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We are what we eat!

After the great flood in the Book of Genesis, and the story of Noah and the ark, the Hebrew people began to live under a set of rules about what they could and couldn't eat. These rules are still followed by many Jews around the world today. In the different creation stories at the beginning of Genesis, God makes it quite clear to the first humans that they are meant to be vegetarians. God says: "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food." (Gen 1:29). But then, after the flood, God apparently realizes that humans have eaten, and will eat, meat, despite his earlier declaration. So this time, God gives Noah dominion over the animals, the birds, and the fish, and God tells Noah: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood." (Gen 9:3-4).

But that was only the beginning of Jewish dietary laws. The books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy lay out elaborate rules for what Jews could and could not eat. These laws, which were essentially about purity, i.e., food that was clean or unclean, would eventually become the laws of *Kashrut*, or Kosher. Jews were permitted to eat certain land animals, primarily cattle, sheep, and goats, which were the animals also used for sacrifice in religious ceremonies. Distinctions were made on the basis of whether an animal chewed a cud or had divided hooves. Thus the exclusion of the pig over the centuries, for both Jews and Muslims. Creatures of the oceans and rivers were permitted only if they had scales and fins. Birds were permitted, except mostly for the raptors: vultures, eagles, and the like. And so on.

Here's an example of a modern set of dietary rules (MBA card) – Karen and I are vegetarians who eat seafood, so we follow these guidelines pretty strictly. Which species are endangered? Which are OK if farmed, and which are not. And we also have begun to look at where the fish come from. Are we willing to eat a species that has come around the world to get to us, rather than caught locally, and so forth.

But back to Jewish dietary laws! What do they have to do with us today? Well, a couple of things suggest themselves. First of all, note that it is very easy to keep kosher if you are a vegetarian. Almost the rather arduous rules come into play if you want to eat meat. First, the blood must be drained from any meat. And then there are all the rules about what is clean and what is unclean. What was God trying to tell the Jews? According to Rabbi Michael Lerner, the hidden message in the kosher rules is this: Okay, you can eat meat. But it's going to be such a hassle for you, and what you can eat is going to be so restricted, that you will gradually realize that it's easier to be a vegetarian. And so, some Jewish communities, such as Rabbi Lerner's have made it standard practice at their communal meals to be vegetarian.

But there's another thing to notice about following rules such these, or even those in the list from MBA. Focusing on the provenance of what we are eating – where it comes from, how it got here, how it was raised – can lead to sense of mindfulness about what we are eating. For example, when we think about how cattle are raised in

massive feedlots, spending their whole lives standing in filth, force-fed with antibiotics, fed with grains raised through monoculture rather than eating grass, slaughtered inhumanely, it becomes harder to justify killing another animal to satisfy our palates. It also becomes harder to ignore the fact that the grain fed to farm animals could be used instead to feed tens of millions of hungry people around the world.

[PAUSE]

Well, here we are in that season from Thanksgiving to Christmas, when food is such a huge factor in our lives. Surely, sitting down to meals together with family and friends is a good thing, and we enjoy doing it in this Fellowship. Still, in the midst of our busy lives, as occupy ourselves with obtaining food, and preparing it, and serving it, and cleaning up afterwards, it might be a good thing to develop a sense of awareness about the food we are eating. And for this, I want to preach about this morning from the gospel according to Michael Pollan. Some of you, I know, are familiar with his work. Michael Pollan formerly wrote about food issues for the *New York Times*, and is presently on the faculty of the Journalism School at UC Berkeley. Perhaps his best-known book is *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. His latest book is *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto*, in which he discusses Americans' eating habits in some detail. Summed up, his message is "Eat Food. Not too much. Mostly plants." Or, as he himself jokingly put it, "never eat anything your grandmother wouldn't recognize as food."

I want to focus particularly on an article of Pollan's that was published in the *New York Times Magazine* in October. It is entitled "Farmer in Chief," because it is written as a letter to the yet-to-be-decided President-Elect, addressing food policy for the coming years. I recommend the article highly. You should be able to obtain from the New York Times website, but I will also make a copy available in our beginning library at our Hess Ave. office. Pollan makes his case for a new agricultural policy elegantly and persuasively, but his essential point is fairly simple. Our present food system provides us with relatively cheap food, because it is highly dependent on the use of fossil fuels. And this system is rapidly becoming unsustainable as cheap fossil fuel becomes a thing of the past. And yet, every calorie we eat is a product of an energy source that is free – the sun, through the process of photosynthesis. So Pollan's argument to the new president is essentially this – we need to set a new course towards a system of food production that is based on energy from the sun (as has been the case for every food system the world has known up till now). And as do that, we need to wean ourselves from our dependence on petroleum products to put our food on the table. And Pollan suggests many steps we might take to accomplish this massive transition back to sustainable agriculture. I urge you seek out his article to read them in detail.

After automobiles, our food system uses more fossil fuel than any other sector of our economy – 19 percent. And the way we feed ourselves contributes more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere than anything else we do – as much as 37 percent by some estimates. In 1940, 2.3 calories of food energy were produced for every calorie of fossil fuel used to produce it. Today, it takes 10 calories of fossil fuel to produce 1 calorie of modern supermarket food. Industrialization of agriculture in the 20th century increased the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by the food system by an order of magnitude. Chemical fertilizers are made from natural gas, pesticides are made from petroleum, and of course farm machinery, modern food processing and packaging, and transportation all require massive quantities of fossil fuels. So, when we eat food

from the industrial-food system, we are essentially eating oil and spewing greenhouse gases.

Now, to be sure, our current food system does accomplish something unprecedented in history – it produces a huge amount of calories for a very low price to the consumer. It is a significant achievement for an American to go to a fast-food restaurant and to buy a double cheeseburger, fries, and a coke, for a price less the cost of an hour of labor at the minimum wage. Unfortunately, though, this system doesn't take account of the quality of the food calories it produces. Back in the 1950s and 60s was the last time high food prices produced political fallout. So decisions were made to promote maximum production of commodity crops – corn, soybeans, wheat, and rice. And these are the crops from which most of our supermarket foods are derived. And this is where mindfulness comes in. Most of us have no idea that one of the main ingredients in these kinds of foods is “high-fructose corn syrup.” And this lack of knowledge, of course, is one of the reasons we are experiencing a major crisis of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and so on.

So how did we get here? Well, it's important to recognize that this dependence on monocultures of corn and soy in the field, and cheap calories of fat, sugar and feedlot meat on the table, is not simply the result of a free market. It is the product of a specific set of policies that drove a shift from solar and human energy on the farm to reliance on fossil-fuel energy. Cheap energy enabled the creation of monocultures, and monocultures vastly increased the productivity of the land. But the transformation did not occur by happenstance. The government encouraged the conversion of the munitions industry to making chemical fertilizer (both use large amounts of ammonium nitrate) and the conversion of nerve-gas research to making pesticides. And the government also began subsidizing the commodity crops, paying farmers for the all the corn, soybeans, wheat and rice they could produce. The cheap grain was produced by the system only because the government paid farmers. And note that this system was dependent on the availability of cheap oil to keep it going.

Before the application of oil and natural gas to agriculture, farmers relied on crop diversity, the presence of farm animals, and photosynthesis both to replenish the soil and to combat pests, as well as to feed themselves and their neighbors. But subsidized monocultures of grain led to subsidized monocultures of animals – with cheap grain, America's meat and dairy animals migrated from farm to feedlot. But note what we did – by taking animals off farms to produce cheaper calories, we created two new problems. Previously, grazing animals had replenished fields depleted by crops. No need for fertilizers, and no pollution problem. By moving animals to feedlots, we forced farmers to rely on chemical fertilizers and we created the huge problem of disposing of animal waste – a problem that has not been remedied.

And then, of course, there's the problem of transportation. What was once a series of regional food economies is now a system that is national, and even, global in scope. And this too was possible because of the availability of inexpensive fuel. But we have to recognize that we can no longer rely on cheap fuel. Increasingly, as consumers, we are beginning to pay attention to where our food comes from, and how it got here. More and more, we seek out local food producers at farmers markets and we look for food that is grown without fertilizers and pesticides. Many things need to happen for us to make the transition from fossil fuels, but one of them surely is to change our national

policies so that we promote these types of farming systems. Right now, the government actively discourages this type of farming – farmers receiving subsidies for growing monoculture crops are prohibited from growing “specialty crops,” which means fruits and vegetables. Policy should cut the other way. All farmers should be encouraged to diversify their crops, and thus to reduce their need for fertilizers and pesticides. Michael Pollan lays out many other policy changes that could be made to bring our food system more into line with the needs of the 21st Century. I don’t have time to go into them here, and I haven’t even touched on the issue of global and societal distribution of food – the fact that some of us have abundant affordable food choice while millions around the world go hungry. But I hope I have piqued your interest enough that we as a Fellowship might decide to explore these issues, and, more importantly, to act on them.

At our latest General Assembly, the UUA adopted a “study action issue” entitled “Ethical Eating.” It is designed to examine issues around the production, distribution, and use of food around the globe. A substantial study and resource guide has been posted on the UUA website. I encourage you to find it on the web, and to think about the questions that it raises. Next spring, congregations have an opportunity to submit comments to contribute to the drafting of a Unitarian Universalist “Statement of Conscience.” I would like to see us contribute to this effort to draft a statement on ethical eating.

Beginning in the new year, I would like for this Fellowship to form an adult study group on the subject of food. We are considering using a curriculum called “Menu for the Future,” that was produced by the Northwest Earth Institute. We found their curriculum on global climate change to be very powerful for last year’s study group on that subject. The curriculum includes articles by Michael Pollan, along with many other notable authors, and it addresses the many important questions we face as we try to be mindful about what we eat. We now have 2.25 acres of land on Hess Avenue. One project that came out of our study group would be creation of a community garden on the property. This could involve our children and youth in learning about how we grow our food. And who knows what other projects might come out of study and research into our food system?

We began this morning by considering Jewish dietary laws, and I want to return to the importance of food in religious teachings and practice. Because food is so central to our very existence, all religions have important teachings and ceremonies that celebrate the spiritual side of our relationship to food. For Christians, the Eucharist, or communion meal, celebrates the sharing of food within the community. It had its origins, of course, in the Passover meal that Jesus and his disciples shared in Jerusalem before Jesus was crucified. For early Christians, communion was an important ritual of sharing food that brought the community together. Only centuries later did it become the macabre celebration of Jesus’ death as atonement for humanity’s sins. And it’s the community aspect of sharing food that we need to be celebrating today.

We gather frequently for potluck meals where we share both food and companionship. We find spiritual sustenance in this act of sharing food. In two weeks, we will celebrate the winter holidays with a potluck meal; gathering to share stories and songs, and fellowship. And as we continue these rituals around food, may we also develop our mindfulness about food and its importance in our lives. May we become more mindful about the provenance of the food we share. Where does it come from?

Who worked to grow it? What's in it? Is it healthy? Would my grandmother recognize it as food?