

# **Eating Our Way through the Interdependent Web: An Ethic of Food for Unitarian Universalists**

A Sermon by the Rev. Charlotte Shivers

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Unitarian Universalists for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (UFETA)

I thank the Unitarian Universalists for Ethical Treatment of Animals for this award – and for what they are doing in the world. And thank you all for being present at 8:30 at night after a Holly Near concert! Let me begin with the long story of how this sermon started. I'm part of a ministers' study group and this was the year it was my turn to produce an essay – a studied research into some aspect of our religion. I had wondered and worried all last year about a theme.

Then early last December I had an epiphany. It came after meeting with the man who is farming some of our land **organically**.

Now **organic** is radical in southern Iowa where my husband and I live in the 1890's farm home where I grew up. There, my parents gave my sisters and me not only a farm home but a religion of the land that echoes Chief Seattle: "We do not own the land; we are here to take care of it."

I can still remember on that farm early summer mornings when Daddy might come to the side door and call out to Mother and any lucky sister who was awake, "Come, see the flax!" We would pile into the pickup and drive to whichever field was covered with the wet, blue blooms of flax. Watching this farm through the past 50 years has not been all joyful. Flaxseed, oats, wheat, barley, sorghum, corn, brome, alfalfa, clover, sheep, hogs, cattle, horses, chickens – the rich diversity is gone. For all our loving management, our farm is like most of the Corn Belt, a monoculture of corn and soybeans with occasional hay. We spend far more money on fertilizer, pesticide and herbicide than on seed. We operate barely in the black only because of the subsidies you all are paying.

Last year we were finally able to reach toward a better way and found this creative farmer who was willing and eager to attempt the rigors of "certified organic" on 160 acres of our land.

Because I'm the managing partner for my sisters right now, I had the December meeting with our farmer and his son, an Ag major at Iowa State University. The year had gone well and we were in a celebration mode as we ate my husband's cookies and reviewed the year. As they were leaving, the son pulled forth two books saying, "My mother thought you would enjoy these."

*Enjoy* wasn't the right word. *Epiphany* is better. One book was the size you display on a coffee table – with a picture of a monotonous row crop being sprayed with chemicals – named *Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture*. The other was cheerier; a Brueghel painting was background to the title, *The Ethics of Food*.

I suddenly had my essay topic: not just the ethics of food, but something directed to that huge gap I had felt in my religion between our Unitarian Universalist reverence for an interdependent web on the one hand and our general silence about the environmental catastrophe which produces our food, on the other.

Eight brave colleagues listened through my essay and urged me on. Later I wrote the sermon and presented it as a guest minister at All Souls UU in Kansas City, Missouri.

Where is our ethic of food in our reverence for the interdependent web? How is food sacred in this religion? We know that all our food comes from earth, and whether we read from Genesis or the Bhagavad-Gita, we know that earth is sacred. What happens to the Web between the earth and our table?

Let's begin with the animals; like me you probably want to forget their story when you're looking at a menu or the meat counter. But I do remember my pet pig Lilly Belle and how she used to love to have her tummy scratched, how she slept under the snowball bush, curled up with our dog Doc. Now, most pork pigs like her seldom see the light of day but live crowded

into pens called Confinement Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO). In the CAFO your eyes burn with the stench of the waste products from thousands of animals. It's almost as bad for the neighbors as it is for the hogs. The lobbying efforts of industrial agriculture are so powerful that the hogs, the workers, our neighborhoods, our land, our water supply, our fish, our earth are all at risk from toxic air and toxic runoff that can escape these hog factories.

The chicken's fate today is similar – except they have their beaks cut off (no painkiller). Same with turkey – they have been so carefully bred for the white meat *the consumer demands* that some 270 million turkeys produced in these factories last year were all appropriately named "Broad Breasted White." These ill-proportioned birds are unable to walk or have sex. But artificial insemination, hormones, antibiotics, and other drugs take care of everything – except the weeping of the Web.

The beef story is a little happier, but deceptive. You can still see herds of cattle grazing placidly on the meadow – as if well-placed propaganda to tell us all is well. But all is not well, as the calves mature they go to factory feed lots. Did any of you drive to GA south on Route 5? Harris Ranch? There, hormone implants, antibiotics, and other drugs short-circuit cows' **wondrous** natural digestive system, and we get fast fattening for fast food and fatter people.

If we knew the full story of the meat and seafood *most commonly sold* to us – the damage to them and the damage to earth – we would probably all be vegetarian for at least a day. Factory farming demands that we confront our moral selves in a new way when we eat meat.

Lily Belle was my good friend, but my best animal friend was my pet sheep, Patty. It was Patty that I once promised to invent a meat substitute when I grew up. I broke my promise to her, and I would have to tell her as I tell you that I'm all right with animals being raised for meat and killed for meat – **humanely**. But each time I re-visit *the way in which they are now raised for meat* I draw closer to becoming a total vegetarian. It is unconscionable that an animal be trapped in a confined life of torture to provide humans with *haute cuisine*.

The animal story may be the most viscerally painful but the land story is a more serious threat: what we do to animals – except for species loss – could be healed in a generation or two. What our food production has done to the land will take eons to repair.

We spend 26 billion a year for farm support programs, encouraging commodity producers to buy fossil fertilizers that increase our dependence on oil. The subsidies go largely for corn, soybeans, wheat, rice and cotton and have created monocultures of these crops, thereby destroying plant diversity as well as the soil. But the subsidies do more. My Iowa Senator, Chuck Grassley, the **Republican Head of the Senate Finance Committee**, wrote last month "Under current law, farm payments are effectively unlimited for anyone with a good lawyer, allowing the nation's largest farms to drive their neighbors out of business by bidding land away from them."[\[7\]](#)

The most subsidy dollars do not go to reward those who **care** for the land but as bonus to those who rape the most land. The subsidies undercut the agricultural economies of developing countries because they allow the United States to sell grains for less than the cost of production. And this "cost of production" does not include any recompense for the topsoil loss, lack of a living wage for workers, loss of species, toxic chemical damage to land and water, millions of fish killed, nor the human damage in our body's response to the chemicals. There is also no recompense for the cruel way we raise the animals we eat – or for what that does to us.

The horror of it has me ready to fantasize with the *New Yorker* cartoon that pictured a chicken laid back in pleasure, sunning herself on a tropical beach. The caption read, "Yes, I heard I was free-range and I just took off."

But we can't take off. This is the only earth we've got, and this industrial agriculture has stormed over it within the last sixty years. How can we intervene? **How can we respect the interdependent web of all existence when this is the story of our food production?**

Yet that is what we have called ourselves to do: "The seventh principle calls us to reverence before the world ... of our everyday experience."

This radical theological position is so demanding that we may want simply to bury ourselves in the earth so our bodies can enrich the soil and we do no more harm by eating. **But that is neither a positive nor a long-term solution.**

What to do? I find the most encouragement in a recent book co-edited by Unitarian Universalists Laura Jackson and Dana L. Jackson, *The Farm As Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems*. Laura's father is a land hero to many of us, Wes Jackson, founder of Kansas' Land Institute. There's hope for me here because –

- First of all they have named at least one elephant in the living room: agricultural land in this country has been sacrificed as an ecological disaster area.
- Second, they are encouraging because they begin with that small, devoted group of farmers who are making it work economically and ecologically.
- Third, *The Farm as Natural Habitat* shows that we, all varieties of environmentalists, can restore beauty and health to our farm ecosystems. It is a choice for the Web.

At Starr King divinity school where I studied many years ago, there was a small kitchen, popular for snacks and conversation. It had a way of filling with dirty dishes – until one bold artist posted a sign over the kitchen sink: **You are responsible for your own theology – and your own dishes.** Well, folks it turns out we're responsible not only for our own theology and our own dishes, but our own food choices. Our food choices are like a vote between that chemical monoculture on the cover of *Fatal Harvest* and the field of blooming flax as symbol for farmland ecology.

We could begin by moving *toward* a vegetarian or vegan diet. That would help the Web immensely. It's estimated that "if Americans were to reduce their meat consumption by only 10 percent for one year, it would free 12 million tons of grain for human consumption – or enough to feed 60 million people."[\[8\]](#) Patty and Lilly Bell would appreciate that, too.

Eating less meat – or insisting on "free-range" meat – not only respects animals as part of the Web, but also weakens the market for the livestock who drive the grain machine that so damages our land. The Reverend Ken Jones of our Tacoma church says he chooses an

organic, vegan diet as a spiritual practice and sustainability as lifestyle. As to challenges, he said, "It's an odd thing, because I don't know how to handle the potlucks yet."!!

If only potlucks were our worst challenges! Our radical theology is even more demanding in the grocery store or restaurant. But we have immense power as *consumers*. One cattleman said, "I'd love to give up hormones ... if the consumer said, we don't want hormones, we'd stop in a second. The cattle could get along better without them. But the market signal's not there ..."[9]

As the consumers who drive the market, we lovers of the Web need to move on toward buying "certified organic." Though far from perfect, organic standards allow us to protect ourselves, farm workers, and earth – by avoiding pesticides, herbicides, artificial fertilizers, genetically altered crops.

I personally promote organic especially as an attempt to boycott what I find the most threatening of all: genetically altered, genetically engineered, genetically modified, or biotech food. It's all the same. I'll call it GMO for genetically modified organisms. It's a way of creating new plant varieties by splicing genes from one organism into a different one, to give this "genetically engineered" plant a new characteristic – longer shelf life, resistance to a particular herbicide, or more color, for instance.

GMO represents a major scientific achievement, as was splitting the atom. But both achievements have been treated very carelessly. GMO products have been handled as if people didn't know that pollen blows over fences and grain warehouses make mistakes. All this *permanently* contaminates other crops, other seeds. Our whole fragile ecological web is at risk.

I am angriest with GMO for its claim that we need it to feed the world. That is not true[10], but a myth generated out of greed. The New York Times summarized well in a heading, "Will the latest genetically modified food save the world? Or just the biotech industry?"[11] Because GMO producers have resisted efforts to label foods as to their GMO content, we have to

choose organic – or any other food we know to be non-GMO – to best discourage their threat to the planet. It's a sign of hope that Mendocino County, California, recently voted to outlaw GMO production.

We can vote for earth by eating less meat and by choosing organic; we can eat like the "Eat Your Values" lunch that the Green Congregation group at the All Souls Church in Kansas City serves. But, best of all, we can buy *local*.

My turkey resource wrote, "The key word ... is 'traceability.' If the person behind the counter where you buy your turkey can name the farm or farmer who raised it, you are taking a step in the right direction. You'll help give turkeys a better life. You'll be kinder to the environment. And you might even wind up with a turkey that tastes, well, like a turkey."[\[12\]](#)

We need to *wake up* to *local* food. It was also California where I delivered my food essay; that morning I looked out my window and saw oranges on the ground under an orange-filled tree. Washed and sliced those oranges became a delicious communion during the essay. We were appalled to realize that we had been meeting there 15 years and never eaten an orange before.

On local food, the great news is that **if you do a little research**, you will probably find – **regardless of where you live** – some group similar to the Kansas City Food Circle to help you connect to local food, organic food, free range food – the markets and **restaurants** that increasingly provide them. They can also connect you to that ultimate in local food, community supported agriculture (CSA) – that system in which you buy into a local produce farm and receive your fresh foods every week. We can select food with a clear conscience and drool over the fresh, healthy taste.

Our vote as consumers is strong as we choose more vegetarian, more organic, and more local. But there is more. We are political animals, too, and we need to find strength in our own numbers. **We need to speak up** before "there is nothing left for me to eat." We can add our voice to the growing chorus demanding reverence for our food system. You can use that [www](#)

web or the telephone to find many different groups; look at the web sites in this order of service. You can connect to situations where a single e-mail or phone call to your legislator could be a strong vote for the Web.

Finally, we can speak up to witness that these "farm bills" affect the heart of our Web. Over half of United States land is farmed or ranched, and the care of that land will improve dramatically as legislators learn that urban people know and care. We must complain as effectively about tax-supported, petroleum-based, row-crop monocultures as we have about the Alaska Wilderness being drilled for oil, as much about food animals being fed in confinement torture chambers as we have about the dolphin being caught in tuna nets.

When I met with our organic farmer – I'll call him James – last month, I gave him a copy of this sermon that he had helped inspire. I was proud to explain to him that in Unitarian Universalism we don't care so much what people **believe**, as what they **do**. Well folks, this is our chance to **do**.

No choice is perfect, but our food choices need to be a vote for earth, a spiritual practice that connects us to the Web each time we eat. All food is sacrament if we raise it and transport it and serve it in a way that sustains this earth. "The seventh principle calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday experience."

**Closing Words:** I extinguish this flame, but it does not go out; it goes with us as support from Schweitzer, Chief Seattle, this company, and Mother Earth herself. So strengthened, rejoice! Each food choice is another way to say "Yes!" to the Web of life.

## References

[1] Richard Manning, "The Oil We Eat: Following the Food Chain back to Iraq," *Harpers Magazine*, 2-04, p. 39.



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[3] Unitarian Universalist Laura L. Jackson and Dana L. Jackson, *The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems*, p. 3.

[4] Unitarian Universalist minister, David Bumbaugh, "The Heart of a Faith for the Twenty-first Century," *UU Selected Essays*, 1994, p. 37.

[5] The Unitarian Universalist 2001 Statement of Conscience, "Responsible Consumption Is Our Moral Imperative."

[6] Dana Jackson, *The Farm as Natural Habitat: Reconnecting Food Systems with Ecosystems*, p. 249

[7] Letter to me on United States Senate stationery, May 3, 2004.

[8] Lester Brown, Overseas Development Council, 1974, as quoted by Peter Singer, "Animal Liberation and Vegetarianism," *The Ethics of Food, A Reader for the 21st Century*, ed. Gregory E. Pence, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. (Oxford, England, 2002), p. 33.

[9] Michael Pollan, "This Steer's Life," *New York Times Magazine*, 3/31/02, p. 51.

[10] "The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has pointed out that there is 1 ½ times as much food produced in the world today as would be required to feed everyone on the planet 2,500 calories a day." *Organic News*, Autumn 2002, p. 4.

[11] Michael Pollan, *New York Times Magazine*, March 4, 2001, p. 15.

[12] "Traceability and Winding Up with a Turkey That Tastes, Well, Like a Turkey!!!" *New York Times*, from [www.saynotogmos.org](http://www.saynotogmos.org)

