

## **Change or Loss?**

Something that Pat Smith and I came back from General Assembly with is the following concept:

### **People resist change because they fear loss.**

We fear loss.

That's been rolling around in my head, now, for a couple of months, and it's beginning to make sense. Change can be good or bad. Even with good change, we may resist.

### **People resist change because they fear loss.**

And, I imagine we each fear to lose different things and with differing intensity.

The Buddhist Law of Detachment seems to apply here. If we're unduly attached to something, we bring suffering on ourselves either through fear of loss, or poor choices we make to avoid the loss, or through the loss itself. We can be attached to ideas or furniture, social structures or lifestyles.

So, let's say we're attached to a lifestyle. Then along comes some scientific study or fact about which we had not previously been aware. And, let's say this new information removes support for the assumptions upon which we've based our lifestyle.

Well, we value reason. Our living tradition draws from six sources. One of these sources is Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit. I think of this as warning us against denying reality in order to maintain a fictitious belief. For example, denying the person-hood of black people in order to maintain a belief in one's superiority. Or denying that women could reason as well as men in order to maintain a social structure supported by the subservience of women.

And, if we use just these two cases, we see that change was incredibly hard to achieve. Change was hard because people feared loss. The loss of economic success because of the loss of free labor. The loss of exalted status. The loss of the control of households, workplaces, houses of worship. The loss of a lifestyle.

In both of these cases the lifestyle that ultimately changed was causing harm. Harm to those people about whom other people were in denial. As with many things, it's quite clear in retrospect. So, what lifestyle are we attached to now that's causing harm? Do we have knowledge through science or observation to confirm that harm is being done? Are we in denial about the underlying facts, which leads us to cause this harm?

I've had the opportunity to be a member of the UUA's Ethical Eating listserv for several years. And, I had the privilege to attend the mini-assembly at General Assembly this year where the final language of the Ethical Eating Statement Of Conscience was hammered out prior to being presented to the delegates in the business meeting. And it was approved. Our Unitarian Universalist Association approved the 2011 Statement of Conscience called Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice. It's a three and a half page document, so I won't read it to you today. If you're interested in reading the entire statement, go online to [uua.org](http://uua.org) and put ethical eating in the search bar. But, here's the first paragraph:

“Aware of our interdependence, we acknowledge that eating ethically requires us to be mindful of the miracle of life we share with all beings. With gratitude for the food we have received, we strive to choose foods that minimize harm and are protective of the environment, consumers, farmers, and all those involved in food production and distribution.”

So, after our sixth source, heeding the guidance of reason and the results of science, we continue by recognizing our seventh principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. And, since we are striving to minimize harm while heeding the guidance of reason and the results of science, let's take a look at who and/or what we are harming.

- Ourselves

We're harming ourselves? Let's take a look at this chart I compiled. Our food expenditures as a percent of total expenditures has declined from over 40% in 1901 to about 33% in the 1930's to less than 15% at the beginning of this new century. Meanwhile, our per capita health consumption expenditure has increased markedly. Moreover, the percent of the population considered obese and extremely obese has risen from less than 15% to 35% just since 1960. Makes sense, right? We pay less for food and we eat more.

Studies show the benefit to each of us, of a minimally processed, plant based diet. Yes, we're harming ourselves with highly processed, pesticide laden, animal based foods.

Subsidies have manufactured a price inequality that helps junk food undersell nutritious-but-unsubsidized foodstuffs like fruits and vegetables. Here you see a picture of America's Kitchen Garden. This is the layout of the garden at the White House in spring 2011. Looks like a good garden; lots of variety.

Now, let's look at a picture of America's "Subsidy Garden". This is what the White House garden would look like if it were planted to reflect the relative costs of the main crops subsidized by US taxpayers. Lots of corn, wheat, rice and sorghum. Cotton isn't edible, but it's highly subsidized, too.

Are we in denial? Are we resisting change because we fear the loss of our cheap and convenient, but flavorful calories?

## **Change or Loss?**

- **Farm workers**

We know, don't we, that much of our food is brought to us by farm workers who are poorly paid, and who end up relying on food banks to feed their families. We can find Fair Trade labeling on imported foods, but what about Domestic Fair Trade? No, there's rarely certification or labeling for that.

Science has shown the links of birth defects, cancers and other chronic illnesses to the use of pesticides, herbicides and fungicides. Despite this, our farm workers are, more often than not, still subjected to unprotected use of these poisons.

In addition to the use of such poisons, a majority of these workers function in poor and unsafe working conditions where they are exploited and, often, in slavery. As an example, in the Florida tomato picking workforce, people are being bought and sold, shackled in chains, beaten for not working hard enough or fast enough or being too weak or sick to work. People were actually shot and killed for trying to escape these conditions. Through the Coalition of Immokalee Workers we learn of seven successful slavery prosecutions in Florida in the past 15 years. Two more cases were brought in 2010, though they haven't yet been decided in court. In these last two cases, against different defendants, workers from Thailand in one case and Haiti in another were lured to the US with the promise of work. Once here, their passports and visas were taken from them and they were held in forced servitude working on farms.

Here's another example. The Rainforest Action Network is trying to pressure Cargill to stop buying palm oil from plantations in Indonesia that are known for human rights violations including slavery.

Do we resist changes to our buying patterns because we fear the loss of a wide range of products year-round? Or is it the loss of convenience?

## Change or Loss?

Do you remember the line “I say tomato, you say tomato”? Well, here’s a new one – You say tomato, I say pesticide-laden, unsavory fruit of slave labor.

- **Our Environment**

Research has made us aware that the use of fertilizers, herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides on plants and antibiotics and hormones in animals are detrimental to our environment as well as our health. Many would have us believe that protecting the environment means feeding fewer people, but a scientific review published in June says that we can have both food security and biodiversity. Citing a UN study, among others, the authors explain how agroecological farming not only can feed the world, but also can enhance biodiversity. Their evidence also directly refutes the “Borlaug hypothesis”. The “Borlaug hypothesis” argues that biodiversity conservation requires the intensification and industrialization of agriculture. This refuted hypothesis claims intensive, industrialized agriculture is required in order to produce enough food in a limited area to leave neighboring wildlife habitat intact. In fact, far greater biodiversity is found in mosaics of ecological farming systems, which also support crucial ecosystem services like pollination.

From start to finish says environmental scientist David Pimentel, we have based our food production system on petroleum and other energy sources that will continue to dwindle. The enormous monocrop fields of grain and soybeans needed to feed livestock require equally enormous quantities of petroleum-based fertilizers.

Do we resist changing to organic produce and pastured animals because we fear the loss of cheap food? Because we feel entitled to spend less than half (as a percentage of household expenditures) of what people spent on food 50 to 60 years ago?

## Change or Loss?

- Farmed animals

In 2006, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations released a report on the environmental impacts of animal agriculture. In it they say that “the livestock sector emerges as one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global.”

In addition, by now, everyone in this room is aware of the horrific suffering of animals raised for food or raised to produce food. Our Statement Of Conscience expresses “Concerns about the Humane Treatment of Animals includ(ing) intensive confinement and abuse in Confined Animal Feeding Operations, and inhumane conditions during production, transport, and slaughter.”

Norm Phelps, author, activist and UU says

“Factory farms constitute the most intense cruelty that the human race is capable of. They are, in fact, concentration camps in which sentient, sensitive beings live out their all-too-brief lives deprived of fresh air, sunlight, space in which to move about and stretch their legs or wings, and the ability to live in social communities suited to their natures. Their suffering is so intense and unrelieved from birth to death that insanity is a regular consequence of life in an animal factory. The helpless animals’ minds are simply crushed by pain and deprivation.”

“The Butcher’s Guide to Well-Raised Meat” is by Joshua and Jessica Applestone. These authors believe so strongly that well-raised meat is for everyone that they have a list on page 92 of the book to prove that they can get you ten meals for \$50.00. Does meat remain the focal point of the meal? I suspect not. But, does it need to be and how much do we waste when meat *is* the main dish?

Eating at restaurants is, admittedly, more difficult, at least here in Lubbock, if you want to support only humanely raised, pastured animals for food. It's even more difficult in Lubbock eating out as a vegan, as I am. So, the loss of fitting in might be a point of resistance to change. Trust me, I know what it's like to be the odd order at a restaurant. The upside is that many of the wait staff know me by sight.

So, do we resist change because we fear the loss of hamburgers, hot dogs and chicken wings?

## Change or Loss?

- Fish

Charles Clover has written a book and from that created a documentary, both entitled “The End of the Line”. He says

“Imagine what people would say if a band of hunters strung a mile of net between two immense all-terrain vehicles and dragged it at speed across the plains of Africa.” “This fantastical assemblage ... would scoop up everything in its way ...” “Pregnant females would be swept up and carried along, with only the smallest juveniles able to wriggle through the mesh.” “Left behind is a strangely bedraggled landscape resembling a harrowed field. The industrial hunter-gatherers now stop to examine the tangled mess of writhing or dead creatures behind them. There are no markets for about a third of the animals they have caught because they don’t taste too good or because they are simply too small or too squashed. This pile of corpses is dumped on the plain to be consumed by carrion. This efficient, but highly unselective way of killing animals is known as trawling.”

His point is that we have an outdated image of fishermen and what they do is obscured by distance and the veil of water.

Overfishing is the great environmental disaster that people haven’t heard about, according to the documentary’s producer George Duffield. Fish were once seen as renewable resources, but no longer. In a single human lifetime we have inflicted a crisis on the oceans greater than any yet caused by pollution. Overfishing is changing the world.

Do we resist change because we fear the loss of our pan seared tilapia?

## **Change or Loss?**

- **Food Waste**

Sylvia Ashby, a founding friend of our church, gave me an article to read about food waste. I was shocked to learn how much food we throw out. The USDA estimates that Americans waste 30% of all edible food produced, bought and sold in this country, although it acknowledges that this figure is probably low. The University of Arizona and the NIH recently published estimates of 40% or more. Looking at it another way, 13% of all municipal solid waste consists of food scraps and edible cast-offs from residences and food-service establishments. That's about 30 million tons a year. It's enough food to feed all of Canada during that same period.

Do we resist change because we fear loss? I'll tell you something I've resisted. I bought an electric composter, which is still sitting shiny and clean in my garage. Even after talking with Elliot Benge about how easy it is, composting still scares me. What if I don't get it right and it smells or attracts bugs? You have to balance types of input and it seems complicated to me. I think I fear the loss of peace of mind about how it will work. Yet, I so want to reduce my footprint by composting my food waste. This is a hurdle I have yet to overcome and I invite anyone who is interested to help me get past this point of resistance. Maybe I'll have a composting party at my house some Sunday afternoon.

## **Change or Loss?**

We are Unitarian Universalists and we pride ourselves on our belief in science and our ability to use reason. Yet, when we come to this issue of eating, we seem, sometimes, to have something of a blind spot.

Why do we, so often, deny these realities as we go about our daily lives? We deny them every time we stop to catch a quick meal at a fast food restaurant. We deny the damage to our planet, our health and our farm workers when we purchase conventionally grown produce and meat from confinements. We deny the suffering of fellow creatures when we insist that the consumption of animal products is central to our lives.

Are we so attached to this chemical laden, animal based, highly processed eating regimen that we don't feel we should have to change?

**We resist changing because we fear losing what we have.**

According to author and environmental activist Derrick Jensen,

“One of the reasons there aren't more people working to take down the system that's killing the planet is because their lives depend on the system”. “If your experience is that your food comes from the grocery store and your water comes from the tap, then you are going to defend to the death the system that brings those to you because your life depends on them.” He goes on to say that “another part of the problem is the narratives behind this culture's way of living. The premises of these narratives grant us the exclusive rights and privileges of dominion over this planet. ... these narratives tell us that our intelligence and abilities permit us exclusive rights and privileges to work our will on the world that is here for us to use. ... In the real world you can't have a nature/culture split, but in this culture you do and it has real effects on the physical world. You can't live on a planet and kill it at the same time.”

## **So, how do we turn this around?**

First, we stop the denials. If we choose harmful practices, acknowledge our complicity in the resulting damage. I think we should have compassion on those who denied Copernicus and Galileo about the earth revolving around the sun. Galileo said “I do not feel obligated to believe that the same god who has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use.”

Next, we forgive ourselves for those actions which have brought harm. We aren’t going to be perfect, but if we know we need to change, we can begin to move down a new path regarding our food choices.

Next, we craft individual plans to change our eating habits. The way I do it is to start with one thing – something I consume regularly. I research my options and try brands, products and alternatives which are less harmful to the planet and all who live on it. This is a journey, not a destination. I’m always finding one more food choice in my life to review.

A major action we can take is to get back in our kitchens. Yes, cooking from scratch and planning ahead take some effort, but then you’ll have a refrigerator full of wonderful, nutritious food waiting for you. That’s what I do most Sunday afternoons, because I work full time. That way I have food prepared for the week. But, for those of you who have a little more time, you have more options on how to accomplish this.

**We can break through our resistance to change once we see that the loss we fear isn’t so great. Once we detach ourselves from this harmful lifestyle -- our wrong belief in our ability to separate our actions from consequences.**

The Ethical Eating Statement of Conscience was hotly debated at this year’s UUA General Assembly. Some felt it was too strong, others felt it didn’t go far enough. All agreed, however, that this issue was so important that we needed to help people reevaluate what our culture has told us is right. We are asking people to think about what they eat based on evidence, science and reason.

Again, from the Statement of Conscience:

As Unitarian Universalists, we are called to address our relationship with food. There are many paths available to us and we need to respect each other as we address our relationship with food. Our Principles call for recognition of and respect for the other. As we search freely and responsibly for truth, meaning and spiritual wholeness, we will make a variety of individual choices about food. Ethical eating is the application of our Principles to our food choices. What and how we eat has broad implications for our planet and society. Our values, Principles and integrity call us to seek compassion, health, and sustainability in the production of food we raise or purchase.

**Do we resist change because we fear loss?**

**Change or loss?**

**We can change!**

I'll close with a quote from Eric Herm, author of "Son of a Farmer, Child of the Earth" and a fourth generation West Texas cotton farmer.

"As human beings, we should be the fully aware collective conscience – the mind's eye of this wonderful planet. As farmers, we should be guardian angels protecting the flesh and bone Holy Grail that is our Soil. Instead, we've sold out. We've exchanged home-grown methods for disparaging schemes because it is easier to do what we're told rather than adhere to what we feel deep inside us. Now is the time for all of us to realize what must be done, what must change, and to begin that process today. Not tomorrow. Today! The problems existing now were not solely created by inept government and greedy corporations. These problems were also created by a lack of resistance by all people. Yes, the problems exist. No, it is not too late to do something about it."

So, let's heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. Let's strive to minimize harm in our food choices.

**And, let's commit, right now, to take one action today to bring our Ethical Eating Statement of Conscience to bear in our lives.**

May it be so.

**Sources**

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International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (United Nations)

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“You Can't Kill a Planet and Live on It, Too” by Frank Joseph Smecker and Derrick Jensen, Truthout

“Dispelling the ‘Borlaug hypothesis’” by Marcia Ishii-Eiteman, Pesticide Action Network

“The Troubled History of the Supermarket Tomato” by NPR staff

“Dangers of farm work in the sunshine state” by Margaret Reeves, Pesticide Action Network

“A Meaty New Book”, 7Gen Blog, Seventh Generation

“Our Love Affair With Fish is Unsustainable” by Charles Clover