

FOOD PRAYERS and MEDITATIONS

"Sometimes, in terms of health, there is perhaps too much emphasis on what you eat, rather than on the spirit with which you eat."

When I talk about how you eat, I don't mean to neglect what you eat. Because how you eat can be a way to lead you to change what you eat. The more mindful you are, the more likely you are to change your eating patterns -- **through awareness rather than through scientific or nutritional advice. . .**"

-- Edward Espe Brown, author of *The Tassajara Bread Book*, *Tas. Cooking* and *Tas. Recipe Book*.

The journey toward better health and the task of greater awareness are really the same. The wrong "good advice" for you will produce the wrong results in your body, even if it is scientifically or politically correct. Awareness of what's happening in your body is your most accurate gauge. Or as Mary Oliver wrote "The Wild Geese":

"You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

David White, poet and reader of poems, calls the 'only' in the last line of Oliver's poem 'the 3000 mile *only*' -- this *only* is a threshold to mystery. It takes everything to get through to this knowing.

What does the body really want? What would be deeply nourishing, like a soup that makes the body sigh with contentment. . . . Sometimes it's a fresh salad, sometimes red meat -- before my period, I was amazed, even shocked to discover my body wanted liver. Discovering what the "soft animal of our bodies" **really** loves requires moments of quiet attuned attention. Learning how to follow our bodily intuitions for what our life can be, what our being needs to eat, to do, to live. . . is the rest of the story, unfolding in awareness.

Saying grace before a meal is a way of slowing down, slipping from our busy lives into "rest and digest". This is especially important for those of us who are often in "flight or flight" or some other hypervigilant, hyperactive, anxious state of preoccupation where we can inhale food standing up without ever noticing that we're eating. No wonder we don't feel satisfied.

Buddhist tradition also offers practices for cultivating presence and receptivity with food. This Zen blessing for beginning a meal offers one possibility for changing how we eat: (from *The Tassajara Recipe Book*)

We venerate all the great teachers
and give thanks for this food:
the work of many people
and the suffering
of other forms of life.

May I
together with all beings
enjoy the pure taste
of kind mind, joyful mind,
big mind.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk who is active in peace work, offers the following verses as part of a ritual of mindfulness that extends throughout the whole meal. This type of mealtime meditation can be adapted to any spiritual tradition. I include it as an example of the kind of ritual which generates greater awareness. Please feel free to create one that reflects your own inner goals and religious convictions.

With an empty plate:

Now I have this empty plate in front of me, and I am fortunate that it will soon be filled with food.

When the plate is filled:

Now that my plate is filled with food, I see the entire universe reflected here and how it contributes to my existence.

Sitting down:

Sitting here is like us sitting under the Bodhi tree*, the body of mindfulness is upright and I am unassailed by confusion.

(*The tree under which Buddha sat when he attained enlightenment.)

Looking at the food:

I see this food on my plate, I am aware that all living beings struggle for life and I hope that all living beings have enough to eat today. . .

Before eating:

I am aware that each morsel of food is the result of many labors on the part of those who produce it and bring it to our table.

With the first mouthful:

With this first bite I promise to practice love and kindness,
With the second bite I promise to relieve the suffering of others.
With the third bite, I promise to experience the joy of others as my own.
With the fourth bite I promise to live even-mindedly.

After eating:

Now that I have finished eating and my plate is empty, I feel satisfied and content. Grateful to my parents, teachers, friends and all beings, I vow to keep their spirit alive.

As Brown comments, "If you practice like this, it's not so easy to overeat or eat forgetfully. . . over a period of time (one's) diet may change quite a little. . .(as) we eat our food in a different way. With different spirit."

Whatever your ritual, it has a very important purpose. You can tell if you have accomplished this purpose if your body takes a deep breath, a sigh of relaxation. This shift in breath signals a shift in physical, mental and emotional energy. In scientific terms, it means that you have shifted out of sympathetic overdrive -- fight or flight mode -- and back into parasympathetic. In parasympathetic, the energy and blood has left your arms and legs, and has moved inward to your digestive organs. Your body is now ready to receive and to assimilate the food it is offered.

Some tips from your "Chinese Grandmother":

Begin to prepare your meal before you are hungry. Set aside time to eat, and eat sitting down. Remember, "Yuppie grazers" who eat on the run may end up with food allergies or chronic fatigue. Food goes in, but no one is there to accept it. We know how to give and to take, but not how to receive.

If slowing down is still difficult, the Chi Gong practice of **clicking the molar teeth** together lightly 36 times will help activate the salivary glands. Swallow the saliva it generates in 3 swallows. Then slowly and carefully chew each bite, because if you don't, key enzymes in the saliva won't make it with the food to the stomach, and without them, foods containing carbohydrates can't be digested.

Massage acupuncture/acupressure points on the inside of the wrists (Pericardium 6)-- 3 fingers down from the crease in the middle of the wrist. And points on the outside of the leg, (Stomach 36) 3 fingers below the outer "eye" of the knee and one thumb width out from the top of the shin bone. Massage your ears. Sigh.

If you read or watch TV when you eat, your digestive energy is diverted and divided. Using the eyes draws on Liver energy, which is needed to assist in digestion. Whenever possible **eat where you can look out on a green, natural view. Don't read or watch TV while eating.** These can be hard habits to break. Be gentle with yourself and notice what resistance may arise.

Arguments, family conflicts, or heated discussions also irritate the Liver energy. If anyone in your family has stomach aches or loss of appetite at mealtimes, nausea or vomiting, ulcers, nervous diarrhea, or even constipation, intentionally choose peaceful interactions around mealtimes. Make appointments to handle unfinished conflicts at another time. Again, consciousness offers amazing benefits.

More Blessings:

One of my favorites: An East Indian, Ayurvedic blessing before meals says, more or less: "May the pure nourishment in this food be received by my body. May any toxins or harmful substances pass through untouched, without causing harm."

A "children's" blessing that I love:

Earth who grew for us this food,
and made it ripe and good
Earth and Sun, we give you thanks
We will not forget.

And Johnny Appleseed's song:

Oh the Lord is good to me/us, Sun who
and so I/we thank the Lord
for giving me/us the things I/we need,
the sun and the rain and the apple seed.
The Lord is good to me/us.

"Bless this food to its intended use, and us to Thy service. Amen." was my father's blessing. A Midwestern farmer who came back from China after World War II with visions of starving children in his mind and a vow in his heart to feed his people, he

imparted the understanding that the greatest gift is to follow our highest purpose, and to serve the good of the whole.

Blessings on your healing, and on mine, for this is my lesson too. May we help each other learn to nourish ourselves; may we nourish each other; may we allow ourselves to be nourished by the highest Source of Spirit.

May our mealtime prayers, our cooking rituals, and our healing practices remind us to allow and acknowledge the transformation of all that we receive into the Bread of Life.