

Opening Words

Food for the Spirit by Rev. Mary Wellenmeyer, UU Church of Manchester, NH

In one church it was meals,
prepared and frozen
to be shared with those in need.
Food was handed out at the door
or taken where it was needed.

In another church it was casseroles,
brought to families
whose strength was consumed
by illness or disaster.

Small gestures, these,
little hairs on the roots
of community, reaching into the soil,
drawing the nutrients of earth.

When we sing together,
share a meal together,
make soup together,
the hairs on the roots
reach out then, too,
nourishing us in ways beyond the ways
we may think we know.

The dark soil is full of nutrients.
It feeds our bodies and nurtures our communities.

Come let us worship together.

A Communion for the Community, One Table at a Time

By Rev. Katherine Jesch
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Orencia, Oregon
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Good morning! I'm so glad you invited me to join you here at Community Church this morning to celebrate communion – that beautiful metaphor for gathering and nourishing each other in community.

I begin with a recipe: (or a “receipt” as my grandmother would call it.)

“In all your life you will be hard-pressed to find something as simple, soothing, forgiving, and consoling as lentil soup. You can take things out of it or put things into it. It can be fancy or plain. Lentils are friendly – the Miss Congeniality of the bean world. They take well to almost anything.

“But let us start from scratch. The most minimal lentil soup calls for a cup of lentils; a quart of water or stock of any kind; one each sliced carrot and celery stalk; one or two cloves of garlic; maybe a bay leaf; one small diced onion; and there you are. This makes a nice plain soup to which no hungry person can object.”

This recipe by Laurie Colwin in her collection *More Home Cooking*, is about communion – simple, comforting, and as she says, forgiving.

That old fable, *Stone Soup*, is also about communion. Do you know it? The story goes like this: [from: http://spanky.triumf.ca/www/fractint/stone_soup.html]

Once upon a time, there was a great famine in which people jealously hoarded whatever food they could find, hiding it even from their friends and neighbors. One day a stranger arrived in the village and began asking questions as if he planned to stay for the night.

"There's not a bite to eat in the whole province," he was told. "Better keep moving on." "Oh, I have everything I need," he said. "In fact, I was thinking of making some stone soup to share with all of you."

He pulled an iron cauldron from his wagon, filled it with water, and built a fire under it. Then, with great ceremony, he drew an ordinary-looking stone from a velvet bag, and dropped it into the water.

By now, hearing the rumor of food, most of the villagers had come to the square or watched from their windows. As the visitor sniffed the "broth" and licked his lips in anticipation, hunger began to overcome skepticism among the villagers.

"Ahh," the stranger said to himself, just loud enough to hear, "I do like a tasty stone soup. Of course, stone soup with *cabbage* – now that's hard to beat."

Soon a villager brings a cabbage he'd retrieved from its hiding place, and adds it to the pot.

"Capital!" cried the visitor. "You know, I once had stone soup with cabbage, and a bit of salt beef as well. It was fit for a king."

The village butcher managed to find some salt beef hiding in the back of his cupboard . . . and so it went, through potatoes, onions, carrots, celery, maybe even some lentils, until there was a delicious meal for all. Their feast that night was indeed a communion.

Pot lucks are another way people offer and receive communion. We Unitarian Universalists are famous for them! People usually bring their best dishes. Even if you don't dictate what to bring – you know the drill: People whose names begin with A through H bring salad, I through R bring main dish, S through Z bring dessert . . . You rarely have a major component of the meal missing. Besides, who would care if everyone brings dessert? Everyone loves good food. And we especially love it when the food is shared – with good friends, accompanied by good conversation.

In the years I was doing Green Sanctuary workshops around the country, the green teams often would organize a pot luck when I visited. All Souls Unitarian Church in Kansas City would call it an "eat your values" lunch. "Eat your values" meant people were asked to bring food that was consistent with their environmental principles. It's low on the food chain, locally produced, mostly organic, and results in little waste. Not everyone followed all the rules, but it did get people thinking and talking about the impact of the food they were eating. And when you pay that much attention, the food is usually delicious and healthful. Since I started suggesting this idea when I visited other churches, the idea has become very popular.

Most of us are aware that something in our food system is seriously broken. For those of you who attended the film festival this week, you got this point all too well, I'm sure. [Films included *King Corn* and *Food, Inc.*] As the family farm has given way to corporate agriculture, to huge industrial complexes, a widening disconnection has developed: Many Americans have no idea where their food comes from, how it is made, or what it costs beyond the price at check out, and that, they think, is way too high.

It is past time to start questioning the justice and sustainability of industrial agricultural practices, with their far-reaching impact on the environment, workers, and food animals, and on all those humans who don't have access to safe and healthy food.

I know your film festival this week focused on these issues. Many of you probably already knew about industrial agriculture and factory farms. You're conscious of the antibiotics and hormones fed to animals that we're going to eat. You recognize how monoculture of food crops increases risk famine when a pest or disease devastates the whole crop on all farms within a region.

And you're at least skeptical about bio-technologies that fiddle with the genes of our food crops. You may also be aware of how some of these strategies are forced on farmers in the developing world, not only making them extremely vulnerable to disaster from crop failures, but also destroying their food related cultural heritage and robbing them of their inherited wisdom of how to farm with nature instead of using expensive technologies they can ill afford.

As the "Green Revolution" over the last forty years increased our ability to cheaply feed the masses, it has also increased the risk to our food security. Wal-Mart style marketing has taught us to expect very cheap prices for our foods, but we hide from the knowledge that cheap food is only cheap because of government handouts and regulatory indulgence, not to mention

the exploitation of workers, animals and the environment on which its supposed “economies” depend.

Cheap food is food dishonestly priced — It is, in fact, unconscionably expensive. Most agricultural workers in the U.S. are immigrants. Conditions are hazardous and pay is low. Recent exposés reveal the substandard living and working conditions of workers and the cruel treatment of animals on factory farms. And as rapidly developing countries transform land previously used for their local food production, into grain production for animals and bio-energy for export, the world stockpiles of grain diminish, prices rise, and hunger increases. We subsidize unhealthy crops, making a handful of people incredibly wealthy and hundreds of thousands of our citizens obese, at least partly because they don’t have access to healthy food. When it’s cheaper to buy soda and chips than a good salad, what can we expect?

This is indeed a dismal picture, but it isn’t the whole picture. We know what we need to do, and there are increasing examples of advocates and activists working to change the situation on a local level, even as they work increasingly for systemic change. Young people are returning to farming as a lifestyle and a career. Farmers markets are expanding to meet increasing demand. And advocacy groups are achieving some successes in campaigns for better wages and protections for migrant farm workers.

Some of our salvation will lie in recovering indigenous wisdom and agricultural practices, gained over millennia of experience with unique and locally sustainable ecosystem. One of my favorite authors is Gary Paul Nabhan. He’s an ethno-botanist who studies the reciprocal relationship between food plants and human culture. His focus is primarily on the desert southwest of the United States and Mexico, but his principles of a place-based diet apply in any ecosystem. One of his most important discoveries, or re-discoveries he would say, is the absolute necessity of diversity for a sustainable food system. And he means both plant diversity and cultural diversity. Farmers have been co-evolving food plants for dozens of millennia, selectively breeding the plants they want to domesticate from their wild ancestors.

Cultural evolution supports and reinforces this process of botanical evolution, modifying specific plants to make them fit within the culture and the ecosystem. When a crop fails because of a pest or disease, or a prolonged drought, indigenous societies depended on the wild plants remaining in their region to reintroduce native genes with pest resistance, drought tolerance, or other necessary factors in the face of challenge.

This process has been critical throughout human evolution, but it is thwarted today by our industrial model of food production. As an antidote here in Oregon, a group of farmers and ranchers came together a couple of months ago to re-claim agriculture. They drafted the “Agricultural Reclamation Act” that proposes a road map for future food and agricultural policy for our great state that prioritizes family-scale farms and ranches, food security, and rural economic viability. They claim that regulations fit for industrial agriculture are inappropriate for family scale farms, (well, duh!) and are hampering the ability to manage local and sustainable food production.

The article I saw in the Oregonian the other day didn’t give much detail, but we should watch for the public release of this bill to consider whether we want to support it. At least in concept, it looks like a significant step to support the kind of food we’re talking about. And if it’s real, it won’t go down easily with industrial agriculture. It will need all our support.

Faith communities have been focusing on the ethics of what we eat for several years now, Unitarian Universalists are among them. You may already know that as an Association, we have

been exploring what we eat and how it's produced so that we can make choices that are healthier and more sustainable for ourselves, for all communities around the world, and for the Earth itself. That study process will come to a head as the Commission on Social Witness prepares a draft Statement of Conscience on Ethical Eating next fall for consideration at General Assembly the following summer. I hope you'll be a part of the review of that draft statement. Maybe we'll want to consider the new Oregon legislation as a model of some for what our statement should say.

The risks of the industrial system are well documented, as are the benefits of avoiding food grown in that manner. Here in the Northwest, we're really fortunate to live in a place where a healthier culture of food is part of our lifestyle. What's really wonderful about it is that the same elements that make for a healthy and sustainable food system also make a healthy community. In this culture we often overlook the spiritual aspect of our food rituals, but it is central.

Homo sapiens is the only species that makes a bigger deal out of it than simple survival. We not only eat to live, we have developed great traditions of living to eat. Practically every social occasion is organized around food and drink: whether it's a date with a new friend, a quick meeting after work or school, a Saturday evening community gathering, or the social hour after worship. Because food is such a communal experience, it has a special role in gathering and building community. Sharing a meal somehow opens us to our interdependence with each other. We feel less threatened, more connected.

For some of us, the task of planning and preparing a meal may bring as much pleasure as sitting down to eat. Sharing the preparation tasks: cutting, measuring, stirring, sautéing – not to mention the cleaning up, all the while sharing stories and jokes – this is the stuff of community.

I had a wonderful experience during my last year at Starr King School for the Ministry that reinforced for me the role of food in community building. I stumbled on the opportunity to live in a group house near the campus with seven other house members. The couple who owned the place were left-over Berkeley hippies from the 1970's. They had lived in shared housing most of their lives so when they found this house so near the University, they immediately saw the potential for a communal household. They had six bedrooms to rent out, and they wanted international graduate students who would be willing to be a part of community at home. Fortunately for me, each year they accepted one American student along with the foreign students, so I got to be the token Yankee that year.

There was only one rule (besides the usual expectations of sharing chores and keeping the noise down at night – rarely a problem among dedicated graduate students.) We were required to share meals four nights every week, and each night someone different would cook. We kept a calendar on the refrigerator, and each person would sign up to cook one night every two weeks. This was a brilliant rule. Sharing meals builds community. Before long the students were socializing, having pizza parties on weekends, going to movies together, sharing skills (one member set up a website for us), telling stories about their homeland, and so on. Over the course of a year, some lovely friendships blossomed.

The semester after I left, a Japanese woman who had stayed on became involved with a French housemate. About two years later I received an invitation to their wedding in Paris. I couldn't go, but the German who had been in our household invited the rest of us to provide recipes for some of the dishes we had shared so that he could create a cookbook as a wedding gift for them, complete with photos from our time in the house.

Sharing meals builds community. We learn from infancy that sharing food is a very powerful way of sharing love. Our mother feeds us, therefore she loves us. If someone is sick, a neighbor brings a casserole. To celebrate a birthday, promotion, whatever, a spouse or friend takes you out to dinner.

Approaching food with compassion and intentional thought expands and enriches our understanding of our interdependence with all living entities: soil, plants, food animals; food “intermediaries” such as farmers, grocers, and chefs; and our families, friends and neighbors with whom we share our meals. Good food takes time and care to grow and prepare. Ayurvedic traditions in India say that the energies of those who prepare the food transfer into the food to nourish the eaters.

The slow food movement is based on time. Like relationships with friends, families, and lovers, our relationship with the land that nourishes the food we grow, takes time and intention. It’s more labor intensive, giving both farmers and chefs time to indulge in a deeper relationship with the animals and plants that will nourish us; and encouraging us to take time to be mindful about what and how we eat.

Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hahn tells us that when we eat mindfully, we’re in close touch with the food. “The food we eat comes from nature, from living beings, and from the cosmos. It reveals the interconnectedness of the Universe, the Earth, all living beings, and ourselves. Each bite contains the life of the sun and of the Earth. We can see the meaning and value of life in those precious morsels of food. Our way of producing food and eating it can be violent to other species and our own bodies, and to the Earth, or it can heal and replenish the Earth and our own bodies. With each meal, we make choices that help or harm Mother Earth. When we’re able to get out of the shell of our small self, and see that we’re interrelated with everyone and everything, we see that each of our acts affects the whole of humankind, the whole Cosmos.”

As we experience these connections, the food we eat may help us to stumble across the essence of our Seventh Principle: the interdependence of all existence, of which we are a part. May we hold on to that wisdom. And may we nourish ourselves and each other by caring for the Earth’s capacity to bring us food that sustains both our bodies and our spirits, so that we may truly know the communion of all that is.

May it be so.
And may we make it so.

Closing Words

Let us remain grounded on the soil of this planet, our home.
Let us remember where our food comes from,
and choose our meals to insure the health of this precious earth.
And let us often share our food, and our stories about sharing food,
in communion with each other,
nourishing our souls as we feed our bodies.
Thank you for allowing me to be in communion with you this morning.
Bon appetite!