

Since I'm looking out on a bunch of faces I know, I'm pretty confident we share a sense of urgency to act more responsibly towards our mother earth. I assume that because it is deeply ingrained in our common faith. By now, we know that each of us should reduce our "carbon footprint", that is, the amount of fossil fuels we consume and the CO2 emissions we cause. Right?

So, if I could tell you what may be the single most effective thing you personally can do to reduce your carbon footprint,

...and if I could further show you that it would involve no huge sacrifice on your part; in fact it would make you healthier both in body and in spirit; and ya don't have to buy a little bottle of snake oil either;

...if I could do all those things, could I get you to pay attention to this sermon?

If you paid attention to title of this sermon you might have already guessed what my secret is. It has something to do with paying closer attention to the sources of the food we choose to nourish our bodies with.

I want to go about sermonizing you about that using a sort of "old time religion" formula for sermonizing. It's in three parts:

First, we hold up in praise what is most sacred and precious to us.

Next, we acknowledge, we confess. if you will, our sins, our distorted thinking and behavior that has caused us to stray.

Finally is the call to repentance. Repent brothers and sisters and turn your directions around to reclaim the sacred tarnished by all those sins.

As to the first part of the formula, where we affirm our sacred values, instead of using words like "giving glory to God" or "Praise the Lord", we UU's might be more inclined to refer to something like "reverence for the interconnected web of all that exists of which we are apart." That is our 7th Principle. As Jamal Rahman likes to say: Let's think on those words for a minute and what they mean for our lives.

A vehicle for entering more deeply into a reverential space for the interconnected web, might be to recall and honor strong connections to the land, I know many of us have had in the past. It is a way of finding the sacred and giving praise to it. So allow me to reminisce about several connections I was gifted.

I spent a good part of my summers on my grandparents' ranch in Western Montana (Boulder Valley to be specific). In the spring, after calving friends and neighbors would join together to drive the cattle up into the mountains. There they would spend the summer while the valley meadows grew high with the grass that would be mowed and piled into haystacks to feed the cattle through the winter.

And, at the end of the summer, cowhands on horseback would scour the mountains to find all the cows with my grandfather's lazy crutch brand and herd them down to the valley meadows for the winter.

My great-grandfather homesteaded the land in 1867 so it was a cycle that had sustained itself for about 100 years when I witnessed it.

Other chores I had on the ranch included taking care of the chickens. Once a day I took them out table slops and a little grain. I would open about 12 nesting boxes and was always amazed to find 1-3 gifts in each nesting box, every day. My grandparents could afford store bought eggs but they wouldn't touch them. They much preferred their own eggs which were richer in color and flavor.

I also helped Carl, the hired hand milk "Lulubelle" and hauled buckets of her warm, unpasteurized bounty to the separator. The cream we produced was so thick it couldn't be poured. Sometimes, I would chop off a block of river ice preserved all summer in sawdust in the ice house and we'd make ice cream.

Every evening I would accompany my grandfather as he simply drove around the ranch and surveyed the land he was born on and was utterly connected to and loved beyond reason.

From age 15 to 22, I spent large parts of my summer working on farms around my hometown of Walla Walla.

Mostly it was very hot, dirty, monotonous, but one memory I have is of plowing fields from dusk until dawn when it was cool and the dust was held down by the dew. I would turn off my tractor lights and plow by moonlight all night long and be followed by owls waiting to nab mice that my plow flushed.

Our reverence for the interdependent web is expressed when we take some time to appreciate the small miracle of turning water and dirt and sunlight into, say strawberries, with awareness that we are part of and not as separate from the dirt and the strawberries as we might pretend.

Reverence is also present when we are connected to the rhythm of life by involving ourselves in some way in the caring creation of our own food. Nature holds up a mirror so we can see more clearly the ongoing processes of growth, renewal, and transformation in our lives. Recall the words of our farmer/poet, Wendell Berry;

The farmer enters into death yearly, and comes back rejoicing. He has seen
The light lie down in the dung heap, and rise again in the corn.

Our reverence and gratitude for the miracle of the interdependent web yields a sense of obligation.

It is a religion of the land that I think my grandparents had a sense of in a way that echoes words attributed to Chief Sealth: "We do not own the land; we are here to take care of it."

We know that all our food comes from earth, and whether we read from Genesis or the Bhagavad-Gita, we know that the earth is sacred.

Now, we gotta look at the sin part, and here my topic becomes especially juicy, maybe slimy, cuz, brothers and sisters, we've been doing some serious sinning in the area of our food habits. The sins of greed and gluttony fuel the horrors brought to us by agribusiness and global food distribution. And we have been complicit!

If you want an extended visit with the global agribusiness that supplies almost all the food you will get at the supermarket or fast food outlets, I recommend “Omnivore’s Dilemma” by Michael Pollin, or “Animal, Vegetable, Miracle” by Barbara Kingsolver. They are my primary sources of fact.

A summary: 70% of agricultural land in the U.S. has shifted to corporate controlled, monoculture or single-crop farms of enormous size. Of their crops hybrid and genetically engineered corn and soybeans dominate; corn and soybeans that the industry turns into thousands of starch and oil based food and chemical products.

Among many other things corn and soybeans convert cheaply and quickly into animal flesh and corn syrup. When you have a hamburger and coke or about anything else at McDonalds you are literally eating corn.

The other major dynamic of the 21st century food economy is convenience. We want our food picked, cut, washed, packaged; all but chewed and digested for us. And, we want strawberries 12 months a year. As a result 85% of every food dollar goes not for the food but to the processors, marketers and transporters.

Still, supermarket and fast food is fairly cheap, often cheaper than local, organic food. But the hidden costs make cheap food incredibly expensive. But let’s make this into a little bit of a dialogue, a sort of communal confession of our bad habits. I know I’m largely preaching to the choir here—you guys probably know more than I do about those hidden costs in our food network. Can someone think of one?

First: OIL. Agribusiness contributes to the depletion of oil and to global warming because 17 to 20 percent of all our fossil fuel use in this country goes to into the nitrogen fertilizers, pesticides, tractors, transportation, refrigeration and processing of our food. That’s more than we use for personal transportation according to Michael Pollin! Hardly any of it is essential.

Second hidden cost: HEALTH. Humans are hereditarily attracted to inexpensive oily and starchy corn-based foods. For a dollar you can get 1200 calories in the snack food aisle but only 250 in the produce aisle. So, the hidden cost is an obesity crisis, and diabetes and heart disease epidemics. The industry spends 10 billion dollars a year marketing food brands to children and it isn’t for broccoli, and now experts are predicting that the life expectancy of our children is expected to go down for the first time ever. Meanwhile 800 million people in the world are chronically malnourished,

Third hidden cost: SOCIAL the industry has found ways of dealing with the huge corn surplus: Pass NAFTA and dump it in places like Mexico at a price less than the cost of production, which is made possible by government subsidies. And down in Mexico the price of corn fell by half and 1.5 million formerly self-sufficient Mexican corn farmers were forced off their land. They have to feed their families so they migrate to Mexico City or the Skagit Valley, often without visas and in terror of the ICE arrests, willing to do almost any kind of work even at slave wages. Thus, another hidden cost is the unraveling of rural society in both Mexico and Montana. This is also a very vivid example of how interrelated issues of justice are.

A fourth hidden cost: ENVIRONMENTAL DEVASTATION. Just one example: Industrial farming leaves polluted water on a massive scale. There is a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico the size of New Jersey consisting of all the excess nitrogen fossil fuel fertilizer we use on Midwest fields. On my grandparent’s ranch the cows fertilized the

fields. The plants and animals were raised together on the same farm—which, therefore, neither produced unmanageable mountains of manure, to be wasted and to pollute the water supply, nor depended on huge quantities of imported, commercial fertilizer.

Fifth hidden cost: **FOOD QUALITY**. Consider what we have done to the end product: the food that sustains our lives. Instead of free range chickens, cows and pigs I grew up with living more or less naturally on the land in Montana, we have several billion food animals living in nightmarish conditions on factory farms because of the oceans of corn aided by hormones and antibiotics that grow them quicker and cheaper. Strawberries and other produce have been genetically engineered to weather long distance transportation, and still look perfect, yet taste like cardboard copies of their former selves.

The final hidden cost: **TAX SUBSIDIES**. Behind our cheap industrial food is 26 billion dollars of annual government subsidies. Our taxes thus encourage all of the horrendous habits I've been regaling about.

So now brothers and sisters are we ready to repent?

We UU's take pride in being responsible for our own theology. Why not be responsible for our own food choices. It's like a vote, you have a vote between the monocultures built on fossil fuels and chemicals, or my Montana ranch where the land and the food it produced were sacred—my grandparents would never have said so but you knew it was felt in their bones.

What happens when you get out of the supermarket and fast food outlets, when you go to the farmers' market or join in community-supported agriculture, or nurture your own garden? What happens is that suddenly a whole world opens up.

You won't find strawberries 12 months a year but you will learn what the land produces each season where you live.

The food will be healthier and fresher and better tasting.

You will delight in direct contact with the creative people that grew your food for love rather than big profits.

You will create yourself by cooking again. The whole equation of your relationship to food is changed.

Kingsolver says: "Food is the rare moral arena in which the ethical choice is generally the one more likely to make you groan with pleasure."

This is where the hope is, I think. And we hear about the spectacular growth in farmer's markets and in restaurants that buy locally so there is real hope. Three members of my Skagit Valley congregation are devoting their lives to teaching and modeling permaculture, or farming organically. We need to support people like them.

Let me candid. I am not such a true believer that I intend to give up the pleasure I receive from some things we can't produce locally, like chocolate and coffee. I'm not that saintly.

But I am convinced that I should generally follow Barbara Kingsolver's two, overriding goals of food choice: (1) Use food whose provenance you really know; (2) Wring most petroleum out of the food chain. I have provided Michael Pollin's 10 rules

for eating better in a handout with your orders of service and I hope you will get a chance to look them over and perhaps post them on your refrigerator.

I am aware that in several recent sermons by the Reverends James Kubal-Komoto and Kit Ketchum you have had a rich conversation about spiritual practice.

Let me add my 2 cents worth by saying that attentiveness has to be near the heart of a mature spirituality. “My work is loving the world” says Mary Oliver. Do we really have anything more important to do?

Our Seventh Principle calls us to reverence before this world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday experience. Eating, of course, is an essential element of our everyday experience.

Attentiveness to where our food came from is a form of blessing of it; dare I mention the word “grace”? It involves a recognition and expression of gratitude for the many miracles it took to cultivate, harvest and prepare the forkfuls of food we will slip into our mouths. With this kind of caring we just might deepen our connection to the earth and move towards living our seventh principle. We will have repented well.

. Let’s take a moment for silent reflection.

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We have a few minutes for response. Can anyone tell us how they or someone they know is moving towards this ideal – or share ideas that are working?
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Our closing words are again from Wendell Berry:

“We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives, so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption that what is good for the world will be good for us. We must recover the sense of the majesty of the creation and the ability to be worshipful in its presence. For it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.”

Michael Pollin’s 10 Rules for eating better:

1. Don’t eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn’t recognize as food.
2. Avoid food products with more than five ingredients or with ingredients you can’t pronounce.
3. Don’t eat anything that won’t rot.
4. Shop the perimeter of the supermarket where the food is least processed.
5. Avoid food products that make health claims.
6. Eat only at meals and at tables.
7. Eat only until you’re 4/5 full.
8. Pay more, eat less.
9. Diversify your diet and eat wild foods when you can.
10. Eat slowly, with other people whenever possible, and always with pleasure.