

## Sustenance

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

Sunday, January 29, 2012

Fiona Heath, Intern Minister

“Blessed be carrot and cow/Potato and mushroom/Tomato and bean...”

Alla Renee Bozarth

We all do it. Every day, day in, day out.  
Most of us have probably already done it this morning.  
Most of us will do it again not too long after the service.

We ate. We will eat again.

This morning we scarfed down bagels, munched on granola bars,  
slurped up cereal and milk, fried up eggs and bacon,  
or drank a protein shake. We had juice or coffee or tea.

I myself ate a sesame seed bagel, toasted with butter, in the car,  
washed down with black tea with milk and honey.

We eat.  
We eat because we must.  
We eat because we are living beings requiring energy.  
We eat because we are a part of the earth.

Our food comes from the earth, and, after awhile,  
Returns to the earth.  
As do we.  
Eventually our own bodies return to the earth to join  
In the grand cycle of birth and life and death and regeneration.

Eating is our common ground.  
Our common ground with another, no matter our differences.  
Our common ground with all the living creatures,  
from coyotes to sparrows.  
Eating connects us in the most profound ways to the  
glorious fertile spinning rock we call home.

When we eat, we are eating other life,  
Whether that be a carrot or a cow.  
And that carrot, that cow, becomes part of us.  
Literally.  
Their molecules are absorbed into the tissues of our body.

Life begets life in a real and profound way each time we bite into a juicy apple.

We are what we eat. Truly.  
Which kind of makes me regret that old candy cane I ate yesterday.

We are what we eat. Or, more poetically, as the German proverb says,  
Whose bread I eat, is whose song I sing.  
That biological fact,  
Is also a profoundly spiritual truth.  
It matters what we eat.

It matters in that it expresses – or doesn't –  
Our gratitude for the fertile abundance of this land,  
Our gratitude for those who laboured mightily to make our food.  
Our love and concern for our own beautiful bodies.

Wendell Berry, the great rural essayist,  
argues that eating with the fullest pleasure  
– pleasure that does not depend on ignorance -  
requires us to know the agricultural economy to which we belong.  
It means to know who grows our food, how it is manufactured,  
and to participate in its creation, even in a small way.  
Through learning the foods of each Ontario season.  
Through growing parsley in an apartment windowsill.  
Or making a pot of potato leek soup.

As Unitarians we are called to live our principles out in our daily lives.  
What we eat matters.

It is so easy to be stupid about food.  
And at times I want to be.  
I really don't want Marc to be reading out the ingredients  
Of the sour cream and onion Ruffles potato chips  
As I am eating them.  
It spoils the pleasure of the moment.

We do live in a time when we are so separated and isolated from our food.

Years ago I was a supply teacher in Ottawa.  
In a grade three class, teaching a lesson about nutrition,  
I asked the children where milk came from.  
And a child put up their hand and said "from the store".  
After thanking them, I wondered if milk might also come from a cow.  
About the half the class looked totally surprised at the thought.  
I spent the morning drawing a cow – badly – and talking about food.

I told this story for several years, amused by the ignorance of kids today,  
until we got a community garden plot.

I had a lovely time planting tomatoes, carrots, and peas.  
 I had no idea how much water  
 celery requires if it isn't going to be totally bitter.  
 And towards the end of the summer,  
 Looking over at another plot,  
 I was astonished to see a green pepper on a very spindly little plant.  
 I was so surprised.  
 I was thirty before I saw a green pepper plant.  
 I sent a mental apology to the kids in Ottawa.

Despite the foolishness of a food system which  
 Convinces us that milk comes from stores and  
 And green peppers are exotic vegetables,  
 We are also living in a time of great hope for good food.

We can now make choices which support the local food economy and leave a lighter footprint on  
 the earth.

We can buy milk in returnable glass bottles.  
 There are more and more farmer's markets, with real, live, actual farmers at them.  
 Farms are diversifying. Tomatoes, apples, peaches, carrots, goats cheese, sheeps cheese, peanuts,  
 popcorn, walnuts, pears, potatoes and dozens more crops are grown in Southern Ontario.  
 Local food ventures are being supported through the efforts of organizations such as FoodShare,  
 Wychwood Barns, and the Toronto Food Policy Council.  
 We can eat locally and well. We can buy fair trade coffee, tea and bananas.  
 There are so many dedicated people who want to bring us good food.  
 Good in all ways – good for health,  
 Good for the economy, good for the environment, and accessible to all,  
 Not just those who can afford it.

There are still endless problems with our global industrial food system,  
 But there are also endless bright lights as well.

Our food choices can bring our principles to life.  
 They help us remember that our community, our tradition,  
 is stronger and deeper than that of this fast food nation.

It matters what we eat.  
 It matters in that it expresses – or doesn't –  
 Our deep knowing that we belong to the whole,  
 That we are physically, emotionally, spiritually intertwined  
 With all life.  
 Food binds us together.

One of my favourite movies is a Danish film called Babette's Feast.  
 It is set after the French revolution in a remote Danish village.  
 A famous chef, Babette, who fled Paris, has been living there for many years,  
 Quietly serving two elderly women devoted to the memory of their father,  
 a respected Lutheran minister.

She cooks pickled herring and gruel, their preferred spartan diet.  
 The village is filled with elderly people who have, over the years,  
 as so often happens in our relationships,  
 gotten cranky and bitter with one another over past hurts.  
 Eventually Babette comes to prepare a special dinner in memory of the minister.  
 She has come into money, and is astoundingly extravagant in creating the meal. She is a culinary  
 artist.

Turtle soup, roasted quail, special sauces, fancy cakes, excellent cheeses, fresh fruit, and the finest of  
 wines. All magnificently presented.

The guests, old, dour, used to austerity and plainness,  
 Over the course of this grand meal,  
 find their way to forgiveness, love and delight.

It is an exquisite depiction of how sharing food,  
 food beautifully and lovingly created,  
 Cares for the spirit through celebrating the body.  
 How the pleasures of the senses can bring us to the  
 Greater experience of belonging to life itself.

I know food isn't joyful for everyone.  
 Painful relationships can make the finest steak taste like ashes.  
 Some of us struggle with eating disorders, so that lunch becomes an agony of will.  
 Some of us struggle with weight, so that every mouthful that is not lettuce can be guilt inducing.

But if even I, a vegetarian for the past twenty years, after seeing Babette cook,  
 find myself – just for a moment - longing for turtle soup,  
 there is always the hope of transformation.  
 Breaking bread together opens us to possibilities.

The food writer M.F.K. Fisher once wrote:  
 “It seems to me that our three basic needs,  
 for food and security and love,  
 are so mixed and mingled and entwined  
 that we cannot straightly think of one without the others.  
 So it happens that when I write of hunger,  
 I am really writing about love and the hunger for it,  
 and warmth and the love of it and the hunger for it ...  
 and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied ...  
 and it is all one.”

It is all one. The hunger, the feast, the love, the warmth.  
 Life and death. We are all bound up in it together.

It is why here at First Toronto the Winter Dinner Party is so popular.  
 And the Thanksgiving pot luck lunch.  
 I love the congregational conversations that happen here,  
 Not just for the conversation, as interesting as that can be,  
 But because of the food.

Because the social events team or the green team cooked for us.  
 They stayed up late or got up early and took the trouble to  
 Create a healthy vegetarian meal for 50 or 60 people.  
 Not for the fancy wages – or the great tips – because there are neither.  
 But because they care, care for us as human beings,  
 Care for us as a community.

The social events team and green team offer  
 some of the most meaningful ministry around,  
 honouring us in both body and spirit.

By serving up feasts, for us to share,  
 they create the loving space that helps  
 Us make connections, build relationships,  
 Helps us be Unitarian together.  
 We are so lucky to have them.  
 They already do wonders.  
 Imagine the feasts we could have if we had a kitchen  
 with stoves that the manufacturers still made parts for!

The gift of good food is a gift of love, of love for one another, of love for good work well done, of  
 love of the earth.

The ministry of the tuna casserole is not to be underestimated.  
 Although these days it is more likely to be the ministry of hummus and pita.

I invite you to consider how you are – or could be – sustained by good food.  
 What are your warm memories of food and fellowship?  
 What foods bring you back to love?  
 How do we eat knowing that we are deeply and profoundly what we eat?  
 How can we eat to nourish our spirits as well as our bodies?

We must eat.  
 So may we eat well, with knowledge.  
 May we eat with gratitude and with love.  
 May we feast together.

May it be so.