

***Gourmet Ghettos:  
Complexity and Contradiction in American Cuisine***

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With Thanksgiving behind us, the season of gastronomic overindulgence and dinner discussion is officially underway. For me, the season often starts with leftover Halloween candy. There has been a seasonal food-themed display at my local library, Davis Branch, and all the magazines, including the November 24 issue of the *New Yorker*, feature cover stories on holiday cuisine. The current issue of *UU World* offers a helpful layout on Thanksgiving dinner choices; many newspaper lifestyle sections feature delicious environmentally sound, healthy, money-saving recipes. Even the comic strips and cartoons these days are all about food. For example, when Luann's mother complains there are too many bread choices in the supermarket, compared with the simpler "white or brown" of her youth, Luann tries to help by googling "healthiest breads" on her iPhone, to come up with just 2,860,000 suggestions.

So the time is ripe for us to think seriously together about the Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI) passed at General Assembly for the three-year period 2008-2012—*Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice*. Recently published online, the resource guide states, "The CSAI process is designed to engage individuals, congregations, and districts in an ongoing process of study, action, and reflection on pressing social issues to deepen our faith, to foster a greater sense of association among Unitarian Universalists, and to proclaim our vision of justice in the world" (5).

Another time, we can look at the CSAI process itself; over the years it has produced a series of powerful resolutions with the full weight of all of our congregations—that is, all those who choose to participate—behind them. Specifically, though, today we explore the interrelationship of food, justice, spirituality, personal health, and sustainability. A gourmet is defined as a "person devoted to refined sensuous enjoyment, especially food or drink." A ghetto, on the other hand, is a "poor densely populated city district occupied by a minority ethnic group linked together by economic hardship and social restrictions." I can understand how these two words—"gourmet" and "ghetto"—came to be linked, because alliterating terms make clever titles. A term coined in the early seventies, "Gourmet Ghetto" refers to a neighborhood in North Berkeley, home of the original Peet's Coffee, the worker-owned Cheese Board Collective, Alice Waters' world-famous restaurant Chez Panisse, and many other purveyors of fancy treats. But what about the painful irony, the obvious contradiction? This dissonance—"gourmet ghetto"—provokes thoughts about all kinds of ideals related to food: beauty, justice, sustainability, health, mindfulness, community, and "respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part."

Before I go on, let me assure you, I'm not here to preach restraint, or to urge or even suggest any kind of dietary or nutritional orthodoxy. It's a bit early for New Year's resolutions, anyway. If only it were that simple! I do want to explore the spiritual and theological implications of our food choices, and how each of us might ground ourselves, as Unitarian Universalists, for maximum health and wholeness as we enter this season of indulgence and celebration.

There's a delightful, beautifully illustrated story my children used to love at bedtime, *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, by Judy Barrett. It involves a mythical town, "Chewandswallow," where meals came from the sky, in nutritious and tasty combinations, and nobody had to shop or cook. The upcoming menus were reported on the news, like weather predictions. For breakfast, "After a brief shower of orange juice, low clouds of sunny-side up eggs moved in followed by pieces of toast. Butter and jelly sprinkled down for the toast. And most of the time it rained milk afterwards."

Suddenly one day, the system started to malfunction, causing a complete breakdown of everyday life. "One day there was nothing but Gorgonzola cheese all day long.... And the next day there were brussel sprouts and peanut butter with mayonnaise. Another day there was pea soup fog.... There was an awful salt and pepper wind accompanied by an even worse tomato tornado."

The story doesn't explain—or even ask—why or how the pattern of precipitation suddenly shifts from a comfortable, familiar menu to unmanageable super-size quantities of yucky combinations. The Chewandswallow equivalent of global warming remains a matter of speculation. Fortunately for the residents, there was another land within reach where they could seek refuge from the bizarre weather conditions, but where they had to learn a new way of life *without* wholesome, appealing ready-to-eat meals coming down from the sky.

A couple of years ago, I had an experience that felt like living in a stormy Chewandswallow, when I undertook observance of the Islamic month of fasting, Ramadan, while living, learning, and working in a non-fasting culture. I did this partly out of intellectual curiosity, partly to express my solidarity with Muslims, and partly as a challenge to interrupt my bad habits. I have always experienced powerful cravings of various kinds, and often, I yield to them. I have never been a person who could stop at one potato chip, one Hershey kiss, one bowl of ice cream. Ramadan offered me new hope for redeeming my relationship with food.

Observant Muslims abstain from all food and drink, including water, as well as from sexual intimacy and smoking, between the hours of dawn and sunset for the entire month. They regularly rise at dawn to say the first of their five daily prayers, and during Ramadan, they also have their morning meal at this time—about an hour and a half *before* sunrise. They fast during Ramadan to experience and express empathy with the poor, to commemorate the month of the first Revelation to Mohammed, and to become more open to God's presence. The practice is adjusted for those whose age, health, or other circumstances present difficulties, and missed days can be made up by extra donations to charity or additional days of fasting. God is merciful and gracious, and submission doesn't necessarily mean sacrifice. While it *is* considered a duty, Ramadan is embraced with joy and enthusiasm by the faithful.

In my Unitarian-Universalist seeker version of fasting, I confess I did not abstain from water, and I also missed a day of fasting here and there. It was still an enlightening experience for me in many ways. The first thing I noticed was how much a part of everyday life food smells and food talk and food planning and preparation and eating and drinking are. People were munching and slurping away all around me throughout the day. I felt like a fish getting out of the water to watch the other fish swimming. In his book, *In Defense of Food*, Michael Pollan observes that Americans now snack a lot more than we used to—gone is the taboo against between-meal

nibbling. Work is no longer a “food-free stretch of time” and roughly a fifth of all eating, according to one study, now takes place in the car. “Snacking,” he writes, “in recent years has colonized whole new parts of our day and places in our lives” (p. 190).

In addition to heightening my awareness of our food-filled environment, fasting for Ramadan taught me something about the significance of religious community in everyday life for Muslims. Since I do not belong to such a community, I really appreciated the companionship of one or two other UU friends who were fasting, even though I couldn’t fully participate in the evening worship and fast-breaking dinners that bind whole communities in celebration of their faith throughout the month. I am powerfully moved by the thought of something like a billion human beings around the globe—roughly 20% of the world’s population—observing Ramadan all at the same time in their diverse forms of cultural and culinary expression.

Of course, other religious traditions also affirm community bonds by means of dietary customs. Seventh Day Adventists observe biblical dietary laws and advocate healthy eating. Many traditions within Buddhism and Hinduism embrace vegetarianism as part of their doctrines on non-violence. Before Vatican II, Roman Catholics were bound to abstain from meat on Fridays to commemorate the Crucifixion; we always had fish-sticks on Fridays in my public school cafeteria. Many pious Christians today observe fasts during Lent. When I shared my food justice thoughts with a Jewish chaplain colleague at Stanford Hospital last summer, he noted that keeping Kosher, for him, is the “Highway 101” of ethical eating. This includes holiday treats heavy with oil, latkes and jelly doughnuts, celebrating the Hanukkah miracle that the oil of one day lasted for eight.

In my own faith journey as a Unitarian Universalist, drawing on the world religions that pique my curiosity, I am attracted to traditions of mindfulness, and for several years I have practiced yoga. Recently I learned about a yoga class in which poses are paired with special flavors of chocolate. This may seem especially decadent, until we remind ourselves that chocolate in ancient times was imbibed, in the Americas where it originated, as a spiritual medicinal beverage. “For those not quite as ready to pick up yoga as they are a truffle, Katrina [Markoff, inventor of the chocolate-yoga retreat,] offers that chocolate not only has the power to enhance yoga, but the experience of eating chocolate, of allowing each flavor to hit the tongue slowly, ‘can be the yoga itself—the thing that gets you into a meditative state’” (Beliefnet)....Think about it.

In my yearning for mindfulness and embodied wisdom and beauty, I envy traditions with rich symbolism and dramatic forms of ritual, such as Catholicism and Wicca. Islam famously avoids representational art of any kind, but at the same time, its practices promote mindfulness and embodied faith in ways that I believe we cerebral, language-loving, reason-revering, doctrine-averse Unitarian Universalists might learn from. We’ll come back to this idea in a few moments, when we consider what might guide us in making the most responsible, healthy, and mindful decisions we can about what we eat.

Before I take on that question, I want to lift up that for some, even if the answers were simple, the choices are limited. Fresh, local, sustainably produced whole foods are not available everywhere, and they can be considerably more expensive than highly processed products with

shelf lives extended by preservatives. Even more so if they bear “organic” or “fair trade” labels. As Van Jones described for us a few weeks ago, some people live in “food deserts,” inner city neighborhoods or isolated rural areas where they must depend on convenience stores and fast food franchises—and yes, liquor stores—that charge higher prices than suburban supermarkets, because they can. “Food deserts” like these stand in stark contrast to “gourmet ghettos” full of upscale restaurants and shops. In her book *Nickeled and Dimed: On Not Getting by in America*, Barbara Ehrenreich describes how minimum wage workers often live on “fast food,” simply because they can’t save enough money to pay the deposit on an apartment lease, and their motel rooms have no cooking facilities. These conditions must be addressed, and it will take more than just creative cooking to rectify them.

Meanwhile, what are the usual grounds for the food and lifestyle choices we make? Even for those of us in relatively privileged positions, prices are far from irrelevant, and often the more wholesome choices come with the higher price tags. What if it comes down to a choice between making a larger contribution to a worthy cause and purchasing an Organic turkey who lived a comfortable life for sixty dollars, instead of a frozen one raised in the conventional way on a factory farm for sixteen dollars?

Personal health themes certainly figure largely in our menu planning, *but* often these choices are not straightforward, either. In *Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy*, Harvard Medical School author Walter Willett writes, “Research about diet and nutrition seems to contradict itself with aggravating regularity. You stop using butter and instead start spreading margarine on your toast, only to learn later that margarine can be just as bad for you as butter.... Early research shows that coffee drinking increases the chances of developing pancreatic cancer, while later research shows that coffee drinking is harmless and may even have some benefits. Some studies find that eating fish prevents heart attacks, others don’t” (p. 27).

Perhaps considerations about animal cruelty influence our meat shopping habits. The City of Chicago has passed an ordinance against serving *foie gras* in restaurants, because of the suffering caused to geese in its production; California just passed Proposition 2, affirming humane treatment of farm animals. *But* these decisions are far from no-brainers. Many of us will pay extra for “cage free” or “free range” eggs, although serious questions have been raised about what these labels actually mean. Unless you buy eggs directly from the farm, where you can see for yourself the happy hens clucking about the yard, you can’t be sure.

Environmental concern increasingly enters discussion about diet, and these are the issues I personally find most compelling. [When I visited the UU Congregation of Marin in California to attend a workshop (led by former CLUUC intern Katherine Jesch) on the Green Sanctuary program, they served a luncheon menu from “low on the food chain,” and offered copies of recipes for participants to try at home.] As part of a sustainability themed worship service, I pledged to shop more frequently at the Farmer’s Market. *But* the rising gas prices made me want to get out my calculator, to see whether I burned more fuel driving to the Farmer’s Market once or twice a week than I conserved by not purchasing goods shipped from longer distances to a supermarket closer to my home.

I stopped eating meat a few years ago after learning that turtle habitats are destroyed and ocean ecosystems compromised when anchovies and sardines are harvested in massive quantities to make feed for pigs. I thought, if I can't enjoy bacon and baby back ribs, why eat meat at all? Then I saw ice cream heir John Robbins' video, *Diet for a New America*. He shows how many sacks of corn it takes to produce one pound of hamburger, and how many acres of rainforest and other native habitat get sacrificed to growing corn for feed. That year I joined the vegetarians at UU Family Camp in Mendocino, where the non-meat menu options excel, and I have kept to a pesco-vegetarian diet—including fish and seafood—ever since. *However*, it can be argued that meat from animals humanely raised using sustainability practices makes a better protein choice than imitation meat products “concocted in laboratories by multinational corporations trying to exploit the vegetarian market,” as Robbins puts it.

Without doubt, our food and lifestyle choices have an impact on our own personal health as well as collectively on the ecological health of our planet. At every level, however, complicated and contradictory information can make choices difficult. How can we sort through the tangle of messages to make healthy choices that sustain the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”? Does all the confusion[—2,860,000 kinds of “healthy bread”—]mean that our choices really don't matter in the end?

Steven Covey talks about using the image of the compass as a guide through confusion and chaos, rather than using maps, which are apt to change with weather and road conditions. My experience with Ramadan suggest to me that “true north” for food choices *could be* sought in the principles of spiritual mindfulness, on the one hand, and community values, on the other. My own journey has taught me that the choices that promote personal health *are the same choices* that contribute to social justice, sustainability for the planet, and affirmation of all life. *Moreover*, as anyone who has tasted the difference between supermarket tomatoes and those from the back yard or the produce stand or the farmer's market can tell you, the best choices have the added advantage of providing the *most pleasure* in eating. In the words of Alice Waters, “An appreciation of food is environmentalism at its most personal and least abstract. And it is through the development of a commitment to food that the values of the environmental movement in this nation can most effectively be advanced.” She continues: “Wendell Berry has written that eating is an agricultural act. I would go farther and say that eating is also a political act, but in the way the ancient Greeks used the word “political”—not just to mean having to do with voting in an election, but to mean “of, or pertaining to, all our interactions with other people—from the family to the school, to the neighborhood, the nation, and the world.” Every single choice we make about food matters, at every level. The right choice saves the world” (*The Delicious Revolution*).

Now, I promised not to preach restraint, but I do encourage you to look up the resource guide on the study/action issue, *Ethical Eating*, on the UUA web site. It is full of ideas for enhancing our understanding and “making easy, tasty, nutritious food choices that fit with our individual ethical and spiritual values” (2). It offers the following suggestions for action:

- \* Support sustainable agriculture and farmers' markets. Encourage organic community gardening.

- \* Volunteer in support of community food pantries, Meals on Wheels programs, and similar projects that address the problem of hunger.

\* Become an advocate for social and economic justice. Support labor unions, farmers' cooperatives, "fair trade" associations, and other organizations that help the farmers and other workers who produce and distribute food in the global market.

In addition to the materials available in the *Ethical Eating* Resource Guide, there are several food and mindfulness-related adult programs being offered here at Cedar Lane in the spring, including "Menu for the Future," which will explore many of these topics in greater depth.

I close with the voice of Alice Waters quoting the impressionist painter, Paul Cezanne. He said: "The day is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will set off a revolution." Waters adds, "So let us all make our food decisions in that spirit: Let us observe that carrot afresh, and make our choice."