

Food is Love!! I heard this phrase throughout my lifetime in my house growing up. Eating together was a sacred event. Dinner was often the one time when the family was always together. No matter what I was doing, I had to be home in time for dinner. My father would leave work and often have to return after dinner. I think much of this was due to my family's experiences during the depression in the 1930s, when food was not so plentiful, and so therefore food just for the sake of sustenance was celebrated and revered. Of course I think dinner might have been even more sacred if someone in my birth family was a better cook. In the Orlando congregational cookbook, I put down my mothers' special recipe, the telephone number for the Chinese Takeout restaurant.

Eating Chinese spare ribs is made all the more ironic as my grandparents on my father's side were orthodox Jews. This means they did not eat pork. They followed the Jewish Kosher food laws, so they did not (and myself when I visited them) eat meat and dairy at the same meal. Also they had to have separate plates on which to eat meat and dairy so the two foods could not possibly mix. I always found these rules strange, so I studied the original source of the dietary laws, which originates from the book of Leviticus, Chapter 11. It has very specific rules about what foods can and cannot be eaten. Animals that have no true hoofs or do not chew the cud, specifically naming camels, pigs, and something that I believe is akin to a porcupine as unclean to eat. It lists fish that do not have fins and scales were unclean to eat, a variety of birds of prey, all insects, and specifically locusts, as unclean

After reading the chapter 11 my initial reaction was that the prohibition on eating certain types of animals was a health issue. This seemed like a logical conclusion to me. Others believe that it was done as a way to intentionally segregate the Jewish people from assimilation with their neighbors, Others believe it had to do with maintaining order throughout the universe. We will never really know this and I think the question we need to ask is, is it relevant to our lives now. The more I read about religious dietary laws, the more I think about the Buddhist practice of mindful eating. I believe the dietary laws certainly force people to be mindful at least about what they are eating.

It makes them stop and consciously think. Once you are on a path of mindfulness, in one area of life, it makes you a more mindful person in general. I believe being in that mindful mindset is a way to allow one to know themselves better and to put oneself in touch with the all of existence. This can lead to a sense of peacefulness and acceptance of others who are different. I am not suggesting that the Jewish priests were studying Buddhism, but I am suggesting that maybe mindful eating and mindfulness in general are practices that may be universal to human and spiritual fulfillment, and the dietary laws were the way the Jewish people learned to practice mindfulness

Thinking about it, food is an integral part of religious life throughout the world. In Judaism, On Yom Kippur the Jewish High Holidays one is required to fast for 24 hours. During Passover, the meal is actually part of the Seder service and for a week you are not allowed to eat leavened bread.. In Catholicism in the United States, there is to be abstinence of meat on Ash Wednesday and all Fridays during Lent, with Fasting on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday for all those over 18. Of course food is involved as part of the Christian ritual of communion. The third major western religion, Islam we are now in the month of Ramadan. During this month, Muslims are to fast during the daylight hours. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islamic faith. They will wake up before dawn to eat a big meal, and then as soon as the sun sets, the family gathers together for a large meal. Again to allow them to be mindful and grateful for what they have

And let's think about Unitarian Universalism. How much food is apart of our culture. In the short time I have been here, I see we celebrate often with potlucks, not just with ourselves, but also as a way of including the larger community such as we had last weekend as we broke break with members from the refugee community. And always we are conscious of those with different eating lifestyles and provide vegetarian/vegan offerings at such occasions.

Many members here are active in the Community Sustainable Agriculture Movement, Many Members here work with Church's United serving a community meal to those in need and as we heard this morning the Crop Walk for Hunger. If you would like to get involved with that, please let me know. We have a tradition of having Labor Day cookouts, and Thanksgiving dinners for people to celebrate together. And in this as in almost every Unitarian Universalist congregation I am aware of Coffee Hour is a major part of our communal life together. It is the one time when the most of us are together at one time. It is the first time we will have the opportunity to meet with and get to know first time guests to our congregation. It is a weekly celebration of our existence as a congregation together. And such a time should be celebrated with a sense of joy. So please if you ever feel the spirit move you to bring food for coffee hour, you don't need to ask permission, just follow that spirit. And if the spirit moves you to clean up, even if the spirit doesn't move you to clean up, you don't have to ask permission, at the end of coffee hour, please help clean up!!

And of course in our American Culture that is the religion of Football, Super Bowl Sunday being its highest holiday, the Super Bowl is the largest day of the year for takeout food where hundreds of millions of dollars are spent every year.

So my point in all of this, is to make present to us that we have a deep relationship with food. It has become much more than mere sustenance for us. It has become part of our culture to utilize food as a way of expressing ourselves and our emotions. We have been blessed with an abundance of food here in America and often we take it for granted. I think food has always been a part of the religious rituals of humanity specifically to remind us not take food for granted. The three main Western religious traditions often focus on the denial of food through fasting or food laws as a spiritual practice. I always found this fascinating. Why deny yourself food when we have plenty of it. How does this help us.

I have actually maintained the tradition of fasting on Yom Kippur. Not for historic religious reasons, but because I have found it to be a centering practice in my life. What I find most revealing about it is that it points to the mind body disconnection I often have about food. When I fast, I become conscious about food. What I become most conscious about is really how little food I really NEED to eat during the day. It is in the breaking of our daily habits that we can see things in a new objective light. Another way I have experienced a way to think of food differently is through the intentional practice of mindful eating.

When I have been on Meditation retreats, we would eat in silence and focus on the act of eating. Part of the practice of mindful eating is to chew the food until it was mush in our mouth, taking in and noticing all the tastes, smells and texture of the food throughout the process. Sort of like when I was young and imagine many of you as well, and our parents would tell us to chew 20 times before swallowing. We didn't realize that our parents were Zen Masters training us. There are many nutritionists who believe that the saliva created in the mouth from chewing helps with the digestive process. When you are consciously thinking about food, you start to realize how certain foods you eat affects the body and mind. It makes sense that if you put healthy things in your body, you will often feel healthier. I would ask you to think about how you feel after you eat. Take note of how much energy you have after eating certain kinds and quantities of meals and think about if you like how that feels. There is a new movie Forks over Knives that has just come

out. Its premise is that as a whole, the food choices we make lead to many of the illness' that we humans face today.

I have to say, I had this come home to me many years ago when I went to my doctor and received cholesterol reading that was off the charts. Prior to that I hadn't given much thought to what I ate. I knew I had put on a few too many pounds, some of which I still have, but you know, when mortality faces you, you tend to become more mindful. I suggest you don't need to wait. I took medicine that reduced my cholesterol significantly and quickly, but I knew I would have to change my eating habits if wanted to live an active and healthy life. So I did what I normally would do in such a situation, I studied, I talked with others, I experimented with different foods to see what worked for me, for my body, for my life, and I encourage you do the same for yourselves, but it is not just for me or you. As we are interdependent with all things, everything we do impacts others and the world around us.

When I started eating a mostly vegetarian diet, and when I say mostly vegetarianism, I always think of the Outback steak house commercial, where the actor says, "Im the kind of vegetarian that eats meat". I have often said I am a vegetarian, but I eat fish. There actually is a word for that - pescatarian, but most people don't know that word, so I just say, I am a vegetarian that eats fish. But I think this Outback commercial brings out a good point. Our American Culture seems to always ask for an all or nothing attitude. That if I am to be a Vegetarian I must eat every single meal as such. And if I don't, then I have somehow failed and upset the cosmic balance of the universe.

If you choose to eat vegetarian or vegan every day, if you choose to make that your food choice or your spiritual practice, I do think that is truly remarkable and wonderful and something we should all aspire to. And in truth I am in awe of people who can do that with the onslaught of a media and society that tells us to act otherwise. Because It does take conscious thought about where to get your food, and how to prepare it. And it is truly living out our values in the world. However I would encourage all of us, even if we are not willing to make that commitment, to at least move to find more balance in our eating habits. For myself I find that about 50% of meals are vegan, and 90% are vegetarian, but that leaves about 10% of my meals or 10 a month to be with some sort of meat. And I do consider fish meat. You can start small, maybe by going a day or two without meat and see how it feels. What do you have to lose?

So to get back to where I started this train of thought of the interdependence of our actions,, when I started a vegetarian diet, this impacted much more than just myself, it impacted the people in my family, the grocery store I shopped in, or didn't shop in, it created a sort of ridicule from people who don't understand why or don't agree with my food choices. And sometimes that ridicule goes the other way as well.

But interestingly, as more and more people are adopting healthier food choices, more and more stores and farmers are becoming accommodating. Just walking into local supermarkets, the selection of organic foods has grown significantly over the past few years. What we demand, as consumers will become a reality. What we consume, food producers will supply us. Despite being inundated with advertisements for unhealthy food, if we choose healthy sustainable food choices, society will adapt to it and one day during the Super Bowl we may see advertisements of people eating locally grown fresh produce and grilled tofu instead of candy bars and BBQ spare ribs.

We the people, can change our eating habits, we can change our selves, and by doing so, by being a model, we the people can change the culture and create a sustainable world for all people Unitarian Universalism in a recently passed statement of conscience titled "Ethical Eating" calls us to "strive to choose foods that minimize harm and are protective of the environment, consumers,

farmers, and all those involved in the food production and distribution.” And although we have no creed or authority that require us to follow such recommendations, we are asked to use all our faculties, the faculties of the heart and mind, reason and reverence, to think about the issues raised.

These are issues that are important to many in Unitarian Universalism and in our own congregation. The four main issues addressed due to our food production system, are the concern for our environment, Human Health, the humane treatment of animals, and the fair treatment of food and farm workers. So I ask you first to read the Statement of Conscience and the consciously think about it, and maybe even engage in dialogue about it and then maybe consider a little experimentation in changing your food choices. As an association, we are very good with dialogue. You can go online and watch the dialogue leading up to the vote by the congregations of our association as to whether to adopt this statement of conscience. What I found important about this process is that it does allow us to hear about other individuals circumstances and perceptions that may be different from our own. So I ask you to think about it, and to discuss how you feel about it and whether you can and should apply it to your life. Ultimately it comes down to a personal choice or circumstances that are unique to each of us. Food has always been and will continue to be a large part of communal life. Let our actions never end dialogue, but let us seek to educate each other, let our actions never judge another, but to learn from one another’s experiences, and let our actions never condemn another, but rather to inspire each other. May it be so.