

HOW ARE WE FED (AND HOW DO WE FEED OTHERS)?
Woodinville Unitarian Universalist Church
December 10, 2006

Have you ever noticed how food and religion go together? Unitarian Universalist tradition is rife with stories of potlucks, elegant meals, feasting and churches that live for the next community meal. We get much of this tradition from our Protestant ancestors who enjoyed potluck gatherings after church as ways to enjoy wholesome meals and catching up on the gossip. We, of course, would never indulge in gossip but the meals can be exciting. In Christian tradition we have the story of the Last Supper. Islam has the fasting tradition of Ramadan. Jewish purity laws have kosher foods.

I thought of the relationship between food and religion when I was reading a book “The Omnivore’s Dilemma” by Michael Pollen. In the introduction, he goes on what might be best called a rant about American obsessions about food. About this obsession, he says, **“for me the absurdity...became inescapable in the fall of 2002, when one of the most ancient and venerable staples of human life abruptly disappeared from the American dinner table. I’m talking, of course, about bread. Virtually overnight, Americans changed the way they eat. A collective spasm of what can only be described as carbophobia seized the country supplementing an era of national lipophobia...when in 1977, a Senate committee had issued a set of dietary goals warning beef-loving Americans to lay off the red meat. And so we had dutifully done, until now...so violent a change in a culture’s eating habits is surely the sign of a national eating disorder...it would never have happened in a culture in possession of deeply rooted traditions surrounding food and eating....[such a culture] would not be susceptible to the pendulum swings of food scares or fads, to the rising up every few years of one newly discovered nutrient and the demonization of another. It would not be apt to confuse protein bars and food supplements with meals or breakfast cereals with medicines. It probably would not eat a fifth of its meals in cars or feed fully a third of its children at a fast-food outlet every day.”**

What does this have to do with American religion and us here at WUUC? I think there’s a similarity between our focus on food and on religious values. In past services I’ve mentioned the French author Alexis de Tocqueville a number of times. He wrote “Democracy in America” in the late 1820’s after his trip here. He comments that we Americans never seem to do anything by halves. We restlessly explore the landscape and travel vast

distances as quickly as possible. He believed we were certifiably insane when it came to religion because we tended to go from one extreme to another. Many of his observations still resonate today nearly 180 years later.

In the late 1950's, Asian Buddhist teachers who came to this country worried about an American fixation on "spiritual materialism." They saw a tendency for Americans to hurry from religion to religion and spiritual practice to spiritual practice sampling and complaining if there were no immediate results for a reasonable fee. This isn't just true in Buddhism. American evangelical churches rise and fall in membership each year as people journey from one to another in hopes of getting just the right combination of values. Religious liberals have worried that they might somehow have missed out and some have tried to form mega-churches out of thin air and fervent hopes that if you build it, they would come.

America feeding on religion is not a pretty sight. Some cultures treat their religious values like a well prepared meal that is lovingly eaten and appreciated. Some have said that American religion is like a vast smorgasbord of options that can be assembled in almost any combination. What experts in the field of studying religion say is that we Americans seem to treat our religious fulfillment the same way we do in our eating. Hurry up, let's get in and out quickly, spicy and elegant is not important but at least be more filling. And if it's entertaining, all the better.

A church has to learn how to feed spiritual sustenance to all in nourishing ways. The Committee on Ministry recently decided to change its focus from a support group for the minister and instead look at the evolution of the larger ministry of this church. If ministry is "to serve" then this church is far more than 'the minister' in service. We serve the larger community by giving once monthly offerings to community needs like Hopelink. We have served the homeless community by hosting Tent City 4 twice now. We serve children who are not known to us by the gifts under this Christmas tree.

Betsy and Brad offered to write short reflections on how church "feeds their souls" to paraphrase the popular book titles. Brad spoke about the companionship and the conversations and music. Betsy spoke about companionship in a distinctly 21st century way. She reminds us that many of us are not as drawn to church as other religious people can be in America. There's no threat of eternal damnation nor is attendance taken to make sure you're here. On the surface, it might seem like our Unitarian Universalist religion is pretty smorgasbord and low fat as well. Nothing fattening in our religious diet means no guilt.

Is that really true? That's the question I want to ask us today. If we are here to be nourished and spiritually fed, there has to be something that brings us back to the table again and again.

The most obvious form is each Sunday. Jan Anderson and the Worship Committee have done a stellar job in the last two years to make our services inspiring and joyful and meaningful. The Sunday services combine music and words in ways that hopefully do not jar the senses but do sooth the soul. That is one way that our children and adults are spiritually fed. Our youth are part of a thriving youth program that seems to be using the entire church on Sunday nights. Our youth groups are encouraged to develop their own programs but with the able assistance of the advisors.

All this is good but let's return to that connection between food and religion. There's a disease in our culture that we see all around us and I suspect we experience here. Betsy mentioned it this morning when she shared her story about checking the status of Lance Armstrong's marathon run in the bathroom. I have it when I had asked for a breakfast meeting this morning some of us had in Duvall, and then come here to prepare the service and then be ready to meet you up front to say hello.

The disease is this: **we are in such a hurry to get filled up with life that we lose its taste— whether it is in our ways of eating, our desperate efforts to get to the next task, or to seek answers to what makes life meaningful. Let's call it "hurry-upitis."**

Churches fall into this habit all the time. All but one of the churches I've served in seventeen years have moved restlessly from task to task trying to keep up with an endless list of unfinished business. That one church is in Saugus, Massachusetts and they've been around for 200 or so years. They found a cure for that disease of hurry-up-and-get-going. They approach religion based on **"been there, done that, nothing new under the sun."** They also have 23 members. Theirs is probably not the optimal one for us so I am going to suggest two other ways to help cure us from hurry-upitis.

The first is to slow down our pace. Many of you get the mindfulness practices that the Wednesday night Buddhist meditation group sends each week. Each of those practices invites us to slow down and appreciate the present moment of our lives rather than trying to do too much and then losing our way. This is the main reason I asked Richard and David to do the juggling for the Time for all ages today. We all juggle time, energy, and tasks. My concern is that in doing so, we become overwhelmed and then are in danger to drop everything. Your leadership here at WUUC has worked very hard in recent years to develop an ongoing 5-year plan that feeds all of us the spiritual nourishment we need. But being the creative and energetic

people we are, we are always coming up with new and exciting ideas. And yes, I admit I am as guilty of that as anyone here. The problem then becomes picking and choosing between all the good choices.

Slowing down reminds us that we don't have to fix everything in a day. Social Justice issues will be there for our grandchildren in 50 years. This church building will hopefully be here a 100 years from now. Slowing down means that we continue to pace ourselves and not take on so much that our energy becomes dissipated.

A second way to heal from the disease of hurrying through our meals or our religious lives is to remember the importance of stories. I couldn't help laughing when I read Betsy's reflection about the marathon and her reluctance to mention she goes to church. In 6 meetings this week in my office, I heard stories of courage and pain and hope and despair. We hear similar stories at Joys and Sorrows each week. That is one reason the sharing of joys and sorrows is essential in our church.

But a story is best shared with another person. Telling ourselves our own story is frankly a little monotonous. Sharing a story, though, requires a listener and a speaker. And where else but at church can we reflect on the stories of our lives, our religious values, and our history? The stories of Christmas and Hanukkah and the Solstice will be told in coming weeks. Each year they mean something just a little different to each of us.

A story, like juggling or cooking a meal, requires patience and open eyes. A story requires us to be together so we can learn from each other and take the lessons forth into the world of our lives. And the lessons we learn can feed our very soul so we can make it through another day.

So here's a final story for this morning. Yesterday I came by the church to drop off the books and see if a meeting was happening here. I walked inside and there was Dave Squier in a T-shirt doing something mysterious with wiring. One of the new members – Rob Kingsley - was on a mechanical lift that went all the way to the ceiling for changing lights and for all I know making a stairway to heaven. Tom Richards and Robert Galloway were pushing a wheelbarrow filled with paint cans to parts unknown. Bob Ditzler was rolling up a tape measure and wanted to show me the property lines. Each person I spoke to shared a bit of a story.

It was an unfinished story about a church that has buildings thanks to these dedicated church members of past and present.

It's the unfinished story that reminds us that building a church is not like building a restaurant. We cannot simply hope that if we build it, they will come back just because we have good signs.

We have to provide spiritual food that will be more than just filling. It will need to taste great.

We have to pay professional staff so volunteers don't have to do everything including all the dishes, the cleaning, and the cooking. People will come here not because "billions and billions" being served but because our recipe of religious faith is for discerning people of the 21st century.

And because we are a religious community and not a restaurant, we should not be afraid to offer a prayer to all who come to share our feast. I end with this one that is familiar to some of you. Those of you here prior to the fall of 2003 may remember these words. They do apply to us all.

**Let us give thanks for the food that we share;
Let us give thanks for all people who care;
Let us give thanks for the food that fills the body and the love that
Makes us whole;
Let us give thanks deep down in our soul, now and forever, for all
We are given.
Peace. Amen. Shalom. Blessed Be.**