

"Food for Thought"
Reverend Alison Hyder
April 15, 2007
The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

Opening Words: By Rev. Mark Belletini – "Breaking Bread Together" (adapted)

Today we join together to give thanks and break bread together. We share food made from the rich grains of earth, each different from the other, no two exactly the same. Like the people of the earth, grains grow in many soils. We gather in gladness and gratitude for our world community as we share the bread of life:

Only bread is for breaking. The dignity and worth of each human life is not for breaking

Bread of life we share, be food for our wholeness and strength.

Only bread is for breaking. The bonds of love and community are not for breaking.

Bread of the world we share, be the food of love that we may all live together in peace.

Only bread is for breaking. Commitment to justice, compassion and mercy is not for breaking.

Bread of life we break, be the food that impels us to act for justice and mercy.

Only bread is for breaking. The earth that is our home is not for breaking.

Bread of the world we break, be the food of healing and goodness.

Only bread is for breaking. Our right of conscience and freedom to seek meanings in our own ways are not for breaking.

Bread that sustains our world, be the source of wisdom and truth that guides us.

Only bread is for breaking. Our spirits are not for breaking.

Bread that sustains our spirits, be the source of our peace.

PRAYER: by Reverend Max Coots "Garden Meditation"

Let us give thanks for a bounty of people:

For children who are our second planting, and though they grow like weeds and the wind too soon blows them away, may they forgive us our cultivation and fondly remember where their roots are....

For generous friends with hearts and smiles as bright as their blossoms:

For feisty friends as tart as apples:

For continuous friends, who, like scallions and cucumbers, keep reminding us that we've had them;

For crotchety friends, as sour as rhubarb and as indestructible;

For handsome friends, who are as gorgeous as eggplants and as elegant as a row of corn, and the other, plain as potatoes and as good for you;

For funny friends, who are as silly as Brussels Sprouts and as amusing as Jerusalem Artichokes, and serious friends, as complex as cauliflowers and as intricate as onions;

For friends as unpretentious as cabbages, as subtle as summer squash, as persistent as parsley, as delightful as dill, as endless as zucchini, and who, like parsnips, can be counted on to see you through the winter;

For old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening-time, and young friends coming on as fast as radishes;

For loving friends, who wind around us like tendrils and hold us, despite our blights, wilts and witherings;

And finally, for those friends now gone, like gardens past that have been harvested, and who fed us in their times that we might have life thereafter;

For all these we give thanks."

READING by Matthew Gatheringwater "TASTE OF JOY" from the UU World, Feb 2004

During the most intense period of Messianic fervor in my fundamentalist childhood, I was forbidden any "worldly" reading. There was just too little time before Armageddon to waste on secular books! This prohibition wasn't so bad during most of the year, when I could smuggle books home from the public school library, but one dreary summer all I had to read was the Bible and *The Joy of Cooking*. As a result, I learned rather a lot about food.

In retrospect, it seems bizarre that Christian hippies living in the middle of nowhere without running water or electricity would even have a copy of *Joy*, which is itself a testament to the pervasive utility of that excellent book. As I recall, my diet consisted mostly of squirrels, innumerable pot noodles, and a nauseating amount of pumpkin seeds prescribed as a folk cure for ringworm. (It didn't work.)

While I was eating squirrels, I was reading about oyster cocktails, boeuf en croute, and how to make a fountain from champagne glasses. More important, I was being exposed to the radical idea that food (and, by extension, pleasure) was not necessarily sinful, but something to enjoy with friends. The Bible, which I was supposed to be reading, portrayed God as a terrible cook who gave the children of Israel the same bland manna every day for forty years and poisoned anyone who complained.

As someone who began to identify with the Unitarian tradition through literature, before ever meeting any living Unitarians, I've traced my exposure to Unitarianism back through Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott. Imagine my surprise to learn that the first Unitarian author I ever read was Irma Rombauer (1877-1962), the author of *The Joy of Cooking*. The legacy she started as a benefit for her congregation has no doubt touched the lives of millions of people in unexpected ways, but I am personally grateful to her for giving me a taste of a future outside of fundamentalist Christianity.

SERMON: "Food for Thought" - Rev. Alison Hyder

Did you know that more than 98% of convicted felons are bread eaters? More than 90% of violent crimes are committed within 24 hours of eating bread. And that is only a hint of the true dangers that bread poses. In the 18th century, when most bread was baked in the home, the average life expectancy was less than 50 years; infant mortality rates were extremely high and many women died in childbirth; diseases such as typhoid, yellow fever, and influenza ravaged whole nations. Bread is made from a substance called "dough." It has been proven that as little as one pound of dough can be used to smother a mouse. The average American eats more bread than that in just one month! And it is baked at temperatures so high that they can kill a person in less than one minute.

Yes, the perils of bread cannot be overstated. No wonder that it is so addictive: in one study, subjects deprived of bread and given only water to eat begged for bread after only two days! This is just one sign of its hold over humankind.

And yet, like wine and peyote, bread is an intrinsic part of religious rituals and celebrations throughout the Western world. Could it be that our ancestors, recognizing its power, sought to set it apart, to raise bread, as it were, and caution us against the mindless consumption of this hole-y substance? Look at the evidence: most churches have now replaced bread with benign and tasteless little wafers in their communion rites and use grape juice for the wine. And yet, how many of the clergy feed their addiction to subs or club sandwiches when alone in their study?

Sociologists need dough to research this sticky question. Still, we may never know for sure. After all, statistics can be twisted and abused. Theologians are wry about attempts to butter them up from both sides, while advertisers simply jam the airwaves, spreading their baloney. Bread is now a pervasive part of American life, sold everywhere. And there are more and more foreign fuels, from croissants and kolaches to bialys. But with brioche in the boardroom and babies chewing bagels, it's our culture that is toast.

What can we do? As people of faith and conscience, where do we roll out on the conspicuous consumption of bread? Well, I think if you all look deep within, to that empty place inside you craving sweet fulfillment, you will not hunger for long. For this is the day of our annual Meeting House membership pancake breakfast. We will meet the challenge together, with all of the implements in our control. It is part of our tradition. We may flip, but we do not flop!

I have to say that I am not a big fan of food. I know this is a strange statement, and maybe even the most absurd thing I've said so far. I eat food, obviously. Many of you have even seen me enjoy it. There aren't really all that many foods that I dislike: green olives, and walnuts, and extremes of any kind. And I'm not afraid to try new things. Mom had me eating escargot and smoked eel by the time I was 10. But I find the whole business of eating tiresome and annoying. I have better ways to spend my time. As far as I am concerned, meals are strictly a social event.

So that is why I delight in this morning's tradition. Food always tastes better when it is shared. It needs the spice of conversation, sweet smiles from friends, and plenty of time to savor the many blessings of the meal.

But if friends heighten flavors, then it is also true that food feeds relationships. Meals are a social lubricant, connecting strangers and foes and cementing family bonds. Many of our family or ethnic identities center on traditional dishes, the particular spices and smells that we call home. Nothing is more basic and evocative. When we share our foods with others we risk ridicule or even disgust. Jellied eels, anyone? How about some deep-fried locusts? Is there any fungus among us? Dining can be a generous and intimate act, requiring trust - and a sense of humor. Ask anyone in a mixed family about holiday meals. Can you spell *ruz al mudhroub*? [an Omani dish of cooked rice with fried fish].

In the arid regions of the Middle East, hospitality is almost compulsory. The desert holds great dangers from sandstorms, cold, and dehydration. Ignore strangers and you may condemn them to death. So when the people of Sodom degraded Lot's guests, God destroyed the entire city. It had transgressed the most essential of God's commandments, to love your neighbor as yourself and share however you can. The ritual of communion started with a seder meal, that Jesus personalized for his disciples. "Remember me," he asked, "when you eat and drink, and share your food for my sake." Early Christians gathered in people's homes over communal meals. There everyone was equal, slave and free alike. And they gave special care to the widowed and poor. The ritual of communion didn't begin until much later, when Christianity became institutionalized in buildings dedicated to the faith. The Eucharist went from being part of the evening meal to a segment of the Catholic liturgy with bread and wine consecrated and administered by priests.

But even with the modern substitutions of wafers and juice many people find communion to be a very powerful and compelling experience, a way to connect and merge with God. As the body and blood literally become their own sustenance, God dwells within them. Although as Unitarian Universalists, we have no common sacraments, there are still some Unitarian Universalist churches that practice communion. When I was the interim at St. Paul's Universalist Church in Palmer, we scheduled it quarterly - although I did introduce them to some alternative forms and frameworks. For instance, at Thanksgiving we shared cornbread and cider instead. But I have to say that most Unitarian Universalist congregations have replaced such rituals for the much more casual and unstructured wine and cheese party. Instead of connecting with God, they focus on communing with each other.

This Meeting House chose to become a place of safety and sanctuary for those who are dealing with alcoholism and addictions. Not only do we host several AA meetings, we completely prohibit alcohol from our property. No wine and cheese reception here! For many years we hosted sober dances and events as social alternatives to the bar scene and built a reputation of fun but healthy welcome. *Only bread is for breaking. Our spirits are not for breaking.*

But that does not mean that we cannot indulge our appetites for life and the many sensations and pleasures that it has to offer. We have moved a long way from utopia, and I think that we are better for it. You will rightly laugh at our Unitarian ancestor Bronson Alcott. When his daughters were young (Louisa May was 10) he, Emerson, and other idealists founded a very short-lived vegan community called Fruitlands, based on noble Transcendentalist principles. For example, they would not plant any of the root vegetables, like carrots, turnips, and beets, because their downward growth into the earth was considered devilish and unhealthy. But leafy vegetables "aspire" upwards toward the light - like the colonists themselves. And that was the ideal. It won't surprise you that more of the colonists preferred to write about the sunlight than work in it, and Fruitlands went fallow after one year.

Alcott, Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson remained vegetarians. But perhaps the most notable UU vegetarian is Frances Moore Lappé, author of *Diet for a Small Planet*, which revolutionized our ideas about nutrition, and the environmental and health impact of America's meat consumption. Lappé's parents founded the Fort Worth Unitarian Church. In an interview with Sarah Ruth van Gelder in *Yes! Magazine*, Lappé recalls,

My favorite memories of childhood are of the smell of coffee wafting into my bedroom as my parents and their friends talked about the big, important things—about racism and about how to move our country to live its values. So the good life for me always meant connecting with those big, important issues that grown-ups get so excited about. ...

... food has always been at the center of community bonding, of family life, and simple pleasure, but it is becoming more and more an obsession, a source of pain. This was my experience, because I was a compulsive eater in my late teens and until I wrote Diet for a Small Planet, so I know what it feels like when food becomes a threat. ...

A life-long mission has been to counter the notion that political engagement is the spinach we must eat in order to have the dessert of freedom. Engagement is the good life. What could be more exciting than getting involved in something that you care about and joining with others and seeing something change? What could be more thrilling?

In the late 1960s, there were alarming predictions that worldwide famine was around the corner. I wondered if humans had already lost the race, overrun the Earth's capacity. I let one question lead to the next, and unearthed information that would forever change my life: Not only is there enough food in the world to feed every man, woman, and child on Earth, there is enough to make us all chubby. The experts were wrong. Hunger was not, and is not, caused by a scarcity of food; it's caused by a scarcity of democracy—by people being denied a voice in their own futures. ["Walking Through Fear" Yes!, April 2004]

Only bread is for breaking. Commitment to justice, compassion and mercy is not for breaking.

Food can be fun, but it is truly a matter of life or death. It is still a spiritual paradox that life requires death and sacrifice to survive. We all feed on each other, getting our energy from the life of plants and animals, our waste returning to the earth, our dust feeding the worms. Eventually, everything must die for the sake of younger generations. Food represents this sacrifice, but it also is a form of power and status. Feudal banquets and State dinners alike send clear messages about the hosts' wealth and influence. You need both to feed that many people in style. And yet, as we all know, food is the essence of nurturing care. And it remains our most basic healing response, the way we offer comfort and care. We bring casseroles to the grieving, cake to celebrate and applaud. We are what we eat, so we are truly sharing ourselves.

It is hard to be generous when you feel deprived. We have layered food with feelings of guilt and snobbery and self-abnegation. So despite all the hundreds of famous chefs, cooking shows and magazines, and all the business of home entertaining, most Americans do not eat very well. We're pulled in all directions, tempted by decadent chocolates, gorgonzola butter, and double-quarter-pounders with cheese - super-sized. At the same time we are inundated with diets promising to make us a size 6. Not Hollywood-thin, but acceptably svelte. Poor Marilyn Monroe wore today's size 12 - a source of satisfaction to many actresses, I hear.

But our standards change with time. We get used to our surroundings and whatever level of comfort or technology we have. We all think that what we do and have is normal - and, of course, in good taste. So food reminds us that there are other norms and other cultures. It opens the door to strangers with new beliefs, and very different experiences. And that expands our own personal possibilities and identity. *Only bread is for breaking. The dignity and worth of each human life is not for breaking.*

Fannie Merritt Farmer was a Boston Unitarian, born in 1857. She planned to go to college, but was paralyzed by a stroke. While she was recovering she did a lot of cooking - a very therapeutic activity. She attended the Boston School of cooking, and became its director in 1891 - two years after graduating.

In the 19th century, recipes were handed down in families. Girls learned to cook by watching and listening to their mothers. Every cook had her own methods and measurements. A pinch of this, a handful of that, a sprinkling of something to taste. There were a lot of bad cooks in the world with odd-sized hands. But in 1891 Fannie Farmer changed all that forever. Her cookbook used standardized measurements and clear instructions. Some complain that she limited imaginations, but I think that Farmer widened everyone's horizons by giving even the most chowderheaded kid the basic tools of cooking. People should not be helpless, she thought. If you can read, you can cook.

And even if you can't cook, you can let yourself dream. I have a friend who likes to read cookbooks in bed. She has dozens of illustrated cookbooks with glossy photos of creams and casseroles and julienned things. They help her relax. I guess they give her sweet dreams.

There are no photographs in *The Joy of Cooking*. There are a few line drawings, but nothing to stir the taste buds or hint at the smell of cinnamon. But to Matthew Gatheringwater, it was a complete spiritual revelation. His world was very small, limited by his parent's rigid beliefs. He learned to sneak books and develop his own values separate from his parents. *Only bread is for breaking. Our right of conscience and freedom to seek meanings in our own ways are not for breaking.* And so it was a cookbook, *The Joy of Cooking*, that opened his eyes. Here was pleasure, variety, society, and culture, all presented in a wry and utilitarian style. Rombauer's book showed him how other people eat and shop and live, what was normal, and maybe even good. "I was exposed," he mused, "to the radical idea that food (and, by extension, pleasure) was not necessarily sinful, but something to enjoy with friends."

Now, *that* is truth in a nutshell, the essence of our humanist UU values. We are not condemned for our desires, or the pleasure that we take in life. For we greet the world's gifts with gratitude and awe, and (we hope) a generosity of spirit that keeps our circle wide. We don't disdain our fortune, but neither do we take it for granted. Instead we share our blessings - and our joy - with all the hungry world.

Only bread is for breaking. The bonds of love and community are not for breaking.
Let us eat pancake!

CLOSING WORDS: - Robert French Leavens

We are all partakers of the bread of life,
Out of the lap of Mother Earth,
And from the hands of our human benefactors;
Many a life has been given for us,
Many a body has been broken for us.

We are all partakers of the water of life,
Out of the springs and streams of the earth,
And of the blood of life,
In uncounted sacrifices made in our behalf.

In ministrations such as these we are nourished.
Freely we have received, freely let us give.