

From:

**“A Crowd At The Table”
A Thanksgiving Sermon
Rev. Lilli Nye
Nov. 23, 2003**

Reading:

“On Eating and Drinking” by Kahlil Gibran

Would that you could live on the fragrance of the earth,
And, like an air plant, be sustained by the light.

But since you must kill to eat, and rob the newly born of its mother's milk to quench your thirst,
let it then be an act of worship.

Let your board stand like an altar
on which the pure and the innocent of forest and plain are sacrificed for that which is purer and
still more innocent in man.

When you kill a beast, say to him in your heart,
"By the same power that slays you, I too am slain; and I too shall be consumed. For the law that
delivered you into my hand shall deliver me into a mightier hand. Your blood and my blood is
naught but the sap that feeds the tree of heaven."

And when you crush an apple with your teeth, say to it in your heart,
"Your seeds shall live in my body,
And the buds of your tomorrow shall blossom in my heart,
And your fragrance shall be my breath,
And together we shall rejoice through all the seasons."

Reading:

**An excerpt from “The Pleasures of Eating”
by Wendell Berry:**

The pleasure of eating should be an *extensive* pleasure, not that of the mere gourmet. People who know the garden in which their vegetables have grown and know that the garden is healthy will remember the beauty of the growing plants, perhaps in the dewy first light of morning, when gardens are at their best. Such a memory involves itself with the food and is one of the pleasures of eating. The knowledge of the good health of the garden relieves and frees and comforts the eater. The same goes for eating meat. The thought of the good pasture, and of the calf contentedly grazing, flavors the steak. Some, I know, will consider it bloodthirsty, or worse, to eat a fellow creature you have known all its life. On the contrary, I think it means that you can eat with understanding and with gratitude. A significant part of the pleasure of eating is in one's accurate consciousness of the lives and world from which the food comes. The pleasure of eating, then, may be the best available standard of our health...

Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend. When I think of the meaning of food, I always remember these lines from the poet William Carlos Williams, which seem to me merely honest:

*There is nothing to eat,
seek it where you will,
but the body of the Lord.
The blessed plants and the sea, yield it
to the imagination
intact.*

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Edward Winslow of Plymouth, New England, wrote, on the 11th of December, 1621 in “a Journal of the beginning and proceedings of the English Plantation settled at Plymouth in NEW ENGLAND, by certain English Adventurers both Merchants and others...”

“Our corn did prove well, and, God be praised, we had a good increase of Indian corn. Our barley was indifferent good, but our peas not worth the gathering, for we feared they were too late sown. They came up very well, and blossomed, but the sun parched them in the blossom.

Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that so we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labors. They four, in one day, killed as much fowl as, with a little help beside, served the company almost a week. At which time, many of the Indians came amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted; and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed upon our governor, and upon the captain, and others.

Although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty.”

The men, women and children of Plymouth lived in such intimate acquaintance with the sources and sustenance of their life. They could not for a moment take for granted their dependence on the soil and sky, on each other, on the good will of the native peoples, and on the providence of their God. This letter, written little more than a year after the settlers first came to shore, does not dwell on the wretched conditions they had endured to arrive at that time of rejoicing, nor does it mention that half of their people *did not* survive at all the year at all.

As we anticipate our own feast of Thanksgiving this Thursday, it is hard for us to imagine such a precarious existence, or to realize that we too are as dependent upon soil and sky, on our fellow human beings, and on the larger forces of life. As we gather to celebrate with family in friends, here’s a little reflection to suggest that there is a much larger crowd around our thanksgiving table than meets the eye.

There is something that I have noticed about Unitarian Universalist food culture. In spite of our great love of sharing food together, it is rare that such feasting in fellowship is preceded by the sharing of a grace or blessing before a meal. This could be for any number of reasons:

Perhaps saying grace evokes a general discomfort with prayer amongst UU’s. It suggests a tone of righteous piety that feels stilted in our very informal religious culture.

Or, perhaps knowing that our companions come from many points along the theological spectrum—from atheist to agnostic to earth-centered pagan to Buddhist to believer in a personal God—we do not know how to gather all those points together for a simple blessing without addressing our thanks “To whom it may concern...”

Or maybe, with our humanistic, independent orientation, we imagine ourselves to be self-sustaining. The food is on the table because *we*, ourselves, paid for it at the grocery store, with the money we earned, and we prepared it. If it's a potluck feast, we have each other to thank for the abundance. But how meaningful is it to thank some vague "Spirit of Life" for what seems to be the fruit of *our own* effort?

In its most unflattering light, perhaps our disinclination to give thanks before eating simply reflects a culture of convenience and entitlement. Perhaps we simply are not in the practice or habit of recognizing the blessing of all that comes to us from beyond ourselves.

Wendell Berry asks us to come back to our senses, to come down to earth. "Eating is the most profound enactment of our connection with the world" he says. That is a powerful pronouncement about this seemingly simple act which most of us engage in without much reflection several times a day.

Unlike our forbears, few of us today are acquainted with the vegetables or creatures we consume in their pre-harvested state. Few of us are blessed with knowing the beauty of the growing plants in the dewy first light of morning, or the memory of the calf in the pasture.

More often, food comes to us packaged in plastic. So, it takes a little extra intention to remember that eating remains—as much today as it ever was—the medium of our most profound connection with the world.

Some of you know that I am vegetarian—of sorts, if you can call someone who eats sea critters, eggs and dairy a vegetarian. *And believe me*, that choice has nothing to do with a distaste for meat. One of the most delicious of aromas in the world to me is barbeque.

Nor do I mean to present myself as some kind of bodhisattva of compassion. However, in my better moments—at least in my more conscious moments—while I'm eating, I do try to imagine the lives and even the deaths of the creatures who nourish me.

I try to think of the freedom and exhilaration of the wild Atlantic salmon leaping up a frigid mountain stream. I try to imagine it's distress as it is pulled from the water and slowly suffocates in the air. I try to imagine the big soft eyes of the dairy cow hooked up to the milking machine and wonder if her udders are sore or if her legs ache as they support her enormous body on the cement floor all day. I try to imagine the bright red-gold eye of the hen who produced the beautiful brown eggs I'm breaking into my cast iron pan, and remember that her laying days will be numbered.

Such thoughts may seem perverse, but simply remembering these beings seems to be one of the few ways that I can express my indebtedness to them. Wendell Berry mentions that the thought of the calf contentedly grazing in the good pasture flavors the steak, that such knowledge calms, and relieves, and the frees the eater.

But knowledge of the factory farm also flavors the meat, in a different way. Imagining the lives of the animals steers me away from meat and eggs produced in the cruel and grotesque conditions that are typical of industrial livestock farming. The thought of the animals' suffering curbs my appetite. It guides me, according to my conscience and financial capacity, to spend the extra money it costs to support humane farming practices.

But since I cannot always be the purist I might like to be, I try to integrate even the awareness of suffering into my eating meditation. It is part of the energy that I am ingesting, and I feel some responsibility to recognize it.

Of course, eating not only places us in debt to plants and animals and the forces of nature. There is a vast human element to this as well. Now, this may not be the most appetizing of meditations, but please allow me to suggest another train of thought:

Let us imagine that we are going to eat something that we've prepared at home using a number of ingredients, including some prepared foods that come in bottles or cans or boxes. Imagine all of the hands that have participated in bringing food to the table for this one meal:

Who are the faceless hundreds who planted and harvested, who cleaned and packaged and canned, who shipped and stocked, who perhaps combined and repackaged, and shipped a second or third time, then stocked the supermarket, ran the cash register, and bagged our groceries? If we also imagine the extended network of relationships that sustain the farming, factory, and freight industries, that web of connections reaches out indefinitely in our global economy.

So many hands, so many faces, so many stories, now connected to your own because you decided to use raisins, or bananas, or salmon, a European cheese, or coffee or soy sauce (although, I hope to God, not in the same dish!).

Consider the migrant workers who harvest so many of our table fruits and vegetables. Their labor is indispensable to the farming industry, yet they are some of the poorest, most powerless, and most exploited people living within the borders of our nation. That they are often denied fair compensation for their work is a factor behind the moderate prices we enjoy.

Imagine all those faces, those hands, those stories. When we eat mushrooms, or apples, grapes or tomatoes, we are, in a sense, ingesting their labor, their life, their deferred dreams and lack of choice.

Kalil Gibran tells us,

*When you crush an apple with your teeth, say to it in your heart,
"Your seeds shall live in my body,
And the buds of your tomorrow shall blossom in my heart,
And your fragrance shall be my breath,
And together we shall rejoice through all the seasons."*

But if he had been writing today, perhaps he would have said,

*When you crush an apple with your teeth, see in your heart the laborer who worked the harvest, and say to him or her,
"Your potential shall live through my body,
And the hopes of your tomorrow shall bloom and come to fruition in my life,
Your efforts shall be my breath,
and our existence shall now be forever intertwined."*

We cannot escape our interdependence. And although we must try to practice some discipline of consumer awareness and ethics, it is unlikely we will be able to escape our complicity in a food economy that includes cruel, unjust, and unsustainable practices.

Yet, these truths need not ruin our dinner. They need not bring gloom to our Thanksgiving table. Part of being spiritually open is simply understanding that our lives, our blood, our beating hearts, live because we are sustained by other lives. The great life force flows without interruption through everything. Being conscious of these realities deepens our thanksgiving.

Remember again the words of Kalil Gibran—would that we could live without taking or using life, but we cannot. Therefore let our eating be an act of worship. Let our table stand like an altar.

This is the meaning of saying grace, of saying a blessing before a meal. This is the meaning of the feast of Thanksgiving. It is an expression of awe and indebtedness to the forces and fabric of life and death. Remembering all those lives makes our gratitude real, deepens our compassion, and strengthens our commitment to do what is right for the beings who sustain our being.

Around 1940 Woody Guthrie wrote a song called “This Land is Your Land, This land Is My Land.” It was an anthem to the beautiful and abundant landscapes of this nation, but it was also a song that remembered the migrant workers and other laborers who worked the land without rights, fair compensation, or any hope of ownership. Remembering our connection with this land and to all the lives that support ours, let's join together in singing, This Land Is Your Land.”

BENEDICTION:

*All life is One
And everything that lives is holy
Plants, Animals, and People.
Let us give thanks,
And bless the lives that have been given
So that we may live,
Resolving, by our word and deed,
to honor the debt of our existence.*

Blessings and joy to all, in this season of Thanksgiving.
Amen.