

Compassionate Consumption- March 10th 2013

By Daryl Bridges

This year the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee has launched a campaign called "Justice is Choosing Compassionate Consumption" which hopes to highlight the challenges of making ethical choices around our buying power but specifically our food. Be it farm workers, transportation workers, restaurant and hospitality workers, and every other person who has worked to get food from field to table face daily challenges. All of these people from end to end of the system deserve safe working environments, fair wages, and healthy work-life balance. That seems a reasonable goal, doesn't it? To highlight this program they have created numerous resources, workshops, educational events, and projects for individuals, congregations, and groups to engage in.

One of their chief issues is the plight of restaurant workers, as highlighted in the book the UUSC is promoting Behind the Kitchen Door by Saru Jayaraman. Saru is the co-founder of the Restaurant Opportunity Center, a workers advocacy cooperative for restaurant workers with locations in Washington DC, NYC, Chicago, LA, Philadelphia, Houston, and more. Saru wrote this book to give a glimpse into the lives of restaurant workers who are paid to put on a friendly and brave face but frequently endure poverty wages, racial and gender discrimination, wage theft, high rates of workplace injury, and frequently no paid sick leave.

Our reading today came from that book and showed one of the many challenges that restaurant workers frequently face, a lack of paid sick leave, and the resultant choice of "Do I work today so I don't get fired and so I have enough money or do I stay home to get better and avoid getting other people sick?" It might seem an easy enough choice but when you are making poverty or near poverty wages a missed work day, let alone a week, can be devastating, especially if that is a heavy tip day like a Friday or Saturday. To complicate matters few restaurant workers have access to employer-provided healthcare so their costs for illness are higher than most especially those not fortunate enough to live and work in states like MA that have reasonable low-cost subsidized healthcare.

The situation for tipped workers is even more challenging than most as the Federal minimum tipped wage has remained stagnant at \$2.13/hour for decades and few states have raised it. For example the only State requirement in MA is that tips must make up the shortfall to \$8/hour. Tip theft is rife and tips are frequently split between server, host/ess, barbacks, bartenders, bussers, runners, and others. MA state law says managers and salaried supervisors cannot split tips and yet they frequently do take a share. Once when I was leading a worker's right session for a group of High School junior and seniors one loudly exclaimed "THAT BASTARD" when I mentioned that managers cannot share tips. Tips can only go so far especially in casual or family dining let alone when someone is taking from the pot who shouldn't!

I won't recap the whole book as I believe it is worth you reading on your own but in short other issues covered in it include issues around wages and wage theft, racial and gender discrimination, and a rapidly changing restaurant market with the explosion of low-cost, low-

margin chain restaurants placing downward pressure on wages and benefits. The life of a restaurant worker is hard but many of them do the job because they enjoy the work, interacting with people during exciting times of their life, and personal satisfaction help offset the low-pay, long hours, and other problems of the job.

But restaurants are only one part of the equation in the quest to highlight "Compassionate Consumption". In the most literal terms of consumption the journey that our food takes from farm to us is both complicated and distant but profoundly important. Perhaps one of the most vocal advocates for more awareness and compassion in our food sourcing has been Wendell Berry, the poet, farmer, and social critic who has made a career out of advocating for Americans to return to the land. He believes that the great distance, both physical and metaphorical, that lie between most Americans and their foods makes us callous to the way food is grown, meat is procured, and the affect on the environment that we are having.

Wendell Berry proposes that all people should be forced to grow at least a small amount of their food to better understand the amount of time, effort, and knowledge that goes into raising even the simplest of plants. His theory is that after seeing and experience the challenge that is farming most people will learn a great lesson and become more compassionate to the needs of farmers and less wasteful in terms of their food. I personally think Wendell Berry overstates the power of a backyard garden to change people but he is onto something.

The bulk of American food is produced far away and far from the sight of the average American. We do not see the farmers, the

farmhands, or the environmental results of growing the food we need to live. The lives of farm workers can be a very difficult one again with poor wages, little to no health care, and other issues that range from racial discrimination to modern day slavery. In 2008 the UUA voted at General Assembly an Act of Immediate Witness in association with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, a tomato-pickers association based in Immokalee county Florida, to end slavery-like conditions and raise wages on Florida tomato farms.

Groups such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers are active members of the UUSC's idea of Compassionate Consumption. The Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW from here on) are a worker's collaborative who formed to give a voice to the struggles of the largely undocumented tomato pickers in Florida. The worst case was the one I just mentioned, a farm which locked the workers up at night, withheld their wages, and treated the workers as little more than animals. Fortunately that company has since been shut down and the owners tried.

But the CIW also works to increase wages for all tomato pickers and to improve their working conditions. They have been campaigning for many years to increase the pay of the tomato workers by 2 cents per pound. While that may sound ridiculously small, 2 cents per pound would be over a 100% increase in their wages. They have lobbied major fast food chains, such as Taco Bell and Subway, to pay 2 cents more as well as the grocery chain of Trader Joe's. And the CIW has helped to bring shade tents, stricter laws around the availability of water, and helped fight racist language used in the fields. The work of the CIW closely copies the work that the UUSC wishes to highlight this year. I have worked with the CIW for several years on this campaign and I

could say much more on it but I will save that for another time. Instead let me turn our attention to why, as UUs, we should be especially attentive and how we can work to a compassionate consumer society.

The Universalist minister, dean of the Crane Theological School at Tufts, founder of the Community Church of Boston, and one of the great social thinker of our tradition the Rev. Clarence R. Skinner. He wrote a book in 1915 entitled The Social Implications of Universalism. In this book Rev. Skinner laid out his belief that Universalism offered something unique to the world as it was a religion birthed, in its modern form, in the same forces that were shaping the world around it. Democracy, freedom, compassion, innovation, wide spread immigration and more. These forces in the early 1900s, Skinner argued, were helping to build a new world but left alone they would create a world that was cold, disengaged, and selfish. For the wonders of technology and industrialization came new moral and ethical questions which he feared would go unanswered.

Rev. Skinner said that where the modern-era went astray was when it myopically focused its attentions on the physical nature of problems and rectified only those. Industrialization itself was a prime example as it saw the need to increase manufacturing and lowering the cost of goods to make them more available but at what costs? Rev. Skinner notes that for all the good of industrialization it also increased child labor and created squalid living conditions of immigrants.

Rev. Skinner was active in the movement to end child labor and was overjoyed to live to see laws change to outlaw child labor but he was disappointed in his fellow advocates. The other advocates spoke

boldly about the physical suffering, the death and the mutilation of children which were all true and terrible things but Rev. Skinner also wanted to point out that his belief in Universalism lead him to see another element to that suffering: a spiritual side. Child labor was as much an abuse of the potential and spirit of a child as their body. Every hour spent in a mine or a factory damaged their bodies but it also took from their potential education, took from the joy and delights of being a child, and cast a pall over their lives forever. These spiritual evils were just as real and just as dire to Rev. Skinner as the physical ones since his belief told him that all people are beloved by God and should have every opportunity to live out their fullest potential and embrace the gift that is life.

And when we speak of Compassionate Consumption as Unitarian Universalists in the year 2013 I believe we do so from the same grounding. We are rightly concerned with the wages and the health care and the physical safety of those that grow, prepare, and serve our food. We are rightly appalled by the working conditions that exist in the world both domestic and abroad and we wish to do all in our power to avoid contributing to the abuses that accompany them. But like Rev. Skinner we are also appalled that other people are abused mentally, emotionally, and spiritually under the guise of economics. We know that as Unitarian Universalists we are called to help everyone live their lives to their fullest potential and to try and put an end to those practices that inhibit human flourishing.

The movement to Compassionate Consumption starts with a compassionate consumer. It starts with a belief that we do not want

our money, our time, our actions to harm others and it starts with a belief that we can use our time, our actions, and our hearts to help others live their lives to their full potential.

A couple of years ago I went to a conference at MIT about the role of ethics and religion in the future economy. The questions revolved around how issues of ethics and justice would, could, or do affect the way we order our economy and behaviors. During the conference we had "break out groups", little discussion groups to chat about the speakers. My break out group had every sort you can think of that might come to a conference on this topic: MIT economics students, a UU minister, an Episcopal priest, an independent record label owner, to an entrepreneur who was promoting his "Goddess-based business leadership model" which he was confident would change the world. And of course, myself, who at the time was in seminary and working at a faith-labor relation non-profit.

One of the discussions for the breakout session was around the subject of what can an ordinary person do to help change things we are not happy about in the economy. We had an interesting discussion going when the Episcopal priest said, "the only power ordinary people have is consumer power". I no longer remember my exact words but I replied quite emphatically that no, that is not the case. We have consumer power but we also have political power, social power, personal power, community power, and more! To limit our ability to change the world to just our ability to buy and sell? That is to fall into the trap that Rev. Skinner feared, to lose the forest for the trees.

In the book Behind the Kitchen Door there are several solid suggestions for helping change the way restaurants do business. Saru Jayaraman suggests speaking to restaurant managers to express your joy or disappointment in their hiring practices, expressing to them that you value dining at places that offer, racial diversity, safe environments, provide good wages and benefits, and that you are more likely to return and to recommend to others places that meet both your ethical as well as your practical needs. And this tactic works, few companies are willing to ignore direct, clear feedback like what Saru suggests. There are resources to help if you want to be careful of who you patronize. The organization the Saru co-founded, the Restaurant Opportunities Center, maintains a database on their website, (ROCunited.org) where you can search restaurants and see if they offer living wages, health care, promotions, and related.

Just as important is to support broad-based movements that affect thousands if not millions of workers. For example, progressive groups in MA have been trying for years to pass a mandatory Paid Sick Leave bill which, if it passed, would provide legally protected sick leave to over a million people in MA, many of whom are restaurant workers, but it is mired in legislation. Later this year a campaign will be starting to increase the MA state minimum-wage, again a bill that would affect a million or more people. These sort of political decisions are not glamorous but their effect is profound but creating a secure social net is one of the most basic ways we can ensure we are operating as compassionate consumers.

As individuals we can speak up if we see injustice but we can also work to be good customers. We can be patient and kind to wait staff, we can speak up if someone is acting out of line, and we can thank hard work graciously. We can be a smiling face for a worker who may not have seen many smiles that day and we can make their lives just a little bit easier.

The Rev. Clarence Skinner was speaking nearly a hundred years ago when he said that the great power of Universalism was to bring into focus that injustice affects the body and the soul. If you have ever been in a restaurant and seen someone yell at a server, you have seen a soul in pain. If you have ever met a farm hand who struggles to feed themselves despite their hard work, you have seen a soul in pain. I believe that we are called, as Unitarian Universalists and as human beings, to bear be compassionate consumers because we care about both the body and the soul of those who work to keep up fed.

Let us remember to be compassionate in all that we do. Amen and blessed be.