

Consumption
A sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
On April 10, 2011
By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia

Food – is a very personal subject. We depend upon food for survival, for health and well-being. But we also enjoy flavors. Food has profound sentimental resonances for each of us. We use food for comfort, celebration, and ritual purposes. Food is as personal as sex – and it's also truly religious in nature. Religion has to do with matters of ultimate meaning – those things – like life, death, love, morality, commitment, meaning itself – that are at the heart of life. Food touches all of those things, and, of course, sustains us to be able to reflect upon those and all other things.

Most of us have by now done some reading about food – some of you may have come here to see the movie Food, Inc. when movies with meaning showed the film here – you may be fans of the slow food movement that champions taking time to prepare and eat food and to slow down our over paced lives. I know I'm in the presence of people with experience and knowledge on this topic. Yet, it's my task, often, to simply remind us, myself included, of what we know on one level or another already – and then invite us to enter that knowing more deeply.

So it might be with trepidation that I'd approach this charged subject from the pulpit. And yet, I'm pressed by a few forces. One is the simple reality that we have a current study action issue on the table, so to speak for the General Assembly – which means that, as an association of congregations we are seriously exploring whether we want to learn about and dig into food together. The proposed Study Action issue statement begins like this:

Food is essential for our survival and an important element in family and cultural life. Religions have devised food rules and rituals to promote group solidarity, to ensure human health, to hallow sentient life, and to provide food for the stranger and the poor. Religions have called for fasting as a spiritual discipline and prayers of petition and thanksgiving to God or gods for provision of food. In keeping with these religious traditions, we, Unitarian Universalists, are called to address our relationship with food. All of our seven principles call for recognition of and respect for the other—other people and other organisms. Ethical eating is the application of that perspective to food. What and how we eat has broad implications for our planet and our human society.

This is true – we can't eat as though our consumption has no consequence or as though the act of eating is a merely mechanical process.

Our Religious Education Program is taking time to explore ethical eating in their classes and I hoped that, in the sanctuary, we might share that exploration to some extent.

Finally, food has been a challenge to me for a long time. Every time I take a serious look at food, it gets all, as they say, up in my grill – which means it demands my attention, gets in my way – it actually has nothing to do with grilling.

I want us to explore together, so I want to reassure you of a few things up front – I'm not going to preach that there's only one right way to eat. I'm not going to advocate that as I'm a vegetarian, everyone should be a vegetarian. This is a choice I made for myself – but I suspect us of having omnivorous constitutions – though what that means in a modern world is an interesting question to ask. I often think that what's problematic about meat is largely that we've lost touch with the animals we eat. There's dignity in killing the animal that is going to sustain you or at least knowing that the animal died in a way that was respectful. I haven't got the nerve for it, yet often, I think that hunters have the best idea about where to eat on the food chain – because they eat grazing animals, killed one at a time. Finally, I am not going to advocate that all of us should have the same diet. I just don't believe that

we're all physically enough the same that we ought to eat the same way – just look at food allergies – wheat, dairy, legume allergies – we thrive on different foods. It ought to be possible for us to eat foods that match our needs. But even these reassurances don't mean that food is an easy topic.

I chose the passage from Anna Lappé's book – *Diet for a Hot Planet* because I'm keenly aware that we are of nature – it's not a place we go on weekends or hiking trips – it's our bodies, minds, our food, love, our health and our home. When we eat mindfully, as we did earlier, we lift up and make sacred our nature as nature. Our relationship with food is a deep communion that we share with one another and with all living things.

So much of the way in which we often learn eating, ruptures what ought to be deep relationships – with our Earth, with other people, with our bodies, and with the great chain of life that brings food to us. The apple meditation was intended to speak of those relationships – and, perhaps, to redraw connections that have been broken.

We do eat for survival – our sense of hunger alerts us to our need for food. I was talking with a friend the other day and we discovered that we both get going during the day, forget to eat, and then get home at some point and find that we're so ravenous that we can't wait another moment to eat. So we grab whatever's close by (for me it's often bunches of Triscuits) and scarf it down. It's not thought full. I barely taste the food. By the time the edge of my hunger drops off, the opportunity has passed to fill myself with better calories and nutrients. Yet I know, unless I am having one of those rare times when my blood sugar drops and I am getting weak in the legs – I'm just simply hungry – not actually starving. If I have or take the time to prepare a good meal I wouldn't perish from hunger and I'd have a healthier outcome. Every time I get hungry I become a primitive creature – whose life or death hinges on the very food I'm ingesting. That also means that what I really, really crave are the foods that pack the biggest wallop for survival – fat, sugar, and high protein. They provide the fastest way to fortify our bodies for the hardscrabble struggle to keep life and limb together. But – there's the rub – we aren't – at least most of us here – living a hard scrabble life. We're riding the train into the city, driving to evening meetings, doing housework, sitting at a desk. So we pack in survival calories and find that we have become rather thicker around the middle than intended – not out of gluttony – but out of the feeling that we're eating to survive. And everywhere there are foods worthy of survival in the depth of a hard winter lived in cave.

We gravitate toward food through our brains as well as our instincts. In *Diet for a Hot Planet* Anna Lappé describes an experiment conducted by neuroscientist Read Montague in 2003 in which he used an MRI to track the neural activity of people taking the Pepsi challenge. While the drinks were disguised half reported that they preferred the Pepsi. Then Montague told them which samples were Coke and three fourths said that they liked that better. And their brain activity changed at that point so that their brains also seemed to prefer the Coke. It wasn't the flavor that changed – only the brand name. The branding and advertising of Coke made it taste better even to people who thought they preferred Pepsi.

Although I lived in Atlanta for 12 years, I don't really care about Pepsi or Coke – but I do care that a company can make us want and prefer something in such a way that we can't even truly taste it. This makes us extremely vulnerable to messages that tell us that certain foods will make us popular, make eating fun, taste like a party in our mouths. What has concerned me for many years is that people often have little taste for simple and real foods – like the taste of a tomato grown in rich soil -- eaten fresh from the vine. You know what I mean – there are few pleasures greater than the true, fresh taste of a simple food. If you take time to savor it – a tomato can be a party in your mouth – or a good stalk of celery, or a snow pea.

I don't know how many of you ever watch Jamie Oliver – the British nutritionist who came to the US last year to get the city of Huntington, West Virginia to try to eat healthier foods. Anyway he went to public school and discovered that small children couldn't identify potatoes unless they were presented in the

form of French fries, couldn't identify tomatoes but knew catsup, and they were hopeless when it came to more arcane vegetables like cauliflower, beets, and eggplant. Even taking for granted that children often confuse foods – it was a dismal example of how far from real food we are kept.

When I watched the movie *Food, Inc.*, it impressed me when they went to the grocery store and looked at the packaging we're drawn to – labels that say farm fresh, natural, or show homey little pictures of cows and sun rises. They make us feel as though we know where our food is coming from – when, in reality, the food is coming from huge feedlots and factories. There's a vast economic machine that spits out our food. The sweet pastoral scenes we long for are being devoured by that machine. And the sources of our food are truly unappetizing.

In the process of reading Lappé's book, I learned about reality on the ground – about Phillip Heiberg whose corporation, Jarch, has purchased thousands of acres in Sudan because, he said "farm land and food will be the strategic resources that oil fields are now." I learned about Morgan Stanley's 98,000 acres in Ukraine and Landkom of Britain's 2.5 million acres. The list goes on and on. And from day to day the radio tells me that the price of food is going up...

We long for that farm scene not because we want to live there – or because we'd be happier getting back to the land – but because it reminds us of a context in which we could trust what we ate and in which we had a measure of control over what we ate. But the fact is that while we've been losing control over what we want to eat, where it's harvested, and over who can produce it so that fewer and fewer people are creating more and more of our food – we've also been losing control over the very source of food – the seeds. I became aware of this when I was in Indiana. This was also highlighted in the film *Food, Inc.* Farmers are no longer free to grow the seeds they want or even to produce their own seeds – but they have to purchase seeds year after year from a very companies – and really mostly Monsanto – who does not control the seeds for nutrition or quality or how they contribute to the balance and health of the land – but how fast and big they will grow, and that Monsanto will make money on every crop they can own and once they own the crop it is, literally, a crime to grow your own seeds.

If we're mindful of our food – if we learn about it – then there are surprising realities. And they remind me of a time, 30 years ago, that a friend gave me, for Christmas, a copy of Frances Moore Lappé's book – *Diet for a Small Planet*. I took the book on the Greyhound bus from Pittsburgh to Brockport, New York, where my father lived and where I was going to spend the holidays feasting on london broil, spare ribs, and such for two weeks. As the bus rolled on, I read this passage "For every 16 pounds of grain and soy fed to beef cattle in the United States we only get 1 pound back in meat on our plates. ... in converting grain to meat[...]; hogs consume 6, turkeys 4, and chickens 3 pounds of grain and soy to produce 1 pound of meat. Milk production is even more efficient, with less than 1 pound of grain fed for every pint of milk produced." I remember I gasped out loud. All that grain eaten by animals so that we can eat them. Then I thought of all the people who could eat the grain that the animals were eating. That was back before we were feeding them oceans of corn. Of course I wasn't, at the time, thinking about grazing beef – which require no grain. All I knew was that something wasn't working and there was a shortage of food in the world. By the time I got off the bus in Brockport – I was a vegetarian. It wasn't their big brown eyes, it wasn't my health, it was a matter of economic and environmental justice – and it convinced me in a way that no other argument had. I suspect that Frances is proud of her daughter Anna. Now Anna is computing the cost of high density production beef farming in fossil fuel and environmental impact.

So, finally, if we look at our environment -- the means by which we create food has tremendous impact. If we imagine that the scene on the butter box is real or the rows of sunlit veggies are really growing in the valley of a Jolly Green Giant we're not taking into account all the energy it takes just to produce our meat and veggies. From the transport of seeds, to the transport of farmers, to the pesticides developed and transported, to the harvested gathered by machines, or the animals fed on grain, then slaughtered, dressed, packaged, and transported to our grocery stores – it turns out that our forks alone are in fact

as responsible as our cars for our impact in the world – that there's as much climate change wrought in our kitchens than on the highway at rush hour. I'm not suggesting that we should drive or fly feeling that we are having no impact – there is a true impact on our earth from all our driving and our flying.

It isn't an exact science because the energy required to produce crops is hidden all over – in grocery coolers, refrigerated trucks, fertilizer and pesticide plants and transport, parking lots, airports. Anna Lappé "livestock alone account for 18 percent of the global warming effect and that perhaps close to one third of global climate change is annually created by massive global agriculture." But in a certain real sense our food is consuming us far more than we are consuming it.

While this all sounds so awfully dire, it is some of the most hopeful news I have had in years. The full title of Lappé's book is Diet for A Hot Planet: the Climate Crisis at the End of your Fork and What You Can Do About It. And what the book says is that a good hunk of the ability to alleviate climate change is sitting on our plates. And it's not just that, if we eat less meat, we can cut back on more fossil fuel use than if we bought more fuel efficient cars or gave up driving twice a week. It's that every bite we take is a vote we are casting for the sort of future that we want. Every time we lift our forks, we are faced with the choice of family farms or Monsanto, strangers or people whose hands and lands we might know, burning five or eight calories to produce one calorie of food or using our calories to build connections with our food, our neighbors, our bodies, and our world. Every time we lift our forks, we are voting – for a huge, cruel, and impersonal food production system or for our ability to influence healthier food production, reduction of fuel consumption to have, again, control over what lands on our plates. Every time we lift our forks, we are either contributing to climate change or helping to prevent it's worsening.

Every time we eat, we have more power than you can imagine. It does not mean that you have to be wealthy and buy only the finest organic meats money can buy – there is a world of possibility and choice – of relationship building and cooperation – of self-determination and constructing the beloved community right there on our plates.

Every time we eat, we have an opportunity to make each bite an affirmation of freedom and each bite we take can be a prayer.

Creative Spirit of the Universe enter our bodies with every bite of food we take. May we remember the bond we have with every plant that grows and gives us life, with the trees that bring us oxygen, with the soil that holds ancient bodies close and offers nutrients that keep us healthy.

May we feel the grace of the Gazelle in our bodies as our energy is replenished in the sacred act of eating. May we feel the strength of elephants as we are nourished. May we know the wisdom of owls as our brains are refreshed.

In every bite may we taste the cycle of life, the passion of being and growing, of loving and thriving, of nesting and birthing, of losing and longing, of every life that is knit together to make this world whole.

In every bite may we taste the love and care of those who brought the food to us – and may we return that love by eating with pleasure and purpose – so that every meal may be a hymn of creation and every bite – an amen.