

Giving Up Bananas ~ What is Ethical Eating?
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Here we are, at the "Big Question:" What is my relationship to the creatures on this earth, and to the earth itself? Are the creatures and the earth here for me or am I part of an interdependent web of life that includes all creatures and our earth as well? How far does the interdependent web extend, and do I really believe that all of us are intimately connected with all of existence?

It has been said that one of the functions of most religious traditions is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. Today this is also my mission. My goal in sharing my thoughts with you and telling you what I'm about to tell you, is to raise questions that will stick in your mind. I want you to be more thoughtful while walking the aisles in Food Lion, in Tri Star, in Martin's and even Trader Joe's.

To be more concerned as you unload your groceries from those plastic bags that seem to reproduce like rabbits beneath your kitchen sink. To think about replacing them with reusable grocery bags, if you have not already done so. To be mindful next year as you serve your Thanksgiving dinner to your family, in that Norman Rockwell moment as the browned bird is placed before those approving eyes and watering mouths. You have before you bowls of fruit, olives, apples, oranges, grapes, even some cheese. Delicious and nutritious food. Good and good for you. So, let's see what the hidden cost of this bounty might be. The olives might be from Greece, the Middle East or even Texas. The apples were probably grown in Washington State and the grapes might have come from California, Chile or Peru, while the oranges could have come from Florida or California, or even all the food.

The whole idea behind the concept of "ethical eating" is that we think about the food that we're putting into our mouths. And by this I don't mean the nutritional value, whether it's good for us or whether it's going to go straight from our lips to our hips. Ethical eating is consumption wedded to awareness and intention. It is one form of Buddhist mindfulness. Tich Nhat Hahn has spoken quite directly about mindfulness and food.

It is about educating ourselves about the true costs of the foods that we buy and consume. It's about facing up to the ugly facts of the agro-industrial complex. It's knowing, for example, that while we've increased the average yield of an acre of farmland from 24 bushels of corn in 1930 to more than 160 bushels per acre today, to achieve this astonishing improvement we apply about 1.5 billion pounds of nitrogen to the soil each year in the form of fertilizers. All told, the food before you may have traveled a distance of as little as 3,000 miles to more than 18,000 miles to be with us here today.

It's not news to tell you that none of the items before you are grown in the Northern Neck, though apples are grown in the Shenandoah Valley not far from here. Think for a minute, do you buy local apples when they are available, or do you buy more environmentally costly apples because there are more varieties to choose from or because they look nicer - shinier?

Americans consume about 400 gallons of oil a year per person for the food they eat. Author and scientist Steven L. Hopp wrote that if every American family were to eat just one meal each week that was composed of locally and organically raised foods, "we would reduce our country's oil consumption by over 1.1 million barrels every week. Hopp concludes "Becoming a less energy dependent nation," may just need to start with a good breakfast."

As we are all aware, the greatest threat to our beloved Chesapeake Bay is agricultural run off, and animal related waste from agriculture. So are there any solutions for us here in the Northern Neck to not just think Ethical Eating, but practice it? The answer is yes. There are organic foods available at Food Lion, though transportation costs remain an issue. In the Summer, we have the opportunity to purchase locally grown organic produce, locally produced cheeses, local eggs, some from free range chickens. I know free range eggs are occasionally available at the Farm Supply Store on Route 360 in Burgess. We must not forget our abundance of local seafood - fresh to our tables, wild caught - not farmed and obtained with a minimum of fuel costs. Yes, I am aware that oyster aquaculture is growing rapidly in the Northern Neck, but as far as I know, these are free-range oysters, who forage naturally and are not raised on a diet of Purina Oyster Chow.

Perhaps the most ethical solution available to us is Community Supported Agriculture (CSA). Many of you may not know that Northumberland County is home to a successful CSA organic farm co-op. It is called Olin-Fox Farm. Individuals buy shares by season or for all four seasons. Ethical eating is not cheap. You can buy a share for fruit only, for as little as \$69.00. A Summer Season Share will run you \$470.00, and Four Season Share costs about \$1,140.00. Olin-Fox Farm has been in business since 1996, and has distribution points in multiple locations in Northern Virginia, as well as Kilmarnock, and at the farm itself. My point in telling you about this Community Supported, Sustainable Organic Farm, is not to urge you to start buying shares. That is a personal decision for each of you to consider if you wish to do so. The point is there are options for ethical eating-even here in the Northern Neck- the home of Salt Fish and fried everything.

As Unitarian Universalists we proclaim to affirm and support respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. What does that mean to us? How far does it extend? And what does it require of us? The most recent proposed revisions to our principles elaborate on the Seventh Principle thusly: Inspired by the beauty and holiness of the Earth, we become more willing to relinquish material desires. We recognize the need for sacrifice as we build a world that is both just and sustainable. We are called to be good stewards, restoring the Earth and protecting all beings.

In the choices we make about the foods we eat, what does it mean to be good stewards who work to restore the Earth and to protect all beings? What does it mean to us when we proclaim the earth to be "holy?" The seventh principle and questions such as these, point us toward questions of ultimate reality and meaning - profoundly spiritual questions like "Who or what made us?" "Why are we here?" and "Who is our neighbor, our brother or sister?" Finally, with regard to ethical eating, "If we are what we eat - who exactly are we? And most importantly, who do we want to be?"