

August 6, 2017

In a manner of speaking, links in a chain can serve two opposite functions: on the one hand, they connect the two ends of the chain into a single instrument. On the other hand, each additional link pushes those two ends further apart.

Karl's comments about the complex way that food gets from farm to table illustrate that latter point rather well. Yes, ultimately, we are connected with those whose labor produces the food we eat, and with the land where it is produced. But it seems to me that the long link from farmer (or other producer) through trucker to processor and packager through trucker to store to our home means our real connection is pretty attenuated. Most of us live in an urban area with little land devoted to food production, and most of us are not at all engaged in that process at all. Of course, there are those who grow vegetables in a backyard garden, for example, and take great pride in being able to eat and preserve what they've grown. But for the most part, the rest of us are pretty well separated from the whole agricultural process. We live in a world where if it is Minnesota in January and we want pineapple well, by gosh, there is a store relatively close where I can get that pineapple at any hour of the day. (Perhaps soon we will be able to have it delivered by drone, and save us the trouble of actually going to the store at all!) Certainly for me, food is what appears on the shelves at the grocery store; everything before that is a bit hazy.

As Audrey reminded us earlier, at FUS we take time to consciously try to reconnect ourselves to the cycle of the seasons: the solstices, the equinoxes, and the halfway points in between, such as Lammas. As humanists, we tend to believe that this world, with all its beauty and all its warts, is all we have – and that we should be taking care of it, and mindful of and attuned to its cycles which nourish and sustain us, and which have done so for countless generations. We can take heart that even when our political cycles turn unpredictable, we can rely on the steady progression of spring to summer to fall to winter and back through again to carry us on toward a different time. Here in early August, the weather is still quite warm – but occasionally it hints at the coolness to come; we think of State Fair, going back to school, Labor Day. Again, in our urban lives, it may be hard to think of this as a harvest-related celebration – I suspect most people

vaguely associate the harvest with late September, the fall equinox, maybe October. And of course, Thanksgiving.

There may be a number of reasons to lament the widespread sense of disconnection from this cycle of the seasons, and from the harvest time, but one of the most profound concerns to which this sense may give rise is the disconnection from the process by which food winds up on our table. That disconnection – that sense that the typical consumer is not paying attention, for whatever reason – means that sometimes, the process of producing the food we eat takes an ugly turn and becomes something troubling. To feed the huge cities, and indeed the global human population of seven billion, some producers turn to practices that are disturbing, or harmful. We may celebrate the notion of the yeoman farmer, but the yeoman farmer is not likely to have the capacity to feed seven billion people. To create the yields humanity demands, some in the agricultural sector turn to chemical pesticides to keep unwanted weeds in check; to machinery that tills the land while expelling carbon dioxide; to feeding animals unwholesome food while keeping them in inhumane conditions. If we are silent, we allow these conditions to persist.

Of course, there are many who respond to this unhappy scenario by choosing to buy only organic produce without chemical fertilizers, eggs from cage-free hens, and so on; we take pride and comfort in going to farmer's markets and co-ops and joining Community Supported Agriculture programs. But the reality is that many in our community, including, I'm certain, many here at FUS and across the country, don't – not because they hate animals or love chemical additives, but because the premium that must be paid for such "pure" foods is out of their reach. If you're on a limited income, for example, and you can buy cage-free eggs for \$4 a dozen, or "regular" eggs for \$1.50, what choice will you make? Do you get the fancy artisanal loaf of bread, or the more humble Wonder? It's probably not hard to guess. And even for those who strive to be good, it may not be possible to be perfect all the time. If, one way or another, we find ourselves in a place where we snap up cheap groceries and guiltily decline to ask how they can be so cheap, is there anything we can do to soften the blow?

The answer, perhaps, is: maybe. While certainly not a complete answer, one place to start might be to do something many humanists really don't do: take a moment at mealtime (or maybe even at the store) to express gratitude for the food you're consuming, or buying.

Earlier this summer, I had lunch with an attorney in Brainerd with whom I was working on a project; I had not met her before, and so only knew a bit about her. When our food arrived, she asked if it would be all right to say grace before diving in. I was a bit taken aback: this was not something I normally do. Sure, if I have a holiday meal with my mother's mainly-Lutheran family, they may intone "Come lord Jesus be our guest, and let thy gifts to us be blessed," which I normally meet with resignation and hopefully-polite silence. Which is mainly what I did this time, too. She even thanked the supreme being for my being there! Clearly, she didn't know a lot about me, either. Thanking the lord for my turkey bacon club, however delicious, just didn't seem right.

Welcoming Jesus to dinner and attributing the food to his efforts is probably not something most of us typically think of doing. But it is really not beyond the capacity of the typical humanist to be grateful for the good things we experience in life, including (but not limited to) our meals. As David reminded us earlier, "Gratitude is not only the greatest of virtues, but the parent of all the others."

There are many people in our world who don't get enough to eat; surely we can be grateful that we do. And if we suspect the food on our plate ends up there because of agricultural practices we find problematic, then *the very least we can do* is to express gratitude for the farmers and laborers who sweated to make it possible, for the animals who endured to make it possible, for the land that was worked to make it possible. Yes, this is a discussion of saying "grace," and the word grace is related to the word "gratis," which we usually interpret to mean "free." If the food we buy is cheap, even if not "free," someone, somewhere, has paid a price to let it be so. Perhaps part of the price **we** must pay, then, beyond that which is listed on the shelf – a *gratuity* if you will – is the reasonable price of expressing gratitude.

But is it enough, though, just to be grateful? Does simply expressing thanks feed other people? If our food does come to us through the efforts of exploited workers, perhaps undocumented, or through the suffering of animals or the chemical treatment of the land, do we wipe the slate clean with a simple “thanks”? It seems to me that the “saying of grace” might be best if not limited to just saying thanks, but also if it is a reminder of the way the food got to us, and a commitment to working for a world where the more problematic aspects of our food production can be ameliorated, if not eliminated. It’s not about imposing guilt or ruining a good meal, but about living the very humanist value of remembering that if the world is not what we want it to be, it’s up to us to say something **and** to do something about it. The act of saying grace need not be about thanking distant deities; it can be a call for justice in the here and now.

Consciously taking the time to express gratitude – even if we don’t think there is a supernatural audience to hear us – is a way to begin, to acknowledge the benefit we derive, and to remind ourselves there may be ways we individually and collectively can do better. And we need not wait until the last week of November to do so.

The internet is surprisingly awash in humanist expressions of grace, and I will close with one which stuck with me in particular:

We receive this food in gratitude to all beings
Who helped or sacrificed to bring it to our table,
And vow to respond in turn to those in need
With wisdom and compassion.