

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Flavor Based Ethical Eating”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 30, 2011

Call to Celebration – Lynne Lekakis

Why I care that there is quality, fresh, local food in our diets.

I care because I think the obesity epidemic in America is connected to processed foods.

I care because I think that the balance between naturally raised and genetically modified foods is skewed.

.. because America subsidizes the raising of copious amounts of inedible corn and then has to have something to do with it, so makes cheap, questionable sweeteners and allows them to be put in food that we eat.

... because pesticide companies are controlling how large scale farmers do their business.

... because I want the co-ops to succeed, as they exemplify the interdependent web of life, support the local economy, and profits are shared by everyone.

... because factory farming is not only disgusting and degrading to the animals, but returns unbelievable profits to few.

... because I care about small, family farms and have watched the volume deteriorate over the last 20 years.

... because I am concerned that the median age for young women and men to reach puberty is going down due to hormones in milk and chicken.

... because sometimes it feels like America is degrading to the lowest common denominator- we eat only one kind of banana because it's good looking.

... because I want Community Gardens to triple the amount of plots in each city in America so people can take control of their food security.

...because I want the word organic to stand for the same thing all over the globe: sustainable and humane practices, no pesticides, feeding animals the healthiest and most natural foods available without added drugs.

... because family time can be enriched by working together to plan for and put food up for the winter in the summer months.

... because I miss the seasons of fresh fruit. I don't really want a peach in January. I prefer to wait for a fresh, juicy one in August.

... because since 1986, the variety of vegetables grown in California has gone from 1100 to 350. Had any kohlrabi lately?

... because I see no reason why things that grow well here cannot be sold and eaten here.

Since we are not an agricultural society, I can see the need to ship in some vegetables in the colder months, but at the rest of the year, we should support the local farmers.

... because I want Community Sponsored Agriculture to succeed- taking the risk with the farmer connects us all to the weather and to what we eat.

... because I want people to plant gardens where the lush, green lawns suck up water and take up valuable space in the sun, to further enrich the soil rather than deplete it.

... because there is nothing quite so satisfying as planting something, tending it, drying it and eating it, as I did yesterday with some scarlet runner beans that we grew this summer.

And mostly, because I do enjoy eating, I care because local food tastes better- the vegetables are more moist and nutritious, and the meat is leaner and tastier.

So, after this, I'm heading up to the co-op for FUUSA's second service in the produce aisle.

Hope to see you there.

Spoken Meditation

In the stillness of this moment

letting the busy-ness of our lives go, if only for this moment,

Let the stillness of this moment, carry me home.

Home to my true self

that knows what I am thinking and feeling

in touch with a greater sense of connection that extends beyond me.

Let my true self, carry me home.

Home to my true commitments

showing me what matters

choosing my priorities and

driving me toward action in the world .

Let my true commitments, carry me home.

Home to my true vision

a vision of a human capacity for goodness in each of us

a vision of community, connection and welcome,

a vision of justice, equity and compassion,

a vision of lifelong learning, growth and development,

a vision of the interconnected web of existence

of which we are a part,

Let my true vision, carry me home.

In the stillness of this moment, may I find my essence.

Coming home to my true self,

my true commitments

and my true vision,
 In the spirit, by the spirit,
 with the spirit giving power,
 Let me find true harmony.

Reading

In responding to a question about how farming is conducted today and how it can be changed, chef Dan Barber said:

The reason the conventional corn farmer is doing what he's doing is because of our diets. It isn't just the agribusiness corporations pulling levers behind the curtain, it's also the decisions we're making as individuals. If we diversify our diets — if we eat less processed food, or switch to animals raised on grass instead of corn — it supports a healthier system.

So that's why I think it's important to get people to realize they have a very powerful set of decisions to make when they eat. And those decisions have a huge effect on how the world works. That's very powerful! I mean: How many [social justice topics] ... can one get up from their seat [after hearing it discussed] and say: "Today I'm going to do something about that." With food, you can vote for the kinds of food you want three times a day.

September Afternoon at Four O'Clock by Marge Piercy

Full in the hand, heavy
 with ripeness, perfume spreading
 its fan: moments now resemble
 sweet russet pears glowing
 on the bough, peaches warm
 from the afternoon sun, amber
 and juicy, flesh that can
 make you drunk.

There is a turn in things
 that makes the heart catch.
 We are ripening, all the hard
 green grasping, the stony will
 swelling into sweetness, the acid
 and sugar in balance, the sun

stored as energy that is pleasure
and pleasure that is energy.

Whatever happens, whatever,
we say, and hold hard and let
go and go on. In the perfect
moment the future coils,
a tree inside a pit.

Take,
eat, we are each other's
perfection, the wine of our
mouths is sweet and heavy.
Soon enough comes the vinegar.
The fruit is ripe for the taking
and we take. There is
no other wisdom.

Sermon

The Puritan rootstock of Unitarianism and Universalism doesn't celebrate pleasure seeking as a path for our growth and development. When facing a crisis, many UU's tend to lean toward the personal virtue of self-sacrifice and doing without. But, could the solution to the looming agricultural crisis be the hedonistic pursuit of flavor? Could self-denial undermine the changes that will move us toward a sustainable and nutritious supply of healthy and ethically raised food?

We are beginning to witness the end of our current system of food production. That system is based on cheap fossil fuel, chemical fertilizers, pesticides and a global distribution network. This agricultural system, heavily subsidized with government funds, values mono-cultures that deplete the land of topsoil and minerals. Way before oil reaches 100 dollars a gallon, this system will fall apart quickly. Little about this extraction oriented, industrial approach to agriculture is sustainable.

And the food produced by this system just doesn't taste that great. Rarely are the seeds farmers use selected for flavor. Instead they select for disease and pest resistance, transportation stability and shelf-life. And *even if* the food starts out tasting good, it loses a lot of flavor in the trip from Chile, Florida or California to the grocery store to my refrigerator, to my table. I've learned this sprouting seeds. Radish sprouts have a pleasing, spicy zing when I pluck them out of the sprouter and toss them into my mouth. But if I pick them and store them in the refrigerator, they lose that zing in hours. My step brother Don, relishes going to a favorite farm stand at the end of July to get fresh picked corn. He rushes home,

throws the fragrant ears in a pot of boiling water then feasts on the delicious flavor. How many of us delight in homegrown tomatoes picked at the peak of flavor, served straight from the vine? Rarely does our food production and delivery system give us this kind of freshness and quality to enjoy.

So what do chefs do? The good ones are out in the markets looking for the freshest and best tasting food they can buy. But often, what they do with that food is to add spices and flavors to enhance or mask the taste of what they bring into their kitchen. At home, the manufactured frozen, dried and canned food many of us eat often bears little resemblance to what it started out as, hidden under artificial flavors and enhanced with sweeteners, salt, MSG and added fat. Since all you really taste is the engineered sauce, you could be eating textured vegetable protein or starch and cellulose shaped to look like meat, fruits and vegetables. This kind of manufactured food could eventually cut the cord with real food and just become a synthetic product that comes out of a chemistry lab. It may have happened with chicken nuggets. And if our noses and taste buds are dulled, we will not know the difference.

Well, this is where things are going and chef Dan Barber wants to stop the trend right in its tracks by encouraging us to be hedonistic foodies. His vision is being hailed as one of the most exciting social movements of our time.

I first heard about Barber from an [“On Being” podcast](#). He is the visionary chef of the Michelin listed, gourmet restaurant, working farm and educational center, [Blue Hill restaurant at Stone Barns Center](#) about a half an hour north of New York City in the Hudson River valley. Growing up in Brooklyn, he cooked for his family after his mother died. His first flavor epiphany happened when his aunt cooked for him while he was recovering from having his tonsils out. She made scrambled eggs for him using a double boiler, finishing them in french butter. Unlike the overcooked eggs his father made, these slid down his throat in a rush of pleasure. After college he decided to become a chef, studying in France. [A chance meeting with an exceptionally delicious apricot](#), purchased from a woman on the street in Provence, an apricot grown in an orchard lovingly tended for four generations, began changing his vision of food. Most chefs design their food so that what they present to the diner points back to their artistry. Dan started wanting to present food that points to the farmers and celebrates their mastery.

For Dan, great tasting food is inextricably linked to the quality of the land and the skill of the farmer rather than a product of the cleverness of the chef. To illustrate his point, I'd like to share three of Barber's stories with you about [a duck liver](#), [a fish](#), and a carrot. If you want the whole story, the first two can be found on TED and the third in the On Being podcast. I only hope the tasty samples I can offer you this morning will whet your appetite for more.

Many of us refuse to order foie gras. Of course, if you are a vegetarian, you've already got a reason to reject this dish. But, from the animal cruelty standpoint, eating foie gras is even more objectionable. Some states have even considered banning it. The reason for this is the way it is produced. Ducks are force fed grain, called gavage, to inflate the size of their livers many times. Chefs prize this kind of liver because of its exquisite flavor. So following the hedonistic principle, would encourage one to consume it. But valuing the ethical treatment of animals would drive us to want to eliminate it from the menu.

So when Barber heard of a prize winning "natural" foie gras being produced in Spain, he decided to investigate. The producer is a fellow named [Eduardo Sousa](#). He takes advantage of the fact that when the temperature drops in the fall, his free-range geese naturally gorge themselves on grain as they prepare for the winter. So, no gavage, no cruelty. His great-granddad started doing this in 1812.

Actually, this way of fattening geese was known way back in Biblical times. [Supposedly](#) the Jews discovered the delights of foie gras. When Pharaoh found out about it, he didn't just want it once or twice a year, but all year-round. That's when the practice of gavage was started. And many forgot this history and assumed the only way to produce the delicacy was through force feeding the poor ducks.

But that is only one aspect of the excellent flavor of Eduardo's foie gras. He loves his ducks that freely roam his difficult to farm land that also produces olives and figs. He is happy to let his ducks eat 50 percent of his crop if they want it. Eduardo provides them with flavorful herbs they like to eat that enhance the flavor of his product. He noticed his ducks didn't like his electric fence to keep them in, so he rewired it. The electric wires are now on the outside of the fence to keep the predators out. The ducks are so pleased with their accommodations, they will call out to passing flocks of wild geese to encourage them to stop by, visit, eat and mate with them. Yes, he harvests them for food, but they have a very high quality of life while living on his farm.

Given the challenges today of overfishing, chefs like Barber look for sustainably raised and harvested fish to put on the menu. Some of the best tasting fish like salmon are usually farmed in unsustainable ways. Farmed salmon are often fed ground up wild fish caught by large, diesel-gulping trawlers that further deplete the ocean fish stock. Dan thought he had found a good fish farm with the lowest feed stock ratio of 2.5 pounds of feed to 1 pound of fish – best in the business. It wasn't until he discovered the feedstock was primarily ground up chicken rendering waste that he became disillusioned.

While in Spain, traveling in search of really great tasting food, he ate some overcooked fish

that caught his attention. Even though the chef had botched the preparation, the flavor of the fish shone through. On investigation, he was drawn to the source of the fish on the Mediterranean coast, [Veta La Palma](#). Originally, canals were dug into the wetlands to drain it for cattle production. That business failed. The new owner reversed the direction of the canals, flooding the land to use it to farm fish. But the farming methods were novel.

Instead of setting up a fish production facility, they set up a fish friendly ecosystem that looks more like a bird sanctuary. By last count, they had 600,000 birds on the property representing 250 species. By encouraging a rich diversity of algae, phytoplankton and zooplankton that feed the fish, the fish don't need to be fed anything. The ecosystem itself produces enough food for everyone, including the flamingos.

The story of the pink flamingos who come there to feed is magical. The birds eat the shrimp, fish and fish eggs that are being farmed, 20% of the crop. But their droppings are feeding the ecosystem. Their strategy is to farm extensively not intensively. "The flamingos eat the shrimp. The shrimp eat the phytoplankton. So the pinker the belly, the better the system. These flamingos don't even nest there. They fly 150 miles each day to feed because the shrimp are so tasty.

Okay, I've talked about ducks and fish, what about vegetables. Barber advocates a diet that a local region can support. This is one reason he doesn't advocate vegetarianism if the region is best adapted to grazing as it is here in our region. It makes perfect sense however to be a vegetarian in Southern California where fresh produce can be grown all year-round.

That said, our cold weather provides some advantages for growing root vegetables like carrots. Carrots in the ground after a couple of hard freezes go through some interesting changes. To protect their cell structure from being destroyed by ice crystals, the carrot converts its carbohydrates into sugars. This doesn't happen in warmer climates. This actually increases the nutrient-density of the carrot making it much sweeter.

Other vegetables like spinach and kale are very hardy and grow just fine in very cold temperatures. Add indoor gardening to sprout seeds and grow fresh greens along with stored roots, onions and garlic and we can eat locally all year-round quite effectively and nutritiously without sacrificing great flavor.

Does eating locally mean totally giving up imported foods? No it doesn't have to. What it means is a change in attitude about those foods. Fifty or a hundred years ago, few people ate foods out of season. They just were not available. And foods like oranges that traveled many miles were delicacies to be savored. If you have strawberries in February, it's a special treat not something repeated on a daily basis. The same goes for other exotic foods that need to

come from half way around the world. When energy is no longer cheap, those long distance foods will become far more expensive anyway.

The critical message I have for you is we are responsible for the food system we get. What we choose to eat each day is a powerful vote. With modern data tracking methods, vendors are carefully watching what we buy and don't buy. Even small changes don't go unnoticed. Each one of us really can make a difference by how and where we spend our money. Choosing to buy a community supported agriculture share this winter, planning a garden for the spring and starting some seeds now, shopping at farmers markets and the Honest Weight Food Coop are excellent ways to vote for a different kind of food system than we have today. I particularly like shopping at the Coop because they have already selected the safest, most ethical food available for me to enjoy.

What I find delightful is the conjunction of hedonism and good food practices. The best tasting food is usually raised with the most respect for the land and the environment in which it is produced. What this hedonism requires is my willingness to value taste over price. Rather than looking for the cheapest tomatoes or peppers or carrots I can find, I need to buy the ones that taste better. And the ones that taste better are likely to be fresher, more nutritious, and most likely raised according to healthier principles. Because we've eaten factory food for so long, we've lost our taste for really delicious food. By choosing the best tasting food, we start turning the system around.

And, yes, this is going to cost more money. You're going to spend a lot of money at Barber's restaurant. But since we already eat way too much food, I suspect if we are more satisfied by the really good tasting food we eat, we may be willing to eat less of it, balancing out the cost somewhat.

But this is a much bigger topic. Barber is often asked how he envisions scaling this up to feed 7 billion people. I'll be addressing his thoughts on this subject along with other reflections on eating for peace and justice next week.

Between now and then, I encourage you to indulge your desire for flavorful food, but not to settle for less than the best tasting food you can find. And see if it satisfies you!