

I welcome this opportunity to speak to you today on my favorite topic . . . food. I know many of you from the café, but it's great to be able to think and talk about the foods we serve in the café and how it is that I came to be serving up just those foods instead of, say . . . operating a fast food franchise. Far from fast food, I support the “Slow Food Movement,” otherwise known as “food with meaning.”

Recently I read Michael Pollan's books, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* and *In Defense of Food*. In many ways, Pollan's story reminded me of my own, except that my story stretches out over more than 60 years, and his was compacted into less than one year. I guess I'm a slow learner! The specific comparison between our stories, though, is the way he is his own best subject. Similarly, I have used myself as the subject of conscious experimentation, at least for the last 40 years.

My story begins in 1953. I'm sitting in front of a very small TV in a front room of my Medford, Massachusetts home watching . . . mmm . . . must have been either Howdy Doody or Pinky Lee. They were both favorites of mine at the time. While I don't remember for sure what the TV show was, I do remember perfectly the mouth-watering snack I was munching – a fluffer-nutter, peanut-butter and Marshmallow Fluff on Wonder Bread, which was helping to build strong bones for me 12 ways. I remember that miraculous sandwich almost as vividly as my first coke, the one I had when I walked to the corner with a friend with one nickel in my fist. I remember the shape and feel of the little glass bottle. I was startled and delighted by the ice cold burning tingle in my mouth on that hot summer day. I earned my cooking badge in Brownies when I made a delectable Spam loaf with pineapple on top for my family's dinner one evening (I just noticed that they still sell Spam – now in big cans and with “less sodium” -- at Costco. I

grew up in a time when a coke was a rare treat and when we were innocent with regard to sugar and fat and processed foods, which was not yet the industry it is today.

In my home, we sat down every night to dinner together, and no meal was complete without dessert, surely one of the major food groups. My siblings and I all remember when we would protest the large servings of ice cream (as we got older and wanted to keep an eye on our weight). My Arkansas-born Dad would always say . . . “don’t worry; it’s ‘holla’”.

In contrast to my Dad, who didn’t worry all that much about weight – his or ours - - my mother was a fashion model in Boston and New York City. If you have ever heard stories of the weight culture surrounding professional ballerinas, you will have some sense of how that fact complicated things. Regardless of height or bone structure, models had to fit into certain clothing, usually a size 4 or 5. Weight-consciousness was omnipresent in our household – and yet we were sugar-lovers.

Loving sugar and being so weight conscious creates an impossible bind, as I’m sure you can imagine. Eating the sugary treats means cutting back on other more nutritious calories in order to maintain an optimal weight. If you like sweets and don’t understand the chemistry of that craving – and yet are weight conscious – you will be constantly undernourished, hungry and craving more food that doesn’t satisfy. As a result, as a teen – like many other teenage girls -- I found myself struggling needlessly with weight. I was often depressed and often constipated and didn’t have a clue how it all might be linked to what I ate.

Now fast-forward a few years to college in the late sixties. Always a fussy meat-eater (I wouldn’t touch meat that had the least bit of pink in it or any fat), I decided to go

vegetarian. This was my Phase I Vegetarianism. It was based on a negative premise, “I do not eat meat.” I went at it like most novice vegetarians, passionately but with little knowledge of nutrition other than the vague thought that I needed to be certain I got enough protein – and so I ate lots of cheese along with my green beans. This diet was not sustainable, although I didn’t yet understand why.

In the late 60s, my Arkansas grandmother, to whom I was very close, died of colon cancer at the relatively young age of 62, the age I am now. It was an event that moved me deeply, and I believe that I searched for a way to understand. Diet was one explanation that at the time did not yet occur to me as a contributing factor.

During my next food phase, though, as I read and learned about nutrition, in particular the importance of fiber in the diet, I became more and more convinced that my grandmother’s colon cancer was not unrelated to her typical southern diet. We loved those fluffy white rolls that I used to call “JC Higgins Pull-apart Rolls” and southern fried chicken and batter dipped fries and smoked hams. My grandmother and I would treat ourselves to a black cow every evening when we were together. Since we weren’t making the ice cream ourselves, I’m sure it was as processed and full of additives as any ice cream today.

In 1971, I became pregnant with my first son. Like many young mothers-to-be who aspire to being the best possible mom, I started reading in earnest about food and nutrition. I read everything I could find. Those were the days of Adelle Davis and Euell Gibbons. I learned of the importance of whole grains and made a pact with myself to eat only whole grains, a practice I follow to this day. I devoured (interesting choice of verb) Frances Moore Lappe’s *Diet for a Small Planet*. From her, I picked up not only practical

information about food combining for complete proteins as a vegetarian but a social consciousness. She made me aware of the amount of resources that are used to produce meat for human consumption and how those same resources, used differently, could easily eradicate hunger in the world.

I was part and parcel of the movement “back to the land” and to more natural ways of living that Michael Pollan highlights in *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, which he dates to the 1973 events in People’s Park in San Francisco, when a group of “hippies” started to dig up the turf in a public park and plant vegetable gardens. We bought a farm in Galena, and I planted a large garden and orchard, which I tended organically. I knew little about either farming or organic procedures, but I read *Organic Gardening* avidly and tested out its theories in my little world. Some worked – and some didn’t. I wanted my children to experience where things came from, so they tilled the soil with me, hunted for wild mushrooms and wild raspberries, and harvested, canned, froze and cooked.

Although I was no longer a vegetarian, I was committed to real food and to having a hand in every stage of food production, from seed to table. I decided that if my family was going to eat primarily what we ourselves produced, meat in plastic wrap from the grocery store didn’t fit with that picture. Now I found myself directly confronting the Great Paradox of Life and Death. Believing that I should not eat meat unless I could slaughter it myself, I briefly considered killing my own cow. Michael Pollan has more courage than I – I knew it would never happen. Instead, I purchased a whole cow and shared it with friends, thinking it was probably at least less wasteful and possibly a more personal approach to the issue of getting meat. In the end, I found that obtaining meat for

my family in this way was merely more convenient. It was not a significant contribution to having a direct connection with the life I was taking.

This period of my life generated my Phase II Vegetarianism. It would be years yet before Food Inc. would be made, but there was enough written about animal slaughterhouses that a person with imagination, and I was one, could become disgusted with the thought of eating animals and disturbed by the image of mass killings. The knowledge that I could not take the responsibility of confronting the death of an animal straightforwardly and yet would eat the disembodied portions either from plastic and Styrofoam packages from the store or brown paper packages from the cow in my freezer continued to nag me. Shortly after the cow in the freezer venture, therefore, I became vegetarian for the second time. This time my vegetarianism was largely motivated by the disgust factor. This, too, was unsustainable in the long run. The disgust wears off, and there are many ways to shield ourselves from the reality of The Paradox.

What I did keep from this period, though, was my commitment to natural food, food that was processed as little as possible – and to whole grains. I had become an avid label reader and remain so to this day. When I don't make my own food, I choose cans or packages with few ingredients and none that I don't recognize as real food.

My next remake of my life with food was when I started to observe the dietary laws of Judaism, that is, when my kitchen became kosher. For those of you who may not be familiar with these dietary regulations, they revolve around four basic principles, drawn from the biblical text and elaborated upon by the rabbis and centuries of tradition: 1) only prescribed animals can be eaten, and the lists are set out in the biblical text; 2) the animal cannot have “died in the field” and must be slaughtered according to certain

principles; 3) the blood cannot be consumed with the meat (the life is in the blood); and 4) milk and meat, broadly defined, are not mixed.

It seems clear to me that the laws of kashrut are one way of dealing with the Great Paradox, that is, with the intersection between life and death and our implication in causing the death of other creatures to sustain our own lives. Carrots are not circumscribed with elaborate rules – just meat. Although the original order of creation did not include meat-eating (in the Garden), after the flood, meat-eating is permitted – but it is surrounded with rules, and the rules are elaborated as time moves forward.

The rules are in place not to generate guilt over meat eating or to suggest that it is not ok but to allow us to eat meat while straightforwardly facing the reality of what we are doing. It provides a way to manage our responsibility for taking a life. A blessing before and after eating is yet another way of raising consciousness about the source of our food and of our own responsibility for both taking life and contributing to life.

I became vegetarian a third time in the late 90s when I was invited to teach a class on vegetarianism at a weekend retreat. I had a chance to explore some texts more deeply as I prepared for the session and then to live out the meaning of the texts in the framework of a weekend devoted to wilderness training and Judaism. I am still vegetarian today, 15 years later. This time I believe it is finally sustainable – and expandable. My Phase III vegetarianism is inspired by joy and meaning.

I can best describe what I mean by this by telling you about a weekend I spent camping a number of years ago. I liked taking my two dogs and heading out for weekend camping trips on a regular basis. It was always a rush to get to my campsite on Friday early enough that I could set up my campsite and prepare my Sabbath meals. We are

required to enjoy three meals on Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath, all to be prepared before the Sabbath begins since no cooking is allowed during those 25 hours. I don't know why I remember this particular weekend, but I had my two beagles, and I had prepared a particularly delicious vegetarian Shabbat dinner for myself. Everything was ready, and I lit my candles just before sundown and said the blessings. There was something about that vegetarian feast in that moment and place on a warm evening with a beautiful sunset over the Mississippi and my two dogs by my side – that felt harmonious and complete. It was a rich moment, and it was one of the most joyful meals I have ever eaten. I felt fulfilled, I felt like “all was right with the world” – and I felt as though I was part of a harmonious whole. This is what I was seeking through all those years of experimentation and searching and obsessing . . . the ability to be alive with full consciousness, to eat delicious food with joy and to feel that I was living in harmony with creation. For me, this was the ultimate Slow Food experience – a meal with meaning.

When I first read the publicity for this event . . . “the foods we love to hate,” I thought to myself, “Oh no, I LOVE food, I love to grow it, to admire and handle it in the produce section of the grocery store, to prepare it (I'm a very hands-on cook), to serve it up, to watch people enjoy it – and I LOVE to eat. Then I started to think about that phrase . . . “love to hate...” in a little different way. Maybe it points to our obsession with food, and I believe we are obsessed. I certainly am. I think the argument could be made that food is a driving force of civilization, it is an integral part of every culture in every time, it is the foundation of religion and is at the center of religious expression – communion, Sabbath meals, Seder (the Passover feast), fast days, tea ceremonies, monks with their begging bowls, sacrificial systems.

And yet . . . there is a difference between the food obsession of the centuries that preceded us and our food obsession today. Michael Pollan also suggests this. And I think it is in that difference that we can discover the main problem in our American diet, which is, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “food that does not satisfy.” Our alienation from real food at every point in the process from seed to table, points to the need for “remedial” groups like the Slow Food Movement.

I discovered something a number of years ago when I was working on my Masters thesis. I am interested in religious ritual. When I observed the religions with which I am familiar, it seemed to me that they all include rituals that involve food – or the absence of it (fasting). In other words, food is manipulated in a variety of ways to shape spirituality. I wondered why. I began my exploration of this question with a closer examination of biblical religion. Initially I set out to study “meals in the Bible”. I soon found the topic was much too vast – an indication of the Israelite obsession with food. I quickly limited my study to meals in Genesis – and here is what I found.

First of all, I discovered that one of the most frequently used roots in the text of Genesis refers to eating. Second, I discovered that virtually all of the major story cycles in Genesis revolve around meals. The stories literally “turn” on meals, and here is how: all the major story cycles in Genesis are built on the structure of a narrative chiasm. What is that? Simply put, a chiasm is a repetition of similar ideas in the reverse sequence – that is, ABC \* CBA. Here is another more fanciful description I found – based on food imagery. “A chiasm organizes themes much like a sandwich: A) a piece of bread on top, B) mustard, C) a piece of meat, C') another piece of meat, B') more mustard, and finally A') another piece of bread on the bottom. Chiasms generally focus on the meat, but the bread and

mustard are necessary for a complete sandwich. Some chiasms do not have a mustard layer, other chiasms have lettuce on both sides of the meat, and some have just one piece of meat.”

In my experience as I read the biblical text, there will be a central element, a non-repeating element, in the story – that is, ABC – D – CBA. One piece of meat, or perhaps, for the benefit of us vegetarians, one piece of cheese. One of my favorite examples is the Joseph story. This is a story that is based altogether on food – and the absence of food. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, ultimately ending up in Egypt. There is a drought in the Land of Israel, and food is scarce. Joseph’s brothers are sent to obtain food in Egypt, where the family is reunited and all find redemption. A diagram of the story will make the chiastic structure clear. As you can see, everything turns around a meal – a meal that Pharaoh hosts. Joseph has descended from most beloved son to a dungeon in Egypt – is called to the Pharaoh at this meal, the center of the chiasm – and begins his ascent from the dungeon to prominence.

The Abraham story is another example of a chiastic structure with a meal at the center – or actually two meals that bracket the single piece of cheese, Abraham’s “Argument with G-d”. My favorite example, though, is what I call “The Meal in the Garden.” That meal is the fruit which is eaten from the forbidden tree. This event lies smack dab at the narrative middle of the story as the tree is in the middle of the Garden. The entire narrative leads up to this moment and away from it. The Meal in the Garden not only defines the structure of the narrative but defines who we are as human beings, who G-d is and what the relationship is between G-d and human beings. The Meal in the Garden sets the stage for the unfolding of human history, a world in which people are like G-d in the sense that they can make choices, they are ethical beings – and unlike G-d in the sense that they cannot live forever. And it all stems from food and our obsession with food. “Every good thing to eat...” characterizes the Garden and yet the lure of that one item they were not to eat.

And so from the earliest time, we are food-obsessed beings. Perhaps it is because so much of our time historically speaking has been involved with finding and preparing food. Michael Pollan in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* points out that in former times, most of our time and resources each day were involved with obtaining food, preparing it and eating it. He compares this with the minimal time and resources we devote to these activities today (31 minutes on average including prep and clean-up and less than 10% of our budget). He suggests that the ease with which we get food today – and the speed with which we eat it – has something to do with what he perceives as our sickness related to food in the United States. For now, I just want to highlight that part of the reason for our obsession with food is that until very recently in history, most of our waking moments were engaged with food. It was inescapable.

I had another thought, though, as I studied, and that is that our need to eat puts in front of us the central paradox of our lives: that it requires taking life to sustain life. This simple fact of nature is a paradox only to human beings, not to our fellow animals who operate on instinct. We alone in the animal kingdom, at least according to the understanding of those who are the products of a Christian-Muslim-Jewish religious-cultural tradition, can choose to eat or not to eat, to kill or not to kill. As a result, we carry a moral burden that other animals do not . . . and hence religion, an effort to help us define and come to terms with the paradox of life and with our moral burden in that framework. Simply put, how much moral responsibility is each of us willing to carry – how much life are we willing to sacrifice – to sustain our own lives? There is a Gary Larsen cartoon with the caption, “Vegetarians returning home from the hunt,” and the picture shows a line of natives carrying a giant carrot overhead. That is a wonderfully humorous way to suggest that vegans, too, are responsible for taking life. We all are. The paradox is deep – and the responses to the paradox many and varied.

Joel Salatin, the owner of Polyface Farm, says: “It is a profound spiritual truth that you cannot have life without death. When you chomp down on a carrot and masticate it in your mouth, that carrot is being sacrificed in order for you to have life. Everything on the planet is eating and being eaten. If you don’t believe it, just lie naked in your flower bed for three days and see what gets eaten. That sacrifice is what feeds regeneration. In our very antiseptic culture today, people don’t have a visceral understanding of life and death.”

And so – as we avoid full consciousness of the sources of our food, as our opportunities to “have our hands in it” are limited, as we participate less and less in our own survival, as we exclude from our lives rituals which were once common and which allowed us to pause for a moment to be fully conscious -- our awareness shrinks and our hunger grows. We allow others to determine what we should eat and to disguise it in a variety of ways. Our bodies are desensitized and can no longer be trusted to alert us when we are eating the wrong things or too much.

Along the way I have learned many specifics of nutrition. The principles that have been most important to me are these:

- Real food
- Whole grains
- Food combinations for protein
- The glycemic index and regulating inflammatory processes
- Limit sugar
- Deep, rich colors

Michael Pollan sums up his experiment even more simply: Eat food. Not too much.  
Mostly plants.

The most important thing I have learned about eating, though, is not so much practical as it is spiritual. If we are to feel our best, we need to accept that food is of necessity an obsession for human beings – but this is part of nature, not a disease. As human beings, we have the capability to shape that obsession and use it as a tool for our spiritual growth and to maintain our health. We have just forgotten how to do that in our culture as we have come to rely on processed foods, fast foods and to disdain religion and spirituality.

A first step in restoring that knowledge of how food can be meaningful and what and how we eat can become a path to spirituality is to broaden our context. Nothing happens in isolation, including creating good health. Frances Moore Lappe’s book, *Diet for a Small Planet*, broadened the context of my meal to include a social consciousness. In *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Michael Pollan broadened the context of my meal to include the ecological system that surrounds it. Jewish tradition expands my context historically, making the Passover meal, for example, a celebration of freedom and every meal, in fact, part of a larger drama.

A second step is to become fully aware of the source of our food and to find a place among the many choices available to us that we, personally, can feel “right” and “comfortable.” Then we will relax and enjoy. Pollan proposes these rules:

- Do all your eating at a table.
- Don’t get your fuel from the same place your car does.
- Try not to eat alone.
- Consult your gut.
- Eat slowly.
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And I'd like to add – create context and meaning. Then we will eat and be satisfied, and the rest will follow. We will enjoy slow food . . . “food with meaning.”