

FOOD

Pamela Collins – March 2009

Welcome to your Earth Day service three weeks in advance. At first I was somewhat dismayed to be giving the “Earth Day Sermon” off calendar as it were, but the more I thought about it, the more I appreciated the opportunity to arouse our Earth Day energies in advance, to begin the excitement now and increase our anticipation for the Earth Day Fair that will happen here on Saturday April 18th. If my sermon today works the way I hope it will, we’ll all be as eager as kids awaiting Christmas to partake in the bounty that the Green Committee has prepared for us on that day. The fair will give you an opportunity to explore the concrete expressions of the ideas we’ll be considering today.

So now, what if I told you that eating well – in a way that would be healthy for you – could also be one of the most radical social justice actions you could take?

Well it’s true. Our most basic drive – eating – has become our most political act. Then again, maybe it always has been. Competition for food may well be at the root of our human relations and, interestingly, it’s a process that unites us with every other living thing on this planet. The English author William Ralph Inge once wrote, “The whole of nature is a conjugation of the verb to eat, in the active and passive.” Indeed, Inge’s insight is true, for it is not just in the behaviors of natural beings that we see this pervasive influence of the verb “to eat,” but in the development and evolution of life as well. The shape, the color, the structure of every living being is determined by that species’ place in the food chain. Whether it’s a cougar or a leafy sea dragon, first and foremost, it’s all about the food. Many species spend a good part of their day in re-fueling activities, like the hummingbird that, depending on the sugar content of its food source, eats anywhere from 5 to 14 meals per hour.

Now I know there are some of us who would like to eat that often...especially if it’s chocolate...but we don’t have wings that beat 52 times per second nor do we take 250 breaths per minute. Unlike the hummingbird that must feed almost continuously, humans can go for weeks without food. Much is made of the opposable thumb as that which sets us apart from the other two and four legged beings, but it seems obvious to me that our relationship to food plays a huge role in freeing us up to engage in activities other than eating, sleeping and mating. And when we add to our ability to store calories, the fact of our omnivorousness, we see that when it comes to food we have more freedom and more choice than any other living thing. This incredible and unique freedom of choice around our most basic need sounds like a recipe for paradise doesn’t it? And yet, as we are discovering, and as Michael Pollen has recently articulated in his best seller, The Omnivore’s Dilemma, it has become a recipe for disaster. And what is the face of that disaster? Planetary degradation, oppression and war, and ill health, both physical and mental, of our species. Ironically, our choices around food may be doing us in.

It’s hard to say exactly where and why we stepped off the boat on this one, but its clear that as writer Daniel Quinn has argued, we have taken ourselves out of the evolutionary process. We’ve stuck a penny in the fuse box and over-ridden the natural system of checks and balances of food supply and population growth. When we went from hunter-gatherers to agriculturalists, we took our first step out of the natural evolutionary impulse. Some say agriculture began from the desire to produce excess grain in order to make alcoholic beverages. As one who can trace my Irish ancestry back to County Claire before the American Revolution, I’m in no position to argue against agriculture in the service of stout. Nevertheless, hindsight suggests that changing from hunter-gatherer to agriculture started the ball rolling in the wrong direction.

Now, at the present stage of our relationship with the bounty of the earth, we wax highly romantic about sustainable agriculture. The family farm, an organic garden at the White House, friends who grow hops in their backyard, or make their own wine from a small stand of grapes: it’s all real cool back-to-earth stuff – going back to the basics. It’s not quite as far back as the basics of hunter-gatherer behavior, but then again, the hunter-gatherer alternative is, for all intents and purposes, lost to us as a sustainable method of obtaining the nourishment we need.

Now the new kid on the block is the corporatization of food production and in that context the small farm becomes a precious remnant of a better time. We're now so far off the evolutionary train that we can't even hear the whistle.

It is safe to say that Americans ingest as many chemicals and genetically altered compounds as we do real food. Our "food" may still be less costly than in other places in the world, but we've been paying the price in lifestyles determined by ubiquitous obesity, a costly materialism that comes from a perpetual state of unsatisfied desire, and heartbreaking illnesses that not only take our lives, but our dignity as well.

And we are not the only ones paying for eating on the corporate food chain. Third world countries pay dearly for our desires in so many ways it is impossible to name them all here – even to summarize them. Let me give you just one chilling example.

In Plachimada India, when Coca-Cola established a plant there, within six months wells were running dry and people were getting sick just from bathing in the water. To add insult to injury, Coca-Cola posed as a "good neighbor" by giving people the toxic waste from the plant, saying that it was "bio-fertilizer. When this "bio-fertilizer" was tested, it was found to contain cadmium and lead. After protesting daily for two years, the people of Plachimada were finally able to shut down the Coca-Cola plant there...but there's little comfort to be taken in the fact that Coca-Cola is still doing business somewhere.

Native Americans traded Manhattan for cheap trinkets – shiny, colorful things that would live for centuries in landfills while native peoples died on reservations. Now we're trading sweet pure water for diet coke, ripe strawberries for fruit roll-ups, parsnips and kale for Centrum Silver, and grapefruit and sunflower seeds for statin drugs that give us muscle pain and steal our memory. Somewhere, someone must be laughing at us. In our defense, it could be said that we, like the Native Americans haven't really understood what we were giving away, never read the fine points of the contract, never in our lives believed that something we thought was our natural right could be taken away from us and put behind fences of private ownership.

In a recent article on Michelle Obama's commitment to natural food for her family, it came out that Laura Bush also insisted on organic edibles on the White House dinner table, but she kept that under wraps – didn't make it a public issue. My guess is, that is in part because good food and clean water – what were once considered the necessities of life -- are now becoming the luxuries of the rich – a wealth insured by the slow poisoning of the masses. Perhaps some of you may know that Donald Rumsfeld was a former CEO of Searles pharmaceuticals, developers of aspartame which we know to be a sweetener. But that's not how it started out. Originally, it was developed as a cancer drug, but it proved to be ineffective. Accidentally, a researcher got some on his finger, tasted it and found it to be sweet. Eureka! And so it was marketed as a sweetener and Rumsfeld played a pivotal role in pushing it through the Food and Drug Administration. However...aspartame is a neurotoxin which combines with the body's fat. What a fierce irony that so many people suck up diet sodas sweetened with aspartame as part of their hope to lose weight, all the time, creating the opposite effect. And if that isn't enough, when aspartame breaks down in the system, it breaks down into wood alcohol and formaldehyde – like the bathtub gin of prohibition – so that in people who ingest large amounts of the chemical, it can have the same effect: blindness, paralysis and death.

Michael Pollen quotes Wendell Barry as saying that "eating is an agricultural act" then adds that it is also an ecological act and a political one too. This is not news for some of us. Those of us who have been around for awhile perhaps remember the radical little book by Frances Moore Lappe that came out in 1971. In *DIET FOR A SMALL PLANET* we learned just how much more globally "expensive" it was to eat a pound a beef over a pound of beans. Our hunger for meat consumed an inordinate amount of the world's food resources and created scarcity that need not have been. While a few feasted on huge hunks of steak, their meals were paid for by the more than half the world's population who went to bed hungry.

Now, nearly 40 years later, writers like Michael Pollen and Mark Bittman are making the same claim and many are hearing it, if they hear it at all, as news. In his book *FOOD MATTERS*, Bittman not only speaks to the intensity of resources needed for meat, but addresses the issue of junk food as well. For instance, "a 12-ounce can of diet soda – containing just 1 calorie – requires 2200 calories to produce, about 70 of which is in

production of the aluminum can.” Add to this the nutritional ramifications of our addiction to junk food. Bittner tells us that “a study from the University of California at Berkeley...reports that almost one-third of American’s total caloric intake comes from “nutrient-poor” foods like sweets, salty snacks, and fruit drinks. Seven percent of our calories come from soda...with hamburgers, pizza, pastries, and potato chips following close behind.” (p. 13) Now these numbers are worth crunching a bit. If just one calorie of soda takes 2200 calories to produce and 7 percent of our caloric intake comes from soda, and we take the average recommended caloric intake for women and men, which would be conservatively about 2300 calories a day the caloric “cost” for the soda, for one person, for one day, is 340,000 of the world’s calories – that’s per day, per person. That’s an incredible amount of energy to produce something that has no nutritional value and most likely contains poisons such as aspartame and caffeine. Add to that the poisonous ecology impact to make the stuff, and the insanity of this boggles the mind. The harm done to the consumer, to the environment, and to those who must do without adequate nutrition to create this poison...leaves no one a winner. I suppose you could say Coca-cola wins...or whatever corporation is producing the “food stuff” but ultimately everyone will be negatively impacted.

As Unitarian Universalists, we acknowledge the truth of the interconnected web of being. We are beginning to understand that that which is ecological is also political – that the human experience cannot be divided into neat categories nor does any single action have an easily discernable single effect. Of late it often seems to me that this awareness of the interconnected web of being should not be our last principle, tacked on as an afterthought – oh yeah, that too – but rather should be our first principle because it is from the wisdom of the web that all other right action, or attempt at right action, will follow, including the inherent worth and dignity of every individual. The worth and dignity of every person is proven by natural law BECAUSE of the interconnected web of being, for each and every one of us is a strand on that web. And when any one of us falls, whether through illness, or social injustice, then the web is weakened. For those of us with eyes to see, this is evident in our current economic crisis. The super-rich cannot feed incessantly off the resources of the middle class without the whole system eventually crumbling like falling dominoes, just as you can’t kill off the entire herd of buffalo or pull up every last strawberry plant you find and hope to have anything left for tomorrow’s hunger. In our society, our blindness to the simplicity and truth of the interconnected web has led us to a tangled mess. It is imperative that we clear our vision, see the web for what it is, and call out the connections to those who either can’t see them, or won’t admit to them.

In a task as monumental as this, we need a good starting place – and that starting place is the process that is the most basic process of our lives and those of every other living thing – food.

(Holding up an apple)

If I’ve been successful in making the case that eating is an ecological and political act, I’d like to go on to say that it is also a spiritual act. As Pollen says, the way we eat represents “our most profound engagement with the natural world.” Consider his observation that “through what we eat [we are linked] to the fertility of the earth and the energy of the sun.” All beings must eat, all food draws its energy from the sun, and in ingesting our food, we are partaking of the sun’s energy. This apple is a little organic transmitter of the sun’s energy into a form that, miraculously, we can use. That energy then gets converted in us into the power to think, to dance, to paint and to love. And when its time to lay it all down, our energy returns to the earth and the cycle continues. What a miraculous system, and what a joy to be a part of it every time we eat.

But the Corporatization of food, besides poisoning us more than it nourishes us, with its hyper-processing and market-driven packaging, breaks that connection, distracts us from the sacred cycle, and makes all but invisible our connection to the earth and the cosmos through the food we eat.

(HOLD UP A BAG OF CHEESE CURLS).

Thank you o Lord for these cheese doodles of which I’m about to partake. For the rich Polysorbate 60 and the hallowed mono and diglycerides, I give my humble thankfulness. Let these chemicals nourishment me so that I may do thy work... Amen.

As I was writing this sermon, I thought of Jesus and the Last Supper, of his use of bread and wine to concretize his Disciples' understanding of his spiritual, eternal nature. It occurred to me that this dinner in the upper room was not a new idea, but that the relationship between eating and our awareness of our connection with the Eternal must have been a common experience in those times, especially in the Hebrew tradition. And so it became obvious to me that we need to heal that broken connection, to ritually come together and share simple, unadorned food in the spirit of seeking the experience of the energy of the universe becoming our energy, transmitted to us through the food that has arisen from the earth, to be nourished by the rains, and charged by the sun.

To that end, I have prepared for us today a fruit communion. On these trays are tiny pieces of fruit, each one pierced by its own, sanitized, toothpick. In a minute I will invite you to come forward, moving first from the back row, coming down the side aisle then returning to your seats from the center aisle. As you choose your piece of fruit, pop it into your mouth, meditate on the gift of the taste, the texture, the energetic gift of this simple and honest morsel.

Fruit Communion

To the All That Is, to the Spirit of Life, to the Earth, to the Universe, we offer this prayer. As we have taken this fruit into ourselves, felt its texture, tasted its simple sweetness, let it do in remembrance of the blessing of the bounty of the earth, the pureness of the food it brings forth for us, the miracle of its ability to sustain us, the wonder of the cosmic energy so transmitted, and the simple and pure joy of real food, reverently eaten. Let us through this act commit to eating mindfully, with an ever deepening appreciation of the precious gift of food.

Benediction

Perhaps the most important realization of our lives is that what we want for ourselves, we must want with equal passion for all, because the truth of the matter is that UNLESS we want wholeness and justice for all, we stand to lose it for ourselves. Nowhere can we see this truth more clearly in this age than in our relationship with food. If we continue to let the bottomless greed of corporations manifest itself in feeding us chemicals, we will lose everything. Our health, our intelligence, our clean water and air, the very essence of life will be challenged for us and for the entire world. Moreover, we will lose the connection and break the covenant the Universe has made with us, that the proof of our belongingness in the All That Is lies in the sustaining energy we draw from something so small as a single berry. If our communion today stirred in us a visceral sense of that connection, let us hold on to it as something precious and worth repeating. If we did not have that experience, let us henceforth seek it in every bite we take until finally we feel it and we are, blessedly, restored to that intimacy with the Earth and all that is beyond it.