

Bringing Home the Bacon

Rev. Dr. Michael Tino

[Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester](#) – January 11, 2009

© 2009 MICHAEL JAMES TINO

Working to feed the hungry and obtain adequate food for poor people in our society has long been central to my own justice and service work.

When I was in high school, I spent many weekends volunteering with a group called Youth Service Opportunities Project. Based in the Friends Meeting House near Union Square in Manhattan, this program brought together high school and college youth from around the New York metro area for weekends of service to the homeless of New York City.

With other teenagers, I prepared sandwiches for distribution at Grand Central Station after dark, ran a Friday-night soup kitchen on the lower East Side, and volunteered at sites around the area, from the infamous welfare hotels of the time to cockroach-infested food distribution centers.

When I first joined a Unitarian Universalist congregation, some fifteen years ago in North Carolina, I found the congregation busy at work on issues related to food and hunger as well. Several of the ministries of that Fellowship had to do with food—from working the local food pantry to gleaning unmarketable sweet potatoes to fighting for justice for the millions of migrant farm laborers in the state.

The gleaning ministry was especially interesting to me. Through the Society of St. Andrew, volunteers are sent to farms where the harvest has already taken place in order to harvest the food left behind—food that was left in the fields because it was too damaged or blemished or ugly to be sold. (Society of Saint Andrew website)

Believe it or not, sweet potatoes can be too ugly to make it to your local store, and those deemed such are left in the fields to rot.

Luckily, there are many people willing to spend a day of hard labor to make sure that this produce makes it instead to food banks, homeless shelters and soup kitchens, where it provides real nutrition to people who need it desperately. In 2007, gleaning volunteers collected some 20 million pounds of food that otherwise would have gone to waste (Society of St. Andrew website)

Before Christmas, I volunteered with a number of people from this Fellowship at the Mount Kisco interfaith food pantry. We had responded to Jane Hewitt's request for extra help this holiday season. Together, we packed over a hundred bags full of food for the hungry people waiting in the cold outside.

We figured a hundred bags might do for the two days the pantry was open that week—it was significantly more than had been distributed last year. Our efforts would barely last the first day of the two, though, and some seventy more bags had to be packed the next day.

Among the things we placed in each bags were North Carolina-grown sweet potatoes. I noticed that they weren't the prettiest sweet potatoes I'd ever seen. I had a strong feeling I know where they came from.

Food issues in the New York metro area are no better than they were when I was in high school, either. While the homeless are no longer allowed to congregate in the warmth of Grand Central Station after midnight, people—including the youth of our Fellowship—are still involved in programs to feed and clothe homeless folks in New York. We didn't call the program "Midnight Run," but that's essentially what it was, and the number of people who use it continues to climb.

And with the economy hitting the skids, and the number of unemployed and underemployed increasing dramatically, the number of hungry people in our community is increasing as well. Food banks have been straining for years under the burden of providing nutritious food for communities across our country, and this strain is only getting worse.

"For the year 2006, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that 35.5 million Americans lived in households considered to be 'food insecure.' Of these people, 22.9 million were adults (10% of all adults) and 12.6 million were children (17% of all children.) Black and Hispanic households experienced 'food insecurity' at far higher rates than the national average: 22% and 20%, respectively." (UUA Study Guide)

In fact, 10.4% of New York households are labeled "food insecure," meaning that they do not have access to enough food for "an active, healthy life for all household members." (Bread for the World, USDA Food Security websites) Some 4% of New York households experience chronic hunger and malnutrition.

And the numbers on food insecurity and hunger are bound to rise when statistics for 2008 and 2009 come out. We cannot wait for the statistics to be logged in order to do something.

We must seek both short- and long-term solutions to issues of food insecurity in this country, and in this community. People must be able to eat now, and they must have access to adequate, nutritious food from now on.

You might be wondering, whether there aren't programs to help people who don't have enough food to eat? Programs like Food Stamps?

Yes, these programs exist, but they are woefully inadequate.

Consider the hypothetical “average” family on the US Department of Agriculture’s own website for the program formerly known as Food Stamps (now the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program). This family of four has \$1,500 a month in earned income--\$18,000 a year.

They get a little bit from Social Security because of this low income, an amount that pretty much goes right out the door for child care expenses. You can imagine what they must spend on rent to live in New York—actual housing expenses don’t count.

They don’t own a car—if they did, the value of that car over \$4650 would have been counted towards the \$2000 in total resources that families are allowed to own to be eligible for the program. Nor do they have any money in the bank. They’re living paycheck-to-paycheck..

Believe it or not, this family earns entirely too much to be eligible for the maximum Food Stamp benefit for a family of four, which would be \$588 a month (you would have to have a net income of zero to qualify for this stunning sum). The program is pro-rated based on income, so they get \$239 a month, which works out to a little under \$2 per day per person in their family. (USDA SNAP website)

The average food stamp benefit for those poor enough to be eligible for assistance until recently has been just about \$1 per person per meal. \$3 a day, \$21 a week. And last year’s Farm Bill didn’t raise the amounts by much. (Congressional Food Stamp Challenge website)

When was the last time you had a meal that cost only a dollar for all of the ingredients?

The Federal Food Stamp program is so inadequate that it has led many—including some members of Congress—to participate in what’s called the “Food Stamp Challenge,” in which people try to live on food costing only \$21 for a week.

Almost uniformly, the people who have tried this challenge have found it difficult at the very least; most have found it impossible to obtain adequate nutrition, even if they can manage adequate calorie intake. Sarah Barr, a reporter for the Sentinel newspaper in Maryland, ended her article reflecting upon her challenge with this:

“I’m pretty confident I’ll make it through the next three days. I still have, after all, half a dozen eggs, three apples, one yam, half a box of pasta, one quart of milk, six pieces of bread, six slices of cheese, half a bag of rice, four packs of instant noodles and half a jar of peanut butter.

“Like I said, I haven’t been extremely hungry, and while I know the diet isn’t nutritious it’s enough to keep me going. One more confession though.

“Saturday is my last day, and I plan to quit as soon as I scarf down an early dinner so that I can go out with my older brother for his birthday. I’m willing to bet drinks and dinner (take two) are in order. The conclusion of my week spent on a food stamp diet will be a celebration.

“Hardly a realistic end.” (Barr)

Food bank directors, like on that Barr interviewed, report that usage of their services increases dramatically after the middle of the month, when food stamp benefits begin to run out for many. (Barr)

For years, I have been interested in issues of hunger and food security. I have understood issues of food and hunger as an indelible part of my own justice work, even if they were not the center of it. It was, therefore, with great interest that I participated in the voting for a new four-year study-action topic at last year’s General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist congregations.

The winning choice was the one that got my vote—a proposal called “Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice.” From now until 2012, UU congregations across our nation will engage in reflection and action on this topic, and I knew it was one I would be very interested in.

I feared, however, that “ethical eating” meant merely trying to convince everyone to be vegetarians. While I have a lot of respect for that point of view (and while I spent eight years as a vegetarian for reasons having to do with environmentalism and world hunger), my years of work on food, hunger and poverty issues had led me to know that there was more to the issue than that.

I was not disappointed by the way in which the issue was taken up by our Association—from the very beginning, it was recognized that there were many issues wrapped up in the topic of “ethical eating:” economic security issues; issues of race, class and oppression; and issues of trade, labor and even climate change were being addressed. Environmental justice—including environmental racism—was seen as a related issue. I readily volunteered when asked to work on the study guide, even though I had way too much on my plate already.

And so, I’d like to invite this congregation to be one of the many that will work on this issue over the coming years. First, I’d like to invite you to take the Food Stamp Challenge with me—I’d like us to do it together this March, and to reflect upon our experiences together. If you’re interested, let me know.

Next, I’d like to invite you to attend some programs I’ll be putting together this year. I’ll try to mix it up—movie night, discussion group, class. If there’s something you’re particularly interested in, I trust you will let me know.

Finally I’d like you to start thinking about ways in which we can help implement sustainable solutions to food security issues in our own community. What are the long-term solutions that this community needs to helping people have enough food to eat, and food with adequate nutritional value?

I know that some in our very Fellowship are already thinking about these things. Peggy Clarke, who I’m hoping we’ll see more of once she’s done with her ministerial internship, is beginning one such program in Mount Kisco, a community garden that would also be a cooperative raising produce for

poor and hungry people in our area. I'll leave you with the teaser, and invite her to tell you more when she has the time. I've had several conversations with her about it, and I think our Fellowship should be excited to help.

Jane Hewitt, who serves on the Board of the interfaith food pantry, is also involved in this issue, as are all of the people who cooked for our Fellowship's week with the Emergency Homeless Shelter project.

There have to be other ideas out there—and I would like to hear them. Together, this Fellowship can make a huge difference in this community, and I hope you will agree that this is an issue we can all work on.

Blessed be.

Works Cited/Consulted

Millsbaugh, John Gibb et al. *Unitarian Universalist Association Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice Study/Resource Guides*, <http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/issuesprocess/currentissues/ethicaleating/index.shtml>

Barr, Sarah. "Existing on food stamps: Reporter Sarah Barr joins Chris Van Hollen in learning how to live on the bare minimum", *The Sentinel*, <http://www.thesentinel.com/296720556016324.php>

Bread for the World, website, www.bread.org

Congressional Food Stamp Challenge, website, http://foodstampchallenge.typepad.com/my_weblog/

Society of St. Andrew, website, <http://www.endhunger.org/>

United States Department of Agriculture, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, website, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/wic/aboutwic/>

--, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, website, <http://www.fns.usda.gov/FSP/>

--, Food Security in the United States, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err29/>