

What’s sinful about gluttony? When the sixth-century pope, Gregory the Great, made up the list of seven sins that the church deemed serious enough to lead you straight to eternal damnation, how did gluttony make the cut? After all, gluttony is just an ugly-sounding word for what seems like a victimless crime, what we today call overeating. Not a good idea to make it a way of life, no doubt, but hardly up there with wrath and avarice and the rest of Gregory’s picks for the unforgivable, the seven deadly sins.

Well, first of all, we have to understand that “gluttony” in those times included overindulgence in food or **drink**. And drink, in particular, lowers the inhibitions, the self-control that keeps our other sinful tendencies, especially anger and lust, at bay. It allows our basically sinful natures to emerge – our animal natures.

At the very least, the love of food and drink reminds us that we **are** creatures, with bodies, and all the needs and desires that bodies tend to have. And bodies, in the view of the early church, and even in some religious circles today, are not the god-given sources of pleasure, the good gifts worthy of celebration that make us one with the rest of nature. Bodies were the source of temptation and, as such, they separated us from God.

The hungers of the body --gluttony, in particular – distracted us from what ought to be the only object of our love and delight, namely, God. If we’re thinking about food, we can’t think about God. And if we’re worshiping the belly, as those fathers of the church put it, then we are guilty of idolatry. Food becomes our obsession, the object of our desire and the source of our delight, when God should be our only obsession, desire and delight. And idolatry, as we know, violates the very first and most important of the commandments, to have no other god than God.

Does this have anything to do with us? In fact, the so-called “sin” of gluttony is alive and well in 21st century America. Just listen to the conversations of our diet-obsessed young women: “I was bad today... I had a candy bar for lunch.” Or, “This cake is sinfully good.”

The ability to deny the body is almost as admired today as it was in the days of the medieval anchoress, those female saints of the early church, those “holy anorexics” as they have been called, who mortified the flesh by voluntary starvation in order to experience the suffering of Christ and thereby achieve greater union with the holy bridegroom. We may claim to be motivated by health concerns. But the excessive dieting and exercise, the obsession with “fitness” and the aesthetic and sexual ideal of a body that is lean and muscular that characterize our culture are no less idolatry. The gods we worship may be six-pack abs and diet soda, but we are no less guilty of “belly-worship” than the so-called glutton of the sixth century.

And if we fail to exercise self-control? If we give into the temptations of the body, the Big Macs and Twinkies and all-you-can-eat buffets that lurk around every corner, tempting us to stray from the path of virtue, what then? Are we punished with the fires of hell? Not exactly, but punished we most certainly are. If not with high blood pressure and cholesterol and early death, then with the disdain and pity and ostracism, the horrified stares and insults that are reserved for the last group it is permissible to scorn – the obese.

Now, if I sound a little sensitive on this point, it’s for good reason. I was put on my first diet at the tender age of ten months and was prescribed diet pills at age eight. When a child is forbidden to eat the cookies and second helpings that her peers are freely given, she develops issues, shall we say. She grows up with an unhealthy desire for those

forbidden – well, not fruits – but those forbidden cookies. More detrimentally, she grows us with the conviction that she is being punished for her hungers and with the shame of knowing that she is unacceptable as she is. Now, as an adult, I can sympathize with the parent’s dilemma. You want your child to be healthy and happy and popular and successful – you want your child not to be fat – so what are you to do? You put your child on a diet, most likely, and launch them on a lifelong path of self-recrimination and shame.

So I worry about what the current focus on childhood obesity is doing to a generation of children. What does it feel like to our children to be pointed to as a national crisis? To be the focus of so much concern that is so clearly disapproving? Because behind every expression of concern for a fat person’s health is the message, real or imagined, that the person in question is self-indulgent, undisciplined, greedy or lazy or... well, sinful. Fat is also a moral failing. This is the message, subtle or otherwise, that we receive from the earliest age. Welcome to the sixth century.

Now, as any fat person will tell you, fat people are not necessarily gluttons. Certainly not in the sense that we understand the word. But Gregory and his fellow churchmen had more in mind than just over-consumption. The gluttony condemned by the Church actually included five sins. Eating too much was the first and most obvious. But equally sinful was eating at the wrong time – eating when you’re not hungry –or between-meal snacks, if you will. Then there was the sin of eating food that too expensive or fancy, too “delicate.” And the sin of eating food that was prepared with pleasure in mind. And thinking about food was also considered gluttony – anticipation of a good meal was just as much a diversion from your prayers as the actual eating of it.

Like lust, with which gluttony was so often linked in the mind of the early Christian – food was recognized as essential to survival. But, like sex, it shouldn't be enjoyed too much. Or thought about too much. Or indulged in more than was absolutely necessary. Anything else, in matters of sexuality or food, was idolatry.

Again, Gregory would have plenty to preach about in our day, wouldn't he? Not only do we eat too much; we eat too often, think about food too much – or think about the food we are denying ourselves – and we enjoy it too much.

Not only did all these behaviors take our focus off God; they also were uncondusive to peaceful life in the medieval monastery, or to social control in the medieval world. With not enough food to go around, it wouldn't do to have people fighting over the last piece of bread, or thinking too much about how hungry they were. That might lead to revolution.

As for food that was too delicately or expensively prepared or enjoyed with too much abandon, the medieval church father had only to look at the Romans. Lying around on couches consuming vast quantities of wine and barbecued nightingales, only to vomit up all up in order to begin again – this kind of behavior could lead to nothing good. And we moderns, inheritors of the Puritan tradition, would surely agree. But unlike Gregory, we would consider this kind of excess less a matter of sin than of pathology.

We live in the age of eating disorders, when this kind of binging and purging is treated with somewhat more compassion. As long as the patient is a basically attractive white woman, especially if she is young, her overeating is not considered a sin – not called gluttony – but is treated as a symptom of deeper unmet needs. As in the reading by Kim Chernin, we understand that food can be a drug that numbs the loneliness, fear,

boredom, and self-hatred that are so commonly a part of growing up. And these feelings don't necessarily vanish after we reach adulthood. Nor are they limited to females or Anglos. Food is the great comforter that we learn to love at our mother's breast. Anger and sadness are literally swallowed, pushed down along with the pizza and ice cream. But, as with other drugs, the relief that food provides is all too temporary and the pain that is so effectively numbed for a few minutes is merely exacerbated by the self-recrimination and self-disgust that follow.

Pity the poor medieval woman or man who had no recourse to therapy or support groups. For that matter, pity the modern person who does. These therapies can help, of course, but they don't necessarily feed the hunger that's eating away at us. If I knew the answer, I'd be thin. My growing suspicion, though, is that the true nature of the compulsion to eat, like the other "sins" we've been talking about, lies in the sense of disconnection. As with pride and avarice, it may be that a profound and pervasive sense of connection with the web of all life would provide our hungering spirits with the soothing nourishment they crave. What would a Unitarian Universalist diet look like, I sometimes wonder?

First, it would affirm that your inherent worth is inviolable. Your value, your virtue, are independent of what you do or do not consume, and your dignity as a human being is impervious to society's opinions about what you should or shouldn't be eating or how fat or thin you may be. It would vehemently protest that eating is not a sin; nor is the enjoyment of food. It would encourage the kind of joyful overindulgence that MFK Fisher described – gluttony that is mindful, sensuous and celebratory.

It would have us treat with compassion that other kind of overindulgence – the compulsive and self-destructive and joyless gluttony that does not enhance life but makes us miserable. It would urge us to be gentle with our failings and to keep in view their puniness as measured on the scale of human behavior. Eating a Whopper with cheese is not a crime against humanity. And a diet of organically-grown vegetables will not make us saints. Food is just food. There are worthier things to obsess about.

At the same time, it would remind us that we are part of an organic system. What we eat has an effect on how others eat, on how they live or die. Too much grain-fed beef will not only clog our arteries; it will add to our carbon footprint and hasten global warming. Eating foods out of season, or foods that are heavily processed, distances us from the source of all life, the earth, and leads us to forget our dependence on her.

A UU spirit-inspired diet would remind us that everything we eat was enjoyed at a price; that the animals and plants that feed us were living things and should be honored. Eating wastefully, mindlessly, without enjoyment, or in excess of what we need dishonors life and makes us forget our place in the web of being. A place that may be at the top of the food chain, but is not at the top of the web of existence -- for that has no top, no bottom, and no center.

This holiday season, may we seek a middle way; a way that truly celebrates the good gifts of life. May our deepest hungers be fed. When they are not, may we seek and find what it is we hunger for: friends to love, stories to move and delight us; rest and peace of heart that renew us; beauty that soothes us, connections to the holy that remind us that life is good; and grace that amazes and awakes in us wonder, humility and gratitude. May all this be yours. Amen.