

-CHOOSE LIFE-
Cedars UU Church, March 25, 2018
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MEDITATION, inspired by Isaiah 55

Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor on that which does not satisfy?

Hearken diligently to the voice of the holy, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in abundance.

The rain and snow awaken seeds and roots. They bring forth buds on the trees and push shoots from the ground.

The sun breaks through the clouds and paints daffodils in sun-drenched yellow.

We are given so much, sustenance for the body, and food for the soul, thoughts to chew on and a feast of beauty for the heart.

Listen to the voice of the trees, the hum of the earth, and the still small voice within. Be open to all that is good so that your soul may live abundantly.

READINGS

Ancient: "Deuteronomy 30"

The Lord will delight in you and make you prosperous, as with your ancestors, if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

This day I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."

*Modern: excerpts from Dr. Joel Fuhrman, *Fast Food Genocide*, and *Eat to Live*.*

"The modern food and drug industry has converted a significant portion of the world's people to a new religion—a massive cult of pleasure seekers who consume coffee, cigarettes, soft drinks, candy, chocolate, alcohol, processed foods, fast foods, and concentrated dairy fat [that is "cheese"] in a self-indulgent orgy of destructive behavior. These revelers become so drunk on their addictive behavior and

the accompanying addictive thinking that they can no longer tell the difference between health and health care.”

“People are now enslaved to their illnesses and food addictions, accompanied by years of chronic suffering and medical dependence before a premature death... Escalating health tragedies are worsening in all demographics and regions of the country, and more so in younger people and in impoverished communities with poor access to fresh produce.”

SERMON

From March 30 to April 7 this year Jewish people will observe the holy days of Passover. Once, some UU children were talking with their teacher on a Sunday morning about the relationship between Easter and Passover. The Seder meal came up, and they got on the subject of food. They compared “Kosher” rules to the Muslim concept of “Halal,” and they focused on rules against eating pork, and Hindu rules against any meat and Muslim rules about not eating during Ramadan. Then a child raised her hand and asked, “And what about us? What do UUs not eat?” Children question what we never think of asking.

Sharing a meal is an essential, universal, ritual. It reminds us that we live not by bread alone but by relationships. Food is not just about “fueling your hustle” as the football star Dak Prescott implies in recent yogurt ads. The emotional, ethical and social dimension to eating are not extra but part of the whole. Eating is about the quality of our relationships. So our response to the question of what we do not eat is anything that hurts our relationships with other people and the web of life.

My wife cut out a cartoon from the Funny Times and put it on our refrigerator. It is an image of Mother Earth, with flowers in her hair, and birds on her shoulders. She looks sad, and is holding a sign reading, “Me Too.” All religions have understood that if our relationship to life and the source of life is poor, then not only will we lose our health, our relationships with one another will be troubled well.

So, how do we choose life? Simply put, we do not eat unhealthy, unsustainable, unfair foods and we do eat whole, fair trade, sustainably grown food that tastes good and that we share with others. If you want to read a bit more about the UU perspective on food, search the web for UUA 2011 Statement of Conscience on Ethical Eating. [<https://www.uua.org/environment/eating>]

First of all, we don’t eat what harms our health. When I was a child, it was clear that the average American Diet in the 20th Century had gone way off the rails. High levels of fat and cholesterol and refined food had led to high levels of heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and general malaise. For decades doctors and others had been explaining how to eat to improve our health, but few listened. There is an old proverb, “The person who takes medicine but neglects the diet, wastes the skill of the physician.”

In fact, though everyone likes talking about food, few of us like talking about food rules. Now, some people simply want to know the rules. This desire is part of everyone. I have heard many ten year old UUs who are deeply frustrated by their parents’ and church’s lack of clarity. One child said during a classroom discussion about UUism, “How can I break the rules if I don’t now what they are?”

But most of us resent the feeling that someone is controlling our behavior with their rules. Likewise, any sense of deprivation makes us uncomfortable. Years ago, early in my vegetarian life, my brother-in-law

found just the idea of being in our meat-free house threatening. Burger King had an advertising slogan, "Where's the Beef?" So, he bought a T-Shirt with those words so he could wear it when visiting our house. A couple of times he even stopped at a Burger King to eat a burger on his way to visit. We did not ask him to be vegetarian, but just the idea of being vegetarian disturbed him.

Another big problem with rules is that there are few universals. Each rule is best if tailored to persons. For example, I became a vegetarian when I was in my early 20s. When I was nearly 40 years old, my doctor noted that my cholesterol levels had reached dangerous levels. He said, "I'm sorry to tell you that you will have to cut all red meat from your diet."

I responded, "Im sorry to tell you but I cut all meat from my diet years ago."

"Then," he said, "You must cut all cheese and eggs from your diet."

I told him that a dream had prompted me to reduce those almost three years earlier. So, he put me on heavy doses of niacin and statins. In the end, the best thing I did to lower my triglicerides was to start running with my dog every morning. Choosing life, for me, includes aerobic exercise.

There is no one-size-fits-all diet, but we know that, on average, the American diet is not very healthy. I am preaching this sermon because a friend of this church, Marianne Wiley, purchased the topic of this sermon at our auction. She chose this topic because she is a nurse who struggles every day to save overweight and unhealthy people from needless suffering and avoidable causes of death.

Part of the problem is that our American diet developed when most of us were laborers. It used to be far more common for people to get up at 5 AM, do a bunch of physical chores, like milking cows or scrubbing floors. Then they would eat a big breakfast, then do several more hours of chores, then eat lunch with their family, rest, and then do some more chores before eating an evening dinner. Today most people sit a lot in work, leisure or transportation. Furthermore, our human likes and desires evolved eons ago when fat, refined sugar, and even meat, were very rare and famine was always possible. Now those foods are available every day in inexpensive forms. When our digestive systems evolved whole grains were all we had, now it takes work to find whole grains. Now we must choose to avoid foods that harm our health.

The second way we choose life is not to eat food that is bad for the earth. As a teenager I knew all about Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring*, but, the first book that inspired me to be a vegetarian was Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet For a Small Planet*. I still believe that the energy use and waste of vast feed-lots and of factory farms and slaughterhouses used to produce our food are troubling to anyone who is concerned about the impact of climate change, or the decline of free forests, salmon, and orca.

I grew up in Greeley, Colorado. If you have read *Fast Food Nation*, you know a little about Montfort feedlots and their impact on the economy of northern Colorado. I have climbed a tower, to look out over a pen, bigger than this room and nothing in it but dirt and cows. Beyond that, a dirt road to give truck access to feeding troughs, and beyond that another lot, and so on, seemingly stretching on to the horizon. I remember the smell and unsavory experience of visiting what was euphemistically called a "Processing Plant" where cows become beef. Some don't want to know the details. Upton Sinclair, the 20th century activist author, and journalist especially noted, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his job depends on his not understanding it."

Tom Standage, a journalist and science writer, in his book *An Edible History of Humanity*, explained how distinctive is the mass-method of food production. "A cultivated Field of maize or any other crop is as [hu]man-made as a microchip a magazine or a missile... Stone Age hunter-gatherers would have regarded neatly cultivated fields stretching to the horizon, as a bizarre and unfamiliar sight. Farmed land is as much a technological landscape as a biological one. And in the grand scheme of human existence the technologies in question - domesticated crops - are very recent inventions. Think of this, if we compare the last 150,000 years of human history to an hour, then farming and agriculture has only existed for the past 4 and ½ minutes."

Most Americans think that without large-scale, industrial agriculture, with its chemical inputs and waste products we would all starve to death. In fact, "to feed a single person the typical Western diet (heavy with animal products) for a year requires 3.25 acres of stable land. To feed one vegan requires about one-half of an acre" notes John Robbins in his, *Diet for a New America*. Most UU persons are not vegetarian, but we consider the impact of our living on the earth, and most of us at least try to eat more local and more organically produced foods.

Also, we as UUs don't eat food that harms other people. There is not time today to go into how we treat the working-poor in our country. I could give a whole sermon on food stamps WIC and urban Food deserts. As Jesus of Nazareth said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." Along those lines, I recall that my parents and I joined in the California Grape boycott for a couple of years when I was eight or nine years old. We should pay attention to the big systems that produce our food and distribute it to the people of this country.

But in the end, what we eat is largely determined by the people around us. I admired Mahatma Ghandi's vegetarianism and read *Diet for a Small Planet* when I was in high school. But, when I told my mom I wanted to be vegetarian, she said, "Fine, but I'm not cooking you anything special." That was the end of my vegetarian life until I moved in with my girlfriend who was a vegetarian. She taught me about food combining and amino acids, about whole foods and whole grains. She also became my wife, and together we raised two healthy vegetarian daughters. Lately, for health reasons, my wife has shifted from a purely vegetarian diet. She describes her eating with a famous line of the classic film star Mae West, "I used to be snow white, but I drifted."

This sermon is about food, but it's also about harvesting a deeper way of living. It's about planting and watering and weeding and harvesting community. It is about remembering that our health depends not just on individual choices but also on the health of all living things. Choosing life is not about choosing mere existence, but a deeper life, a better life, the shared life of Life. The Seder meal is not about food as much as identity and community and solidarity in choosing life. It is about hungering and thirsting for goodness and wholeness. It is about choosing life.

If you eat well, nurture your health, nurture the health of others and the whole web of life, then to paraphrase Isaiah:

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the northwest will clap their hands.