

## **First Unitarian Universalist Church**

**August 26, 2007**

### **Spirituality of Food**

**Rev. Sandra Fees**



Earlier this month, a group of neighbors, city officials, and a few others including Channel 69 News gathered late on a Friday afternoon to dedicate Amanda's Garden and Courtyard. Amanda's Garden, named for nearby Amanda Stoudt Elementary and located on South 10<sup>th</sup> Street, is a community garden.

It is part of the Berks County Conservancy's program, Berks Urban Greening whose acronym is BUG. BUG transforms vacant lots into community green space. Local residents grow their own vegetables, herbs, and flowers while also working cooperatively, improving their family's health and nutrition, building community spirit, and also providing attractive green space in an urban area.

The individual gardens are well tended. The evening of the dedication, the whole area was bursting with color. Plump red and yellow tomatoes, green beans, yellow and green squash, banana peppers, and even an orange pumpkin beginning to swell. Bees hovered on bright flowers.

We had to walk through the bountiful plots and through an arbor to reach the courtyard at the back of the garden where we gathered for the dedication. The neighbors had just recently built the courtyard. There they had laid bricks and gotten a picnic table so that they would have a place to come together for neighborhood meetings, and simply a place to sit down together to chat.

Designed into the brick were two mosaics of the badge numbers of Reading City police officers Scott Wertz and Michael Wise Both officers were killed in recent years in the line of duty. The space was being dedicated in their honor and also as a tribute to all the city officers who have given their lives to keep others safe.

I was invited to offer a prayer of dedication. I don't live in that neighborhood, but my husband has been working with the neighbors at Amanda's Garden as part of his community-building work. I think you can see how I ended up there.

Their garden, like this space, is a sanctuary, a haven for those who enter. It is a place to grow food and flowers, but it is not only about consuming the food. A community garden, like a church, can nourish the spirit. It is also a place to grow souls. The neighbors at Amanda's Garden have designed a space that does both.

The garden affirms what we instinctively know. Food is the very stuff of life. It creates life – it ministers to both our spirits and our bodies.

That is also why food is central to religions the world over and why we use it in worship and religious practices. From festivals for harvest and planting times to communion, from prayers at meal time to church social hour, from fasting to keeping kosher, food is a vital part of the life of faith.

## **Spirituality of Food (cont'd.)**

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The principal act of worship of Roman Catholics, the Eastern Orthodox, and some Protestant denominations is Holy Communion. Bread and wine are used liturgically in a sacred communal meal representing the Last Supper of the disciples with Jesus.

Different Christian traditions have different theological understandings of the bread and wine. In some, these elements are believed to become the actual body and blood of Christ. In others, the wine and bread are used as a remembrance. Communion, with its multiple meanings, points to the death of Christ as a cornerstone event in Christianity.

In Judaism, food has had a significant role in reinforcing community and religious identity. Historically, maintaining strict dietary rules has helped keep Jewish people together. The exacting rules for food preparation make it a near necessity for observant Jews to eat, live and marry within the faith.

The basic rules apply to killing and eating animals and other conscious life, but not to plants. The regulation that most of us are most familiar with is the prohibition against pork. But when it comes to eating animals, the guideline is that the animal must have a split hoof and chew the cud. This permits sheep and cattle to be eaten, for example, but excludes horses and swine. The rules applying to sea creatures require they have fins and scales, while birds of prey and insects are banned.

Beyond what may be consumed, there are rules about how meat must be prepared and which foods may be eaten together. A traditional observant Jewish family would be likely to have two sets of pots and pans in order to comply with all the requirements.

Today, the observance of the Jewish dietary laws varies considerably. Some Jewish people continue to adhere to the original laws, while others limit themselves to not eating pork (Many Peoples, Many Faiths, Robert Ellwood and Barbara McGraw).

In the Muslim tradition, fasting is central to religious practice. It is so important that it is among the five pillars of Islam and provides a test of faith.

During the month of Ramadan all healthy adults fast. Individuals maintain the fast during sunlight hours from dawn to sunset. While fasting, adherents devote their attention to reflection and prayer. In particular, individuals remember and respond to the needs of the poor and hungry.

At night, family and friends dine together, read aloud from the Quran, and pray. On the 27<sup>th</sup> day, the Day of Power is observed. This is the day when Mohammed first received the divine revelation of the Quran. Ramadan ends with a celebratory Feast of the Breaking of the Fast – Id al-Fitr (Islam: The Straight Path, John Esposito).

In Unitarian Universalism, we do something a little different. We identify an ethical position that is as unique as any religious practices associated with food. In our principles, we affirm “respect for the interdependent web of all existence.” In his essay, “The Heart of a Faith for the Twenty-first Century,” Rev. David Bumbaugh calls it a “radical theological position.”

## **Spirituality of Food (cont'd.)**

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He writes, “The seventh principle represents our peculiar contribution to the religious agenda .... [It] calls us to reverence before the world, not some future world, but this miraculous world of our everyday experience.” (in UU World, Spring 2007)

Food is sacred because it is part of our everyday experience. It is central to our daily lives and represents kinship with all life. The food we eat or don't eat can impact our physical health. It can kill us or restore us. The decisions we make about food have ethical implications for our personal health and well-being – and that of our families. They also have implications for the rest of life on the planet.

That is why our food choices matter. That is why it matters whether we eat a Twinkie or an organically grown peach, whether we eat foods grown locally or shipped from Florida, whether we buy and serve organic fair trade coffee or drink a liter of soda.

The seventh principle, however, doesn't tell us which items to eat or not to eat. Instead, our religion tries to help us develop awareness without trying to make our choices for us. For example, not everyone can afford to eat organic or fresh foods or do well on a vegan or vegetarian diet.

While I strive to adhere to a vegetarian diet, I also eat a bit of fish and seafood. I love the fresh produce available at this time of year – tomatoes and corn and zucchini. I also eat potato chips and peanut butter cups.

My own attitude toward food is that there are a number of ethical approaches to eating. What seems most needed is food that fills the body and the spirit – not just for you or me – but for everyone. So that no one goes hungry – physically or spiritually.

Amy Hassinger says in her article “Ethical Eating”:

When you can open your refrigerator and imagine the face of the farmer who raised the cows that gave your milk and butter, or who picked the asparagus in your crisper, there's a unique sense of satisfaction, of knowing that the system you're supporting is healthy – not only for you and your family, but for your community and for the planet. This is connection, this is intimacy with the interdependent web, and, at the very least, this is an excellent step toward a food system that respects the complexity and fragility of the natural world. (UU World)

This is what the children have been learning about in their Farm to Fork program these last few weeks. Visiting the West Reading farmer's market, learning about local produce, purchasing peaches and zucchini, they have been on a journey of learning more about how food makes it onto the table – and how many lives are touched in the process.

They are also learning how much fun it can be to interact with fresh food items – whether they are making homemade ice cream or creating characters out of vegetables. These activities bring them directly into a relationship with the various people and places touched by their food choices.

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Our food connects us to each other and all life. The foods we buy, serve, and consume all bring us into relationship with other people, other places, and other creatures. When we open the refrigerator this week, I hope each of us will pause to imagine all the things and people who are part of the butter on the shelf and the lettuce in the crisper.

Amen.