Dinner Dilemmas – Ethical issues at the Thanksgiving dinner table
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Appearing in the Winter 2008 *UU World* and here unabridged with the permission of the *UU World* and Rev. Millspaugh. (The abridged version appearing in the *UU World* can be seen **here**.)

Introduction
Thanksgiving has long been America's most complicated, high-expectation meal. Setting the right kind of table this November will be even more challenging. We have long shopped based on quality, price, and tradition, but we are beginning to recognize that our food choices are ethical choices, too. They impact climate change, worker justice, and animal welfare, to name a few. Do our ethics affect which aisles of the grocery store we walk down this November? If so, how? Since the 2008 General Assembly chose "Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice" as a study/action issue, we decided to research the ethics three typical Thanksgiving options (turkey, mashed potatoes, and cranberries) and three areas of ethics (organics, buying local, and animal welfare). Our findings may not affect how you set your table. But what we discovered will surprise you, guaranteed.

Local vs. Global

1,022 miles Supermarket Potatoes

- Produce used to be seasonal. Now the freight industry makes it available year-round. Yum!
- Produce travels an average 1,506 miles from farm to market.
- Shipping pollutes the air and hastens global warming. **Points for addressing climate change: zero.**

73 miles Local Potatoes

- Food travels an average of 56 miles from farm to America's 4,000 urban and rural farmers' markets.
- Driving an average car just three miles to a farmers' market releases as much carbon dioxide as would shipping 17 pounds of potatoes halfway around the world.
- Buying local keeps money in your community—which is already wealthy by global standards. You might better address economic inequality by buying Mexican potatoes (see pg. X).
- Proportionally, local farmers can pour as many pesticides and chemicals into the ground, air, and water as Big Ag. **Points for addressing climate change: Few if any.**

.02 miles Garden Potatoes

- Backyard and rooftop gardens save money, reduce pollution, and spare packaging without skimping on taste.
- Supermarket potatoes are grown to withstand abuses of shipping and storage, but garden potatoes can be chosen for taste and texture.
- Gardens take time and effort, but nothing is more local than your own backyard. **Points for addressing climate change: 100.**

Animal Welfare

$2.69 /lb Butterball® Turkey

- A 12-pound Butterball® bird is $40 cheaper than an organic, free range bird.
- Your family will eat growth hormones & antibiotics in every slice.
- Butterball® birds are factory-farmed. **Points for animal welfare: zero.**

$6.05 /lb USDA Organic, Free Range Turkey

- More than twice the price, but better for both you and the environment.
- "USDA Organic" means pesticide-free & no antibiotics.
- The definition of "free range" is, well, free-ranging. **Points for animal welfare: unclear.** (See page X.)

$9.18 /lb Tofurky® Roast

- Costs 50% more per pound than organic, free-range turkey.
- Surprise: more protein & less fat per ounce than a Butterball® turkey breast.
- "But how does it *taste*?" One clue: Tofurky® Roast sales in 2007 surpassed 2006 by 37%. **Points for animal welfare: 100.**

Conventional vs. Organic

170 barrels/acre Conventional Cranberries

- Growers apply chemical fertilizers, fungicides, herbicides, & pesticides to double or triple natural yields.
- Not subject to the Clean Water Act, cranberry bogs discharge pollution to lakes, wetlands, and rivers at lethal levels. (see page X)
- Workers and neighbors are exposed to highly toxic chemicals. **Points for social responsibility/environmental sustainability: zero.**

50 barrels/acre Organic Cranberries

- Growers shun chemical fertilizers, fungicides, herbicides, and pesticides, making these cranberries better for workers, neighbors, and habitats downstream.
- The most typical organic fertilizer is fish remains, which may contain mercury and rely on overfishing.

- Like conventional counterparts, organic bogs require large amounts of water and often depend of fossil fuels. **Points for social responsibility/environmental sustainability: 90.**

100 barrels/acre Niche Organic Cranberries

- A few specialty producers like Oregon's "Coquille Cranberries" are "beyond organic."
- Coquille Cranberries runs equipment on biodiesel, preferentially hires historically oppressed members of the Coquille tribe, and supports marriage equality. (see page X)
- Coquille Cranberries' northwestern coastal location helps it outproduce other organic bogs, naturally. **Points for social justice and environmental sustainability: 100.**

Page 3, Section 1: "Don't Panic, It's Organic!"

Cranberries are an extraordinarily resource-intensive crop. Conventional cranberry farmers shower the plants with twenty-two types of pesticides, as well as fungicides, herbicides, and chemical fertilizers.[1] Cranberries also require massive amounts of water, so growers typically locate cranberry bogs on or near wetlands, or near a lake or river. Throughout the plants' life cycle, cranberry farmers irrigate and flood cranberry bog, then discharge the water back to its natural source. Cranberry bog discharges are not subject to the Clean Water Act of 1972. How polluted is the water leaving the bog? A 2000 study found that even with the best management practices, water downstream from a bog contained the dangerous insecticide diazinon at a level lethal to aquatic invertebrates.[2] The same year, another study of conventional cranberry bog discharges found elevated concentrations of lead, arsenic, and other toxic metals.[3] And a 2004 study suggests a slightly higher incidence of breast cancer for women who live near cranberry bogs that use aerially applied pesticides.[4]

Equal Exchange, the organization supplying fair trade coffee to many UU congregations, also supports organic cranberry farms. Wisconsin Equal Exchange cranberry farmer Dan Wandler switched from conventional to organic cranberries for one reason: money, since organic berries can fetch twice the price of conventional. But "that's changed for me now 180 degrees," Wandler says. "Before, after we sprayed the bog, you didn't hear a sound for two weeks. You knew you'd killed something… [now] I can farm without a space suit on. I can walk off the bog and hug my kids without taking my suit off and spraying myself down. I used to have to say to my kids, 'Don't touch me, I'm poisonous right now." Like many organic cranberry bogs, Wandler's now supports natural wetland denizens: spiders, bees, and migratory birds like sandhill cranes.[5]

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[1] Faith A. Fitzpatrick et al., US Geological Survey, Report 02-4225, Nutrient, Trace-Element, and Ecological History of Muskey Bay, LAC Courte Oreilles, Wisconsin as Inferred from Sediment Cores, Water-Resources Investigations 9 (2003)

[2] Paul Anderson & Dale Davis, Washington Department of Ecology, Evaluation of Efforts to Reduce Pesticide Contamination in Cranberry Bog Drainage, September 2000, available at http://www.ecy.wa.gov/pubs/0003041.pdf

[3] Marjorie Winkler & Patricia Sanford, Final Report: Environmental Changes in the Last Century in Little Trout Lake, Inkspot Bay, Great Corn and Little Corn Lakes, Lac du Flambeau Tribal Lands, Wisconsin 10 (2000) at 3-4, 9.

[4] http://www.ehponline.org/members/2004/6845/6845.html

[5] http://www.equalexchange.coop/sandhill-cranberries

While organic farms care for the environment and foster human health, they can still leave agricultural workers holding the short end of the stick. Many employ migrant workers at low wages.

But some specialty producers now push that envelope. Oregon's Coquille Cranberries, gives hiring preference to members and spouses of the Coquille tribe. General Manager Bill Snyder says, "We compensate our employees well, and they receive paid leave, a 401(k), and health, dental, life, and disability insurance. We try to not depend on fossil fuels, either. We own three Ford F250s that run on used cooking oil, so they smell like French fries." Tribal members are proud of their ten acres of cranberry bogs, which sit on tribal land next to the community health clinic. You can mail-order Coquille Cranberries for $1.50-$2.00 per pound, but only if you're fast—the cranberries sell out every year.[6]

Page 3, Section 2: "Is the Turkey Done?"

You can't beat the price of turkeys raised in intensive feeding operations, but factory-farmed meat comes with hidden costs to human health, the environment, the workers, and the birds. Consumers interested in more ethical alternatives now turn to organic and free range meats. But what do these labels really mean?

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulates the label "free range," but not according to the dictionary definition: "Of, relating to, or produced by animals, especially poultry, that range freely for food, rather than being confined in an enclosure." According to the USDA, to qualify for the free range label, "Producers must demonstrate to the Agency that the poultry has been allowed access to the outside." There must be a door, it must be open sometimes, and it must lead "outside"—perhaps to a narrow pen saturated with turkey droppings. With that door and turkey run in place, even producers confining thousands of birds in one shed can label the meat "free range."

"USDA Organic" is a more meaningful label… in some ways. These birds will be free of pesticides, unnatural growth hormones, antibiotics, and toxic heavy metals, and will have been raised on grains not fertilized with sewer sludge. Still, both organic and free range turkeys can be de-beaked, de-toed, transported and slaughtered in the same manner as their Butterball® counterparts. The Humane Slaughter Act does not apply to any of the nine billion turkeys or chickens we slaughter in this country each year.

So what meat to eat on November 27? Historians say that the first Thanksgiving feast may have included swans, eagles, venison, eels, and seals.[7] We know from experience that we don't need any of those traditional meats to celebrate Thanksgiving. Still, most Unitarian Universalists don't feel ready to let go of animal products, at least not cold turkey.

In the balancing act of setting our Thanksgiving tables this November, we may have more questions than answers. This Thanksgiving, few of us will find a solution that perfectly balances our ethical, ethnic, and aesthetic commitments. Perhaps we do our best menu planning when we welcome all of what we value about eating—taste, tradition, nutrition, animal welfare, and environmental stewardship—to places of honor at the table.

Page 3, Section 3: "Eating Local"

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[6] Author's phone call with William Snyder, September 26, 2008.

[7] "First Thanksgiving: The Pilgrims' Menu." In *The History of Thanksgiving*, History Channel. http://www.history.com/minisites/thanksgiving/viewPage?pageId=873

"Locavores" eat food grown no further than 100 "food miles" away. Locavores aim to reduce the environmental toll of food transportation, and to improve local communities' self-sufficiency, prosperity, and social health.

The environmental benefits of buying local food seem obvious. A British study found that a simple meal of chicken, potatoes, beans, carrots, and peas might have travelled a total of 24,364 "food miles" from producer to distributor. That's about the distance of the earth's circumference. A British locavore could have assembled a similar meal with ingredients travelling just two percent of that distance.[8]

But according to a 2008 Carnegie Mellon study, of all food-related greenhouse gas emissions, trips from producer to distributor account for just four percent. Richard Pirog, Iowa State University's Associate Director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, says "people resonate" with the food miles concept, but food miles were "never meant to be some proxy for environmental impact."

Freight trains and tractor trailers move food much more efficiently than personal automobiles, so in most cases combining several shopping trips into one big trip or biking instead of driving will make more of a difference to the environment than going out of our way to buy local food.

What about supporting local communities, local economies? After all, buying locally strengthens relationships among neighbors. The food may taste better, too, as local farmers can sell produce that does not ship well. And when it comes to farming practices, your neighbor is more likely to answer your questions than is a distant corporation.

Yet in their book *The Ethics of What We Eat*, fifth-generation Missouri farmer Jim Mason and ethicist Peter Singer write that "…ethically, we should put ourselves in the position of all those affected by our actions, no matter where they live. If [local farmers] need extra income to send their children to good colleges, and farmers in developing nations need extra income to … afford basic health care or a few years of elementary school for their children, we…do better to support the farmers in developing countries." Even, they show, when those impoverished farmers receive just two cents of every dollar you spent.

How do we balance the spiritual virtue of neighborliness with the ethical imperative to address economic inequality? It's a complex questions deserving a multifaceted response—the kind that might arise in our religious communities in the years ahead, if we break bread together and explore what it means to eat ethically.

[8] Andy Jones, *Eating Oil: Food Supply in a Changing Climate*, Sustain & Elm Farm Research Centre, London, 2001, Case Study 1. http://www.sustainweb.org/news.php?id=50