

Eating Ethically

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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My daughter, Elizabeth, who is 30 now, has a good friend named Lori, whom she met back in grade school. We all, in our family, think Lori is an incredible young woman – smart, friendly, and dedicated to helping others. A few years ago she was one of the Peace Corps workers emergency-evacuated out of Africa’s Ivory Coast when fighting broke out in the area where she was working. My parents invited Lori to lunch when they were out in California this winter and had a delightful conversation, I heard. She’s now studying for an advanced degree in public health.

But, the rather amusing truth is that we weren’t always so crazy about Lori. One summer many years ago Liz invited Lori to come stay with us for a while at our summer cottage in western New York. I think the girls were about 13 or so. My Mom was there, as always, the one who made most of the decisions about our meals. We always ate, and still eat, very well at Chautauqua – lots of fresh local fruits and vegetables. But we also almost always have meat for our main meals.

The problem involving Lori arose when my mother found out Lori was a vegetarian. What was she going to fix for her to eat? Did she have to prepare two separate meals? What did vegetarians eat, anyway? It was really quite a dilemma for her. Vegetarian just isn’t her style of cooking. I think our problems with Lori stem from the fact that she was not just a vegetarian, she was a difficult vegetarian. She was a self-righteous thirteen year old who was very sure of her position, and rather intolerant of other points of view. I don’t think she was invited back for a while. Seventeen years later, Lori gets along much better with people, but she’s still a vegetarian. In fact, Elizabeth just told me that Lori is now a vegan. It makes me wonder what my mother prepared for lunch when they met in California.

I have told this little story merely to illustrate some of the hurdles standing in the way of more healthy and ethical ways of eating. Our old habits are hard to break. It’s also hard to teach an old dog new tricks – or convert my mother into a happy vegetarian homemaker. Not that my mother is an old dog, of course! Other obstacles? The idea that eating vegetarian or vegan is boring. The problem of being thought rude not to eat a meat dish that is served to you at someone else’s house. And these are only about the question of whether to eat meat – or not.

I’ve been a meat and animal products eater all my life. When I was young my birthday dinner request was invariably for “pull-apart roast beef.” That’s a pot roast, in case you didn’t recognize my less technical name. These days I eat a lot less red meat, but still fish and poultry – also eggs and various milk products. I have to say there are some days when the taste of a good steak sounds just about perfect. But up to now the changes I have made in my diet haven’t, for the most part, been for environmental reasons, they have been about better health. I would venture that most of our decisions about the food

we are going to eat have been, up to this point, mainly about health issues, not environmental or ethical issues. Human physical health, not Earth health or moral health.

The times, though, they are a changin’.

Seemingly all of a sudden there are some very compelling arguments for making further, more difficult, changes to our diets than just reducing our intake of animal fat and becoming a vegetarian. Ethical arguments. Ecological arguments. Some of these have been around for thousands of years – like the compelling moral issue that one must actually kill an animal to eat it. While animals do eat other animals in the natural world, as humans we know what we are doing – taking another life by choice – and it isn’t just following an instinct. It might be slightly different if we were only eating the meat we could hunt and kill for ourselves, but the way in which many of the meat producing animals are raised in this country is shameful. And disgusting as I found out in my research. The cruelty of some of the ways in which livestock is raised is unbelievable.

Other arguments for ethical eating have more to do with our impending crash course in global warming, like buying locally grown produce (and locally raised meat) to reduce the time our food spends in trucks and other carbon spewing vehicles. I haven’t seen much emphasis on the distributive justice aspect of ethical eating, but it is certainly true that there are many people in the world starving while at the same time others are continually gluttonous to a fault.

Why is ethical eating a subject to talk about here, in a religious setting? I hope some of the reasons are beginning to become apparent to you. I’m sure you may have already been reminded of some of our UU seven principles.

In some religious circles, particularly in theological school, the question one is always encouraged to ask is “Where is God in this equation?” What would God want us to do, or what is God’s will?

As Unitarian Universalists, our wording might be different, but the result should be the same. What should be the nature of our relationships with other human beings, other animals, and the earth itself? What can we do to improve those relationships? And why does it matter? Why does it matter what we eat and how we grow and shop for our food?

Here’s where you should think of our seventh principle....

It matters because how we eat is not an isolated issue. While we would like to think, and often do think, with our independent human personalities, that what we eat is our own business, the truth is that what I eat, what you eat, has further reaching consequences than merely staying alive and being healthy. In this world of infinite connections, our interdependent web, there is no such thing as an isolated event, and because of that fact it matters what we do. It matters what we eat. It matters where it comes from. It matters how it’s grown. It matters how an animal is slaughtered. It matters that the earth is heating up and that eating food that has been transported long distances (the average is

said to be 1500 miles) is contributing to the greenhouse effect because of carbon dioxide emissions. It matters that raising livestock produces copious amounts of methane, another carbon compound, which is twenty-three times more harmful to the atmosphere than carbon dioxide. (The Cheeseburger Footprint, (www.openthefuture.com/cheeseburger_CF.html) It matters if the food we are eating was harvested by people being paid less than a living wage. Nothing is an isolated act.

But, it also matters that eating is one of the most intimate and pleasurable of human experiences. The food we eat becomes a living part of us. We are literally what we eat. It is ethically important to feed ourselves and our loved ones food that makes us healthy and happy. Yes, I think enjoying our eating matters, too. Why would we have taste buds, if tasting and enjoying our food were not beneficial in some way? It matters very much that eating with friends is fun and a way to get to know each other better. These kinds of things may play into our decisions about eating as well.

The costs of buying food involve more than dollars and cents. But the benefits of food involve more than protein and carbohydrates. Much has to be weighed in the balance. Many of our decisions will of necessity be compromises. As I read in an article in Aquarian On-Line, “You don’t have to be ethical all the time (or according to other people’s standards) to be ethical. You don’t have to be the Dalai Lama to be a good guy – indeed, even the Dalai Lama eats meat every other day.”

The point is that you don’t have to put off making some of these ethical decisions because you are afraid you will fail by not being perfect at it. Better to do some, than none. A single decision to eat meat one less day a week will help fight global warming and arterial clogging. Or perhaps you might decide to eat more “humane-certified, free-range, or grazed and pastured animals and their products because you believe that any animal that puts food on your table ought to be treated with at least a little kindness.” Or you could decide to “drink fair trade coffee or eat fair trade chocolate so as not to support the exploitation of impoverished farmers in the developing world.” “Maybe you oppose genetically modified crops because you believe they pose a threat to biodiversity – and therefore to the world’s food security.” (www.aquarianonline.com/Op-ed/Ethical>Eating.html) The choice to buy local fruits and vegetables (maybe even freeze some away for a snowy day) helps reduce CO2 emissions involved in transportation – and insures that you know how and by whom your food is grown. Any of these small intentional choices can add up to big differences. You don’t have to be perfect to be ethical.

Maybe you will choose to become part of a newly defined eating group practicing what it calls “freeganism.” This is a movement that decries the billions of dollars worth of safe, edible food landing in dumpsters every year, and are determined not to let so much go to waste. I’m not sure I’m up for dumpster-diving, but practices that reduce restaurant waste sure would be good.

Our Earth Day service has been specifically about making ethical choices in our eating and purchasing of food. But in a larger sense, it is also about one aspect of a new way of

thinking about “being” in the world, a new way of being human that is more and more about relationship and connection. I would call it a new chapter, a necessary chapter, in our moral-awakening.

One of our best options toward ethical eating, our topic this morning, has already been well represented – community supported agriculture. The UU World magazine article on ethical eating, that inspired this service, concluded that, indeed, “it’s hard work building and supporting a local food network. It takes persistence and a certain amount of dogged dedication. But the good news is that there’s joy in it, too. When you can open your refrigerator and imagine the face of the farmer who raised the cows that gave your milk and butter, or who picked the asparagus in your crisper, there’s a unique sense of satisfaction, of knowing that the system you’re supporting is healthy – not only for you and your family, but for your community and for the planet. This is connection, this is intimacy with the interdependent web, and, at the very least, this is an excellent step toward a food system that respects the complexity and fragility of the natural world.”

A significant step toward the moral-awakening of humanity.