

**Eating Our Way through the Interdependent Web
An Ethic of Food for Unitarian Universalists**

**Rev. Charlotte Shivers
All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church
March 28, 2004**

Opening Words:

Be welcome here.
You join a community of seekers
Who look toward many traditions
To find the truths we need
To guide us on our way.

This morning we seek truth from Chief Seattle:

“This we know. The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.
This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family.
All things are connected. ...
We did not weave the web of life; we are merely one strand in it.
Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.

Be welcome in our community of seekers.

Introduction to Silence and Centering: The Rev. James Ford tells the story this way: “In the muggy heat of Columbus, Ohio, at the 1984 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, a crowd of rationalists, [humanists], atheists, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, pagans and miscellaneous others ...” were gathered to approve a new statement of Principles. After years of amending, negotiating, and wrangling we were ready for the final vote when the holy spirit moved among us in the form of one more motion. The Reverend Paul L’Herrou offered an amendment that gave new words to our seventh principle: “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

That Seventh Principle passed without further discussion. The Reverend David Bumbaugh has called it “the heart of a faith for the twenty-first century.”

Now may we rationalists, humanists, atheists, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, pagans and miscellaneous others share silence. As we breathe together may we be sustained by this common breath, aware that the Web breaths through us ... and in us ... may we share silence ...

Peace. Shalom. Amen.

Readings: A revision of words from Pastor Martin Niemoller:

First they milled the flour, threw away the germ ... and added a few vitamin extracts.
And I didn't speak up because I eat whole grains....

Then they laced the beef with hormones and antibiotics.
And I didn't speak up, because I don't eat beef.

Then they fed chickens artificial pellets and kept them from sunlight.
And I didn't speak up, because I don't eat chickens or eggs. ...

Then they marketed fish contaminated with mercury, dioxin, and PCBs.
And I didn't speak up, because I don't eat fish.

Then they grew the vegetables with commercial fertilizer and sprayed them with pesticides.
And I didn't speak up, because I eat only organic vegetables.

Then they spliced the genes of the vegetables with toxic viruses, and the pollen from the vegetables
blew into the organic gardens and contaminated the organic vegetables.

And I spoke up because there was nothing left for me to eat.¹

Second Reading: Rev. Melitta Haslund wrote from her home in an avocado orchard,

“Helicopters, planes and huge land sprayers douse the orchards with pesticides at least twice a year. They sprayed last week. As I sat at my desk, I saw plumes of pesticide dissipate into the air. Farm laborers have long suffered serious illness as a result of frequent exposure to the pesticides. In fact, the entire valley is affected: local doctors report numerous complaints of headaches, nausea and sore throats. It does not end in this valley either. Our food, vegetables, fruits and produce are covered with pesticides.”

“... why have only 10% of the 35,000 pesticides, introduced since 1945, been tested for health effects? I believe part of the problem has to do with our collective denial that these are deadly to our interdependent web of existence.”

“We can demand organically grown produce. We have already seen changes on the shelves at the markets. Recycled paper products, biodegradable detergents, are slowly becoming the norm. These changes reflect our growing consciousness of our interconnections.”²

¹ From the website saynotogmos, anonymous.

² “Melitta’s Musings,” Newsletter, Sepulveda Unitarian-Universalist Society, 5/13/92 – 6/13/92, 2.

Responsive Reading
(Response words are from the Ute Indians - Hymnbook #551)

It requires the equivalent of 3 or 4 tons of TNT per acre for modern American farming.¹

Earth teach me stillness as the grasses are stilled with night.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, approximately 75% of the world's agricultural diversity has been lost in the last century.²

Earth teach me suffering as old stones suffer with memory.

One pound of steak from steers raised in a feedlot costs five pounds of grain, 2,500 gallons of water, the energy equivalent of a gallon of gasoline, and about 35 pounds of eroded topsoil.³

Earth teach me caring as parents who secure their young.

The place we call home, the Midwest, the Breadbasket, ... the Heartland is an ecological sacrifice area.⁴

Earth teach me regeneration as the seed which rises in the spring.

The seventh principle calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday experience.⁵

Earth teach me to remember kindness as dry fields weep with rain.

Our goal should be sustainability – a balance between the human impact on the natural world and the world's ability to support life indefinitely.⁶

Earth teach me courage as the tree which stands all alone.

Consumer demand for food from sustainable farms must be built, and the best place to start is with people who are concerned about the environment, but haven't made the connection between their grocery list and the endangered species list yet.⁷

ALL: Earth teach us courage.

[For information and encouragement as you try to link your grocery list to the Seventh Principle:

www.eatwild.org,

www.saynotogmos.com

www.cropchoice.org,

www.kansascityfoodcircle.org

www.cfra.org Center for Rural Affairs, Lyons, NE

www.practicalfarmers.org,

www.landinstitute.org, Wes Jackson, Salina, KS

www.organicconsumers.org

www.sierraclub.org/environment (go to factory farming and look at their "Meatrix!")]

¹ Richard Manning, "The Oil We Eat: Following the Food Chain back to Iraq," *Harpers Magazine*, 2-04, p. 39.

² Helen Norbert-Hodge, Peter Goering, and John Page, "From Global to Local: Sowing the Seeds of Community," *The Ethics of Food*, ed. Gregory E. Pence, p. 198.

³ Peter Singer, "Animal Liberation and Vegetarianism," *Ethics of Food*, p. 33.

⁴ Unitarian Universalist Laura L. Jackson and Dana L. Jackson, *The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems*, p. 3.

⁵ Unitarian Universalist minister, David Bumbaugh, "The Heart of a Faith for the Twenty-first Century," *UU Selected Essays*, 1994, p. 37.

⁶ The Unitarian Universalist 2001 Statement of Conscience, "Responsible Consumption Is Our Moral Imperative."

⁷ Dana Jackson, *The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems*, p. 249

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Bob and I enjoyed our time at All Souls immensely when we were here officially for my interim ministry – just before you called Jim Eller – and we enjoy being a part of the community again.

I told some of you a few weeks ago that if you heard my sermon you would not want to eat again. We laughed. But it is a difficult topic.

Let me tell you how it started. I am part of a ministers' study group and this was the year that it was my turn to produce an essay – a studied, footnoted, research into some aspect of our religion. I had procrastinated all last year searching for a theme.

Then early last December I had a meeting with the man who is farming some of our land organically. *Organic* is radical in southern Iowa where Bob and I live in the 1890's farm home where I grew up.

My parents gave my sisters and me not only that home and farm but a religion of the land that echoes Chief Seattle: We do not own the land; we are here to take care of it."

Watching this farm through the past 50 years has not been all joyful. The rich diversity is gone – oats, wheat, flax, barley, sorghum, corn, brome, alfalfa, clover, sheep, hogs, cattle, horses, chickens – it's gone. For all our loving management, our farm is like most of the Corn Belt, a monoculture of corn and soybeans with occasional hay ground. We spend far more money on fertilizer, pesticide and herbicide than on seed. It operates barely in the black only because of the subsidies we all are paying. **(It is still beautiful, though – I don't want to scare away the folks who bought a weekend there at the talent auction!).**

Last year we were finally able to reach toward a better way and found a young farmer who was willing and eager to attempt the rigors of "certified organic" on 160 acres of our land.

Because I'm the managing partner for my sisters right now, I was the one to have this December meeting with our farmer and his son – who is majoring in agriculture at Iowa State University. The year had gone well and we were in a celebration mode as we ate Bob's cookies and reviewed and divided. As they were leaving, the son pulled forth two books saying, "My mother thought you would enjoy these."

Enjoy wasn't quite the right word. *Epiphany* might have been better. One book was coffee table size with a picture of a monotonous row crop, complete with chemical spray – named *Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*. The other was cheerier; a Brueghal painting was background to the title, *The Ethics of Food*.

I suddenly realized my essay topic: not just the ethics of food, but something directed to that huge gap I had felt in my religion between our Unitarian Universalist reverence for an interdependent web on the one hand and our general silence about the environmental catastrophe which produces our food, on the other. The essay I wrote contained 51 footnotes, and 8 of my brave colleagues not only listened through it but urged me on.

Where is our ethic of food in our reverence for the interdependent web? How is food sacred in this religion? We know as well as the children that all our food comes from earth, but what happens between the earth and our table needs scrutiny.

Let's begin with the animals; like me you probably like to forget their story when you're looking at a menu or the meat counter. Bacon, for instance, ordinarily these days comes from an animal who never saw the light of day, lives crowded into pens called Confinement Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO). In the CAFO your eyes burn with the stench of the waste products from thousands of animals. It's almost as bad for the neighbors as it is for the hogs. The lobbying efforts of industrial agriculture are so powerful that the workers, our neighborhoods, our land, our water supply, our fish, etc. are all at risk from toxic air and toxic runoff that can escape the lagoons of hog waste.

The same with chicken – except they have their beaks cut off (no painkiller). Same with turkey – they have been so carefully bred for the white meat *the consumer demands* that some 270 million turkeys produced in these factories last year were all appropriately named “Broad Breasted White.” These ill-proportioned birds are unable to walk or have sex. But artificial insemination, hormones, antibiotics, and other drugs take care of everything – except the weeping of the Web.

The beef story is a little happier, but deceptive. You can still see herds of cattle grazing placidly on the meadow as you drive through the country. However, as the calves mature they go to factory feed lots. There, hormone implants, antibiotics, and other drugs short-circuit cows' **wondrous** natural digestive system, and we get fast fattening for fast food on the cheap grain that is grown with petroleum-based chemicals.

I'll bet that if we knew the full story of the meat and seafood products *most commonly sold* as food – the damage to them and the damage to earth – we would probably all be vegetarian for at least a day. Factory farming demands that we confront our moral selves in a new way when we eat meat. Although I once promised my pet sheep, Patty, that I would invent a meat substitute when I grew up, I broke my promise and can say that I'm all right with animals being raised for meat and killed for meat – **humanely**. But each time I re-visit *the way in which they are now raised for meat* I draw closer to becoming a total vegetarian. It seems unconscionable that an animal be trapped in a confined life of torture to provide humans with *haute cuisine*.

The animal story may be the most viscerally painful but the land story is a more serious threat: what we do to animals – except for species loss – could be healed in a generation or two. What our food production has done to the land will take eons to heal.

We spend 26 billion a year for farm support programs, encouraging commodity producers to buy fossil fertilizers which deplete the fossil energy store and increase our dependence on oil. The subsidies go largely for corn, soybeans, wheat, rice and cotton and have created monocultures of these crops, thereby destroying plant diversity and making the soil more sterile. The subsidies

encourage the large operator to buy out the small farmers and cause over production which in turn causes prices to go down which requires larger subsidies. The subsidized grain is used primarily to feed livestock in confinement/factory situations to provide cheap meat to U.S. consumers, meat that is higher in saturated fats than natural grass-fed meat and contributes to our rampant obesity. The subsidies undercut the agricultural economies of developing countries because they allow the U.S. to sell grains for less than the cost of production. And this “cost of production” does not include any repair or replacement for the topsoil loss, lack of a living wage for workers, loss of species, toxic chemical damage, millions of fish killed, nor the human damage in our body’s response to the chemicals. There is also no recompense for the cruel way in which we raise the animals we eat and the loss in our relationship to them

This has all happened so quickly – within the last 50 years. **How can we respect the interdependent web of all existence when this is the story of our food production?** How can we possibly intervene? Yet that is what we have called ourselves to do: “The seventh principle calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday experience.”

This radical theological position is so demanding that we may want simply to bury ourselves in the earth so our bodies can enrich the soil, and we will cause no more harm by eating. **But that is neither a positive nor a long-term solution.**

What to do? I find the most encouragement in a recent book co-edited by Unitarian Universalist Laura Jackson, *The Farm As Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems*. Her co-editor is her mother, Dana L. Jackson, and her father is a land hero to both Jim Eller and me, Wes Jackson, founder of Kansas’ Land Institute. There’s hope for me here because first of all they have named the elephant in the living room: agricultural land in this country has been sacrificed as an ecological disaster area. Second, they are encouraging because they begin with that small, devoted group of farmers who are making it work economically and ecologically. Third, *The Farm as Natural Habitat* shows that we, all varieties of environmentalists, can and must restore the *natural* beauty to our farm lands. It’s a matter of choices.

At Starr King divinity school where I studied many years ago, there was a small kitchen, popular for snacks and conversation. It had a way of filling with dirty dishes – until one bold artist posted a sign over the kitchen sink: **You are responsible for your own theology – and your own dishes.** Well, folks it turns out we’re responsible not only for our own theology and our own dishes, but our own food choices.

We could begin by moving *toward* a vegetarian or vegan diet. That would help the Web immensely. It’s estimated that “if Americans were to reduce their meat consumption by only 10 percent for one year, it would free 12 million tons of grain for human consumption – or enough to feed 60 million people.”⁸

Eating less meat – or insisting on “free-range” meat – not only respects animals as part of the Web, but weakens the market for the livestock who drive the grain machine that so damages our land.

⁸ Lester Brown, Overseas Development Council, 1974, as quoted by Peter Singer, “Animal Liberation and Vegetarianism,” *The Ethics of Food, A Reader for the 21st Century*, ed. Gregory E. Pence, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (Oxford, England, 2002), p. 33.

Many UU's are already there: The Reverend Ken Jones of our Tacoma church says he chooses an organic, vegan diet as a spiritual practice and sustainability as lifestyle. As to any challenges, he said "It's an odd thing, because I don't know how to handle the pot lucks yet."!!

If only pot lucks were our worst challenges! Our radical theology is even more demanding in the grocery store or restaurant. But we have immense power as *consumers*. One cattle man said, "I'd love to give up hormones ... If the consumer said, We don't want hormones, we'd stop in a second. The cattle could get along better without them. But the market signal's not there ..."⁹

As the consumers who drive the market, we lovers of the Web need to move on toward buying "certified organic." Though far from perfect, organic standards allow us to protect ourselves, farm workers, and the earth – by avoiding pesticides, herbicides, artificial fertilizers, genetically altered crops.

I personally promote organic especially because it's a way of boycotting the most threatening part of all: genetically altered, genetically engineered, genetically modified organisms, or biotech food. It's all the same. I'll call it GMO for genetically modified. It's a way of creating new plant varieties by splicing genes from one organism into a different one, to give this "genetically engineered" plant a new characteristic – longer shelf life, resistance to a particular herbicide, or more color, for instance.

GMO represents a major scientific achievement, as was splitting the atom. But both achievements have been treated very carelessly. GMO products have been handled as if people didn't know that pollen blows over fences and grain warehouses make mistakes. All this *permanently* contaminates other crops, other seeds. Our whole fragile ecological web is at risk.

I am angriest at GE for its claim that we need it to feed the world. That is not true¹⁰, but a myth generated out of greed. The New York Times summarized well in a heading, "Will the latest genetically modified food save the world? Or just the biotech industry?"¹¹ When GE producers like Monsanto start crying for better food distribution, more access to birth control, and for First World people to eat less meat, we'll know they really care about feeding the world.

Because GMO producers have resisted efforts to label foods as to their GMO content, we have to choose organic – or grow our own – to best discourage their threat to the planet. It's a great sign that Mendocino County, California, just voted to outlaw GMO production.

We can vote for earth by eating less meat and by choosing organic; we can eat like our Green Congregation's "Eat Your Values" lunch. But, best of all, we can buy *local*.

The man who wrote about the broad-breasted turkey, says, "The key word ... is 'traceability.' If the person behind the counter where you buy your turkey can name the farm or farmer who raised it,

⁹ Michael Pollan, "This Steer's Life," *New York Times Magazine*, 3/31/02, p. 51.

¹⁰ "The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has pointed out repeatedly that there is one and half times as much food produced in the world today as would be required to feed everyone on the planet 2,500 calories a day." *Organic News*, Autumn 2002, p. 4.

¹¹ Michael Pollan, *New York Times Magazine*, March 4, 2001, p. 15.

you are taking a step in the right direction. You'll help give turkeys a better life. You'll be kinder to the environment. And you might even wind up with a turkey that tastes, well, like a turkey."¹²

We need to *wake up to local* food. It was southern California where I shared my food essay with colleagues. That morning I looked out my window and saw oranges on the ground under an orange-filled tree. Washed and sliced those oranges became a kind of communion during the essay. They were delicious! We were appalled to realize that we had been meeting there 15 years and never eaten an orange before.

On local food, the great news is that you Kansas Citians are blessed with a Kansas City Food Circle (with leaders from this church!) to help you connect to local food, organic food, free range food. They can also connect you to that ultimate in local food, community supported agriculture (CSA) – that system in which you buy into a local produce farm and receive your fresh foods every week. You can select food with a clear conscience and drool over the fresh, healthy taste.

We are challenged as we try to follow our Seventh Principle. Our vote as consumers is strong as we let our food choices speak our values. But there's more. We are political animals, too, and we need to find strength in our own numbers. **We need to speak up.**

The cheer, my friends, is that we are not alone. We can choose from a multitude of groups to add our voice to the growing chorus demanding we reverence our food system as part of the Web. You can use that [www](#) web to find them – or the telephone. Start with the UUA. Or look at the web sites I included in the order of service – to help you connect to places where a single e-mail or phone call to your legislator could be a strong vote for the Web.

Finally, we can speak up to witness that these “farm bills” affect the heart of our Web. Over half of United States land is farmed or ranched, and the care of that land will improve dramatically as legislators learn that urban people know and care. We must complain as effectively about farm runoff being sent down the Mississippi as we have about the Alaska Wilderness being drilled for oil, as much about tax-supported, petroleum-based, row-crop monocultures as we have about tuna nets that catch the dolphin.

No choice is perfect, but our food choices need to be a vote for earth, a spiritual practice that connects us to the Web each time we eat. All food is sacrament if we raise it and transport it and serve it in a way that sustains this earth. “The seventh principle calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday experience.”

¹² “Traceability and Winding Up with a Turkey That Tastes, Well, Like a Turkey!!!” *New York Times*, from www.saynotogmos.org