

*A UU Diet*  
**Sunday May 6, 2018**

Today is International No Diet Day. Yes – that really is such a thing. It was first celebrated in the UK in 1992 to help people of all sizes accept and appreciate their bodies. Its founder Mary Young had dealt with life-long issues of weight, shame, and dieting, and had come through to a point where she had accepted her body type and felt good about herself. She was working as a management consultant and she tells the story of getting fed up (no pun intended), listening at coffee breaks to the conversation of the women in the courses she led: they could spend the whole break agonizing over whether to eat or not to eat a cookie – or biscuit as the English call them. "Oh, I'll just have one." "I shouldn't really." "Oh, all right then." So finally Mary Young asked the group "What do you think would happen if you spent as much time and energy on your careers as you do on diets?" And she went on to start International No Diet Day to make people aware of the way their focus on diet and body image was narrowing their lives and depriving them of joy.

I think her question is great, and I appreciate the aims of her group, but as someone who believes – as my family would tell you! – in the importance of using precise language, I have to quibble with the name of the day. Because really a no diet day isn't what they want. They want a no punishment for food issues day, though that isn't a catchy title. A diet isn't a bad thing. It's just the food we eat regularly.

Of course that's not how we think of it: How many of you have ever been on a diet? Or maybe I should ask, is there anyone here among us who has never been on a diet? I thought so – it's a rare person who hasn't tried – for a week or two at least – to control their weight. There are a lot out there to follow – high carb, low carb, Paleo, Adkins, South Beach, Mediterranean, Jenny Craig, Weight Watcher's, ... Any others to add? Was there one that worked for you?

They're hard to keep up, aren't they? How long can you control your diet so rigidly? And for some of them, doctors and nutritionists argue that they're not even safe – we need a balance of proteins, carbohydrates, and fats to stay healthy. A friend of mine rigorously followed the Adkins diet a year or two ago. He lost a lot of weight. But he works long hours at a stressful job, his mother was diagnosed with cancer, and he has young children – he went off the diet and gained back all the weight he'd lost. Diets can be very frustrating! They don't allow for real life.

But as I said, it isn't really accurate to speak of going on a diet. Really, we go from one diet to another. For we all follow a diet – whatever we eat regularly, that's our diet. Whether it's gluten-free and vegan, take-out dinners, or beer and popcorn on Friday nights – it's a diet. It's such a part of our routines that we don't think of it that way. Only when we try to change it do we name what we're doing. That's when we go on a new diet – before reverting back to the old one. So what really matters, as all the diet experts will tell you – at least those who aren't trying to sell special foods and books – what really matters is that your everyday diet, the one you don't really think about – is healthful. Extremes don't work because we can't keep them up. We have to change what we eat day to day, if we want to be healthy.

As Richard Watson wrote in his book *The Philosopher's Diet*, “Taking off 20 pounds and then maintaining the weight reached is a total change of life. Few people manage to do it because it requires a modification of behavior so radical and so interrelated with one's customs and habits, likes and dislikes, actions and passions, that few human beings can sustain it. You can't just change your habits sufficiently to take off a few pounds and then expect to maintain the new low weight. You must revolutionize your whole life plan.”

Richard Watson is a real philosopher, and in this book he writes about keeping fat off our bodies, but also out of our lives. He uses fat as a metaphor – it represents “the nagging triviality, the utter banality, and the inevitability of ordinary reality that separate us from what we think we want to be.” He wants to motivate his readers to commit to getting rid of fat – to think about what they take into their bodies and their lives, to question society's norms – quick food and quick thinking – and in so doing, change themselves and change the world.

A healthy diet for body, mind and spirit seems ever harder to achieve. In most households, adults are working full-time out of the home, and if someone is staying at home, that can be a full-time job too. I get to the end of the day, to that window for cooking and eating dinner before heading out to a meeting or scouts or soccer practice, and even when I've planned a balanced meal, I often find myself without the time to cook it. Do you find it hard too?

And it can be even harder to stick to a healthful diet for our minds and spirits. The news is confusing, discouraging, certainly not wholesome, and often scary. Facebook invites us to compare our lives with others who only present their best selves. We are inundated yet still hungry. As the early 20th century American food writer Waverly Root wrote over 100 years, “One telltale sign that betrays the

defective nature of our diet is the fact that the United States is the country of chewing gum. Working the jaws incessantly, uselessly and unbeautifully is an effort to deceive the body into the belief that it is being sufficiently well fed when it isn't." That's still a zing today.

So under these circumstances, what would a UU diet look like? The food part is pretty easy – a UU diet is agnostic on whether you are vegan, vegetarian, pescatarian, or an omnivore. As long as the food you put into your body is of good quality, grown with under as environmentally careful methods as possible, and humane to the animals involved, it's all good. As far as I know, the food writer Michael Pollan isn't a Unitarian Universalist, but his famous dictum: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants" would work for us. As he explains, "Eat food" means "Don't eat anything your great-great-great grandmother wouldn't recognize as food." To get that real food, he advises, "Spend more, eat less." And for the care of the environment, as well as of ourselves, "Shop at the farmers' market." And his most important rule, "Eat with pleasure." Savor your food.

Finding the time to prepare that real food though is still hard. What if our UU Diet though looked at the preparation and sharing of food as a spiritual practice? It's all part of that budgeting of time in ways that feed us first. As Shunryu Suzuki Roshi wrote, *You're the cook. When you wash the rice, wash the rice. When you cut the carrots, cut the carrots. When you stir the soup, stir the soup. When you cook, you're not just working on food – you're working on yourself, you're working on other people.*

But cooking doesn't have to be the way you feed your spirit. What matters is that you feed your spirit. As the Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein wrote, "The mind is like tofu. It tastes like whatever you marinate it in." We need to marinate our minds and our spirits in sauces and marinades – in practices – which promote love for ourselves and for others. The Buddhist lovingkindness meditation is one such daily practice, but all traditions have them – in Judaism, it's the daily recitation of the Shema; in Christianity, the Lord's Prayer; in Hinduism, karadarshana (kara-darshana); in Islam, it's reciting the opening chapter of the Quran. All these prayers remind the ones praying that they are beings of love and are called to treat others also as beings of love. Praying them, the practitioners root themselves in an understanding that the No Diet celebrators would appreciate – they root themselves in an understanding that their identity is not shaped by their weight or appearance, by riches or fame, or by any human measure of success. It is shaped instead by a unity with goodness, with lovingkindness, with God.

Now as Unitarian Universalists we don't have one prayer given to us by our tradition to say. Each of us has the freedom and the responsibility to choose our own daily words, to concoct our own morning recipe. Perhaps you choose, because of your heritage or other practices to use the words from one of these traditions. Perhaps you recite to yourself a poem by Mary Oliver or Gerard Manley Hopkins. Perhaps you read a different passage or prayer every day and then meditate on it. Perhaps you simply sit in silence or flow through some sun salutations. Maybe it happens in your bedroom, or with your cup of coffee, or on the train. Whatever the words, whatever the practice, just as a good breakfast is important for our bodily health, so a daily practice of some kind is important for our spiritual health. If you don't have a practice, or if you're thinking about trying something new, I'm happy to think with you. It needs to be part of our UU diet.

Part of our UU diet would also include trying new foods – reading, learning, questioning, expanding our knowledge and our understanding. There again is no one way to do this and, just as with foods, at different times what you crave will differ. Sometimes your questions lead you to learn more about another tradition, sometimes you are drawn to expanding your understanding of physics or cosmology; sometimes you need to understand yourself better; sometimes it's how to serve others. But as Unitarian Universalists, we can't stick to one diet week after week, year after year.

Finally, our diet also includes the practice of sharing. We don't just feed ourselves, we feed others, not perhaps with food, but with kindness, with respect, with care. We practice offering lovingkindness metta to those who confuse us, those who make us angry, those who make us feel afraid. We practice greeting everyone from the understanding that they are rooted in goodness just as we are, and that just as we are trying to do the best we can, so is everyone we meet. We share our resources, we share our skills, but we also equally, and perhaps first, share our kindness.

This is a hard diet to practice and that's why we need our church community. We're kind of like a Weight Watchers group. A Weight Watchers group cheers its members on when they lose weight, supports them when they don't, and holds them to their goals. We do the same thing, only we also remind one another that we are wonderful and acceptable just as we are. But sometimes we have the difficult responsibility of letting one another know a diet practice isn't healthy or healthful. We embrace – but we also hold accountable – when we don't treat one another with respect or kindness, when we see someone not taking care of himself or herself.

So while I understand the reason behind International No Diet Day, I won't be celebrating it today. Instead how about re-casting it as Inter-national Healthy Diet day – every day. And, as Mary Young asked those women around the coffee pot, "What do you think would happen if you spent as much time and energy on your careers as you do on diets?", so we could use the day to wonder what would happen if we spent as much time on our UU diet as we do on worrying about the weight of our bodies, the weight of our wallets, the weight of our grievances. What would happen if we savored and enjoyed ourselves, one another, and our world? Imagine the joy of that diet!

- Pamela M. Barz