides in bananas... is that a tarantula makes a nice pet. (They aren't really deadly.) Another way to consume locally is to grow food *yourself*. Many of you do--at home and here at church in our community garden. On weekdays I save on fossil fuels when I walk over there and steal some Swiss chard, kale, or a tomato from one of your garden beds.

More advice: patronize places that practice good stewardship. I love it that so many places in the Sacramento area serve local, seasonal or humanely-raised food. But we still don't have Galactic Pizza! It's a small restaurant in Minneapolis that I like. They use veggies and humanely-raised meat from Wisconsin and Minnesota, and cheese from cows not treated with growth hormones. They use recycled and biodegradable packaging and get power from renewable wind energy. Galactic's delivery vehicle is a small, one-seater electric-powered Gizmo. That's what they call them. Delivery workers drive the Gizmos wearing super-hero outfits—colorful tights and capes and helmets. They bring pizza to your door even in the winter. The Galactic slogan is “Planet-Saving Pizza.” Wherever we are, we can patronize the planet-saving businesses in our area.

California author Michael Pollan's book *In Defense of Food* tells about the effects of complex industrial practices on the things we eat. He recommends trying to buy foods from local sources and eating lots of whole grains, fruits and vegetables. While he's not against meat eating, he says we eat too much of it. Generations ago, meat was used not as a main dish, but as

flavoring or spice for other dishes, like beans, potatoes, pasta, greens. Just because factory farming has made it cheaper doesn't mean we have to eat all the meat we can afford to eat.

Pollan's advice comes down to seven short words. He says: “Eat food, not too much, mostly plants.”ⁱⁱ His rule is: “Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food.” (He doesn't mean a spice from another country, or a kind of fish or fruit that wasn't in your ancestor's market. Given the cultural diversity of our international supply, I'd say “Don't eat anything that nobody's great-grandmother would recognize as food.”) He says: “When you pick up ... something with 15 ingredients you can't pronounce, ask yourself ‘What are those things doing there?’” Here's another sign of whether it's real food: Will it eventually rot? If not, it's probably not food, in his eyes. [ASK:] Tell me, what edible things can you think of that don't rot? (There are exceptions, like honey.) As he puts it: “Just because something is edible does not make it food.”

Pollan says: don't eat too much. Of course, if you are going to overeat, eat something that's better for you. Carrots, better than candy. Big salad, better than a big hamburger. French fries... well, they're better than almost anything, but stick to a smaller portion. Pollan says: “Leave the table a little hungry.” I remember a lesson in *eating as meditation* at a silent Buddhist meditation retreat a few years ago. The teacher said: “Try to stop eating four bites before you're full.” This takes truly mindful eating. Pollan says, “In German culture they say, ‘Tie off the sack before it's full.’”

He warns, “Don't buy food where you buy your gasoline.” Not only

is gas station food not all that good for us, Pollan says 20% of food in the United States is eaten in the car. If we eat on the go, we're less likely to think about how much we eat. The same goes for eating in front of a television set, or a computer. I'm guilty of both habits, and it's true I'm a less mindful eater at those times.

It's best, he says, to eat around a table, with other people. That's harder to do as lives get busier, and as more Americans live alone, or live away from family and friends. Yet, it's worth trying to do a little better. *You* are worth it. "Enjoy meals with people you [care about]," Pollan says. The key to it all ... is to enjoy and to care.

That's his formula: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants." And enjoy it.

Food is more than a way to satisfy hunger. It's a bond we share with all of life, with all the earth. It's a way of drawing near to other people, of sharing, receiving, and giving. It's a way of enjoying people and the bounty of the earth. Let's take eating seriously *and* let's make it fun. And let's be thankful. Now and always, let us give thanks for our food, and for all the gifts of life. So may it be. Blessed be. Amen

ⁱ Frances Moore Lappe, *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet*. New York: Tarcher, 2002.

ⁱⁱ "7 Rules for Eating: Choose Food Over Food-Like Substances, Food Writer Michael Pollan Tells CDC," by Daniel J. DeNoon. WebMD Health News, March 23, 2009. <http://www.webmd.com/food-recipes/news/20090323/7-rules-for-eating>