

Harvest Celebration: Eating the Earth

It all started with Judy Parker. Maybe 6 years ago, Judy, a friend and co-member of the Women's Group in my home church in Mt. Kisco, sent an email to my friends Steff, Patricia and me offering us her share at her CSA while she was out of town for the upcoming three weeks. For those who don't know, CSA stands for Community Supported Agriculture. The idea is that people buy a share of the crop at a local farm in advance of the season so that the farmer has a guarantee of a certain number of customers, regardless of how the season goes. Judy suggested we could each take a week so her share didn't go to waste.

The first week was mine. I drove up to Cascade Farm on the border of Patterson and Pawling on a sunny July afternoon. I parked on their unpaved road and followed the chickens to a big, open barn. Inside there were tables, each laden with wood crates filled with the week's harvest and signs letting me know what to do. Please take...one pound of kale, 2 large or 4 small cucumbers, 3 pounds potatoes, two eggplants, one bunch each parsley, basil, oregano, tarragon, mint, sage, as many hot peppers as you'd like, six summer squash, ½ pound swiss chard, two heads romaine, a handful of wild leeks, one pound, pole beans. On a separate table were dozens of eggs, still warm from the coop.

When I got home, I called Steff and Pat and told them there's no way Graham and I could eat all this food, so they came over that evening to share a meal with us on the deck. We spent the evening drinking cold tea, singing, and eating the gift of the earth.

The next year, we all joined Cascade Farm. Judy, Steff, Patricia, Diane and I all travelled to Patterson on Thursday afternoons to collect our harvest. We left notes for each other on the sign-in sheets, emailed recipe ideas when we got home and shared meals, often impromptu, most weekends. Our summer was filled with friends and music and fresh food. The summer after, we asked another friend to teach us how to preserve this gorgeous harvest. We spent many afternoons in each other's kitchens, practicing the art of canning. We prepared jams and jellies, filled freezer bags with carrots, onions, spinach and zucchini, cooked big pots of Portuguese kale soup and trays of spinach pie and lined our shelves with chutneys and salsas.

And we were transformed.

Four years ago, I belonged to a women's volunteer organization and was asked to chair their Signature Project Committee. We were given a general direction and told to create something that would define the group for the next decade. The focus was intergenerational work, which came at the end of an extensive research process of which I had not been a part, having not been with the organization for all that long. I accepted the direction along with the enthusiasm of my co-chair and a committee made up of what the organization considered the best of the best. Some of what charged this group was the opportunity to play a role in an esteemed and proud history. Over the last 50 years, our forebears founded the first domestic violence shelter in the county, created Mt. Kisco Day Care Center to support working moms when such things were quite controversial, designed the national and acclaimed high school anti-violence program called Love Shouldn't Hurt, restored Muscoot Farm and continues to run a massive holiday sharing program, ultimately collecting more than \$200,000 in goods every December. And here we were, charged with figuring out what's next.

We discovered quickly that in an age-segregated culture like ours, generational integration was becoming a critical issue. As we started to design our options we continued to come around to my experience at the farm. I held it up as one of the few places left where people of all ages and cultures can engage fully and where community has in our past and will in our future, be sustained and supported. My co-chair liked my idea, but it wasn't until she returned from a vacation in Greece that she was committed. When

she got home, she called immediately to tell me about harvest time on this tiny island where she and her family stayed. “They don’t have potable water”, she exclaimed, “but they have spectacular gardens!” Every morning, she and her husband and four kids joined local families to gather their food from the grounds. They’d walk back to their rented house, arms filled with the day’s harvest. She talked about how excited each kid got, eating bush beans on the way back, and writing friends at home to talk about the salads they had for lunch. (Imagine a kid being enthusiastic about a salad?) Those mornings were lively and exciting. This family connected to earth, to their food, to their new community and to each other because of those gardens.

They had been transformed.

My co-chair, Roseann, was interested in intergenerational work as the only reasonable model for social sustainability. Her children span two generations, she and her husband are in another and her father, who lives with them, is from yet another. The fragmentation of American culture into specific, age-segregated groups, has been disconcerting to her and her experience in those Greek gardens demonstrated a more traditional and healthier way for families to live and be in relationship.

That’s when Ro and I created InterGenerate. InterGenerate is a very small, food justice organization. The original idea was to build intentional community around an organic garden in which people across a variety of diversities grow their own food. We designed a model that allowed us to keep the membership cost to \$25 or \$50 a year, making it financially accessible, with an additional commitment to shared work and communal engagement. We opened our first community garden at Marsh Sanctuary in Mt. Kisco during the spring of 2010 in addition to a teaching garden at John Jay Homestead and this past summer we transformed the teaching garden into a communal garden, opened a new garden in Chappaqua and our first heritage egg co-op in Katonah. We’re also set to open another garden at the Katonah Community Center for clients of the food pantry and are working with the mayor of White Plains to create a chicken co-op for the city.

I don’t know how many pounds of food we’ve grown or how many suppers we’ve shared or how many eggs we’ve harvested or even the exact number of members we have. I know we send a steady stream of produce to the food bank, but I couldn’t tell you how much, and I know we’ve organized some successful gleaning projects, but I can’t tell you how many and I know I’ve been invited to speak and write in all kinds of arenas, but, again, I can’t easily recount the times or places.

But, I do know how many friends I’ve made, how many times I’ve seen my son run through the fields with other garden children or lie in the grass with the chickens. I can tell you about the afternoon Jodiⁱ and I knelt for hours thinning beets or the morning I woke in a panic realizing I forgot to water the night before. I can recall the messy tomato fight Maria and I had and the cuts and scrapes on my arms after filling the compost pile with Li Lai. I remember how delicately two sisters nursed some milkweed others were clearing and how we all gathered to watch the snapping turtles climb our fences when they realized we’d blocked their path. I remember clearly the first time at Marsh where I did not have a plot, an Italian woman in her 80s gave me her first head of lettuce as a thank-you for opening this garden and the young couple who finally felt at home in their new town and the email I got at the end of our first season from a woman who said that our garden brought her back to life.

They were transformed.

The one thing I was afraid I’d really miss when I left Roman Catholicism was communion. As some of you may remember, I was born into an atheistic family with a Jewish mother and a Catholic father and in college decided to follow a Catholic path. The Catholicism I chose was smart and justice oriented and had great impact around the globe on issues of poverty and war and over the course of a week, nothing fed me as much as 45 minutes of prayer and breaking bread and sharing wine with my spiritual community.

Some of you may also remember that I taught Roman Catholic theology on the undergraduate level for a decade. My students, also of the “reason informs theology” school of Catholicism, would often want to argue with each other or with me about whether or not communion was the body and blood of god.

For those of you who may not know, traditional Catholic theology teaches that Jesus broke bread and drank wine with his friends at table shortly before his death and entreated them to do the same in his memory. For 2,000 years, Catholics have not only been doing that, but they believe that the bread and wine are literally the body and blood of Jesus, or more specifically, the body and blood of God. It was one of the hot button topics that sparked the Protestant Reformation. Most of the other Christian churches believe the bread and wine represent god, but are not, in fact, god’s body.

And so, my students would argue. “Of course”, I’d tell my students, “the bread and wine are the body and blood of God.” Believe it or not, I didn’t say that so I could keep my job. (Had that been the case, I wouldn’t have told them Mary wasn’t a virgin.) No, I said it because I did then and still do, believe that bread and wine are the body of god. And, so are all things. We are the body and blood of God and so are the trees and the oceans and so is the snow and the soil. And we share it. We harvest the wheat and bake it with water and oil and break the bread we dip in wine and divide it amongst us. And, yes, that’s god. That’s god in the bread and god in the wine and god in the sharing and god in the circle. It is god we give and god we receive and god we become.

And I will not be defining god for you here. I think I can safely say that I don’t believe in the same god none of you believe in but there is a god I do believe in and we are it. I need a whole other sermon for this, which I’ll preach December, but for now I want to tell you...we are it. This Earth is, for me, the body of god. And when we eat the foods we plant and water and weed and harvest, we are sharing in communion.

For me, that’s transformational.

A member of our congregation has just learned that her company will match her family’s pledge to First Unitarian each year, to be used exclusively on an outreach project. There’s a lot of work that needs to be done before we can make it happen, but she’s hoping that we can start a community garden on our property that will be open to people who want or need to grow their own food. This has just come up and we’ll have a lot of planning and talking and voting in plenty of circles before anything happens, so don’t take my musings and random thoughts about it as an edict. But, I’ve been wondering what it would mean if we were to grow some of the food we use for our Midnight Runs. What if the breakfasts and dinners we packed were planted, watered, weeded and harvested by our own hands on our own property? What if that were true of the food we serve on Sunday mornings? Or for pot lucks? What if we spent our summers welcoming the stranger, welcoming families willing and able to grow their own food, who are completely unfamiliar to us. Maybe they don’t look like us or have different family histories or educational backgrounds or they speak different languages. What would it be like if people in Hastings and Greenburg and Ardsley and Yonkers thought of First Unitarian as the place people gather for harvest suppers and to learn the art of canning and drying and freezing and preserving, the place that welcomes all people seeking to live gently on Earth and with each other.

Would that be transformational?

I’m not preaching this morning on the Harvest season because I thought I had something to say about it. In fact, I was afraid I had nothing to say. I’m doing it because this summer, April Castoldi, our congregational president, asked me to as part of a list of requirements we need to fulfill for our Green Sanctuary application. Green Sanctuary is a designation declaring us sufficiently prepared to live out our commitment to a sustainable planet. I guess we need to show our minister knows how to talk about this stuff.

I'm also teaching an adult religious education class here called Menu for the Future designed to inform and inspire us to eating ethically. That might be another check on the list of things to do.

But, what I'm about to say, I'm not saying because the topic was requested or to drum up business for my class or to ensure that we become a green sanctuary. This comes from the center of who I am.

We are good people on a dying planet. We think a lot and talk a lot and mean very well. We want to do what's right but sometimes our desire doesn't translate into action and often we're so busy with the details of our own existence we just can't think about anything outside of the next few hours. We want stronger communities, we want a healthier planet. But we don't have time even to learn about all the things we have to do to get there, so we hope someone else will do enough for the both of us.

I speak here for myself. No fingers being pointed. I don't do as much as I wish. Sometimes I don't do half enough. Sometimes I'm embarrassed not to be doing more. I think I'll start this or that as soon as I have the time or the money...

But, that's how we got here. Good people not being able to get past the inertia of their individual lives. We have something more than most. We have each other. We aren't talking about individual lives, we're talking about our collective lives, the life we are sharing here as one congregation.

Here, we can make those changes. Here, we can decide, together, to think differently, to act differently, to live differently. Houses of worship are centers of hope. It's in churches and synagogues and mosques and temples the world around where people are introduced to the possibilities of the human experience, where people reach beyond themselves into the depth of community and the depth of the spiritual and return to their lives knowing we can be more.

Our Harvest Celebration is about food during this harvest season, but it's also about harvesting a deeper way of living. It's about planting and watering and weeding and harvesting community. It's about deeper life, better life, shared life.

It's about transformation.

Rev. Peggy Clarke: Minister of First Unitarian Society of Westchester, Rev. Clarke co-founded InterGenerate, a non-profit dedicated to food justice; its four community centers supply food pantries and low-price markets in areas without equal access to healthy food. A GreenFaith Fellow with doctoral work in American religious history, Rev. Clarke is the Racial and Social Justice Consultant for the Metro NY and Saint Lawrence Districts.

ⁱ Many of the names have been changed for this online publishing of the text.