

“The Spiritual Life of Food”

By Rev. Barbara H. Gadon

July 18, 2010

First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, DE

We know that food is life. Without it, we die. But food also has a spiritual life. It connects us to everyone else on the planet, and to all living things. Food can be a source of joy – in shared meals, in flavors that connect us with home and childhood and family. There is joy in the adventure of trying new foods. There is joy in the preparation and offering of food – when someone prepares a meal for us with great love. The joy of food can just as easily be diminished, and even vanish. Joy, of course, is non-existent for those who do not have enough food, for the millions of people on the planet who are hungry. But the joy of food also vanishes with over abundance. It vanishes when we have eating disorders and become the slave of food, as is the case for bulimics, anorexics and other compulsive overeaters. I am certainly in the latter category, as many of you know, though I am gratefully recovering from it. The joy of eating also gets dulled when we eat our food in isolation, or when we eat our food without noticing it – tasting very little as we ignore the very bite we are taking right now. And the joy of food does get strained when we carry too much weight and put stress on our health and feel badly about our bodies.

Do not think that this is going to be some smug, schoolmarm-ish lecture about “eating right”. I can see some of you eyeing the exit signs right now. Don’t worry. I know you have plenty of information about nutrition already – about whole foods, organic foods, local foods, and scary statistics about obesity and its impact on our health. You know this stuff. It’s valuable information, but it’s just not very much fun. I once was on a committee to plan a 3-day retreat for the UU ministers in our district. We received a proposal from one of our colleagues – someone who is in fabulously good shape. He offered to do a program designed to help each of us develop a plan for physical exercise and nutrition. Our whole committee had the same immediate and visceral response: “No”. My friend Heather said it best. She said, “Just hearing about it makes me want to sit in front of my TV with a bag of jelly donuts. And maybe a beer.”

Food is personal. Choices that we make about food are intensely personal. Having even a whiff of someone making that choice for us – by telling us what to eat, or criticizing our food choices – sets our teeth on edge. While there is no denying the impact of our food choices on our bodies, each person’s choices are their own, and must be respected. And information about food doesn’t touch the spiritual life of food – it doesn’t feed our souls.

For that, we need poetry, and we need stories. Consider the story about the wedding at Cana. In the gospel of John, this story is the first event in Jesus’ public ministry. Biblical scholar Marcus Borg argues that the choice each gospel writer makes, of what story to put first in his narrative - is very significant. The first public act is a helpful clue about his life and message. Setting aside questions of whether or not the story is literally true, the wedding at Cana an interesting story to put first. It’s not a teaching or a claim to fulfill ancient prophecy. It’s a miracle. And as miracles go, it’s kind of frivolous. It has none of the deep compassion of a healing – casting out a demon, making the blind see or the lame walk. None of that. It lacks the outright usefulness of being able to feed 5,000 people from five loaves and two fishes. Walking on water is much more impressive. All he does is change water into wine – at a party.

But not just any party – this is a wedding banquet. Weddings then, as now, were huge celebrations in the life of the community. People may have been poor, but they scraped together what they had to put on a lavish feast. And in times of great oppression, as the Jews were under the Romans, celebrations were very important. And the wine runs out. This is a huge problem for the host, but obviously, Jesus doesn’t think it’s that serious. His mother does. You have to wonder what that was like. Your MOM tells you to do a miracle – how embarrassing is that? *“Come on, Honey, do that thing you always do at home.”* *“No!”* But despite his protests, she tells the stewards to do whatever her son tells them. She knows he’ll do it. And he has them fill the six tall jars with water, and take some to the head steward to taste. It’s delicious, as if they had saved the best for last. Because of this *sign*, the story says, the disciples believed in him.

What is the sign? What does the action signify? The Hebrew scriptures are rich with the imagery of God as the bridegroom. Life, therefore, is meant to be a lavish celebration of the love of God and humanity. In more secular terms, you could say that food and wine and human celebrations are at the heart of life. That life should be a banquet where the wine never runs out. That there is abundance. But as we can’t help noticing, that’s not the way things are. People go hungry.

Wine runs out. Somebody has to do something, but everyone looks at each other and says it's none of their business.

And like all good prophets, leaders, and heroes, Jesus gets backed into getting involved where he would rather not. The story says that he conjures wine – not from water – there wasn't even any water in the jars when they started. So actually, he conjures the wine from nothing. And the joy of the celebration may now continue. From nothing, then, you may conjure joy.

Here's another story from the spiritual life of food. You may have to work hard to imagine this scene. It takes place in Minnesota in the wintertime. I am out in the blinding white of a new snow – thick and brisk and alive all around me. It is also brutishly cold, but I don't notice this right away. I am 8. I am sliding down the hill by our house on my wooden sled with the red runners. Snow is caked in the creases of my enormous snowsuit, stocking cap, mittens and boots. (I was prone to falling off.) At some point, my face becomes chapped and red. I am cold and suddenly hungry. I pull my sled on its thin rope into the garage and dutifully pull off most of the layers in the basement, as I have been trained to do. I stump upstairs, which lead directly into our kitchen, and what I see seems like magic: my mother has set out lunch. I sit at our round kitchen table, at a square of paper towel for a place mat. The meal is: a grilled cheese sandwich, made with American, the only legitimate cheese, and tomato rice soup, from Campbells, the only legitimate kind of soup. There may be a small glass of 2% milk set neatly at the corner of the paper towel.

MFK Fisher writes in *"The Gastronomical Me"*: "It seems to me that our three basic needs, for food and security and love, are so mixed and mingled and entwined that we cannot straightly think of one without the others. So it happens that when I write of hunger, I am really writing about love and the hunger for it... and then the warmth and richness and fine reality of hunger satisfied..." In Fisher's terms, this is the perfect meal, a perfect conveyance of security, love and nourishment. It was joy conjured from nothing. If I were to choose my last meal, this would probably be it.

Feeding someone and being fed are profound acts of caring and being cared for, going way back into our body's memory, when we were fed as infants. They connect people. No wonder something happened inside Brian Price when a prisoner sent word to the kitchen to thank him for his last meal. No wonder he was compelled to prepare all the prisoners' last meals from then on. He could do

something to comfort them in their last moments on earth. He could conjure a tiny moment of joy. And they were connected.

When we cook for someone, when we feed them, it is an intimate form of connection. It's all the more profound to do this when you are cooking for someone that's not in your family, or even someone you know that well. We do this when our caring friends volunteers prepare meals for people in our congregation when they are recovering from illness. It creates a connection. I am always a little sad when people turn down the meals offered to them. "No, no, we're fine. We don't need the food." You may not need the food, I want to say, but the food is not the point. What you need is the love.

We're not used to connecting this way. We are shy about it. We go into restaurants and are separated from the people who cook our food. They will cook our meal with dozens of others – they will not see the look of delight (or disappointment) on our faces when we taste what they have made. I am not a cook myself, but I am married to a deeply excited cook – someone who looks eagerly for my reaction at the first bite of whatever he has prepared. I've learned it's rude not to exclaim over the meal. To not notice the love I've been offered.

None of this happens for meals we eat in restaurants. There is a discreet separation. There is also a separation between ourselves and the other diners. We either sit alone or with people we have pre-selected. Now in some French restaurants, they serve food in what they call 'family style'. Family style dining places you right next to or between people you do not know. It's customary for you to pour the wine for the person on your right. You spoon out your portion of each dish from the same big bowl that everybody else is taking from. That would be just weird, in America. Too intimate. We like our privacy. We like a big menu, where we can choose according to our own personal taste and mood.

And we are often lonely and distracted in our eating. Michael Pollan reports that 19% of all American meals are eaten – where? In the car. Nineteen percent. The car and the food have both been engineered for this purpose, he says. "The car has cup holders, front seat and rear, and most fast food (which we can order, pay for, and pick up without opening the car door) can be readily eaten with one hand. Indeed, this is the genius of the chicken nugget: it has liberated chicken from the fork and plate, making it as convenient, waste-free, and automobile-friendly as the pre-condimented hamburger." (Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*)

Now don't get me started on fast food. The schoolmarm will come out, and it won't be pretty. But it's not only the poor nutrition I have a problem with, it's

the isolation. It's the invitation to not pay attention to what you're eating. When we eat McDonalds in our cars, we are not drawn toward other people we're eating with. We're not noticing our food, either. We are free to focus on the traffic, and the place we are going to next. Because the payoff of eating fast food is that this Big Mac will taste exactly the same as the other 300 you have already had. You don't have to pay attention.

In the spiritual life of food, paying attention is important. And not always easy. I was at a week-long Buddhist meditation retreat, and part of the meditation practice was 'eating meditation'. Great! It sounds a little like my favorite spiritual discipline, napping meditation. But eating meditation was more strenuous. We were asked to pay attention to each and every bite of food we put into our mouths. To notice its texture, temperature and flavor. While I certainly noticed my food and appreciated it more, I found mealtimes exhausting. We are not used to paying attention.

I have a long way to go in this department. I was startled to realize that I eat many, if not most of my meals alone. Robert often teaches class during supper, and I tend to eat lunch at my desk at the church. I have a fierce reading-while-eating habit. I even have a long, black book weight that lays nicely across my book so I can cut my meat using both hands and not miss a word. It does not encourage mindful eating. But I appreciate the moments when I am encouraged to pay attention. When other members of the staff corral me into bringing my food into Marina's office and we eat together.

I am glad for the moments I am encouraged to show gratitude and to feel my own connection to the source of life. Almost every Saturday I eat with friends at Lucky's Diner. We are a motley assortment of religions: New Age and Unitarian, Jewish and evangelical Christian, Catholic and No-Religion-Whatever. And each of us takes a turn saying grace before our meal. It doesn't matter what the words are. What matters is that we take hands, that we pause to give thanks, that we are reminded to pay attention to the miracle, the source of life.

Every month, we as a church pay attention to the miracle of food. We have a crew that cooks a meal for Emmanuel Dining Room. Cindy Cohen leads this group. We used to have trouble finding enough people to fulfill our commitment to serving food each month. But last year, when Cindy proposed that we prepare the meal ourselves. Now there is no shortage of cooks or servers. Youth take a turn, retirees, young parents. It has somehow changed from a duty – feed the

hungry – to a joyful, creative event. People cook together, serve together and eat together. It helps bond them.

And it helps keep in front of us what we would rather not see – what is altogether too easy to tune out – and that is, the stark reality of hunger. Food links us to all other people in the world – we all need to eat. And we must somehow deal with knowing that every time we have a meal, someone else does not. But knowing this information usually doesn't get us to act. Cooking together, making connections, creating joy – that is what helps.

I asked Cindy why she started doing the Emmanuel Dining Room cooking project – why she commits so much of her time to it. “Feeding people means love,” she said. It's true.

Cindy Cohen and her crew that cooks and serves for Emmanuel Dining Room are also invited to say grace before the meal they serve. She says that people are generally shy. It intimidates the Unitarian Universalists to pray out loud, but she urges them to step up to the plate and do it. Saying grace connects you to the people you are eating with, and reminds you of why you are there. That there is a spiritual purpose to this time together. So she composed a grace that she feels comfortable saying. “May we be mindful of those who are hungry and hurting,” she says. “And may we be of comfort to them. We are thankful for everyone who came to eat. And may we be mindful of all those who contributed to the meal, including those who gave their lives for this food.” As a vegetarian, she is very much aware of the chickens. She doesn't try to convert anyone to her way of eating. She learned early on that you have to cook what people want to eat. But she is acutely aware of the sacrifice of life. A lot more so, than the kitchen staff. They think it's the funniest prayer they've ever heard - to pray for the chickens.

So to encourage the spiritual life of food in your own life, it's really quite simple. Cook for someone else, or gratefully accept the cooking of someone else. Don't be embarrassed by the love. Eat with people more – at a restaurant or at home – find some way to regularly share a meal. Remember that in God's kingdom joy can come from absolutely nothing. Find some regular practice of paying attention to what you are eating, remember to acknowledge it as the source of your life, and offer thanks. Do not forget that people are hungry, and find some small way to help feed them. And don't forget to pray for the chickens. Amen.