

Ethical Eating

the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
May 31, 2009

Good morning. Welcome to the Meeting House Ethical Eating Café, the “EthicUUrean.” My name is Edmund, and I’ll be your server for the morning. Before I get to today’s specials, let me explain a little bit about what we’re doing here at the EthicUUrean.

This café was set up pursuant to the Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI) passed last year at General Assembly in Fort Lauderdale. The resolution notes:

“Some people enjoy many food choices while others remain hungry. The food industry produces wealth, but small farmers and farm workers are often poor.

Food production and transportation contribute to many environmental problems.”

So here at the EthicUUrean this morning, we’re not going to be concerned with whether the food is healthy for you; that is between you and your health advisors. We’re concerned with how the food choices you’re making impact other people, other life forms on this planet, and good old Mother Earth herself.

So before we discuss the menu or our specials today, would you like to start out with some drinks? We have a wide variety of beers and ales on tap, red, white and rose wine, cocktails and spirits. And the ethical piece tag of these is fairly easy to compute.

Ethics, as you know, comes into play whenever our own behavior has the potential to harm others. And consuming any alcoholic beverages has an obvious potential to harm others. Not at the beginning; it starts out as a personal matter of our own taste and our own means of relaxing and being with others. But for some of us, that first alcohol will set up a craving for more, and by drinking more, we will endanger both ourselves and others, particularly if driving a motor vehicle is involved.

Now here at the EthicUUrean, we recognize that UUs are freedom-loving people who don’t like to be told what they can and cannot do, and so we don’t do that. We have three principles we live by: (1) you, the customer, are always entitled to your own choices; (2) complete ethical perfection in eating is impossible in our present culture and economy; and (3) to live a religiously mindful life is to be as well informed as possible about the ethical consequences of all the choices we are making.

So let’s get back to that drink order. Some of you will have a glass of wine, right, and others a martini. What’s that? Yes, of course we have attractive non-alcoholic alternative

beverages. We have carbonated soft drinks, for example.

Now carbonated beverages are neat because they were invented by a Unitarian, Joseph Priestley, back in the Eighteenth Century. But in modern times, the principal ingredient in commercial soft drinks is high fructose corn syrup. High fructose corn syrup is a ubiquitous sweetener in our economy, and while it is cheaper to produce than sugar, it is not as healthy for your body and some people blame the national epidemic of obesity, particularly obesity in children, on high fructose corn syrup. Now, having said that, I should say that the corn industry disputes this, and they have a lot of money to do so because the government subsidizes them to a fair-thee-well. You should also know that supporting corn products is generally supporting large agribusiness concerns at the expense of the family farmer, and encouraging single-crop use of vast amounts of land, thus diminishing biodiversity.

So you say you will skip the soft drink and get some fruit juice? OK, we have several types of fruit drink from the shelves, labeled fruit cocktail or fruit beverage. But you should know that often with that labeling, the principal ingredient is high fructose corn syrup, with a little fruit juice added for flavoring.

So you're changing your order again, and think you'll go for something that says 100% fruit juice. Good, now what kind? We have some orange juice made with Florida oranges; they have only traveled 900 miles to get to Massachusetts from where they were grown. That's less than the 1500 miles that the average piece of produce travels to get to your supermarket¹. What's that? You'd like something with a lower carbon footprint? Maybe cranberry juice, since we have plenty of cranberry bogs right here on the Cape. But even there, it is usually mixed with grape juice and other sweeteners from elsewhere because cranberry juice by itself is too tart for most people.

OK, I have the drink orders. Now let me tell you about tonight's specials. Tonight we are featuring a sirloin steak, marinated in red wine and topped with a special bearnaise sauce. Now if you want to investigate the ethical costs of this choice, you might want to interview Carrie the Cow. She is available right here (produce cow).

What's that you say? Some of you really don't want to interview the cow you are about to eat. You don't want to know that it's a real animal, and you don't want to know that it has a name. Some of you were raised on farms, and many farm families adopt the custom that they don't give names to animals which are going to be slaughtered and eaten. But others of you may have been raised on farms where you named the animals and went ahead and slaughtered them

¹“Eating ethically” by Amy Hassinger, *UU World* Spring 2007.

anyway, and when the meat was brought to the table you knew you were eating Sissy or Bob.

Theologian Martin Buber distinguished between having an I-Thou relationship with something and an I-It relationship. We want to have an I-Thou relationship to God, and we want to have an I-Thou relationship to any person because we can see the divine in that person. But what about animals? We have an I-thou relationship with our dogs and cats; we name them, we talk to them, we spend a lot of money at the vet when they get sick, we bury them and sometimes have ceremonies around the burial. And we generally don't eat them.

So it is very challenging for most of us when I invited us to interview Carrie the Cow before we ate her. We carry in our culture a deep distinction between beings we eat and other beings. We don't name them and we don't talk to them. We eat beings that we have categorized as "it," not beings we have categorized as "thou."

So maybe we decline the interview, but as ethical eaters, we do want to know something about the kind of life Carrie has had before she was slaughtered. We know that cattle have been bred and evolved to eat grass – they have four stomachs for that – but that most beef cattle in this country are fed corn. This is for two reasons: it is cheaper to feed them corn and keep them stationary, and because corn-fed cattle have more fat marbling their meat and fatty meat is easier to chew and generally more attractive to the average American consumer. Much of it is ground into hamburger anyway. So you will want to know whether Carrie was a free range cow during her lifetime or spent it cooped up in a cow penitentiary, because you are concerned with how much support you are giving the corn industry, big agribusiness, and government subsidies.

We have some veterans of the Seventies here – maybe some of you read Frances Moore Lappe's book *Diet for a Small Planet* which made the point forty years ago that eating meat is a lot more inefficient use of land than eating vegetables, since it takes a lot of land to feed Carrie and if you just ate the vegetation from that land directly, you could feed a lot more people. Today 40 percent of the world's grain output today is fed to animals².

Nowadays, we are also concerned with global warming and the rain forests. The global market for beef, of which the US market is a major part, gives incentives for farmers in the Amazon to clear vast areas of rain forest in order to raise beef cattle. Thus your choice of steak tonight may impact global warming by cutting down on the trees which absorb carbon dioxide. A recent U.N. study estimated that the world's livestock alone account for 18 percent of all

²Michael Pollan, "Farmer in Chief" New York Times Sunday magazine food issue October 9, 2008

greenhouse gases, more than all forms of transportation combined³.

But you also might want to know whether Carrie was a free range cow just because you care about the quality of her life. You know that most cattle, as well as most swine and most poultry raised in this country are in Confined Animal Feeding Operations or CAFOs. You don't want to be encouraging the cattle industry to warehouse cattle, you want them to have a happy cow existence before they make it to your table.

This is not just a matter of the imagined happiness of the animal, but of public health. Animals in CAFO's are more likely to spread any bacterial illness that they have, and so have to be dosed with massive amounts of antibiotics, and this massive use of antibiotics breeds antibiotic-resistant bacteria which can pose a serious threat to the health of animals and humans⁴.

You might consider the special beef we can buy from Northeast Family Farms, which has a supply chain to farmers who feed their cattle grass and raise them by a strict protocol, without the use of hormones and feed grade antibiotics. They are endorsed by a new group called Slow Food Cape Cod, which is dedicated to promoting ethical food. Slow food says of the Northeast Family farms beef, "the result is an authentic, artisan food."⁵

If you're like me, your hackles just went up when I said the word artisan. Yes it's a marketing word, and it can get thrown around loosely, but if it were used properly, it would help the consumer know what food was produced with time and care and what used a lot of shortcuts.

Back to the free range: this choice between free range animals and animals housed in close quarters took on a new complexity recently when an historian wrote an op-ed piece for the New York Times arguing that free-range pigs are more susceptible to the trichinosis parasite than those raised in factory farms⁶. In other words, we may be trading the animal's happiness for a risk to the animal's health or even our own.

You might also want to know how Carrie is to be slaughtered, for there are some ways which involve more pain to the animal than others. You may have read about the autistic woman animal rights activist who has been working for a decade to develop more humane ways of

³Pollan, see above..

⁴Straight to the superbug supersource: Q&A with Maryn McKenna about MRSA in people — and pigs By Bonnie P. 14 April 2009. <http://www.ethicurean.com/2009/04/14/mrsa/>

⁵<http://slowfoodcapecod.org/>

⁶April 10, 2009 "Free-Range Trichinosis"by James E. McWilliams

slaughter.

What's that you say? You think you'll pass on the steak. Well how about some fish? This is, after all, Cape Cod. We have a tradition of fishing. We offer a delicious cod with a mango salsa. Just a minute. Oh, the kitchen just informed me that the State Fisheries department just came and said we had to put our cod back in the water, it was the only one left and they're needed it for reproduction of the species.

We have plenty of fish you never heard of, because they didn't get overfished because there's little market for them.

Maybe you'd like to try some vegetables. We have some eggplant imported from the Israel in an olive sauce from Syria, kind of a culinary Mideast peace process. What's that you want to know? How many miles have the vegetables traveled to be in our kitchen? Oh, about 4,000.

You want something more local, that doesn't have as big a carbon footprint? Well, funny you should mention that, because I went up the road six miles to the Orleans Farmers market yesterday. They had some nice locally grown rutabagas, but what I ended up getting were these collard greens. Local and organic.

Think you'd like those? Great, I'll put on some water now, and we should have them ready to eat in about, oh, two hours. What, you can't wait that long?

No, I'm afraid we don't have any garden-fresh tomatoes yet. That will have to wait a couple of months.

You don't have time to wait for your food? That is probably the biggest obstacle to eating ethically. We don't have time. We have arranged the whole system of production and distribution of food to be available to us in the supermarket when we are ready for it, on demand. The supermarkets have a computerized inventory system called just in time so that when you buy an item, as soon as it is scanned, the computer sends an order for a replacement item to be shipped and it can be shipped from anywhere in the world, but you know that when you go to the supermarket it will be ready when you are.

This is something new in history. For all of human history up to the last forty years, people had to wait for food until it was available – until the men had run down the antelope, in hunter-gatherer society, or until the crop was harvested in an agricultural society or until the lambs were ready for slaughter in a pastoral society. Here in the twenty-first century we have a food system which is based on convenience and oil. If we want to change things, we have to change our expectations around food. We will plant our gardens and wait to see what comes up – maybe a radish, maybe a beanstalk, maybe we'll get two.

But I digress. We still haven't taken your order. What's that, you'd like to go vegan?

OK, we have a couple of tofu dishes on the menu, but I need to remind you that tofu is made from soybeans, and soybeans is a monoculture which is almost as harmful to biodiversity as is corn. You want to try some beans and brown rice? That's a good idea, though when Americans eat rice it drives up the price for the Third World consumers for whom it may be the difference between life and death.

So you want food that has not been bought, but obtained in the wild. The Cape has many edible plants, and our estuaries teem with shellfish that can be had for a small permit fee. Of course, you must know what is poisonous and what is edible. The poet Mary Oliver once was invited to address the General Assembly, and she read a long essay about eating off the land on Cape Cod. Do you have your Wellies on?

What's that you say? You think you'll skip lunch? Well you can do that of course, but you're not going to give up eating. You don't have a choice not to eat, in the long run; your choices are to eat consciously or eat unconsciously.

Remember our three rules here at the EthicUrean café: (1) you are always entitled to your own choice; (2) complete ethical perfection in eating is impossible in our present culture and economy; and (3) to live a religiously mindful life is to be as well informed as possible about the ethical consequences of all the choices we are making.

And even though you are exhausted and I am exhausted, we have hardly exhausted the subject. There are many aspects of ethical eating which we have not touched on here. What we have covered this morning is but the tip of the food iceberg.

And so I encourage you to make your own investigations, individually or in small groups or in ad hoc committees. See what can be done to start to change our way of getting, preparing and eating food. What resources, what alliances are available locally? I've already mentioned a group on Cape Cod called Slow Food Cape Cod, which is a convivium, or local chapter, of a national group called Slow Food. We also have the Cape Cod Organic Gardeners Association. You can check out the blog at ethicurean.com; you can pick up this magazine called Edible Cape Cod at your local health food store. You can follow the blog of food writer Tamar Haspel as she tries to eat off the land in Wellfleet⁷. You can patronize the farmers markets in Orleans and Hyannis, or if you have a lot of energy, organize one in Chatham. You can organize a pot-luck meal for the church consisting entirely of locally-grown foods.

It will take a lot of effort to turn this ship around. In Pogo's words, we have met the enemy and he is us. Our deeply ingrained habits of eating will need to change if life on this

⁷www.starvingofftheland.com

planet is to be sustainable. This journey of a thousand miles begins with small steps that we all can take.

Thank you for visiting the Café EthicUrean. The ice cream parlor is right across the street. Amen.