

Eight Wild Boars for Breakfast: The Sin of Gluttony
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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Centre County,
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I took the title for today's sermon from a line in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, then discovered that Shakespeare likely got it from Plutarch. In Shakespeare's version the meal was breakfast, not supper, and eight wild boars had been roasted for a dozen eaters, not to accommodate an unpredictable mealtime.

Jim Harrison described a lunch consisting of 37 courses and 13 wines in *The New Yorker's* food edition about a year ago. The tab for lunch for a dozen was about the cost of a new Volvo station wagon. The dining companions traveled from Montana and other places in America and Europe to Burgundy for lunch. But as Harrison said, none of them wanted a Volvo, they just wanted lunch. And, after all, they saved money on dinner by skipping it after the 11-hour lunch.

Greg Brenneman wouldn't likely show up at such a meal. He's a fitness buff, who works out every morning before work, trains and competes in triathlons, and avoids coffee. Lunch for Greg is usually a salad. He's also the CEO of Burger King with a strategy to increase the bottom line by marketing really big fast-food meals, like the Enormous Omelet Sandwich (that's its name on the Burger King breakfast menu). It's 740 calories with two omelets, two cheese slices, three strips of bacon, and a sausage patty on an oversize sandwich roll. 55% of the calories are from fat, more than a third of it saturated fat. In fact, there is more fat in the sandwich than either carbohydrates or protein along with a whopping 330 mg of cholesterol. You'll get almost 2000 mg of sodium in your Enormous Omelet Sandwich — equivalent to a full teaspoon of salt, and approaching your recommended allowance for the day.

Brenneman's strategy is to market to the 18% of the population that accounts for half of Burger King's business — hard-core fast foodies, primarily men between 18 and 34 who eat fast food several times a week.

Since introducing the Enormous Omelet Sandwich, Burger King's breakfast sales are up 20% while Brenneman is working out on the StairMaster in the company gym. But don't blame him — Burger King is just giving their customers what they want. And spending a lot on carefully crafted advertising to manufacture desire and shift your menu selection to a larger meal.

Morgan Spurlock's film, *Super Size Me*, follows his personal journey from a fit and healthy guy to an unhealthy, overweight, and depressed man by eating exclusively at McDonalds for a month. His medical team strongly recommended ending the experiment early when blood tests revealed results that surprised them, including indicators of

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serious liver dysfunction. His girlfriend reported a reduction in his sexual performance, and he struggled for months afterward to shed the extra pounds of body weight. That was after one month. But other results show that even a single high-fat meal can have a measurable negative impact on the health of your arteries.

If you want to take it with you, the Duluth Trading Company offers Tiny's Lunch Box, a carrier that holds a "linebacker size breakfast, lunch, and dinner" plus not one, but two 12-packs of sodas. It's marketed to construction workers, with a side note that it could hold all the food and drink for a pretty decent tailgate party. Tiny's Lunch Box is the maximum size most airlines will allow as carry-on luggage. It comes with four reusable ice packs.

This week Tasty Baking Company in Philadelphia announced a new line of packaged desserts, dubbed Doublicious. They are bigger, have more icing, and more calories and fat than the original cakes and they are responsive to focus groups of Tastykake eaters who said, "We want more." The new fatter cakes come in a family pack that is priced at 50 cents more than the originals. Doublicious Butterscotch Krimpets have twice the icing and 90 more calories than the original. They were expected to be in your favorite grocery store this week.

Gluttony is one of the seven deadly sins that Pope Gregory listed in the 6th Century. Like much of Christian doctrine, the seven deadly sins don't appear in scripture, but were created by church leaders and became part of the orthodoxy centuries after Jesus' death. Since the list was created by a Pope, presumably it could be changed, and French gourmands unsuccessfully petitioned the last Pope to remove gluttony from the list. It's still officially a major sin.

Gluttony usually refers to the over-consumption of food or drink. The most specific and narrowest definition of gluttony refers to the consumption of food simply for pleasure, but I think that is much too restrictive. These bodies we inhabit, after all, are designed for pleasure, and we have claimed that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right. I'm not preaching against pleasure or its pursuit today.

But I am preaching against harming the most precious possession you have — your body. Gluttony to the point of harming your physical wellbeing is a serious — and unfortunately sometimes literally a deadly — sin.

Yes, sin does exist in the Unitarian Universalist context, much as we would like to dismiss it and avoid any references that come so close to home. Perhaps sin should have a bigger role in our teaching since we value actions in this life over considerations of conditions in the unknowable experience after death.

The inherent worth and dignity of every person that we assert; our call to justice, equity, and compassion in human relationships; and our recognition of the interdependence of all existence, along with our expressed purpose of creating the beloved community, all suggest that we should hold ourselves and each other accountable to high standards of behavior.

Our inevitable failures to always meet those standards are sins. They harm us and they hurt the fabric of community. They damage the planet. We should feel regret and

seek atonement for them. True, our theology doesn't provide punishment after death for them, but we do suffer in this lifetime and are in need of the salvation that comes from confession and commitment to restoration. Our faith in the ultimate embrace of a loving universe that arises from our universalist heritage and our trust in the perfectibility of humanity — in our own capacity for self-development and forgiveness — that arises from our humanist heritage give us hope.

I'm a process theist. I believe that God is the force of allurements that is always present within us, among us, and beyond us. In addition to being always present, the God I believe in is omniscient, but not omnipotent. If God were omnipotent, I wouldn't be able to explain why bad things happen in a way that left me with a God worthy of adoration.

We have free will. We choose our actions, and we can choose either good or evil. It's seldom that simple — most of the time the options we face involve both good and evil. The challenge is to choose the greater good with the least evil attached to it. I name the force that wants us to choose well — to choose the path that brings more love to the world — God. But if you don't want to name it, that's OK with me. I still believe you are being lured to choose good, even if you have time and again chosen evil.

Intentionally choosing a lesser good and greater evil is a sin because it violates our essential nature as loving and beloved beings and it violates our inherent worth and dignity.

As a Universalist, I believe that there is nothing we can do to sever our connection with God. Despite our sins — the bad choices we make — and the harm we cause by them, we are always held in God's love, always being lured to choose well.

Belief in original blessing expressed as the inherent worth and dignity of every person and in our ultimate indestructible connection with God doesn't mean we are free from sin, that we don't suffer as a consequence of our errors, nor that we need salvation — the healing of our brokenness — any less than anyone else does.

The sin of gluttony harms our bodies. We suffer from it. Who among us has not — maybe just once or twice — stuffed himself to the bursting point, drunk too much, or otherwise over-indulged to the point of harm? Has anyone not regretted the over-indulgence that results in heartburn or hangover at least once in our lives?

I propose that gluttony is not restricted to consumption of food or drink, but can refer to the over-consumption of anything that we pursue for short-term pleasure despite the risks of long-term harm or as a means of avoiding living fully in accord with our calling.

We become gluttons when, like Burger King's prime customers, we consume too many calories and too much fat and consequently damage our health. Or when we automatically say "Yes" like Morgan Spurlock did when asked if we want to SuperSize a fast-food meal. One piece of rhubarb custard pie is a pleasurable reward, a second piece, eaten simply for pleasure and knowing that it is too much would be gluttony. So tempting a pleasure tests my resolve. And we become gluttons when we use more of the Earth's

resources than we need and damage the planet's health. I'll get to a helpful technique to boost your resolve soon.

All of the world's major religions include injunctions against the gluttony of overeating. Beliefnet offers an overview. Christianity approaches gluttony from viewing the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, which should not be harmed. In addition, Catholic doctrine teaches that gluttony represents an undesirable attachment to worldly goods and a lack of self-restraint. For Eastern Orthodox Christians, overeating dulls the senses and decreases the ability to guard against temptations. Brigham Young told his Mormon followers that gluttony would be the greatest curse of the latter days. The problem with gluttony is not only that it causes harm, but also that it distracts you from communion with the holy.

Orthodox Jews turn every occasion of eating into a sacred act and attach ritual and symbolism to foods. The laws of *kasruth* provide strict dietary rules that effectively keep eating in moderation, except that Judaism also celebrates bodily pleasure and encourages occasional over-indulgence, for example on Purim when you are encouraged by the Torah to drink until the words "Blessed be Mordechai" can no longer be distinguished from "Cursed be Haman." But take note that it only comes around once a year.

Followers of Islam practice a month-long fast from sunrise to sunset during Ramadan in order to bring them closer to Allah. There are injunctions against gluttonous breaking of the fast. Fasting, of course, is common among the world religions as a spiritual practice.

Hinduism takes a practical stand against gorging beyond the limits of the digestive fire lest illness result, and teaches that certain foods have particular spiritual elements that should be kept in appropriate balance.

Pagans follow the agricultural cycle of planting and harvest, and celebrate food with feasting, but modern pagans tend to feast in moderation, using foods symbolically and placing high value on physical health, the environment, and the needs of the community.

I saved my favorite for last. Buddhism seeks to transcend the senses, but recognizes that neither deprivation nor over-indulgence lead to transcendence. The Buddha said, "You should lose your involvement with yourself and then eat and drink naturally, according to the needs of your body. Attachment to your appetites — whether you deprive or indulge them — can lead to slavery, but satisfying the needs of daily life is not wrong. Indeed, to keep a body in good health is a duty, for otherwise the mind will not stay strong and clear."

Or as my Dad was fond of saying, "Moderation in all things, except moderation." Good food is good for you as long as you don't become a slave to it, but find the balance that matches the specific needs of your body.

But gluttony is not just about food. It applies to anything that we consume in ways that are out of balance and thus bring us harm. Sometimes that means abstinence. Eating walnuts causes me to suffer. A good baklava loaded with walnuts and honey might tempt

me to endure the suffering, but my body would be better off if I abstained completely, and thus eating a single piece is, for me, gluttonous.

Our addictions are often expressed as gluttony. When we abuse ourselves with alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs in our quest for pleasure and escape, we are gluttons.

Some of us are gluttons for television or Internet chats. When your involvement with any activity becomes excessive to the point of harming your health, keeping you from activities of self-care and maintenance of your life, or damaging your relationships, it's too much.

Even things that are good for us in moderation can be done to excess, and then we are guilty of gluttony. The gym rat who is obsessed with his body and spends hours every day working out for the pleasure of an endorphin rush may well be harming his relationships by over-indulging his quest for fitness.

But we're also guilty of the sin of gluttony when we consume resources faster than they can be renewed or when we use more than we really need. I heard recently that Americans have consumed more stuff since 1960 than the entire human population on Earth did before that time. And the rate is increasing. It is estimated that it takes the Earth 62 weeks to replenish the resources we use in one year, up from 36 weeks in 1961. That's for the average use world-wide, but we Americans are particularly gluttonous consumers, using more than four times as many resources as the world average. It takes five years to replenish the resources the average American uses in one.

Based on resource consumption, it is possible to estimate your ecological footprint — how much land area is required to support your lifestyle. The global average is 5.7 acres per person, while the amount of biologically productive land is only about 4.5 acres per person. At that rate, the Earth can only support four of every five people alive now.

But we Americans have an average footprint of 24 acres each. If everyone on Earth had a footprint that size, the carrying capacity would be less than one of every five people now living. You can get an estimate of your personal acreage requirement by completing a simple internet-based survey at www.myfootprint.org. Based on the size of your house and the number of occupants, the efficiency of your car and the number of miles you drive, and similar factors, the web site will tell you how many acres are required to keep you, and suggest some actions to reduce your resource gluttony and make a smaller personal ecological footprint.

Since it is apparent that Congress and our state legislature have little interest in mandating resource conservation, it's up to us to begin by finding ways to decrease our gluttony for the world's limited resources.

Laurel Mellin, writing in *Spirituality and Health*, offers advice on managing the cravings that lead to gluttony. It may take some practice to break the automatic and unquestioned response to temptation — to learn to watch for that moment of decision and interrupt it and no longer, like Morgan Spurlock, automatically accept the offer to Super Size it.

But when you catch yourself at that decision point, Ms. Mellin suggests invoking both the good mother and the good father and asking yourself three questions on behalf of each of them.

First the good mother wants you to consider “How do I feel?” “What do I need?” and “Do I need support?” These questions represent nurturing feminine parental energy. But they are only half of what we might need. The masculine parental energy sets limits to provide safety and helps us access power. It asks “Are my expectations reasonable?” “Is my thinking positive and powerful?” “What is the essential pain (the unavoidable risk) and the earned reward (the benefit)?”

Ms. Mellin illustrates how this works with her desire for a pinwheel cookie. Just one. They’re small. She had a small lunch. They are in the kitchen just downstairs. She asks herself the first three questions:

“How do I feel?” Guilty about not having done her taxes. Bored by routine tasks.

“What do I need?” To call her accountant for an appointment and to take a walk for some exercise.

“Do I need any support?” No, she can do that without help. She’s gotten to feelings and needs.

Now she asks the second three questions to seek limits and power. “What are my expectations?” If she makes an appointment with the accountant, she’ll have to cancel her weekend plans to prepare. Is that reasonable? No. She can make the appointment for next month and schedule a few hours each week between now and then to prepare.

“Is this thinking positive and powerful?” No, because she’s already telling herself she hates doing her taxes and that she will never finish. She turns that into something positive and powerful by telling herself that she doesn’t have to do the taxes alone and by scheduling time for it, she can finish them.

Finally, she asks herself “What is the essential pain that triggered the need for nurturing and desire for a cookie?” It is that she must do something she doesn’t want to do. Just articulating that helps ease the pain, and she realizes that by following through with the plan, she will stop feeling guilty, avoid paying late filing penalties, and feel proud.

She put on her shoes and jacket and went out for a walk. Returning refreshed, she was ready to call the accountant and get back to the routine tasks she has been working on.

To recap, the questions are:

- How am I feeling?
- What do I need?
- Do I need support?

And:

- What are my expectations?

- Is my thinking positive and powerful?
- What is the essential pain and the earned reward?

Gluttony threatens the wellbeing of the greatest gifts and miracles we enjoy — life itself, relationships with others, and this marvelous Earth. Your essential task, your calling, your purpose is to learn and practice excellence in stewardship of these miracles. Practice self-care to keep your body, mind, heart, and spirit well. Practice care of your relationships to keep them strong and healthy. And practice care for our Earth as our home. God dwells within us, among us, and beyond us, luring us to choose well. Practice noticing the holy allurements that constantly urge you toward health and wholeness. Notice when gluttony blocks fulfillment of your purpose, gently forgive yourself, and begin again in love. Recommit to health and wholeness. Now begin. Let this be our prayer.

Amen.