

Ethical Eating
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Ethical eating turns out to be a very large and complicated topic. Eating, of course, is central to our daily life, and is required for our very survival. Furthermore, how, what, and how much we eat affects – and is affected by – many other aspects of our lives. It is because of all of those interactions and intertwining effects that eating is very much an ethical issue.

A few weeks ago we had a lay-led service on the spirituality of food. That focused largely on our personal experiences of growing, preparing, and eating food. Our topic today of “ethical eating” is not so much a different topic, but rather an extension of that of the spirituality of food and eating. We get a hint of that in Thich Nhat Hanh’s meditation on childhood cookies, when he says “Eating mindfully is a most important practice of meditation.”

Eating mindfully means more than simply being aware of our own experience, our own bodily sensations. It also means being mindful of the origins of our food as living beings, of the labor that has gone into its preparation, of those with whom we share our food, of those who may lack adequate nutritious food, and so on. Once we realize that eating is about much more than simply ourselves and our individual needs and experience, the ethical implications begin to come into focus.

Every other year at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, delegates select an issue for four years of congregational study and action. Some of those issues in recent years have been peace-making, global warming, civil liberties, and interfaith cooperation. This past summer, the issue selected was “Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice.” A Resource Guide recently published by the UUA Commission on Social Witness lists a number of possible study topics under the “Ethical Eating” umbrella. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it is a start in thinking about a complex issue. For instance:

- There are different religious teachings concerning the production, distribution, and use of food. Why is food so important in religion?
- There are environmental concerns and concerns about animal rights and human rights. What moral guidelines, if any, should govern food production?
- Some people have too much food and some have too little. How should congregations address issues like poverty and hunger, nutrition education, and health promotion?
- What guidelines, if any, govern the purchase and use of food and beverages in your congregation? Do you pause for a blessing when you serve food?

And because this is a Study *and* Action issue, the guide also lists some possible actions:

- Support sustainable agriculture and farmers’ markets. Encourage organic community gardening.

- Volunteer in support of community food pantries, Meals on Wheels programs, and similar projects that address the problem of hunger.
- Become an advocate for social and economic justice. Support labor unions, farmers' cooperatives, "fair trade" associations, and other organizations that help the farmers and other workers who produce and distribute food in the global market.

I know that many of us are already doing several of those things, as well as others not mentioned. Some of us are doing more than others. Some have thought more about these issues than others. The purpose of having this as our study/action issue for four years is to encourage our exploration and growth, both as individuals and as a congregation.

Our journeys will differ: we begin in different places, proceed along different paths at different rates, and may arrive at different ends. But that's okay. Such a journey is inherently difficult because the factors that influence our relationship with food – culture, family, values, religion, resources, health – are personal and complicated. And so, as we proceed, I ask that we approach one another with open hearts and generous spirits, and remember the words that greeted us on our way into the building this morning: "You need not think alike to love alike."

Before I go on I want to engage in a little bit of confession. First, I have read and thought quite a bit about issues surrounding ethical eating, but I still have much to learn. Things are not always as clear-cut and obvious as they seem, and so I know I have to be prepared to change my mind when that is warranted. Furthermore, there are many things that I know I could do to be a more responsible, ethical consumer, and yet I don't do them. That's primarily out of laziness; it's just too darn hard to be perfect. But I share the sentiments of Syd Baumel, expressed in our reading this morning, that it's "not about absolutes. It's about doing the best you're willing and able to do – and nurturing a will to keep doing better." I hope that we can all – without engaging in too many guilt trips – encourage each other to do the best we can and to keep on doing better.

In that spirit, I'd like to take this opportunity to ramble on a little bit about some of the many aspects of this issue of ethical eating. I don't intend this to be a comprehensive treatment of the topic. In fact, I intend to do another service this coming spring, that I hope will grow out of conversations and follow-up that emerge from some of the issues raised here this morning. That conversation can begin immediately following these remarks of mine, as we will have an opportunity for Congregational Response. So gather your thoughts as you listen, so that you can share them with us.

I will also point out that the Resource Guide from which I've been quoting has myriad suggestions of resources to tap, as well as possibilities for congregational study and action. If anyone is particularly interested in this topic and would like to be part of an Ethical Eating Task Force or Study Group to help keep the conversation going over the coming months, please let me know.

Some folks have already shared some of their interest with me. Dorothy Blair, whose area of expertise is nutrition education, shared with me a draft of a paper on sustainable food systems from that vantage point. The paper enumerates six goals toward attaining a sustainable food system. They are:

1. Eat lower on the food chain (which would have positive impact on health, land use, water quality, and soil conservation)
2. Eat and act to promote good farming/fishing practices (that is, reward those who do it right)
3. Reduce food processing, packaging energy (by eating foods as close to their original fresh state as possible)
4. Reduce transportation energy (by eating locally produced meats, milk, grains, fruits, and vegetables whenever possible)
5. Reduce food waste (by buying sparingly and using leftovers)
6. Eat for social justice (by supporting fair trade initiatives that promote fair prices and sustainable production practices)

Jean Wiant, our Director of Lifespan Religious Education, shared something with me as well. It was a sermon she delivered some years ago, which dealt with one line of argument regarding vegetarianism. There are several strong arguments for removing, or at least reducing the meat in our diets. As I just mentioned in the previous list, there are the matters of our own health, as well as land-use, water quality and soil conservation. Then there are the moral arguments about killing other living beings.

I don't embrace that moral argument as an absolute. I believe that we have evolved as omnivores, and that we are part of the same ecological system in which fish eat insects, bears eat fish, wolves eat rabbits, and so on. But I do believe that we have an obligation to be mindful of the sources of our food, to recognize their rightful place in the interdependent web of life, their existence as living, breathing, feeling creatures.

Jean's talk included graphic depictions of the suffering and abuses inflicted on many of our food animals. And she posed some difficult questions:

Can we as Unitarian Universalists expand and deepen our sensibilities of compassion, kindness, service and love to include our fellow creatures of the earth? Do love and compassion have boundaries? Can we really say we respect the interdependent web when we allow and support the atrocities that exist in the meat, dairy, fur, and entertainment industries?

Even if we choose to include meat in our diet, we can seek ways of mitigating the abuse and suffering inflicted on the animals we eat. But that, too, comes at a cost. As one example, the current issue of the *UU World* magazine talks about "Ethical issues at the Thanksgiving dinner table." It points out that organic, free-range turkey is available, but generally costs more than twice as much as its factory-farmed counterpart.

I'm not yet ready to give up meat. Perhaps some day I'll get there, but I'm not there yet. But I can try to take a number of steps to make my meat-eating more responsible. I can be aware of where my food is coming from, and select more ethically responsible sources (even if they cost a bit more). I can recognize that fellow creatures have died so that I might eat, and feel gratitude for their gift of life. And I can move to at least reduce the amount of meat that I eat by, for instance, going meatless at least one or two days a week. Finally, I can keep near the forefront of my mind the words of Ralph

Waldo Emerson, who wrote “You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity.”

As I mentioned at the top, eating in general, and ethical eating in particular, is a complex issue, interacting with several aspects of life. I’ve spoken at some length about the area of animal rights and human responsibilities. I’ve at least mentioned the areas of health, and environmental degradation. The way we eat also intersects with issues of trade, labor, neo-colonialism, and environmental justice. I encourage you to look into all of these in coming months, with the help of the Resource Guide that I have available.

Before I close, I’d like to touch on one more area directly related to how we eat: hunger and malnutrition. We waste about 3,044 pounds of food per second in the United States. Each year 27% of US food produced for human consumption is lost at the retail, consumer and food service levels. Globally, 4.3 pounds of food are produced daily for every woman, man, and child on earth – enough to make all of us fat. Yet every year, six million children across the globe die as a result of hunger and malnutrition – one child dying of starvation or malnutrition every five seconds. Hunger and malnutrition are responsible for more deaths in the world than AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the human right to food, to secure personal health and well-being. The United Nations member states have agreed to reach eight international “Millennium Goals” by the year 2015, the first of which calls for major reductions in poverty and hunger. It has been said that the one major obstacle to eradication of hunger is political will. May we each exercise our personal will and our collective political will to make a difference.

We’ve moved from the spirituality of eating to the ethics of eating. And now, I’d like to bring it back full circle, by closing with the following reflection by Marc David, from his book *Nourishing Wisdom*:

As an eater, I acknowledge the domain of the sacred. I recognize that the act of eating may be ritualized and inspired. It may be given symbolic meanings that are religious or spiritual in nature. It may even be joyous.

I further agree that eating is an activity that joins me with all humanity. I recognize that to be an eater is to be accountable for the care of the earth and its resources. I acknowledge that despite our differences, we are all ultimately nourished by the same source. As such, I agree to share.

I recognize that at its deepest level eating is an affirmation of life. Each time I eat I agree somewhere inside to continue life on earth. I acknowledge that this choice to eat is a fundamental act of love and nourishment, a true celebration of my existence. As a human being on earth, I agree to be an eater. I choose life again and again and again . . .

May it be so.