

GETTING REAL ABOUT FOOD

By Ana Porter

Moses was a rancher. Long before he became a famous Biblical patriarch who led his people to freedom from slavery, he was a simple rancher. And this simple rancher was tending his flock on the side of a mountain one day circa 1527 BCE, when he came upon a small forest fire – a burning bush. He was fascinated and awed by this miracle that the bush was burning but was not consumed, neither spreading nor dying. He approached it with some trepidation, and suddenly the voice of God rang out from the sky, “Moses! Stop right there and take off your shoes, for the ground on which you are standing is holy ground.”

How odd for God to tell Moses to *take of his shoes* at a time like this! God was about to tell Moses that he’d be leading the Israelites to freedom. God was about to tell Moses God’s own divine identity. But before *any* of this could happen, Moses’ shoes had to be off.

Whether or not you believe this story to be historically true, it’s a powerful image. As if for Moses to walk on holy ground with the heaviness, clunkiness, and sharp-edgedness of shoes would have been a sacrilege. Moses had to have the humility and intimacy of his bare feet in direct contact with the earth before he could begin his conversation with the divine.

Our sun is a fire that burns like that burning bush. For all intents and purposes, it burns without being consumed. And the light from that great fire travels all the way to earth and gets transformed by green plants into substances that we can then eat. Plants grow in the ground and they turn sunlight into food which literally becomes our bodies. Surely any ground in which such miracles happen is holy ground. Perhaps we should all be taking off our shoes.

The 7th principle of the UUA promotes “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are all a part”. What does the 7th principle mean for us *today*? Our lives don’t occur at the level of epic meaning and Biblical tales where the forces of light battle the armies of darkness. Our lives occur in the mundane day-to-day world where things are messy. You have to get your kids to school and you didn’t have time to shovel the driveway yesterday. *This* is the level on which we actually experience our lives. This is the ground level. And likewise, if we want to make a difference in this world, we can’t theorize about it, we need to take action in a specific, deliberate, and down-to-earth way.

Today I want to get really specific and really concrete: I want to talk about food. I’ve asked our ushers to pass around collection plates full of corn seeds, otherwise known as popcorn kernels. Please take one and pass the plate. Examine it; roll it between your fingers. Hold it in your palm and imagine the life energy of this tiny, tiny creature.

This sermon is my attempt to “get real” with the 7th Principle and at the end of it, I’m going to ask you to get real as well by taking a small, down-to-earth action. So hold on to your corn seed -- you’re going to need it.

Our relationship to food in this country is a very strange thing. The flavor of a McDonald’s french fry doesn’t come from the french fry itself but is manufactured separately in a flavor manufacturing plant in New Jersey. But beyond just fast food, almost all the food we eat is manufactured somehow as a product by a corporation. It’s kind of a weird thing that the foods that we need to survive are products, like iPods and Toyota Camrys are products. And yet, they are. Even the corn kernel you are holding in your hand is a product. Big business agriculture in this country is usually not even about growing food directly, but about producing *products* that have to undergo further processing to become food.

I want to read you a quote from an article on agribusiness by Richard Manning in *Harper’s* magazine: “America’s biggest crop, grain corn, is completely unpalatable. It is raw material for an industry that manufactures food substitutes. Likewise, you can’t eat unprocessed wheat. You certainly can’t eat hay. You can eat unprocessed soybeans, but mostly we don’t. These four crops cover 82 percent of American cropland. Agriculture in this country is not about food; it’s about producing commodities that require the outlay of still more energy to *become* food.”

So most of the food we eat does not arrive directly at our dinner table from a field somewhere. Most of it travels a circuitous route that involves processing and re-processing, packaging, and being shipped long distances. We eat burgers, ice cream, power bars, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, breakfast cereal with milk, apple pie, spaghetti and meatballs. All of these things are only distantly and dimly related to plants that once actually grew in the ground.

Most urban and suburban people in this country buy food, all clean and packaged in supermarkets and have no real sense of connection to food as plant or animal. There is no sense of food as something that was once a living being and is part of the “interconnected web of all existence.”

Ironically, the closest many of us come to such intimacy with the natural world is often during the holidays – the one time of year when we buy a whole turkey at the supermarket. It looks surprisingly like a *bird*, minus the head and feathers and feet of course, but it does kind of look like a bird. And with slight queasiness and uncomfortable jokes, we are forced to deal with it as such. It has blood. It has giblets. At least most supermarkets have the decency to put the giblets in a plastic bag for us so that we don’t have to actually touch the bird’s gizzard if we don’t want to.

How has this dislocation come about and what are its consequences? One of the turning points in our relationship to the land came with the counter-intuitively-named “green revolution.” According to Manning, the author of the *Harper’s* article I mentioned,

“With the possible exception of the domestication of wheat, the green revolution is the worst thing that ever happened to the planet.”

I want to tell you a story about agriculture in this country:

The story goes that in the 1960’s the supply of unfarmed, arable land in the U.S. ran out. There was no more “farming frontier.” There were no new fields to be ploughed, no new farms to be started on new land. In a Capitalist system that needs constant growth to survive, this was a crisis.

The crisis required a drastic solution and the solution was the modern-day factory farm. Crops are now genetically modified to grow twice their natural size, fields are pumped full of nitrogen fertilizers and pesticides, land that is too dry for the crops we grow is irrigated with water diverted from rivers and lakes far away. Iron is mined and oil is drilled to manufacture and fuel the giant farm machinery that ploughs and fertilizes and harvests the massive acres and acres of monocrops. You can be sure that the farmers who do this work wear shoes.

The amount of fossil fuel energy it takes to accomplish all this is massive. According to Manning, it requires the equivalent of three to four tons of TNT per acre for a modern American farm. Iowa’s fields require the energy of 4,000 Nagasaki bombs every year.

And here’s the kicker: today’s food industry spends ten calories of fossil fuel energy for every one calorie of food energy it produces. The waste is staggering. If the whole world ate the way Americans eat, all global fossil-fuel reserves would be gone in ten years.

You’d think that if this were all true it would simply be too expensive to keep running farms this way. You’d think farmers would be going out of business left and right. Well, it *is* too expensive and farmers *might* be going out of business except for the fact that the U.S. government gives subsidies to these giant factory farms to the tune of billions of dollars a year. Over the last ten years, \$113,557,000,000¹. These subsidies have a devastating effect on agricultural markets around the world and because of this, we’re currently in violation of World Trade Organization standards.

The litany of horrors goes on and on:

- In the Gulf of Mexico, the runoff from nitrogen fertilizers has created a dead-zone the size of NJ where nothing can live.
- High-fructose corn syrup, one of the main products made from corn, is terrible for you and the increased production of high-fructose corn syrup since the 70’s tracks exactly with the rise of obesity in this country.
- 80% of our grain gets fed to cows, which are then pumped full of chemicals and raised in horrifyingly cruel living conditions. It takes 35 calories of fossil fuel energy to make one calorie of beef in this way.

¹ <http://www.ewg.org/farm/>

Well, there's good news and there's bad news. I always like getting the bad news out of the way, so here it is: the bad news is that we are all complicit in this. The box of cereal that we all have at home required the equivalent of a quarter gallon of gasoline in its production. It is *our* tax money that funds the subsidies. *We* make the choices to eat the foods that we eat, we vote with our dollars and support the systems create this mess.

But the good news is that insofar as we are all complicit in this, there is also hope. Because we can choose to know that beets don't grow in cans, cows don't grow in burgers, and chickens don't grow in nuggets. We can choose to reconnect with our food and with the people who grow it. We can choose to tread lightly on the holy ground on which we are standing.

But I promised to make this sermon concrete and specific so I'm going to talk about what we can actually do on the ground level to (in the words of the 7th Principle) "respect the interconnected web of all existence." I called up two non-profits that deal with issues related to industrial agriculture and I asked them, what do you recommend that I ask this congregation to do? (Interestingly, both of the people I randomly spoke to were Unitarian Universalists! It was a proud moment.)

Both people I spoke to and everything I've read says that the most important thing is this: ***buy your food from local, organic farmers.*** This is the single most effective thing we can do: exercise our power as consumers. Buy food that's less processed, eat lower on the food chain, eat less meat. This is the most practical way of taking off our shoes as a community.

Every dollar we spend on local, organic food is a dollar that promotes environmentally sound agriculture, protecting our water and air. That dollar supports a family farm and a culture of small, personal businesses instead of giant, faceless corporations. That dollar reduces our dependency on oil. That dollar helps protect animals from extreme cruelty. And that dollar buys healthier, fresher food for our families and ourselves.

So I want to suggest a New Years Resolution for 2006. And, stay tuned, here's where your corn kernel comes in. I would like everyone in this room to pledge to spend at least \$10 a week on local, organic produce for this year, 2006. Meat counts too if it's organic and free-range. Now, in January in Illinois, obviously you can't get local produce, so I'll settle for just organic but not local. But starting in June, there is an abundance of beautiful, delicious produce from organic farms not too far from here. I have info sheets about those farms and how to find their produce in supermarkets, farmers markets, and by ordering directly from the farms themselves. These sheets are on the table outside.

Here's what our \$10/week will do: According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the average family farm income last year was \$20,663. If this is true, and say that half of the people in this congregation, say 150 people, pledge to spend \$10/week on local, organic produce. That means that this year, this congregation will put \$75,000 into the pockets of real people, growing food sustainably. This will support the equivalent of more than three farms. Just from our little congregation here.

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If you feel that you can make this New Year's resolution of \$10 a week, I ask that you take your corn kernel and put it in this wooden bowl that I will have outside. I will count up all the kernels and let you all know next week how many we have.

In the meantime, may we all practice greater mindfulness in the food we eat and the products we buy. May we find greater and greater respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are all a part. And may we all metaphorically take off our shoes – for the ground on which we are standing is holy ground.

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Source material for today's sermon from "The Oil We Eat: Following the food chain back to Iraq" by Richard Manning (<http://www.harpers.org/TheOilWeEat.html>)

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[Follow-up note: By the end of the two services in which I delivered this sermon, 116 people (out of about 140) had put their corn kernels in the wooden bowl, representing their pledges to spend at least \$10 per week on local and/or organic produce. If people stick to it, this will add up to \$59,160 this year.]