

READING

SLOW DOWN

A Poem by Claire Manwell Danaceau

Can we:

Take a moment

Slow down

Breathe

The slower and quieter our breath, the calmer we feel.

Think

What am I really hungry for?

What does my body need?

Do I really need to eat? Maybe I should be drinking more water. (not soda!)

Not water from a plastic disposable bottle from far away, but local water from right here.

But...what has drained into our waterways? How did it get there? Why?

What's in my water?

How will I take it with me?

Can I refill and reuse this bottle? Or is it headed for a landfill?

My body needs water before it needs food.

Clean, fresh water.

Fresh, local food.

Where did my food come from?

How did it get here?

Is it processed and packaged?

Where did the package come from and where will it go when I unwrap my food?

Is it a whole food, sustainably produced?

How far did it travel to get to me?

If I am eating meat, what kind of story would the animal tell me about its life?

If I am eating plants, what of the earth they grew from?

What story would they tell?

Have I lost this connection to my food?

What is the true cost?

The cost to the earth, the cost to my body and my health.

What is really in this food?

Have I read the ingredients?

Do I know what they mean? Can I pronounce them?

What am I really putting in my body?

Why am I eating this?

Do I care?

This is my only body, I want to take care of it.

I love myself.

I love my planet.

This is where I live, where my family lives.

Where my friends live.

This is the only planet we have.

Each of us is a caretaker.
Of our bodies, ourselves, our children, and our planet.
The newspaper talks about the 'trendiness' of eating local.
I want to be part of this kind of trend.
I want to help this trend become a movement.
This movement can become a way of life.
This may be the only way to sustain life
On our beautiful planet.
If we could all slow down
Breathe
Take a moment
and think
Respecting our bodies,
ourselves,
each other
and the earth we all share:
Imagine a future
For our children
Brighter than today.

HOW SHALL WE EAT?

THREE GENERATIONS TALK ABOUT ETHICS AND FOOD

A Sermon about Our Bodies, Our Values and Our Planet

The Paint Branch Unitarian Universalist Church

By the Rev. Phyllis L. Hubbell

in conversation with her step-daughter and her granddaughter

Claire and Rebecca Danaceau

January 11, 2009

PHYLLIS: Slow down. Breathe.

This morning might change your life.

Preparing for this service has already changed mine.

Oddly enough, sadly enough, most of us don't expect that Sunday morning will transform our lives. We come in here Sunday morning at 10:00, maybe running a little late, give out a few hugs, take our usual seat, sing a few songs, listen to wonderful music, look out the windows at the trees, listen to a sermon, maybe drift off a bit – it's been a long, hard week—light a candle, sing another song, visit with friends, maybe stay for a class or a discussion, then we're out of here. Just like last week. Just like next week. Our expectations are often modest – that the sermon will hold our attention, make us think, give us something to hang on to in hard times -- that the music will move us, that we will find some peace. We don't come expecting our whole life to change.

But preparing worship is my spiritual discipline. It may be that whether you think about it or not, whether you use those words or not, coming here each week is a part of yours. This time is the time we slow down, breathe, and try to remember what is important in our lives. It is the time we try to discover what we want our lives to be about. It is the time we connect with something larger than ourselves. Sunday mornings are the time we recommit to being who we want to be, both as individuals and as a church.

I didn't really want to preach about the ethical implications of eating this morning. I knew if I did I might have to change how I eat – not just for this week, but for the rest of my life. But last June at our yearly General Assembly of Congregations, our brother and sister Unitarian Universalists around this country chose Ethical Eating – Food and Environmental Justice -- as the focus of study and action by our congregations for the next four years. This last fall they requested all ministers to preach on this subject. And I decided it was time.

I love to eat. I am a meat eater, but I gave up eating veal on humanitarian grounds a long time ago. I try to buy free range chicken, but I eat whatever's available when I eat out. My family thought going to a restaurant for a good steak was a special treat. I don't like beans. I'm not crazy about whole grains and my list of acceptable vegetables is short.

I don't have many vices. I don't smoke. I don't drink. But I want to eat food I like. Food is a treat in the midst of a wonderful, but hectic and demanding life. I don't want the inconvenience of searching out and cooking food that is good for me and good for the environment. I don't want to inconvenience my relatives and friends at holiday times.

And I don't like beans. I don't like whole grains. And my list of acceptable vegetables is really short. Forget brussel sprouts. Beets are disgusting. Cabbage is nasty.

I suspect I am not alone here this morning. Still for years, I have occasionally read disturbing reports about the environmental implications of our western diets heavy on beef. I have largely averted my eyes from the cruelty factory farms inflict on animals. But I have admired my daughter and now my thirteen-year-old granddaughter who have studied this issue and taken a stand. I invited them to join me in a conversation about this subject. Three generations look at food.

Rebecca is an eighth grader at Lakelands Park Middle school. After reading a book last year on the harmful effects of much of the food we put in our bodies, she has become a vegetarian – at least most of the time.

Rebecca, aside from the health reasons, can you talk a little about what bothers you about eating meat?

REBECCA: Well, at first, I still really wanted to eat meat. I struggled to resist fried chicken, ham sandwiches, and bacon. It just happened to be that one day, at my...other grandma's house, I decided to have a chicken leg. I poked it with my knife experimentally, and it hit me – I was eating dead flesh. Some poor, defenseless bird that had spent its whole life in a torturously small cage before being brutally slaughtered for human consumption.

As you can imagine, I lost my appetite after that.

PHYLLIS: Rebecca, what's hardest about being a vegetarian?

REBECCA: Well, once you've done it for a while, it's actually not that hard. Chicken feels like slimy, flavorless pieces of flesh, and the strongest flavor in beef

for me is the iron in its blood. But the smells don't change, and frying bacon, hot chicken, and beef stew all smell irresistible.

PHYLLIS: My step-daughter Claire has been serious about food for a long time. Indeed, she is serious about respecting her body, generally, teaching and practicing yoga, Pilates, and other approaches to physical fitness, as well as being a fairly serious cyclist.

Maintaining a mostly vegetarian, leaning toward Veganism, diet, hasn't always been easy for her in her family. She is usually the cook at home, but she has to consider the wishes of the rest of her family.

Claire, share with us where you stand on this issue.

CLAIRE: I'd love to be a locavore, meaning I would eat mostly locally grown food, but that's hard in the winter. I guess I'm mostly vegan, but I do eat meat in small amounts, if I feel a craving for it, and occasionally dairy. I try to listen to my body, before, during and after I eat. I notice that I feel most energized after eating fresh vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, in that order. I've even recently developed a taste for raw carrots, (not processed 'baby carrots') which I never liked, because they really energize me.

I love eating (that's why I exercise so much!) and when I'm in the store I check to see where the food has come from. I'd love to spend more time in farmers markets, but my life is just so busy that I usually get my food from Whole Foods (sometimes called "Whole Paycheck"), and try to buy the products that are marked as local. Is it more expensive to eat locally grown, sustainable foods, and organic foods? Sometimes processed and refined foods are cheaper. Well, I decided that, while my grocery bill is pretty high, I have only taken one sick day in the past 2 years that I have been working full time. So I've made an investment in my health.

I'm rarely home at mealtimes, so frequently eat on the run, and packaged energy bars are handy. However, I always read the label so I know what's in it and what I'm putting in my body. Then I note how I feel after I eat it. I try to always pack healthy snacks for while I'm out for 2 reasons: 1 to save money, and also to eat well. I teach a lot of exercise classes and have to eat good food to keep my energy up.

Unfortunately, while packaged food is really convenient and usually tasty, usually it's quite processed and after you eat it you have generated more trash. (That's one reason I pack my kids' lunches in reusable containers). Because, although we can throw things away and not think about them anymore, since we have so many other things on our minds, don't you ever wonder where the trash goes and what it is doing to our planet?

Practically everyone you meet is in favor of recycling and reusing, but do they really do it? Why do we have the urge to just throw things in the trash and move on and forget about them? Why doesn't everyone care about what happens to the things we throw away? What if we all cared?

Last spring I purchased a book called "Skinny Bitch", which is a really easy read about why you should care about what you put in your body. Rebecca and my other daughter Sarah read it after me, and suddenly Rebecca decided to become vegetarian and they both decided to start taking their lunches to school every day! Previously they had bought the school lunch every day, and while they were tasty, frequently those lunches would give Sarah a stomachache. Once they started taking healthy vegetarian lunches from home and drinking water instead of chocolate milk, they noticed that they had lots more energy for the rest of the day! Also, since they are eating healthier, they are rarely sick!

I am only one person, but I feel (I hope!) that one person can make a difference.

PHYLLIS: Our seventh principle lifts up the interdependent web of existence that we impact by our actions. Our faith does not tell us what we should eat. Experts and philosophers will disagree on these issues. But it calls us to slow down, to reflect on what we are eating, to care about what we are eating, to care about our planet. It calls us to consider the gas spent on getting our food to market, the pesticides and fertilizers necessary in the production of our food, on the food we waste, the excess packaging that fouls our environment, and on our treatment of the animals who are raised for our dinners.

It seems unarguable that what we eat has a major impact on the environment and specifically on global warming. The United Nations has estimated that raising cattle accounts for more greenhouse gases released into the air than automobiles, trucks and airplanes. Even if we do not choose to be vegetarians, we may want to consider meatless Mondays (or meatless any days) because of this concern. Being conservative where our environment is concerned seems like a prudent, ethical, even religious thing to do.

But while it may be of less global significance, what got me in the gut in preparing this service was making myself read about the cruelty we are routinely inflicting on animals. Both my parents lived on farms at one time in their lives. I grew up in Chicago. I don't have pet chickens. I don't have to look pigs in the eye. Michael Pollen, author of *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, struggled with this issue himself. He describes the plight of the chickens that lay the eggs we eat. They are packed six to the cage, so close they can't stretch their wings. They rub their bodies against the wire until they are featherless and bleeding. They sometimes eat their cage mates. Ten per cent of them "can't bear it and simply die."

In an article Pollen wrote in 2002, he suggested that one ethical response was to eat locally, to know the farm where the chickens are raised, to insist that they be allowed to roam, to insist that they be slaughtered humanely. That's one of the changes I'm making. But I can't bear being part of such a system.

Rebecca:

Ethical Eating.

It's such a broad subject.

Who knew how much

What we put in our bodies

Affected the world?

I chose to be vegetarian.

It was hard.

The smells of fried chicken

Are still tantalizing.

After a while, I learned to dislike meat.

“What does this have to do with ethics?” you ask.

A lot.

When you look at a hamburger

Or a hot dog

Or even salad

Or a glass of milk,

Think about how that food product was created.

First there's the farmland,

Where the domestic food chain starts out.

Imagine

How many trees were cut down

How many creatures were robbed of their homes.

And the *pesticides*.

All those chemicals are damaging

The soil,

The groundwater,

Which runs into streams,

Which feeds into lakes

And oceans

And poisons the fish

And sea plants,

And through that,

It comes back to hurt *us*.

Now, not all the plants on this farmland are in your salad.

Some is going to feed the animals

That will end up in your next meal.

And we're back to the pesticides.

What happens when the pesticides in the plant

Are fed to the animals?

I don't think it requires explanation.

The animals we don't eat

Are giving us

Eggs,

Milk,

All loaded up with the chemicals in the animal,

From the plant.

So what now?

What am I supposed to eat?

That's the reason people came up with "Organic" products.

But that's enough about pesticides.

What about the energy consumed in making these products?

Bigger is better,

And to maximize output

(and income)

There's going to be a lot of energy-sucking machinery in use,

And trucks for transportation.

Which brings us to global warming.

So, as you can see, this is pretty grim.

With the population expanding,

How much better will this get?

Nothing's going to get done

About anything

If we sit on our butts and say,

“Well what can I do? I'm just one person.”

Yes, you're one person.

So am I

and my sister

and my friends

and my parents

and the person sitting next to you.

If everyone thought,

“I am one person, and I'm going to do as much as one person could do,”

What do you think would happen?

I took that mentality

I researched the unhealthy junk served in school lunches in public schools for a school project

And I convinced several of my classmates to not buy school lunch

With the speech I prepared.

That's what a thirteen-year-old can do.

What can you do?

PHYLLIS: What can we do? We can slow down. Breathe. Study. Reflect. We can be gentle with one another. But we can be clear about where we stand. We are each one person, but we can do as much as one person can do. We are one

church, but we can do as much as one church can do. And we are part of a larger association of churches. With two hundred thousands people, we can take public stands support legislation, change our state, change our country.

Rebecca's thirteen. She made a difference in her school. We're adults. What difference can we make?

How shall we eat? What shall we do?

RESOURCES

UN News Center, "Rearing Cattle Produces More Greenhouse Gases than Driving Cars, UN Report Warns." November 29, 2006

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=20772&Cr=global&Cr1=warming>.

Pollan, Michael. "An Animal's Place." *New York Times*, November 20, 2002

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9500EFD7153EF933A25752C1A9649C8B63>

Pollan, Michael. *An Omnivore's Dilemma*. New York, NY: 2006.