

Melody Moberg – “Mindful Eating”

OPENING WORDS: from Wendell Berry’s 1977 essay “The Use of Energy”

[Agriculture] is a practical religion, a practice of religion, a rite. By farming we enact our fundamental connection with energy and matter, light and darkness. In the cycles of farming, which carry the elemental energy again and again through the seasons and the bodies of living things, we recognize the only infinitude within reach of the imagination. How long this cycling of energy will continue we do not know; it will have to end, at least here on this planet, sometime within the remaining life of the sun. But by aligning ourselves with it here, in our little time within the unimaginable time of the sun’s burning, we touch infinity; we align ourselves with the universal law that brought the cycles into being and that will survive them.

The word agriculture, after all, does not mean agriscience, much less agribusiness. It means cultivation of the land. And cultivation is at the root of the sense both of culture and of cult. The ideas of tillage and worship are thus joined in culture. And these words all come from an Indo-European root meaning both “to revolve” and “to dwell.” To live, to survive on the earth, to care for the soil, and to worship, all are bound at the root to the idea of a cycle. It is only by understanding the cultural complexity and largeness of the concept of agriculture that we can see the threatening diminishment implied by the term “agribusiness.”

MESSAGE

The topic of today’s service is “mindful eating,” and there is a whole lot that this term can and does suggest.

Mindfulness is a Buddhist concept and one aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path. The idea in Buddhism, as I frame it, is that we should be mindful of what we are doing and thinking, and aware of the associations and attachments which arise in our minds when we think certain things and perform certain actions. Mindfulness is the ability to see things as they are with clear consciousness. By being mindful and viewing our actions and thoughts from a perspective of detached understanding, we can become aware of how and when our minds spin off into negative places or we do things that harm ourselves and others. Mindfulness leads to clarity, insight, and a means of

escape from our own personal Hells. The point of mindfulness, like all Buddhist practice, is letting go of those strong attachments and discriminations which so easily poison daily life, enabling us to live with deeper awareness, compassion and connection.

Mindful eating is at once more specific and a whole lot broader than Buddhist “mindfulness.” I like initially framing mindful eating in terms of Buddhist mindfulness because it makes the religious ramifications of mindful eating transparent. However, mindful eating does not need to be thought of in Buddhist terms.

One key difference is that mindful eating usually involves a lot of attachments, and I don’t think this is a bad thing. The ethics behind what we choose to eat are incredibly personal and profound. After all, these principles and decisions affect us at least three times a day. Mindful eating means embodying our broader value systems in concrete decisions about what we will and will not eat, about what we think food means, and how we frame our relationship to that which sustains us. It is shaped by our cultural traditions, personal histories, physical needs and economic pressures. And, it can be religiously motivated.

What is Jewish adherence to Leviticus or Hindu abstinence from eating beef or meatless Fridays or vegetarianism in the name of ahimsa if not mindful eating? But, if our decision to eat mindfully is not motivated by specific dogmatic guidelines but by broader ethical concerns, how do we decide what to eat? How do we decide, if we are working under principles that welcome nuanced individual interpretations, such as “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part,” “justice, equity and compassion in human relations” or “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all”? The answer, I think, is personally.

Our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” extends to the food we eat, and we must all make our own informed decisions, conduct our own research and take into account our personal philosophies, ethical guidelines, physical needs, economic concerns and gut reactions.

Researching what to eat can quickly become overwhelming and ethical decisions can be murky. There are a lot of things to take into account. Food miles. Fair trade vs. free trade. Local. Organic. Vegetarianism. Ethical omnivorism. Slow food. Veganism. Deciphering labels. Preservatives. Artificial flavors. Community supported agriculture. Human rights violations. Global hunger. Genetic engineering. Environmental justice. Food security. Animal rights. Neo-colonialism, and so on.

Luckily and wonderfully, our current UUA congregational study/action issue is Ethical Eating. This means that the UUA website offers excellent resources exploring these issues through a UU lens. There are links to a variety of books and media that can help us orient ourselves within all of this information, to help us make informed decisions about our food, where it comes from and its hidden human and environmental costs.

So - there are a lot of factors to consider when choosing food that is both ethically sound and healthy. I usually follow some general rules to prevent every shopping trip from becoming a nightmare, keeping in mind, of course, that my ideals are ideal. I believe food should be whole. Food shouldn't be distorted with a lot of chemicals, industrial processes or advertisements. If possible, food should be local or organic. Food should have transparent origins and it should be fair, promoting rather than hiding the communities and interconnected webs behind it.

But, as essential as the ethical, decision-making features of mindful eating are, so is pure pleasure and awareness when eating. This means being really present with food. Noticing the texture of fresh vegetables, the fragrance of seasonal fruits, the satisfying sizzle of garlic and onions in a heavy cast iron pan. Color, scent, texture, temperature, nuances of taste. Added to this pleasure is knowledge of the source of this food and its history. Added is memory, community, maybe even love. The pleasure aspect of mindful eating compliments the ethical decision-making aspect, because caring about food politics requires caring about food. Understanding that everyone has a right to clean, wholesome food comes from distinguishing it from industrial food products. This fuels outrage over the inability of so many low income families to afford healthy food because it is considered a luxury.

I take a lot of comfort in the material, in knowing that I am not merely a disembodied mind, but a living extension of the Earth. Daily bread can be a meditation on our physicality and an opportunity to pause and consider what our need to eat signifies. We are physical, we are extensions of a whole and we are delicate, individual mortal creatures. Our sense of reality and quality of life can be dramatically swayed by what we eat. Eating can also be a chance to deeply acknowledge what a miracle it is that we are alive at all - to taste and drink deeply from the well of life and to savor the sensation of doing so.

In giving this talk, my intent is not to be specifically prescriptive. Instead, I want to share my own spiritual journey, and to explore the place mindful eating has within my personal religious practice and understanding of the sacred.

Like most girls growing up in America, my relationship with food was frequently poisoned by our diseased food culture.

The messages broadcast to us through advertisements, through our cultural obsession with makeovers and through the self-help and dieting industries preach hatred of our bodies. We are fed messages of how to count calories, fat and carbs, of how to eat pre-packaged and distorted food products pumped with vitamins and marketing hype. We are fed messages that being thin and fitting strict beauty ideals is a moral imperative. We are fed messages condemning food outright; messages painting a dualistic worldview of asceticism vs. gluttony. We are fed a worldview devoid of moderation and balance.

At one time I drank a lot of Diet Coke and meticulously logged everything I ate in a special notebook. Although I do not believe I had a full-blown eating disorder, I now recognize how easily this kind of neurotic, quantifying behavior could have become one. Like most American girls, I learned to fear food. I also learned to view eating as a guilt-ridden mechanical necessity. Calories are calories, it is best to aim as low as possible and, as I remember reading in a magazine ad, “in a perfect world, calories wouldn’t count.”

This says nothing about ethics, nothing about taste, nothing about processing, nothing about tradition, and absolutely nothing good about pleasure and the life-sustaining qualities of good food.

I don’t look very favorably on this period of my food-life. It was miserable. These life denying messages are rooted deeply in our culture, and they are poisoning generation after generation. Now, I am horrified by how easily I fell for these messages primarily because I can see so, so many other women falling for them, too.

In 1990’s *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf describes this life-denying system as a kind of religion. She writes:

In this century, most fields of thought have been transformed by the understanding that truths are relative and perceptions subjective. But the rightness and permanence of [beauty’s] caste system is taken for granted by people who study quantum physics, ethnology, civil rights law; who are atheists, who are skeptical of TV news, who don’t believe that the earth was created in seven days. It is believed uncritically as an article of faith.

I strongly believe that women and men today must be mindful of how the messages of the self-help and dieting industries poison pleasure and distract us from deeper issues. American consumer culture teaches us to feel inherently dissatisfied with ourselves, a process that, over time, seeks to destroy any individuality or diversity that can't be bought or sold. I know that, for me, questioning these messages and destroying my food journals was immensely freeing. My relationship with food and self transformed. Dropping the heresy of the dieting industry enabled me to discover a truer religion of food.

Another significant aspect of my spiritual food-journey was rediscovering materialism.

This might sound counter-intuitive, so let me explain.

Before entering college, I began reading the work of the comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell. His exploration of mythology as a form of knowledge - a vision of truth and a way to discover and craft meaning outside of rationalism and scientific approaches to life - hit me like revelation. I was so blown away by the news that the stories we tell ourselves, the stories that permeate our cultures and imaginations, are resonant and meaningful not only because they offer a fantastical escape from "real life," but because they are ways of framing reality. Myths and stories are forms of knowledge and wisdom even if and perhaps because they aren't factual. They speak to our deepest longings, to our psychological and spiritual cravings. Joseph Campbell convinced me to become a religious studies and English double major. This, combined with my solid background in the UU free and responsible search, and the radical idea that truths are relative, granted me a vantage point of inexpressible freedom.

Well, at least intellectually. I was a focused and determined scholar, relishing the constant revelations of my studies and working very hard because studying religion was what I wanted to do most in life. I read a lot, thought a lot, wrote a lot and spent a lot of time questioning and undermining my assumptions. I learned about theory, metaphysics, and sacred texts. I learned about Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism. I learned about anti-intellectualism and ideas that point beyond themselves and how silly it is to try and learn Zen in a classroom. I worked and worked, and read and read, and cloistered away. What began as a blissful intellectual adventure became an exercise in solipsism as I lost my balance. I spent too much time in my own mind and started to feel a little crazy, like a disembodied brain that questions everything all the time, and floats from bed to class to the library.

Everyday life began to lose its zing and immediacy, which was kind of ironic, since I was learning about the importance of this everyday immediacy all the time. I guess you could say I was so immersed in the spiritual and the intellectual that I was

spinning off to somewhere I didn't want to be. I required a reassessment of my relationship with materialism to feel whole and sane. One long and cold Wisconsin winter, I began going to the gym with my roommate and rediscovered my body. I was shocked by how much better I started feeling, by the newfound strength of my immune system, and by how neurotic fears and frustrations dissolved with a rush of endorphins. I never dreamed that working up a sweat could soothe my mind. Slowly, I realized that all the stuff I had heard about cultivating holistic balance was true.

As I began appreciating my physical body more, and identifying with it, I started paying more attention to what I nourished my body with.

And, what do you know? By drinking water and eating real food with real ingredients and real taste rather than vitamin-pumped garbage, I felt astronomically better. By nourishing and promoting a deeper connection to my physical body I felt - well - more connected not only to it, but to everything that sustains it. I started reading a lot about food, and learning as much as I could about where it comes from, and why food matters. I became fascinated by food history, by the healing properties of whole foods and by the uncanny nutritional wisdom of traditional food cultures. I also became deeply troubled by the excesses of industrial agriculture. By seeing within my food choices the rich and complex interdependent webs of people, animals, soils and effort that go into them, I felt a deepened connection to the world in general. My acute sense of isolation lifted. Feeling physically grounded and appreciating the material allowed me to care. I thought about what I really wanted from religion, because systematic detachment just wasn't doing it anymore.

I decided that what I needed was connection. What I wanted from religion was respect and awe for the vast mystery we are immersed in. I wanted to feel really alive. I wanted to care about things. I wanted simple pleasures and to find peace and beauty in the mundane. I decided that I wanted to care about food. Food is so tangible. Food is so visceral. Food is so significant in all of our lives. For me, food is something I can hold on to. It's a social justice issue that fits on my plate, an incarnation of ethical ideology.

I joined a vegetarian co-op at school and taught myself how to cook. This was certainly a revelation. I had always assumed cooking was necessarily impossible or impossibly time-consuming. I assumed it was constant drudgery. But it really isn't, or at least it doesn't have to be. As I discovered the magical feeling of creating a finished meal from a pile of ingredients, I also discovered how nourishing and bonding it is to cook and eat in a make-shift community.

Cooking and eating good food brings people together. Especially at school, it forced us to slow down and get out of our own schedules to do something meaningful together. To talk. To share. To eat.

To nourish this newfound real food revelation, I decided to attend real food boot camp. I decided to work at an organic farm. I spent a summer in at an intentional community and organic farm where I lived and worked with developmentally disabled adults. I saw exactly where my food was coming from, and lived in a community with real food at its economic and social center. I helped grow food that not only sustained me but the wider community. I weeded and harvested and shoveled and planted and cooked and washed dishes and acted as a caregiver and friend for the price of food and shelter. I ate meat that I not only knew, but saw, had been raised ethically.

My respect for the “interdependent web of all existence” flourished, as did my understanding of the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” For the first time, I really felt the importance of healthy soil and how everything exists in a fantastic cycle with almost-magical compost sealing the deal. I was simultaneously exhausted and renewed, busy yet delighted in the expansive freedoms of simplicity. I realized that food really does taste better when your hands are covered in dirt, and when you really know the effort that it takes to create it.

There are so many wonderful food-related things to gush about. For example, how the fermentation process creating yogurt allows milk last a long time and predigests lactose and other things that a lot of people find difficult to digest, and how the friendly bacteria in yogurt regulates our digestive systems, helps maintain our immune systems and may even fight allergies. It’s incredible and kind of gross that when we eat it, we take into our bodies billions of microorganisms that become part of us. Talk about an interdependent web!

Or, how absolutely incredible a fresh tomato nourished in local soil tastes, still warm from the sun. How much more complex and delightful and infinitely unique fresh tomatoes are than their flavorless pink January counterparts. How tomatoes were once known as “love apples” and were believed aphrodisiacs.

Or coffee. Fresh coffee. Freshly ground coffee that is freshly roasted and that is fairly traded and organically grown, and maybe even purchased from the local UU church.

Freshly ground coffee prepared maybe a little too ritualistically in a French press to create an absolutely perfect and delicious cup of comfort, crystallizing the senses with caffeine and eliciting realizations about not only how delicious and beautiful every

morning can be, but how swiftly our delicate bodies can be swayed by slight chemical changes. Coffee was first drunk in the 15th century by Sufi mystics, who found that it clarified their minds and aided their devotions. I agree.

Or bread. Daily bread. Bread as a sacrament. Bread as something incredibly simple and complex. Wheat, water and yeast. How holding and shaping bread dough is like interacting with some kind of living, breathing creature. How creating bread really does feel magical. Mixing ingredients, following steps, and watching some mysterious chemical process unfold, watching the dough double in size, create a “gluten cloak” and, if subjected to high heat, become the only material request in the Lord’s prayer.

To me, the point of religion is connection - to the planet, to other individuals, to the essential mystery beneath and behind this precious life, and to ourselves. And, to me, food is religion embodied. I believe that pretty much anything can function in this way, as objects of contemplation, microcosms of the greater mystery. The breathtaking beauty of song. Appreciating the aesthetic thrills of a summer sunset. Loving-kindness meditation. Meeting another person’s gaze. The intoxicating scent of fresh basil.

Mindful eating means honoring life and community. It means acknowledging and delighting in our physicality. It means living our ideals. And, it means trying to appreciate what it means to be part of this whole, messy, interdependent web thing, three times a day.

BENEDICTION

Our closing words come, once again, come from Wendell Berry’s “The Use of Energy”:

The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life.