

PIZZA AS A SPIRITUAL PRACTICE
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

If we were a pizza,
which part would you like to share?
—*PollyTheGirl.com*

What do planet earth and a Papa Gino's pizza have in common?

What similarities are there between the earth and a pizza?

(minister draws a circle in the air)

They both are round.

They both have a crust.

They both have things that go on top of the crust (that are good).

On top of the earth's crust are great oceans, rivers, rocks, trees and flowers, a multitude of animals from antelope to zebra, fish, micro-organisms galore, buildings and huts and shacks and shanties, boats and cars and carts and people, so many, many people.

The crust of a pizza is also covered with many things: Rivers of melted mozzarella, mountains of sausage, pieces of pepperoni, anchovies and fresh basil, all floating on top of the tart sauce of the tomato.

What else do the earth and a pizza have in common?

Both are divided up.

The Pizza is cut into pieces for us to eat. The earth is cut into countries with boundaries and borders, boundaries and borders we often fight over.

What else do pizza and the earth have in common?

They both are heating up: Pizza, because of the wood-burning oven that will bake it over at Bertucci's; the Earth because of our unrestrained use of fossil fuels, our unsustainable appetite for consumption, and our other abuses of the environment. This inconvenient truth is melting the polar icecaps as surely as the mozzarella is melting over at Pizza Hut. (More about that later.)

But I think the most important thing that the earth and pizza have in common is this: they are the same thing. They are one and the same. When we hold a pizza, we hold the earth. When we eat a pizza, we are eating the earth.

Now that's a rather strange statement.

But it is true.

Think about it. Let's break the pizza up into its parts.

We need wheat for the flour that becomes the crust. Wheat grows out of the earth, pulls its nutrients and water from the earth. Wheat is the earth growing itself green and good.

We need tomatoes that are crushed and cooked for the sauce. They, too, grow out of the earth. They are the earth itself growing red and ripe.

We need cows to provide the milk to make the cheese that bubbles so deliciously on top of the sauce. Cows feed on grass, hay, soybean meal and cottonseeds. Cows drink the water that bubbles up from deep within the earth. Cows are the earth itself mooing and moving.

Even the sausage that sits on top of the cheese once fed off the earth. Pigs eat corn that grows in fields: corn watered by the rains, sustained by the seasons, and harvested at this time of year; corn that found its beginning within a kernel planted in the rich soil of Mother Earth.

When we hold a pizza, we *do* hold the earth.

Planet earth, scientists tell us, came into being about 4.54 billion years ago, molten and volcanic. Over time it cooled and formed a crust. Then, over more time, "water that was brought here by comets and asteroids condensed into clouds and the oceans took shape." (Wikipedia)

The pizza, too, took shape over time. Some think the first pizza probably was cooked about six thousand years ago, during the Bronze Age, in the area of the world now known as Italy, around Venice. But Italy can't lay sole claim to pizza. Pizza—which some believe is derived from the Latin word "pinsa"—which means 'flatbread'—is a truly cross-cultural phenomenon. "The idea of using bread as a plate came from the Greeks, who ate flat round bread (plankuntos) baked with an assortment of toppings." There is also "a legend [that] suggests that Roman soldiers gained a taste for Jewish Matzoth (unleavened bread) while stationed in Roman occupied Palestine and returned home to cook a similar food, thus creating pizza." (<http://www.lifeinitaly.com/food/pizza-history.asp>)

India contributed greatly to what eventually became the pizza when they domesticated the Water Buffalo, which were later imported to Italy in the 7th century. From the Water

Buffalo came mozzarella cheese. “Even today, the use of fresh mozzarella di buffalo in Italian pizza cannot be substituted. While other cheeses have made their way onto pizza in the United States, no true Italian Pizzeria would ever use the dried shredded type used on so many American pizzas.” (Ibid.)

According to LifeinItaly.com: “The introduction of tomatoes” from Mexico and Peru “to Italian cuisine in the 18th and early 19th centuries finally gave us the true modern Italian pizza. Even though tomatoes reached Italy by the 1530's it was widely thought that they were poisonous so they were grown only for decoration. However the . . . starving . . . peasants of Naples started using the supposedly deadly fruit in many of their foods, including their early pizzas . . . It took some time for the rest of [Italian] society to accept this crude peasant food. [But] once members of the local aristocracy tried pizza they couldn't get enough of it, which by this time was being sold on the streets of Naples . . . As pizza popularity increased, street vendors gave way to actual shops where people could order a custom pizza with many different toppings. By 1830 the "Antica Pizzeria Port'Alba" of Naples had become the first true pizzeria.”
(<http://www.lifeinitaly.com/food/pizza-history.asp>)

But a pizza, as with the earth, is more than its evolution over time and more than its parts. We can eat the wheat on its own. But it isn't pizza. We can eat the tomatoes on their own. But that isn't pizza. We can eat the cheese on its own. But that isn't pizza. It isn't pizza unless all those ingredients are a part of one interconnected whole. It is eating everything as one that makes the experience we know as pizza come alive.

Likewise with the earth. As I said in a sermon last year, there are two ways to look at life on this planet. The first way is to see life as made up of many separate parts—animals, plants, rocks, oceans, storms, humans—interacting in separate and unrelated ways. The second way is to look at the planet as one single living and breathing organism. There is no separation between anything. Rather, every animate and inanimate thing is actually one living entity. There is only one life here, one living being. The ancient Greeks called this unity “Gaia,” their name for the Goddess of the earth. Sir Crispin Tickell, a celebrated English environmentalist, writes: “the notion that the Earth itself was alive came up regularly in Greek philosophy.” Later, during the Enlightenment, “Leonardo da Vinci saw . . . the Earth as [one interconnected living system] . . . But it wasn't until the 1970's that chemist James Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis resurrected the holistic name “Gaia” and set it solidly in science. They put forth ‘The Gaia Theory,’ suggesting that “the Earth . . . behaves as a single, self-regulating system, comprised of physical, chemical, biological and human components.”¹ The “physical and living elements [above, below and] on the surface of the earth combine” into one self-regulating consciousness, a universal “feedback system.”² Gaia Theory “says that all organisms and all inorganic things form a single . . . system” that “maintains the conditions for life on the planet, contributing to the stability of global temperature, balance in the oceans, oxygen in the atmosphere,”³ and other factors that maintain the life of the whole. In

¹ James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia*, p. xvi

² Crispin Tickell, “Gaia and the human impact: Earth system science”

³ Wikipedia

short, the earth and everything in it and on it is one living being, with one single self-regulating consciousness. It is only looking at everything as one that makes the experience we know as earth come alive. But that also means that what we do, how we live, impacts everything—that's the old butterfly effect: When a butterfly flaps its wings in one part of the world it can cause a hurricane in another part of the world.

This interconnection raises important questions, important *moral* questions. We have to ask how our pizza and its parts impact the world.

Rev. Vicki Talbert asks: “Is the food [being used] grown with pesticides or herbicides? What about the polluting runoff from fertilizer and manure? What is the contribution of corporate agriculture to the degradation of our planet and what are the best food choices to protect our environment? . . . How are the animals involved treated? In what conditions are they raised and do they suffer? How does a meat-based diet compare with one that is plant-based . . .? . . . Is water being diverted from local usage to irrigate crops to feed food animals? If the food was grown in another country, were local people displaced from their land? How have their lives and culture been disrupted so that food could be raised to feed us? If we have an ethical obligation to reduce emissions that contribute to climate change, is locally produced food better . . .” [Should we be flying food from all over the world to Market Basket and Stop and Shop just so we can have authentic Italian olive oil in our sauce?] Rev. Talbert continues: “What about fair trade and workers’ rights? What are the justice issues related to corporate agriculture’s use of the land of indigenous peoples? And the biggest question – how will we feed the world if we continue our unsustainable eating patterns?”

(http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/ethicaleating/worship_guide.pdf)

There are about 7 billion people living on the planet. 925 million of them are hungry. 13.1 percent of the population of our planet, almost 1 in 7 people, are hungry. Malnutrition – which contributes to half of the deaths of children in the world, affects 32.5 percent of children in developing countries--one of three.

(<http://www.worldhunger.org/articles/Learn/world%20hunger%20facts%202002.htm>)

Last year, in the United States of America, 50.1 million Americans lived in households where hunger was an issue—16.7 million of those were children.

<http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/hunger-facts/hunger-and-poverty-statistics.aspx>. I think it is safe to say that when it comes to the earth, not everyone is getting a piece of the pizza pie, and yet that pizza pie is big enough to feed everyone if we choose to share.

Suddenly eating our pizza is much less simple.

Suddenly eating a pizza becomes an opportunity for spiritual practice—an invitation to expand our awareness and allow in a deeper and truer understanding of reality.

The Rev. Lillie Nye writes: “Imagine all of the hands that have participated in bringing this food to the table for this one meal: Who are the faceless hundreds who planted and harvested, who cleaned and packaged and canned, who shipped and stocked, who perhaps combined and repackaged, and shipped a second or third time, then stocked the

supermarket, ran the cash register, and bagged our groceries? If we also imagine the extended network of relationships that sustain the farming, factory, and freight industries, that web of connections reaches out indefinitely in our global economy. So many hands, so many faces, so many stories [from all over the world], now connected to your own because you decided to” eat a pizza. “Consider the migrant workers who harvest [our] vegetables. Their labor is indispensable to the farming industry, yet they are some of the poorest, most powerless, and most exploited people living within the borders of our nation. That they are often denied fair compensation for their work is a factor behind the moderate prices we enjoy. Imagine all those faces, those hands, those stories. When we eat” our pizza with tomato sauce, mushrooms, or onions, or pineapple “we are, in a sense, ingesting their labor, their life, their deferred dreams and lack of choice... We cannot escape our interdependence....”

(http://www.uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/ethicaleating/worship_guide.pdf)

My spiritual friends, putting the pizza aside for moment, we really do hold the earth, the world in our hands. We hold its questions, its unsettling and unavoidable answers, and the critical choices that we face. As Scott Carpenter, a Mercury 7 astronaut said not too long ago: “This planet is not terra firma. It is a delicate flower and it must be cared for. It's lonely. It's small. It's isolated, and there is no resupply. And we are mistreating it. Clearly, the highest loyalty we should have is not to our own country or our own religion or our hometown or even to ourselves. It should be to . . . the planet at large. This is our home and this is all we've got.”

Blessed Be. Amen.

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