

“It’s All About Food”
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As Thanksgiving approaches, I can’t help but remember the way we celebrated last Thanksgiving at the Community of the Holy Spirit. As you may recall, the Sisters have a small organic farm, which is part of an environmental ministry, just over the state line in Brewster.

Now, planning menus in the Community was always tricky, and Thanksgiving was no exception. Two members were on gluten-free diets. Two cannot touch liquor, and avoid it in food even if all the alcohol has been boiled off. One avoids onions, and another can’t eat anything in the cabbage family – so much for our bumper crop of kale. Meanwhile, some of us are watching calories, although that sort of thing tends to go by the boards on holidays anyway.

In our planning, the question came up, “Should we purchase an organic turkey or not?” Our friends at Organic Connection still had a few turkeys left. Should we make an exception to our usual vegetarian practice, just for the holiday? We quickly decided to stay vegetarian, and to prepare the meal as much as possible from our garden produce.

A meal began to shape up. Sr. Carol Bernice offered to make the pumpkin pies – with a wheat-free crust, of course. Sr. Emmanuel said she’d make potato and parsnip casserole, using the red potatoes that were beginning to sprout. Sr. Helena Marie said she’d make vegetables – collard greens, and fresh green and red Brussels sprouts.

Meanwhile, I found a fabulous recipe for Winter Vegetable Pot Pie, which would use many different garden ingredients: butternut, onions, shallots, turnips, parsnips, carrots, and herbs - plus some celery root from the local farmer’s market. There were some obvious redundancies with other items on the menu, but on holidays the Mae West principle seems relevant: ”too much of a good thing is wonderful.”

Wednesday, the day before dawned cold and rainy. I went out to the garden to look for parsnips and carrots – and I remember the pleasure of finding them, white, red, and orange, pulling them up through the icy soil. On the way back to the kitchen, I checked the cold frames in the herb garden, and found some remnants of parsley. Everything else I needed had already been harvested. The rest of the morning was spent peeling and cutting everything up. When it was all finally part of a simmering vegetable stew, I went to work on the gluten-free piecrust, working alongside the other sisters.

The next day, when we finally sat down, it was to a grand feast. Almost all of it was from our own abundant harvest, a spring and summer’s labor. Almost all of it was the

work of our own hands. It has a place on my list of all-time great meals. And, as I wrote in my blog later on (www.suespencer.wordpress.com), we didn't even miss the turkey!

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This description gives you a small glimpse of life in community. It may also explain why the sisters often say that their ministry is “all about food.” Of course, this was all very labor-intensive. Now that I've left the Community and returned to the work of parish ministry, which is also very labor-intensive, I don't expect to celebrate Thanksgiving in quite that way again.

On the other hand, the experience will always be with me. It has permanently altered my relationship to food – the way I shop, the way I cook, the way I sit down at table. One way to put it is to say it has heightened my consciousness. That's accurate – but it might be more on target to say that a broken connection has been restored for me.

In this age of industrial food production, it's easy to forget where our food comes from. It's easy to take it for granted - that slab of meat in a plastic package, or the oatmeal in a box, or that bunch of bananas piled up in the produce section. It's easy to forget that the oats once grew in a great field, or that the bananas once pointed upward on a large tree, and have taken a long trip by air to come to us. It's easy to forget that how we eat has reverberations far beyond our dinner table. In that forgetfulness, it's easy to cut ourselves off from the great chain of life, from those with whom we share this planet, and from Earth itself.

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This past year, at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, a new Study-Action issue was passed on “Ethical Eating.” This is the first phase of a four-year process, which, if successful, will result in a GA Statement of Conscience. But the process of getting there is at least as important as the end result. We're all invited to study the issues of food, to learn the ways our food decisions affect the interdependent web, and then to make choices in accordance with our values and principles. Ethical eating is an act of *remembering* where our food comes from, and also an act of re-membering, putting things together that had been taken apart.

But let me be clear about something. I do not intend this to be a sermon about grim, joyless eating. I do not intend it to be about guilt. And I also do not intend it as a sermon about why you should abstain from eating turkey next week. Members of this congregation, I imagine, will come to differing conclusions about that question. I will say that I think a person can be an omnivore, and still eat ethically. And in an age of factory farming, being a vegetarian doesn't automatically exempt a person from ethical risks.

“Ethical eating” is about consciousness. It’s about how our daily choices can make a difference. It’s about empowering ourselves, both as consumers and citizens. And it is, I strongly believe and fervently hope, about abundance, and abundant living.

It also turns out to be a *huge* topic, with many ramifications. Some of you may have seen the article by Michael Pollan, which appeared in the *Sunday Times Magazine*’s Food Issue last month.¹ If you haven’t read anything by Michael Pollan, this article is a good summary of food issues he’s concerned about. The article is entitled “An Open Letter to the next Farmer in Chief,” and is Pollan’s advice to the President-elect, at that time unknown.

The nation is about to face a food crisis, Pollan says. This is because “the era of cheap and abundant food appears to be drawing to a close.” For too long, our agricultural policies have been based on an abundance of cheap energy, something that we can’t count on any longer – the recent dip in fuel prices notwithstanding. Even if fuel prices were not an issue, the *way* we’ve been farming over the last couple of generations cannot be sustained for the long haul. The times demand new approaches – or in some cases, going back to very old approaches.

Furthermore, Pollan tells us, it’s not *just* about food. Our food supply is linked to many other issues, issues that go to the heart of national wellbeing and security. These include many of the things the candidates debated about: attaining energy independence, reforming our health care system, and slowing human-produced climate change.

When we hear the words “energy independence,” we may immediately think about weaning ourselves from fossil fuels. This, in turn, may lead us to think about the automobile. We probably won’t automatically think of food production - and when we sit down at table, we probably don’t think about oil.

Nevertheless, next to transportation, our industrial food system is the second largest user of fossil fuels – consuming almost 20 per cent of our yearly oil supply. To bring food to our table, we consume about 400 gallons of oil per person per year. Or, to put it another way, in the words of environmentalist Steven Hopp, “Americans put almost as much fossil fuels into our refrigerators as our cars.”²

The petroleum-food connection has three basic sources. The most obvious is actually the most minor – the use of gasoline to run farm machinery – tractors, harvesters, combines, and the like. More significant is the oil and natural gas used to make so-called “inputs” – synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.

But the biggest gas-guzzler of all is our process of food distribution – the ways in which we transport food across the country, or even across the world. The average food item on our dinner plate has traveled 1500 miles to get there, so that we can eat without worrying

¹ Michael Pollan, “Farmer in Chief”, *The New York Times*, October 12, 2008.

² Steven L. Hopp, “Oily Food,” in Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 5.

about the season. Raspberries in January? No problem. Oranges in July? Why, of course.

Giving that up, and learning to eat locally and seasonally, would save us a bundle in non-renewable resources. This has a spiritual dimension as well as an economic one. For many Americans, it would mean letting go of a sense of entitlement – thinking we should always be able to have what we want when we want it. It would mean developing a sense of gratitude for what nature brings us each new season.

Steven Hopp tells us that if every American individual and family sat down to just one meal a week of locally and organically grown meat and produce, the country would save 1.1 million barrels of oil every week. It's interesting to note, by the way, that the "local" aspect is even more important than the "organic." Even conventional butternut squash, grown in Connecticut and sold at a local farmer's market, is far more fuel-efficient than organic tomatoes flown in from California.

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The use of fossil fuels in agriculture has another dimension, which has to do with their role in making synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Since World War II, this has led to a revolution in farming, and not necessarily a helpful one. Before the advent of petrochemicals, farming had been a creative act, with farmers relying on biodiversity, both plant and animal, to control pests and enhance fertility. Now it became a matter of pouring on the fertilizer and pesticides, in order to produce monocultures - the same high-yield crops, year after year.

We can see the results if we fly over Iowa. Michael Pollan, writing to the President-elect, asks: "Did you notice when you flew over Iowa during the campaign that the land was completely bare – black – from October to April?" He goes on:

What you were seeing was the agricultural landscape created by cheap oil. In years past, except in the dead of winter, you would have seen in those fields a checkerboard of different greens: pastures and hayfields for animals, cover crops, perhaps a block of fruit trees...Farmers relied on crop diversity (and photosynthesis) both to replenish their soil and to combat pests, as well as to feed themselves and their neighbors.

Cheap energy changed all that - abetted by government subsidies, and government policies emphasizing quantity over quality. These enabled the production of monocultures" – plots of land farmed intensely for commodity crops, in an extractive way that exploits rather than respects.

In industrial agriculture, meat and dairy animals are treated the same way. On a family farm, they were part of the farm's ecology, and sometimes even part of the family. Now they, too, are treated as commodities. They're shipped off to spend their lives in feedlots or, even worse, in CAFOs – confined animal feeding operations. Here they are force-fed

corn, which is not part of their natural diet, and they never have a chance to see the light of day, or even to move around.

It's not good for the land, it's not good for the animals, and it's not good for us. All this cheap grain and cheap meat had to go somewhere. What it did was "work its way up the food chain," driving down "the price of all the calories derived from that grain: the high-fructose corn syrup in the Coke, the soy oil in which the potatoes were fried, the meat and cheese in the burger." It doesn't take too much imagination to link this with our epidemics of obesity, heart disease and diabetes.

Fortunately, all is not lost. What is happening in agriculture now is not due to an irresistible force of nature. It's not even due to the irresistible forces of the sacred market! Rather, it's the consequence, unintended or not, of government policy – and government policy can be changed. The fuel crisis, the health crisis, and the threat of global warming, may make this the opportune time.

Also, it's a sign of hope that people are waking up to these issues. The "locavore" movement is taking hold, along with farmers' markets, consumer supported agriculture, and organic groceries. Young people are taking up farming. Denominations are studying issues of food policy and the ethics of eating. And people are discovering anew that they have the power to change things. We have power as consumers, and we have power as citizens.

As Margaret Mead once reminded us:

Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world – indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.