

EATING OUR WAY TO ETERNITY?

A Service by Fritz Hudson
Presented November 27, 2005

Chalice Lighting

Let us worship with our eyes, and ears, (and mouths) and fingertips.

Let us love the world through heart and mind and body.

We feed our eyes on the mystery and revelation in the faces of our brothers and sisters.

All life flows into a great common life, if we will only open our eyes to our companions.

*Let us worship with the opening of all the windows of our beings,
with the full outstretching of our spirits.*

*Life comes with singing and laughter, with tears and confiding,
with a rising wave too great to be held in the mind and heart and body,
to those who have fallen in love with life.*

Let us worship, and let us learn to love.

Kenneth Patton

Introduction

Shel Silverstein, among other things, was a writer of poetry. Often people think of his work as aimed at children. But much of it seems to speak to older people as well. How many of you know his collection Where the Sidewalk Ends? In it are two poems I think might help us all reflect on an important part of the season we have now entered – on the connection between eating well and living well.

The first I'll use as a kind of test, just to see if our experience of the season has something in common. It's entitled "I Must Remember."

I must remember ...

Turkey on Thanksgiving,

Pudding on Christmas,

Eggs on Easter,

Chicken on Sunday,

Fish on Friday,

Leftovers, Monday.

But, ah me – I'm such a dunce.

I went and ate them all at once.

Anyone feel that way recently – say Thursday evening? It is a danger of this season, for us dunces. In fact, many of our traditions for what to eat when come to us as part of what's usually thought of as religious life, with rules. Perhaps they really are there to spread our eating out - so we don't eat everything all at once.

The second poem I want share, however, might move us to deeper exploration of the role our eating might have in our search for meaning. It's entitled "Hungry Mungry."

*Hungry Mungry sat at supper,
Took his knife and spoon and fork,
Ate a bowl of mushroom soup, ate a slice of roasted pork,
Ate a dozen stewed tomatoes, twenty-seven deviled eggs,
Fifteen shrimp, nine baked potatoes,
Thirty-two fried chicken legs,
A shank of lamb, a boiled ham,
Two bowls of grits, some black-eyed peas,
Four chocolate shakes, eight angel cakes,
Nine custard pies with Muenster cheese,
Ten pots of tea, and after he
Had eaten all that he was able,
He poured some broth on the tablecloth
And ate the kitchen table.*

*His parents said, "Oh Hungry Mungry, stop those silly jokes."
Mungry opened up his mouth, and "Gulp," he ate his folks.
And then he went and ate his house, all the bricks and wood,
And then he ate up all the people in the neighborhood.
Up came twenty angry policemen shouting, "Stop and cease."
Mungry opened up his mouth and "Gulp," he ate the police.
Soldiers came with tanks and guns.
Said Mungry, "They can't harm me."
He just smiled and licked his lips and ate the U.S. Army.*

*The President sent all his bombers – Mungry still was calm,
Put his head back, gulped the planes, and gobbled up the bomb.
He ate his town and ate the city – ate and ate and ate –
And then he said, "I think I'll eat the whole United States."*

*And so he ate Chicago first and munched the Water Tower,
And then he chewed on Pittsburgh but he found it rather sour.
He ate New York and Tennessee, and all of Boston town,
Then he drank the Mississippi River just to wash it down.
And when he'd eaten every state, each puppy, boy and girl
He wiped his mouth upon his sleeve and went to eat the world.*

*He ate the Egypt pyramids and every church in Rome,
And all the grass in Africa and all the ice in Nome.
He ate each hill in green Brazil and then to make things worse
He decided for dessert he'd eat the universe.*

*He started with the moon and stars and soon as he was done
He gulped the clouds, he sipped the wind and gobbled up the sun.
Then sitting there in the cold dark air,
He started to nibble his feet,
Then his legs, then his hips
Then his neck, then his lips
Till he sat there just gnashin' his teeth
'Cause nothin' was, nothin' was,
Nothin' was left to eat.*

*So now, could that really happen?
Is it possibly, in some way, even happening now?
Have you met Hungry Mungry?
Are you, or I, Hungry Mungry?*

Last winter you sent me to visit India, all the way on the other side of our earth. There, for years and years, people have told how Shiva, the creator and destroyer of the world they know, once created a monster who reminded me Hungry Mungry. He too had to eat himself up, but he stopped when he still had a face to hold his teeth. Shiva, they say, proclaimed, "this face shows how life works: life continues only by feeding on itself." And now, in the entrance of the Shiva shrines (or churches) there, an image of the face, Kirtimukha, face of glory, is set to remind everyone of what he said.

What do you think of what he said? Perhaps you'd like to talk about it in your classes or as families on your way home. In what ways might Shiva be right? What allows life to continue? And what does what we eat, or when, or how have to do with it?

Sermon

Preachers love this story: A church member, greeting his minister at the back of the church after a Sunday's service, says, "You know preacher, I've been listening to your sermons almost every Sunday now for nearly thirty years. But you know, I can't remember what you said last week, or perhaps even what you've said on any other Sunday in our time together. I'm beginning to wonder what good all this sermon-listening has done me."

The Preacher responds, "Well Mr. Brown, I've been eating supper almost every night now for almost fifty-five years. I probably couldn't tell you what I had last Sunday, or any other day in that time, either. But I've never wondered whether all those dinners had done me any good. Is there any more reason why you should doubt the good of my sermons?"

Now I suspect that, if asked, most of us could recall at least a few of the meals we've eaten in our lives. Last Thursday's, for some of us, may still linger in very concrete ways that prod our memories. For the most part, though, what we eat finds its value in the physical life it sustains rather than in the memories it engenders. Whether sermons somehow sustain life, even when they don't engender memories, is probably open to debate. This morning's sermon, however, will attempt to illumine our

reflections, however fleetingly, on the way that what, and when, and how we eat may affect the life of our spirit. Our holidays, holy days, of this season, pretend to religious origin and significance. I suspect, though, that in terms of time, effort and involvement expended, their observance is far more fervently ritualized in the kitchen and around the dinner table than in any church, temple or synagogue. So I'd like to think with you a bit about how this investment can best serve our health, and wholeness, in its most encompassing meaning.

The first place our mind goes, when we look for the religious dimension of our alimentary life, is probably to the mythical and scriptural power brought to bear, in various cultures, to enforce restrictions or prohibitions in one's diet. Every westerner who has ever traveled in India has found its "sacred cows", and the deference paid to them, remarkable. I was prepared for that, last winter. I even distained to include it in my pictures – it was such a cliché. Still, the cows are all around you there, and they are big, and they're not always polite. They do run the place. They are the god Shiva's steed, after all, to be worked and milked, but not eaten. But how did they become so? And how did the pigs of the Middle East become proscribed in Leviticus and the Quran from being eaten by the followers of Moses and Muhammad? Why did their Gods care that their people eschew these foods?

Enter the eye of science. Anthropologist Marvin Harris, in his book Good to Eat, looks at these religious proscriptions. He finds underlying them a practical, but subtle, foundation.

- The cow, in India, he says, only became forbidden to slaughter, when the subcontinent's population growth required nutritional output to be stretched as broadly as possible. Before 500BC, Hindu practice among high class Brahmans permitted cows to be slaughtered. But while animals concentrate plant nutritional power, they also use up a great deal of it in the process. As population growth burdened the nutritional system, cows could make a more significant contribution as milk producers and draught animals to plow fields than they could as meat providers. Buddhism and Jainism, as part of the "Hindu reformation," advocated dedicating cows to these purposes alone. Hinduism adapted to incorporate this evident wisdom.

- The pig, in the Middle East, Harris says, posed a direct threat to human nutrition. Pigs are a relatively efficient producer of protein, but they cannot process it from cellulose, in the way that cows, sheep, and goats can. They must be fed with grain rather than nourishing themselves from forage. But, with the limited grain producing power of their quasi-desert environment, the middle-eastern planters needed to consume all their grain directly. They couldn't afford to concentrate its nutritional power through pigs. The other cud-chewing animals didn't make demands on their grain. Moreover, they provided side benefits, milk and hair. So, cows, sheep, goats - good to eat; pigs – forbidden. Simple.

The practical basis for these cultural patterns is easy enough to see. As Harris says, "Preferred foods are foods that have a more favorable balance of practical benefits over costs than foods that are avoided." Where religion comes in, though, is when the cost-benefit analysis is not easy to make, or is evidenced only over considerable time. In Harris' words, "Religions gain strength when they help people make decisions which are in accord with preexisting useful practices, but which are not so completely self-evident as to preclude doubts and temptations." 'Sounds to me like he's suggesting a kind of "survival of the fittest" evolution in religious influences over our eating habits – a somewhat

mysterious power for our intuitions of our not-so-obvious long-term best interest. To me that's a suggestion worth holding onto – "I must remember."

In our religious tradition, in this sanctuary, there is no dietary dogma, at least officially. Over the past few decades, however, there has developed a strong sub-cultural bias in Unitarian Universalist circles toward some species of vegetarianism – if not toward outright veganism. Books like Diet for a New America, by John Robbins, have persuaded many among us that our dominant culture's way of eating, and its attendant environmental impact, is making us all into Hungry Mungrys – that we're headed toward eating ourselves and the entire interdependent web of existence literally out of house and home. Other books, like When Elephants Weep: the Emotional Lives of Animals, by Jeffrey Masson, persuade some among us of the cruelty of any form of animal consumption. George Bernard Shaw speaks their prophetic words: "Eating the scorched corpses of animals - cannibalism with its heroic dish omitted - becomes impossible the moment it becomes conscious instead of thoughtlessly habitual."

From within this conversation, Ginny and I have become persuaded of the personal and cultural benefits of leaning toward vegetarianism. We've moved our diet significantly in that direction. Before I could do that though, and perhaps more importantly, I had to begin removing my eating decisions, step by step, out from their happy home in the "thoughtlessly habitual" and into the painful light of consciousness. And that is not as easy as it first appears.

- Our very language urges us to separate what we eat from its origin and context. We use French words for the meats we eat - beef, veal, and mutton - but Anglo-Saxon words for the animals whose flesh it was - cows, calves and sheep.
- Cultivation and transportation technologies make us almost oblivious to Nature's rhythms of growing seasons. Harvest times in the all corners of our world can now be experienced as a virtual year-round cornucopia in our stores – hardly what Henry David Thoreau had in mind when he urged us to "Let Nature do your bottling and your canning."

I've found Native American thought habits helpful in consciously breaking out of my own. An Eskimo shaman, in a culture whose diet is almost entirely animal, says "Life's greatest danger lies in the fact that men's food consists entirely of souls." The rituals attached to hunting there bid to arouse the hunter's understanding and undertaking of the responsibilities which come with his power to kill. The Lakota seer, John Lame Deer writes in Seeker of Visions, "I was brought up to regard food as something sacred. -- Old Uncle would sometimes leave a heifer or steer in front of a poor cousin's house. He used to tell me, ""There's more to food than just passing through your body. There are spirits in the food, watching over it. If you are stingy, that spirit will go away thinking 'that bastard is so tight, I'll leave.' But if you share your food with others, this good spirit will always stay around." To me that's another suggestion worth hanging onto - "I must remember."

Shiva's face of glory, Kirtimukha, shines from India's temple gates to remind us that life continues by feeding on itself. But the end point of this process need not be Hungry Mungry's - "gnashin' our teeth," with "nothin' left to eat." Joseph Campbell, the prolific student of human mythology, notes the symbolic appearance of serpents in many cultures. "The serpent represents the primary function of life, mainly eating," he wrote. "(it) is a traveling alimentary canal, that's about all it is. And it gives

you that primary sense of shock, of life in its most primal quality." But different cultures value this symbol differently. For Southwestern Native Americans, the Pueblo people, for example, the serpent is a symbol of life, of connection with creative power. For the ancient Jews, and for Christians by inheritance, however, the serpent, luring Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, is the source of alienation from the creator of the universe. "This amounts," says Campbell, "to a refusal to affirm life." I don't know if I'd go that far, but surely it puts the spiritual life at tension with the physical. It is the wellspring of religious asceticism – a profound discomfort with our need to eat.

The Buddha, having tried and rejected the ascetic path to spirituality in his early years, speaks for his "middle path."

*Know that food is like medicine,
Partake of it without craving or hatred.
Not in order to fatten or to indulge,
Neither to heighten arrogance --
But only to sustain the body!*

My spirit, grounded in no experience or expectation of a life which is not physically based, leads me back again toward a more earth-centered inspiration. Even ancient Judaism and Christianity's suspicion of our appetites did not prevent it from seeing more than one sermon embodied in a meal. Yahweh's sustaining grace rewarded the Hebrew nation's quest for freedom in the form of manna in the desert. Jesus' words were strengthened by the distribution of loaves and fishes among his auditors, and his coming self-sacrifice was offered to his followers as bread and wine to be eaten and drunk "in remembrance of me." Those memorable meals were memorable sermons. And I would commend to you yet one more.

Do your family holiday rituals include at least one film-viewing? Ours do. As I looked toward this sermon, I was lucky enough to remember a film of about 15 years ago, an oscar winner, and to find it again at our local Blockbuster. Perhaps you remember "Babette's Feast." Danish writer Isak Dinesin wrote the story. Two Danish sisters, daughters of a warm-though-strict protestant pastor in a remote seaside village, are struggling to keep the spirit alive in their father's congregation after his death. They lead their people in the old songs and make visits to their sick, but over time the group grows dispirited and quarrelsome. Babette comes to the village as a refugee from the French civil war, offering herself as a servant to the two sisters. Her reference tells them "she can cook", but for years the poverty of their provisions gives them only the slightest hint of her gift. Then, while the sisters are planning a memorial celebration of their father's 100th birthday, Babette receives a letter with the winnings from a lottery ticket bought for her in France. She asks the sisters to allow her to order, pay for and prepare the celebration feast. They agree, but when the provisions begin to arrive, they become alarmed. There are rich cheeses, fresh truffles, many bottles of wine, 12 live quail, and a very large live turtle. In their fear of debauchery most contrary to their father's teachings, they gather the congregation to warn them of the danger into which their love for Babette has placed all their souls. Solemnly, they all agree to "eat without tasting." But their ascetic resolve is no match for Babette's artistry. In Paris, she had been head chef at Café Anglais. To their table set with perfect, if plain, linen, stemware, crockery cutlery, she sends course after delectable course. Through their stomachs, despite their fear and despair at physical weakness, the congregation finds again the strength and warmth of their pastor's spirit, as they had once through his words as he embodied them. At the

meal's end, one recalls those words for them all: "Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another." (General Loewenheim's speech.)

Meister Eckhart, the German mystic, once said, "The bodily food we take is changed into us, but the spiritual food we receive changes us into itself."

Rainer Maria Rilke, the German poet captivated by the French sculptor Rodin, once wrote:

*Earth, is not this what you want:
invisibly to arise in us?
Is it not your dream
to become one day invisible?
Earth! Invisible!
What do you charge us with
if not transformation.*

Some years ago, I read a table grace in this church's newsletter which I clipped and saved. It was attributed to a Kerstin Van Dervoort. One of you will have to tell me when and where she once sat here among you, as she thought:

*As sun and water have transformed the seed into this fruit --
As the miller and the baker transformed the grain into this bread
As the cow transformed grass and water into this milk --
So may we transform this food into health and beauty and strength
So we may work and play and serve one another.*

Chalice Extinguishing

*The bread we share this day is sacred.
Grain, gift of the earth gives life.*

*The friendship we share this day is sacred.
All gatherings when people meet and touch celebrate life.*

*The laughter we share this day is sacred.
Joy and sorrow that rise from love are springs of life.*

*The stillness we share this day is sacred.
In this peace is a haven for the spirit which nurtures life.*

*For bread, for friends, for joy and sorrow, for the comfort of quietness:
let us ever be grateful and caring.*

Rudolph Nemser

