

## GREEN CONSUMPTION

Rev. Nannene Gowdy

I have been concerned about the food we eat for many years. In the 1970s, when I was a stay-at-home mom, I grew, canned or froze as much of the food we ate as possible. I made my own baby food, finding out several years later that commercial baby food had much too much sugar, salt and fat in it. I did these things because I had been convinced for years that the increased cancer rate in this country is the result of increased pollution in our air, water and soil.

In the nearly forty years since, not only haven't I changed my mind, my conviction has increased as the number of illnesses that are food related has increased. Thus, since retiring, I have returned to organic gardening, canning or freezing our tomatoes, green peppers, peas, beans, beets, swiss chard, zucchini, butternut squash, and spinach. So far this year, only the tomatoes, zucchini and green peppers are still in the pantry or freezer, so we will need to increase our crops this summer.

Most of the meat produced in the United States is processed on CAFOs - Confined Area Feed Operations. This is where a cow spends most of its life being fatten up. They are packed in, wallowing in their excrement. In such tight quarters, they easily catch diseases. They are forced to eat food that would not naturally be in their diet, since cows were made to eat only grass. They are feed corn and ground up cows. No cow left on its own would be a cannibal. If we didn't force them to eat their own, there would never be or have been a case of mad cow disease.

Reading about CAFOs disturbed me so much, I sought out a local grower of meat. I've seen the cows they process and, wonder of wonders, they eat grass, roam in meadows, and have a pretty good life before they are, as they say, harvested. Added benefits are that the meat is less fatty and actually cheaper. That's reasonable, when you think about it, because the farmer doesn't have to buy food most of the year, doesn't have to pay for gas to ship the meat, and doesn't have to buy antibiotics and growth hormones to combat the overcrowding of CAFOs.

We have been so happy with the results of buying meat from Farmer Blood, we have sought out a source of organic, locally grown, eggs. We've found two. I am amazed every time I crack open an egg to see how orangey-yellow a fresh egg is. Carl is convinced he can taste the difference. I can't imagine going back to those pale yellow imitations.

Farmers' markets are springing up everywhere. Almost every community has one now during the growing season. We have one in Pepperell where we can go once a week as well as farm stands where we supplement what we don't grow ourselves. Honey, apples, peaches, blueberries, onions, corn, and potatoes are just some of the things we buy. Grown locally, we reduce our carbon footprint because the food hasn't been shipped across the country.

Not all food we eat, however, is grown by ourselves or locally. We are fortunate that we can afford to buy organic whenever possible. By buying organic, not only are we avoiding pesticides, but the land on which the produce is grown is not being contaminated nor are we contributing to the water pollution that happens when the chemicals run off. So many chemicals from so many farms in the Midwest have dumped into the Mississippi River, there is a dead zone for miles in the Gulf of Mexico where the Mississippi River runs in.

So these were my concerns about food and how I dealt with them before the latest gas crisis. Now, with the price of regular gas approaching \$4 a gallon, I'm REALLY concerned. You may have heard that there are stores in the United States that are limiting how much rice you can purchase. I believe this is just the first of many such restrictions. Non-organic farming takes huge amounts of oil. Non-organic fertilizer is based on oil. Pesticides are oil based. Processing and shipping also take huge amounts of oil. Stupidity also costs us in oil - it takes more energy to produce corn ethanol than we get from it. Using corn to make fuel is causing a corn shortage, which is going to drive the cost of food up further. I am afraid that all of this will cause real food shortages. It will probably take severe food shortages to make this country change the way it has been growing food.

As with any prophet with a dire prediction, I hope I'm wrong, but I doubt it. Perhaps we can't get the country to change quickly, but we can make our own adjustments now so the crisis won't affect us so drastically. So, having voiced my prophetic side, let me talk to you from my pastoral side. I've seen tomatoes and green peppers growing in window boxes. They do very nicely in patio pots, and now is the time to plant. What you can't grow, buy locally. This saves fuel because it isn't shipped great distances and there's nothing like knowing the person who grows your family's food. Whenever possible, get organic. It's an imperfect label, but it's better than nothing. The more people who buy organic, the more growers there will be who are willing to do so. And the more interested buyers, the more growers will be held accountable for their use of the word organic. All of these steps will make you less dependent on agribusiness and, therefore, less affected when they run into trouble.

Because of these concerns and more, many Unitarian Universalist congregations have joined the Green Sanctuary movement. They have taken our Seventh Principle, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" very seriously. It seems so simple to understand, you would think it ridiculous to remind people that if you poison the land, you poison everything on it. Or to remind people that if you use up all the oil without developing alternatives, we will be in great trouble. We are, indeed, interdependent. But it is ideas this simple that the Green Sanctuary movement lobbies for. They also help people decide what is ecologically best for their church and for their homes. Some congregations include monthly energy saving facts in their newsletters. My friend and colleague Joel Miller has proposed giving out Green Chalice seals of approval to farmers, butchers, grocers, and restaurants that make efforts to recognize and support our interdependent web in their business practices.

If prophetic and pastoral responses aren't enough for you to think this is a spiritual issue, let me talk from my priestly side. "Starving people set aside spiritual concerns in order to obtain food." (Joel Miller) A man with a hungry child doesn't care about the ethics of stealing a loaf of bread. If we are faced with food shortages, the time to address the question of who has the right to eat is before people starve, not after.

We have gotten used to abundant food in this country. Few give much thought to where our food comes from. It even comes as a shock to some. I heard of a little boy in New York City who refused to eat carrots after he found it grew in dirt. Educating ourselves and our children about how and where food is grown by visiting a farm is a good start. But there is another way of being mindful of how we are nourished.

When is the last time you heard anyone say grace? Maybe at Thanksgiving? Saying grace at meals can be a profound way of saying thank you to the animals and vegetables who had to die so that we might live. Let's not be too delicate about this. There is no other way we would be alive. Native Americans understood this. Taking a moment to say thank you doesn't seem like too much to ask and in the process we might spend a second thinking about the environment in which the food was raised and how it got to our table. It can even be made interesting. How about, "We are thankful for these wonderful orange carrots, grown by Farmer Brown in his good soil, with the help of the sun and rain. Let us remember to thank him for their sweetness when we see him again." A small child just learned a color, that carrots grow in soil, how they grow, the name of the farmer, that they are naturally sweet, and that saying thank you is important.

We have learned from Eastern religions that being mindful of everything we do is a good spiritual practice. Our routine of eating, of thinking about what we are putting into our mouths, could use this kind of attention. When we think about the total process involved in getting the food from the land to the table, we will be green consumers, and I don't just mean our spinach.