

A Theology of Eating Locally

by Bill Graves

April 2008

I'm looking out on a group of UU's, and assume we share a sense of urgency to act more responsibly towards our mother earth. I assume that because it is deeply ingrained in our common faith. By now, we know that each of us should reduce our "carbon footprint", that is, the amount of fossil fuels we consume and the CO2 emissions we cause. Right? So, if I could tell you the single most effective thing you personally can do to reduce your carbon footprint, and if I could further show you that it would involve no significant sacrifice on your part; in fact it would make you healthier both in body and in spirit; if I could do all those things, might I get you to pay attention to this sermon? I hope so.

If you paid attention to title of this sermon you might have already guessed what my secret is. But let me try to convince you. I want to go about that using a sort of "old time religion" formula for sermonizing. It's in three parts. First, we hold up in praise what is most sacred and precious to us. Next, we acknowledge our sins, our distorted thinking and behavior. Finally is the call to repentance, what we must do to turn our directions around to reclaim the sacred tarnished by the sins we identified.

As to the first part of the formula, instead of using the words like "giving glory to God", we UU's would be more inclined to refer to "reverence for the interconnected web of all that exists of which we are apart." That is our 7th Principle. When we move to the sin part my topic becomes especially juicy, or at least slimy, cuz, brothers and sisters, we've been doing some serious sinning in the area of our food habits. The sins of greed and gluttony fuel the horrors brought to us by agribusiness and global food distribution. For repentance, as I suggested a few moments ago, the option I am focusing just may be one of most important things we can do to restore the balance to this wondrous, interconnected web of creation, and that is simply to eat from local food sources.

One of the greatest gifts I received as a child was a strong connection to land, the source of our food. Allow me to reminisce. I spent a good part of my summers on my grandparents' ranch in Western Montana (Boulder Valley to be specific). In the spring, after calving friends and neighbors would join together to drive the cattle up into the mountains. There they would spend the summer while the valley meadows grew high with the grass that would be mowed and piled into haystacks to feed the cattle through the winter. And, at the end of the summer, cowhands on horseback would scour the mountains to find all the cows with my grandfather's lazy crutch brand and herd them down to the valley meadows to spend the winter. My great-grandfather homesteaded the land in 1867 so it was a cycle that had sustained itself for about 100 years when I witnessed it.

Other chores I had on the ranch included taking care of the chickens. Once a day I took them out table slops and a little grain. I would open about 12 nesting boxes and was always amazed to find 1-3 gifts in each nesting box, every day. My grandparents could afford store bought eggs but they wouldn't touch them. They much preferred their own eggs which were richer in color and flavor. I also helped Carl, the hired hand milk "Lulubelle" and hauled buckets of her warm, unpastuarized bounty to the separator. The cream we produced was so thick it couldn't be poured. Sometimes, I would chop off a block of river ice preserved all summer in sawdust in the ice house and we'd make ice cream. Every evening I would accompany my grandfather as he simply drove around the ranch and surveyed the land he was born on and was utterly connected to and loved beyond reason.

From age 15 to 22, I spent large parts of my summer working on farms around my hometown of Walla Walla. Mostly it was very hot, dirty, monotonous, but one memory I have is of plowing fields from dusk until dawn when it was cool and the dust was held down by the dew. I would turn off my tractor lights and plow by moonlight all night long and be followed by owls waiting to nab mice that my plow flushed. These seem now like golden times in a different world long ago. But my education with the land formed who I am. I have always had to have a garden. Visitors to Francie and my place on Whidbey Island in late summer have sometimes found when they look in the back seat of their car that the zucchini fairy has mysteriously paid them a visit.

Our reverence for the interdependent web is expressed when we take some time to appreciate the small miracle of turning water and dirt and sunlight into, say strawberries, with awareness that we are part of and not as

separate from the dirt and the strawberries as we might pretend. Reverence is also present when we are connected to the rhythm of life by involving ourselves in some way in the caring creation of our own food. Nature holds up a mirror so we can see more clearly the ongoing processes of growth, renewal, and transformation in our lives. These words are by poet, Wendell Berry:

Topsoil increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition and aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past not as history or as memory but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or the tunnel by which its past enters its future.

Our reverence and gratitude for the miracle of the interdependent web yields a sense of obligation. It is a religion of the land that I think my grandparents had a sense of in a way that echoes words attributed to Chief Seattle: “We do not own the land; we are here to take care of it.” We know that all our food comes from the land, the earth, and whether we read from Genesis or the Bhagavad-Gita, we know that the earth is sacred.

Now, we gotta look at the sin part, or how far we have come from my Montana childhood. The lazy crutch ranch is now part of a much larger corporate holding and the ranch house, barn, barnyard, corrals, blacksmith shop, ice house, crew bunkhouse and chicken coop only exist in memory. If you want an extended visit with the global agribusiness that supplies almost all the food you will get at the supermarket or fast food outlets, I recommend “Omnivore’s Dilemma” by Michael Pollin, or “Animal, Vegetable, Miracle” by Barbara Kingsolver. They are my primary sources of fact. A summary: 70% of agricultural land in the U.S. has shifted to corporate controlled, monoculture or single-crop farms of enormous size. Of their crops hybrid and genetically engineered corn and soybeans dominate; corn and soybeans that the industry turns into thousands of starch and oil based food and chemical products. Among many other things corn and soybeans convert cheaply and quickly into animal flesh and corn syrup. When you have a hamburger and coke or about anything else at McDonalds you are literally eating corn. Barbara Kingsolver notes that if you removed all the corn and soybean based products from the supermarket it would look like a hardware store. The other major dynamic of the 21st century food economy is convenience. We want our food picked, cut, washed, packaged; all but chewed and digested for us. And, we want strawberries 12 months a year. As a result 85% of every food dollar goes not for the food but to the processors, marketers and transporters.

Still, supermarket and fast food seems fairly cheap, often cheaper than local, organic food. But the hidden costs make cheap food incredibly expensive. First, there is the fact that it contributes to the depletion of oil and to global warming because 17 to 20 percent of all our fossil fuel use in this country goes to agribusiness, into the nitrogen fertilizers, pesticides, tractors, transportation, refrigeration and processing of our food. That’s more than we use for personal transportation! Hardly any of it is essential.

Second hidden cost: Humans are hereditarily attracted to inexpensive oily and starchy corn-based foods. For a dollar you can get 1200 calories in the snack food aisle but only 250 in the produce aisle. And, the industry, which produces twice what the American public can consume is constantly trying to seduce us to consume more. Remember the shapely, little 8 oz bottle of coke of yesteryear? It has given way to the 20oz “big gulp”. So, the hidden cost is an obesity crisis, and diabetes and heart disease epidemics. The industry spends 10 billion dollars a year marketing food brands to children and it isn’t for broccoli, and now experts are predicting that the life expectancy of our children is expected to go down for the first time ever. Meanwhile 800 million people in the world are chronically malnourished,

Third, the industry has found ways of dealing with the huge corn surplus: Pass NAFTA and dump it in places like Mexico at a price less than the cost of production, which is made possible by government subsidies. And down in Mexico the price of corn fell by half and 1.5 million formerly self-sufficient Mexican corn farmers were forced off their land. They have to feed their families so they migrate to Mexico City or the Skagit Valley, often without visas and in terror of the ICE arrests, willing to do almost any kind of work even at slave wages. Thus, another hidden cost is the unraveling of rural society in both Mexico and Montana. This is also a very vivid example of how interrelated issues of justice are.

A fourth hidden cost is environmental devastation. Industrial farming promotes erosion, salinization,

desertification, depletion of the water tables and loss of soil fertility; one fourth of our arable land is already compromised. It leaves polluted water and a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico the size of New Jersey consisting of all the excess nitrogen fossil fuel fertilizer we use on Midwest fields. On my grandparent's ranch the cows fertilized the fields. The plants and animals were raised together on the same farm—which, therefore, neither produced unmanageable mountains of manure, to be wasted and to pollute the water supply, nor depended on huge quantities of imported, commercial fertilizer. American farm experts have taken a solution and divided it into two problems.

Fifth hidden cost: consider what we have done to the end product: the food that sustains our lives. Instead of free range chickens, cows and pigs I grew up with living more or less naturally on the land in Montana, we have several billion food animals living in nightmarish conditions on factory farms because of the oceans of corn aided by hormones and antibiotics that grow them quicker and cheaper. Strawberries and other produce have been genetically engineered to weather long distance transportation, and still look perfect, yet taste like cardboard copies of their former selves.

The final hidden cost of our cheap industrial food is 26 billion dollars of annual government subsidies. Our taxes thus encourage all of the horrendous habits I've been regaling about. The sum of it all represents a profound irreverence to the interconnected web of life.

And so my brothers and sisters it is time to repent, to opt out of the food decisions made for us by global cartels. We UU's take pride in being responsible for our own theology. We should also be responsible for our own food choices. It's like a like a vote, you have a vote between the monocultures built on fossil fuels and chemicals, and my Montana ranch where the land and the food it produced was sacred—my grandparents would never have said so but you knew it was felt in their bones.

What happens when you get out of the supermarket and fast food outlets, when you go to the farmers' market or join in community-supported agriculture, or nurture your own garden? What happens is that suddenly a whole world opens up. Your spiritual side will be uplifted, certainly more than by one of my sermons, I daresay. You will easily save more fossil fuels than if you buy a hybrid vehicle. You won't find strawberries 12 months a year but you will learn what the land produces each season where you live. The food will be healthier and fresher and better tasting. You will delight in direct contact with the creative people that grew your food for love rather than big profits. You will create yourself by cooking again. The whole equation of your relationship to food is changed. Kingsolver says: "Food is the rare moral arena in which the ethical choice is generally the one more likely to make you groan with pleasure." This is where the hope is, I think. And we hear about the spectacular growth in farmer's markets and in restaurants that buy locally so there is real hope. And, we need to support dreams of people like Cindy Bjorkland to teach and model permaculture, and Laura Cailloux to farm organically. Francie and I just returned from Korea and we couldn't help but notice how much lower on the food chain they eat, and they eat well. Meal after meal consisted of fresh vegetables and fish obtained locally.

Let me candid. I am not such a true believer that I intend to give up the true pleasure I receive from some things we can't produce locally, like chocolate and coffee. I'm not that saintly. But I am convinced that I should generally follow Barbara Kingsolver's two, overriding goals of food choice: (1) Use food whose provenance you really know; (2) Wring most petroleum out of the food chain. I have provided Michael Pollin's 10 rules for eating better in a handout with your orders of service and I hope you will get a chance to look them over and perhaps post them on your refrigerator.

UU Minister David Bumbaugh states: "The Seventh Principle calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world but this miraculous world of our everyday experience." Eating, of course, is an essential element of our everyday experience. Perhaps it's even time to reclaim the practice of approaching our daily meals with a sense of reverence by pausing and joining in a grace, even silently. Such a blessing would contain a recognition and expression of gratitude for the many miracles it took to cultivate, harvest and prepare the forkfuls of food we will slip into our mouths. With this kind of caring and intentionality about our food we just might deepen our connection to the earth, its rich soil and move towards living our seventh principle. We will have repented well.

Amen. May it be so. Let's take a moment for silent reflection

We have a few minutes for response. Can anyone tell us how they or someone they know is moving toward this ideal -- or share ideas that are working?

“We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. We must recover the sense of the majesty of the creation and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.”