

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Small Group Ministry Session Plan
The Spirituality of Food Session I — Gratitude
UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR, Jennifer Houston

Suggested food: Serve banana sandwiches, thinly sliced bananas on buttered white bread (from childhood).

Chalice Lighting

Opening Reading:

Food is not merely something we eat. It is a ceaseless reminder that we are mortal, earthbound, hungry and in need. We are bound by a biological imperative that forever keeps us returning to the soil, plants, animals, and running waters for replenishment. Eating is life. Each time we eat, the soul continues its earthly journey. With every morsel of food swallowed a voice says, “I choose life. I choose to eat, for I yearn for something more.” — Marc David

Ice-breaker round robin: What’s your favorite food?

Go over the Covenant and get agreement on it, especially on confidentiality policy.

Ask everyone, and then remind at the end, to bring a picture of food that has special meaning for them, and we will share one or two of these at each session.

Gratitude: (would everyone please read one)

- ... that we have enough; that we do not experience hunger
- ... that we have choices available of what to eat
- ... that we have a variety of preparation methods
- ... that we have access to clean water with which to cook
- ... that we have adequate vision and manual dexterity for prep and eating
- ... that we have the ability to chew our food
- ... that we have the ability to swallow

Can you think of any more? (How about the ability to smell and taste)

Some history:

People in medieval England still starved to death. With paltry harvests people would eat anything—herbs, grass, drawk and darnel (forms of weed), vetches, acorns and even bark—in their efforts to stay alive. This was after every dog, cat, horse and even rat had been eaten. There may have been fish and fruit in the summer months, but all food production was local. A number of your favorite foods were not yet available. There were no carrots, potatoes or tomatoes as these would come from lands yet to be discovered. There were no turkeys; meats include swan, goose, beef, ham or bacon. Rice was imported only in small amounts, and pasta had yet to make an appearance.

Consider yourself lucky not to be stuck in a house in which the bacon has gone rancid, the flour has been eaten by rats, and the peas have become damp and rotten.

The Great Depression in this country lasted from October of 1929 to 1933, and it took 8 more years to return to normal. At the peak of unemployment (1933) 25% of the work force was out of work. There was no federal program to offer relief. Although few people died from starvation, many did not have enough to eat. People even searched garbage dumps for food or ate weeds. Many families coped by planting gardens, canning food, buying old bread; many did without milk or meat. Meals often consisted of potato pancakes or French fries because potatoes were cheap and filling. In the cities there were breadlines and soup kitchens. In New York City the mayor started hiring jobless Veterans and men with dependents as apple vendors. Apples were brought from Washington State growers directly at the produce terminal and sold for 5 cents each. Some 11,000 apples were sold the first day, November 24, 1930, by 150 vendors, multiplying eventually to 700. After hunger marches in large cities including Salem, Oregon, churches and department stores donated money and food baskets. For children who came of age during the Depression invisible scars remain. Now in their late 80s, these people are mindful that things can change quickly, without warning. They learned not to waste food and to be grateful for today's abundance.

Does anyone here have stories from people in their families who lived through the Great Depression?

During WWII most of the population of Europe and Russia felt hunger at some time. Here are some facts about my own country, England: Food rationing went into effect in January of 1940. Foods not rationed were still hard to get and expensive. Butter - 4 oz. per person per week; sugar 12 oz.; bacon and ham 4 oz. By March meat was added, followed by jam, marmalade, treacle, tea, cheese, cooking fats. Milk and egg rations fluctuated according to season. By July of 1942 candies and chocolate were added, and this lasted until 1954. Everyone over 6 months was allowed 8 oz. of chocolate a month. Children were given milk, orange juice and cod liver oil and a delicious thick syrup containing vitamins. You could only buy imported fruit such as oranges, coconuts and bananas if you had a children's ration book. Bananas were so special that they were very thinly sliced and put into sandwiches. The luckiest of all were people with gardens. We grew potatoes, peas, beans, carrots, onions and tomatoes, lettuce; we also kept 4 chickens. Our most popular meat was rabbit; some people ate horse meat. Canned beef came by ship from Argentina but was not tasty—too fatty. Street scenes in post-war Britain would have been familiar to citizens of Russia with long lines of housewives, although I remember fish as being plentiful and cheap. Nobody starved, but we were all thin.

Has anyone here experienced hunger or "food insecurity" as it is called today? What about food are you grateful for?

Check Out: What did you get from today's session? Likes and wishes.

Ending Reading: "Garden Meditation" by Rev. Max Coots

Let us give thanks for a bounty of people.
For children who are our second planting, and though they grow like weeds and the wind too soon blows them away, may they forgive us our cultivation and fondly remember where their roots are.

Let us give thanks
For generous friends...with hearts...and smiles as bright as their blossoms; For feisty friends, as tart as apples;
For continuous friends who, like scallions and cucumbers, last and last.

For crotchety friends, sour as rhubarb and as indestructible;
For handsome friends who are as gorgeous as eggplants and as elegant as a row of corn, and the others as plain as potatoes And so good for you.

For funny friends who are as silly as Brussels sprouts And
as amusing as Jerusalem artichokes.

And serious friends as unpretentious as cabbages, as subtle as summer squash, as persistent as parsley, as delightful as dill, as endless as zucchini and who, like parsnips, can be counted on to see you through the winter.

For old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening time and young friends coming on as fast as radishes;

For loving friends who wind around us like tendrils and hold us
Despite our blights, wilts and witherings.

And, finally, for those friends now gone, like gardens past that have been harvested but who fed us in their times that we might have life thereafter.

For all these we give thanks.

Closing Reading :

"Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared." The Buddha.

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The Spirituality of Food Session II-- Sharing Food as a Spiritual Practice
UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR, Jennifer Houston

Suggested food: Arrange a large platter with a variety of greens to accompany the opening poem. Each person takes an item.

Opening Reading and chalice lighting:

When I begin to bless this food
And close my eyes I lose myself
First just in green: How
Do leaves grow themselves this
Green and how do they
Grow at all to be so large and how do they
Make themselves from
Soil which in itself is only brown and
Sunlight helps and water, but /
How is the end of this, green? How Can I
bless this food? It blesses me.

Thank you I say, for this bowl which also is field, this green which is meal before I eat. Thank you, I say,
That this green become *me*..
Thank you for mysteries, this life.

“Field at Table” by Nancy Shaffer from Instructions in Joy

Check-in: Pictures of food that have special meaning to us

Topic: This evening we will talk about sharing our meals ... with family (inviting youngsters, friends of your kids; remember parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins)

... with friends (celebrations, birthdays growing up; in times of illness or stress

... what if you have no one to share with? What impact does this have on your enjoyment of food?

... Holiday mealtimes, good and bad; setting limits for round-the-table behavior

... Peace at the dinner space - did your mealtimes ever have grace? Questions for reflection and discussion.

Check Out: What did you get from today’s session? Likes and wishes.

Closing:

“When was the last time, if ever, you saw anyone at McDonald’s offer an expression of thanks (a prayer, a song, a dance) for his or her food?” asks Stephen Hyde in an article in The Sun entitled “Great Man Going.”

Billions of burgers consumed yet not a solitary act of gratitude, individual or corporate, no festival to honor the bovine being in myth and art and imagination, or to celebrate the annual resurrection of the potato. How can this be? What kind of monstrous indifference to the taking of life does this suggest? What kind of heinous disrespect for the life that sustains human life? What is the real price we pay for the convenience of fast and plentiful food? Apathy, neglect, isolation? Or is it something deeper, the loss of relationship, of wholeness, of soul?

Once, the rituals of gratitude informed nearly every aspect of human life. Most of these we have abandoned or forgotten. Now, try to imagine this: for every one of those burgers sold, a song raised, a life recalled, a measure of grace restored.”

Mary Jane Ryan, Editor, A Grateful Heart, Berkeley, California

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The Spirituality of Food Session III – Nourishment as a Cooperative Practice

UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR, Jennifer Houston

Suggested food: Baked pumpkin pudding (Recipe from *The Victory Garden Cookbook* –at end.)

Chalice lighting

Opening Reading:

I once heard a story about a visit to heaven and hell. In both places the visitor saw many people seated at a table on which many delicious foods were laid out. In both places chopsticks over a meter long were tied to their right hands, while their left hands were tied to their chairs.

In hell, however much they stretched out their arms, the chopsticks were too long for them to get food into their mouths. They grew impatient and got their hands and chopsticks tangled with one another's. The delicacies were scattered here and there.

In heaven, on the other hand, people happily used the long chopsticks to pick out someone else's favorite food and feed it to him, and in turn they were being fed by others. They all enjoyed their meal in harmony.

Shundo Aoyama

Check-in: Please help yourselves to baked pumpkin pudding.
Any thoughts on last week's session?

Topic: Tonight we are going to feature nourishment as a cooperative practice and share our thoughts on this week's Thanksgiving meal.

How many of us have grown our own food? Was it a positive experience? Was there a spiritual aspect to it? Did you harvest more than your immediate family could use? If so, how did you divide the remainder?

When you select foods from the grocery store or farmers' markets, how often do you pay attention to how far that food has traveled? Do we thank the farmers, the truckers, the people who stock the shelves? Who can remember food production strikes and/or shortages? How did they make you feel? How blessed we are to live in a state with such a strong agricultural economy! How can we develop a perspective about the food on our plate that includes all of these elements? What difference would this make for you?

Let's share some thoughts on the upcoming **Thanksgiving Meal**. Has anyone ever helped to serve the Thanksgiving meal in a mission or homeless shelter?

If the Thanksgiving Meal is not a pleasant experience for you, can you imagine the Thanksgiving Day you wish you could have?

Thanksgiving Proclamation Plymouth Colony 1623

Inasmuch as the great Father has given us this year an abundant harvest of Indian com, wheat, beans, squashes, and garden vegetables, and has made the forests to abound with game and the sea with fish and clams, and inasmuch as He...has spared us from pestilence and disease, has granted us freedom to worship God according to the dictates of our own conscience; now, I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and little ones, do gather in ye meeting house, on ye hill, between the hours of 9 and 12 in the day time, on Thursday, November 29th of the year of our Lord one thousand six hundred and twenty-three, and the third year since ye Pilgrims landed on ye Pilgrim Rock, there to listen to ye pastor, and render thanksgiving to ye Almighty God for all His blessings.

William Bradford, Governor of Plymouth Colony
Thanksgiving Proclamation, 1623

Check Out: What did you get from today's session? Likes and wishes.

Closing Reading:

The food which we are about to eat
Is Earth, Water, and Sun, compounded through the
Alchemy of many plants.

Therefore Earth, Water and Sun will become part of us.
This food is also the fruit of the labor of many beings and creatures. We are grateful for it.
May it give us strength, health, joy,
And may it increase our love.

Lynn's Bread Pudding Baked in a Pumpkin Shell (Serves 8-10)

To the Pilgrims, "pumpkin pie" meant a custard cooked right in the pumpkin shell. What a good idea! I serve it with whipped cream, fruit, or a brandy sauce.

- 4–5-lb short, wide sugar pumpkin
- 2 Tb melted butter 1/3 cup plus 2 Tb sugar
- 2 cups milk
- 1/4 cup butter
- 2 cups stale bread in 1/4 y2-inch cubes, crusts on (3-4 slices)
- 3 eggs
- 2/3 cup raisins
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp nutmeg

Clean out pumpkin, making a lid. Brush the inside with melted butter and sprinkle with 2 tablespoons sugar. Put lid back on, place in a baking pan, and bake in a preheated 350° oven for 20 minutes.

Make the bread pudding: scald the milk; add 1/4 cup butter and 1/3 cup sugar. When the butter melts, pour the mixture over the bread cubes. Let stand for 5 minutes. Beat eggs; mix in raisins, salt, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Combine with bread, and fill the warm pumpkin. Return to oven, uncovered. Bake for 1 1/2-1 3/4 hours or until the custard is set. The custard will puff up above the opening, but will sink down as it sets. Let stand for at least 10 minutes before serving. Slice into wedges, like a big wedge of pie or cake.

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The Spirituality of Food Session IV - Being Present in "The Practice"
UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR, Jennifer Houston

Suggested food: Home-baked cookies and hot cider

Chalice lighting

Opening Reading :

A novice monk approached the teacher and said, "Please teach me Buddhism."

The teacher asked, "Have you eaten?"

The novice replied, "Yes."

The teacher said, "Then wash the dishes."

This is a famous dialogue.

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After eating, it is only natural to wash the dishes and clean up. This way of naturalness is the Buddhist life. When help is needed, go and help naturally, without any sense of obligation or duty.

Giver and given are forgotten. Clouds appear in the sky according to causes and conditions, and then move on as they should. Water flows from high to low. Man is part of nature. Why do we not live naturally?

When our ego appears, there is so much artificiality. Yes, life is something hard, sometimes hard, very hard. But life must be lived. Things cannot be escaped. We get sick, we become helpless. But that is life. Face reality squarely, don't be defeated, don't be arrogant. When it is hard, endure. Help others and be helped. This is a natural way.

And when we do things, however small, do them too percent. We do not make mistakes in the big things of life. We make mistakes in the little things. Life, after all, is the little things put together. So each day should be done too percent.

A Buddhist life is a life of no regret. To wash your dishes after you've eaten is such a common and natural thing. Buddhism is not something special. Live like the wind, live like the water that flows. Do everything sincerely and completely. Your life will become perfect. Perfect without any comparison. For there is no general criterion, as such.

Each one lives his own true life. This is what the teacher meant when he said, "After eating, wash your dishes."

Check-in Please help yourselves to hot cider and pumpkin cookies
Any thoughts on this year's Thanksgiving Meal?

Topic

What does being in the practice mean to you?

As some of you know, I make cookies every week on Thursdays during the time that the men's group does outside work on the church grounds. When I'm mixing in the softened butter and the beaten eggs or cutting ginger into small pieces, I am thinking of

the good work that these men do and how much they enjoy their 10:30 snack of warm cookies.

On Sundays when the choir sings, I like to make little English-style sandwiches for them to eat between services. I usually do this about 10 o'clock on Saturday evenings, and it is a very spiritual time for me. I think of the choir members' faces as I'm assembling the bread and fillings, and how much I will enjoy their singing on Sunday.

Close your eyes and imagine what it feels like to be taken care of, to be nourished by someone else, to be served and loved by that person. Now open your eyes and look at the tray in front of you. This is the kind of tray that my friend made up each day for his terminally ill wife.

Ask if there are any special foods the sick person would like that day. Pay attention to brands. Do not take shortcuts. Use special plates, favorite colors, anything that helps the ill person take in nourishment.

On the recent Thanksgiving holiday did any family members bring out the "best" china? Does it feel any different to eat from well-loved plates? Could you carry this into your life more often? Even if you eat alone, you could choose one of these plates for their beauty.

How is this like "washing the dishes" story?

Sometimes our intention is all we have. It walks us through periods of doubt, of frustration, of boredom, of bleakness when nothing nourishes us, and it protects our longing for truth so that we don't give up.

Here is a way for you to explore intention: Think about your morning. Morning sets the mood for the entire day. The quality of the morning is sensitive to minor disruptions because of time commitments. If someone wakes up late or forgets to buy bread the day before, or spills something at the table, then we feel the impact at this fragile hour, and this can affect how we go through the day. Before you go to bed, clear the table and set it for breakfast. This could mean table mats, spoons, cups, or a flower in a vase. Do this slowly, deliberately, consciously. You are setting the morning with your intention. Setting the table is a hearth ritual, and there are no rules. It's a sacred time even if it is just for one person. I'd like each of you to do this for at least 3 mornings before we meet again, and we will share how we felt about doing it.

Check Out: What did you get from today's session? Likes and wishes.

Closing Reading

As you eat, know that you are feeding more than just a body. You are feeding the soul's longing for life, its timeless desire to learn the lessons of earthly existence—love and hate, pleasure and pain, fear and faith, illusion and truth—through the vehicle of food. Ultimately, the most important aspect of nutrition is not what to eat but how our relationship to food can teach us who we are and how we can sustain ourselves at the deepest level of being. Marc David

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**The Spirituality of Food Session V – Food Rituals Around the World:
Cultural Aspects of Food**

UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR, Jennifer Houston

Chalice lighting

Opening Reading:

Honey, pepper, leaf-green limes Pagan fruits
whose names are rhymes Mangoes, breadfruit,
ginger-roots,
Granadillas, bamboo-shoots,
Cho-cho, akees, tangerines,
Lemons, purple Congo-beans,
Sugar, okras, kola-nuts,
Citrons, hairy coconuts,
Fish tobacco, native hats,
Gold bananas, woven mats,
Plantains, wild-thyme, pallid leeks,
Pigeons with their scarlet beaks,
Oranges and saffron yams,
Baskets, ruby guava jams,
Turtles, goat-skins, cinnamon,
Allspice, conch-shells, golden rum,
Black skins, babel—and the sun That bums all
colors into one.

Agnes Maxwell-Hall

Check In

Topic: When I think of foods from around the world, the subject is bitter-sweet; the pleasure of foods so different in taste than my Northern European upbringing, and the pain of realizing that so much of the world's population is still hungry.

This book, *Hungry Planet*, looks at both these topics. As I pass it around, please look at the pages marked by blue tabs that illustrate 3 different groups. For those on the bottom rung of the ladder their intake is often the same food eaten once or twice a day. It may have come from a sack stamped "Product of USA." The terrifying reality for these people is the possibility of food aid being suddenly withdrawn.

For the people in the second group (think rural China, Cuba, Greenland, or a Hindu family in India) there is variety but generally more grains and vegetables than there is meat or fish. In countries such as Cuba food is rationed by the government.

For the rest of the fortunate population variety is the name of the game: think USA, Australia, Germany.

As you reflect on world hunger, how do you view and cope with this global problem? How does it affect your spirit or your spirituality?

What is a dish unique to your family of origin, and how does it enter your life now? Do you remember grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles preparing dishes from their country of origin? Will you be passing these dishes on to your children? Are there any of these foods that you now find not to your liking?

Share the most exotic food you've ever eaten.

Share the most unusual food experience you've ever witnessed. How well traveled are we as a group?

How do the people in other countries demonstrate their spirituality with their food customs? As you look through this book you will notice that several cultures share their mealtimes with family and even extended family. In other parts of the world men and women eat separately. Can you imagine how that would feel? Several groups are photographed sitting on the floor, scooping up portions with their hand.

Are there any spiritual practices we would like to incorporate into our personal food practices? In shopping, preparation or with eating? Was the saying of a grace before eating ever a part of your family when you were young?

Let's discuss what we'd like to do for our last session. Should we consider having a potluck here? Or should we consider going to an ethnic restaurant? If so, can we all agree on the same kind of food and the same restaurant?

Check Out: What did you get from today's session? Likes and wishes.

Closing Reading

It was Ramadan, and it was cold. The streets were crowded with people anxiously waiting for the evening call to prayer, so they could break their fast. At the first sounds of "Allah akbar" from the neighborhood mosque, children immediately scrambled home, labourers came in from the fields, and the women prepared the repast. The first course was hrira, a delicious hardy soup, and khubz ('chubs' of bread) accompanied by olive oil, jam and butter. Everyone got a hard-boiled egg, which holds great symbolism in Moroccan culture. Families celebrating births frequently gave me hard-boiled eggs, which are believed to symbolize fertility.

..As everyone slurped their hrira, the women were already busy preparing for the next meal, lamb tajine, for 10 PM (to be served at 4:30 AM to eat before dawn). From *Lonely Planet's World Food Morocco*

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The Spirituality of Food Session VI - Food, the Senses and the Spirit
UU Community Church of Washington County, Hillsboro, OR, Jennifer Houston

Suggested foods: Foods mentioned in the topic in bowls on a large tray, decorated with a flower in a bud vase, a photograph, a smooth stone to hold.

Chalice lighting

Opening Reading:

Were I to teach a course on God
I would begin with a plate of persimmons—
The sweet, crisp kind, the ones more
Orange than red, the hard squat Fuyus
I eat each November morning on hot
Wheat cereal with almonds.

I would slice the persimmons gently
Across their fat centers, then hold them
Out. See *the star shape*? I would
Offer them, so all might wonder.

I would slice brown Bose pears
Straight down their middles,
So the threads of each stem
Trace wispily down to that rounded
Place where dark seeds lie, tear-shaped
And wet in white, firm flesh.
I would hold these halves silently forward, their bottoms smooth
In the curves of my palms.

I would teach God with plates of pomegranates,
Both before they were opened and after.
I would bring wet washcloths.
We would bury our faces and eat:
All that luminescent purple-red,
Those clear-bright kernels fitted in tight rows
On small and tumbling hills—
And all that juice, so easily broken, sweet
And puckery at once. We would say nothing.

I would teach this way:
With plates of fruit, a knife:
Many washcloths. With my eyes Very large,
my mouth mostly silent,
So all might eat.

“Were I To Teach a Course on God” by Shaffer from
Instructions on Joy

Check-in: Any thoughts on the last session on foods around the world?

Topic: Tonight we are going to focus on sensuality and its relationship to spirituality of food.

- Show a picture of food that you would describe as visually beautiful.
- Let's explore touching various kinds of food on the tray that will be passed around. What foods do you not like to touch?
- There are some herbs and spices to pass round for you to smell. What foods do you not like to smell?
- There are samples of chocolate to taste. Is there anyone who does not like chocolate? What foods are sexy?
- Crispy-crunchy foods: Why do we all like crispy fried chicken or Japanese tempura, crispy deep-fried fish, bacon, potato chips, Rice Crispies?

How does using your senses help you to be more present in the practice?

Check Out: What did you get from today's session? Likes and wishes.

Closing Reading (Jenny)

I who am blind can give one hint to those who see: Use your eyes as if tomorrow you would be stricken blind.... Hear the music of voices, the song of a bird, the mighty strains of an orchestra, as if you would be stricken deaf tomorrow. Touch each object you want to touch as if tomorrow your tactile sense would fail. Smell the perfume of flowers, taste with relish each morsel, as if tomorrow you could never smell and taste again.

Helen Keller (1880 - 1968)