

Eat More Pie

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About fifteen years ago, I spent a long January weekend on Topsail Island, North Carolina, at a spiritual retreat. Twelve relative strangers came together in a large beach house to listen, pray, meditate, share, and explore our connections to the Divine. One of our leaders, Donald Engstrom, was a big bear of a guy with a nurturing spirit who had lost his soulmate to AIDS back when being HIV-positive was a death sentence.

The Widow Engstrom, as he called himself, spent the weekend in a crocheted shawl, rocking in a chair sharing his thoughts and dispensing long expositions of wisdom from his place of loss and compassion. At several points during the weekend, we would bring back to the group those messages we had gotten through our meditations, and often we were long-winded as we explored in our limited language the expansive and complex ideas we'd heard. After one such session of sharing, the Widow Engstrom rocked in his chair, having been unusually quiet. When finally he spoke, he said only this: "Grandmother Bear says 'eat more pie.'"

At first we laughed, and then we pondered, and then we decided to take her advice. A run to the grocery store secured the final ingredients we needed to make pot pies and berry pies and a chocolate cream pie. As we cooked, we talked, more deeply and intimately than we had the entire rest of the weekend. We got to know each other, share recipes, share stories, and of course, eat pie. Lots of pie.

I have been thinking deeply about that experience since then, and I think it is time for us to consider pie... not the metaphorical kind, or the mathematical kind, but real, honest to god, stick a fork in and eat it pie.

Who here has a good memory of pie? (Almost) all of us do. Maybe it's the perfect pumpkin pie your aunt made each Thanksgiving, or that amazing spinach pie recipe you found in the Moosewood Cookbook, or the perfect pizza pie serendipitously discovered in tiny pizzeria near Grand Central Station. You say the word "pie" and people pause for a moment, often with a quiet "mmm" on their lips.

There is something mysterious...magical... almost sacred about pie.

In the movie *Michael*, a group of journalists and seekers accompany the Archangel Michael, played by John Travolta, on a road trip to Chicago. They stop at a diner, where the waitress rattles off a laundry list of pies. Michael says to her "bring us two of every kind" and we next see the table laden with cream pies, fruit pies, and custard pies. The strangers who have gathered find themselves sharing food, passing plates across the table, talking

about why pie is so important. Michael then pauses, looks at one of his companions (played by Andie McDowell) and tells her to sing her song about pie.

Pie, Pie, me oh my
Nothing tastes sweet, wet, salty and dry
all at once – oh well it's pie
Apple! Pumpkin! Minced an' wet bottom.
Come to your place every day if you've got em'
Pie, Me oh my –
I love pie!

Eating pie and singing that pie song allows McDowell's character to later sing her more important songs – to find her voice, to express her deepest desires. Such is the mystery of pie.

In 2002, artist Anissa Mack explored this mystery with an installation outside the Brooklyn Public Library called "Pies for a Passerby." Mack set up a picture-perfect miniature white cottage on the steps of the Library, and inside she made apple pies. She made one at a time, and left them, one at a time, on the window sills, intending for them to be snatched away. Mack was fascinated by the effect of a free, freshly-baked pie on folks passing the makeshift cottage. She would play with them a little, too. If you wanted a pie too badly, Mack would do her best to see that you didn't get it. If you were camped out, hogging the window sill, obnoxiously yelling "Hurry up! Make the pie!" – then forget about it. Instead, she might gently steer the pie toward another window where a patient child happily scooped it up. For three weeks, Mack filled the summer Brooklyn air with the smell of freshly baked pies.

Something special happens between baker and eater, touching something... maybe innocent, inside us. Maybe it is just that we have childhood memories of pies, but I think it's more.

Consider how pie is made. It takes time to make a pie. A berry pie requires that you take time to sort out the good berries from the bad, cleaning them up, and even more time if you pick the berries yourself. Making a custard pie, or my favorite, chocolate cream pie, requires careful cooking so that it's a perfect consistency.

And that's just sweet pies. There are savory pies too – quiches and pizzas and shepherds' pies and pot pies that often require a judicious selection of leftovers and just the right gravy.

And then, we bake the pie. Not quick 15 minute bake. Not popping it in the microwave. No... pies take 50, 60 minutes in a preheated oven. The smells build slowly along with our anticipation. We become acutely aware of the odors emanating from the kitchen, our taste buds watering, our memories evoked the way only smells can evoke them.

And yes, after the baking comes the eating. We pull out a plate and a fork, we sit down at the table, often with other people. We sit and eat pie. We “mmm” to each other. We talk about the pie. Pie isn’t eaten on the run. From start to finish, pie is a slow food. It begs us to savor, noticing the combination of flavors, the flakiness of the crust, the texture of the filling.

Is pie Holy Food? Perhaps. Like comedian Jack Handey says, “When you die, if you get a choice between going to regular heaven or pie heaven, choose pie heaven. It might be a trick, but if it’s not, mmmmmmmmm, boy.”

Of course, in all this talk about pie, there are some important spiritual lessons that pie teaches us. After all, it was in a spirit of prayer that Grandmother Bear told us to eat more pie. Now one way to think about the spiritual lessons of pie is to consider our own Unitarian Universalist faith. Think about this:

Pie, especially pot pies and meat pies, are often a compilation of various ingredients. Each is distinct – a pea is not a potato, a chunk of turkey is not a carrot. And yet when we bring them together and add gravy, we suddenly have something new. We can still recognize the pea and potato and turkey and carrot, but we have something that works and is unique. In Unitarian Universalism, we take wisdom from a variety of sources – Jewish and Christian teachings, the wisdom of the eastern religions, our exemplars and pioneers, our own theologians and thinkers, nature, and the world around us – each distinctive. But we put them together in a crust of community with a gravy of compassion and justice – and we have our unique religion – something that works. And each ingredient – each source – has its own approach to asking – and answering – humanity’s greatest questions. As Stephen Prothero points out in his book *God Is Not One*, not only are the different religions finding different answers, they are asking different questions. In Unitarian Universalism, we get to examine all of these different perspectives and find answers to our own questions of faith, love, and justice. Our questions are unique, but they contain elements from all of our sources.

Kinda like pie.

But this easy metaphor is missing Grandmother Bear’s point, I think. For what pie teaches us are lessons not about what our religion is like, but how we might experience and express it.

For starters, pie reminds us to take our time. In the gospel of Luke, we learn that Jesus and his disciples stopped by the home of Mary and Martha – and while Martha busied herself preparing a meal, providing a comfortable space, attending to every need, Mary simply sat and listened to the stories this band of travelers told. Martha, of course, was annoyed, and even asked Jesus why it would be okay for her sister to do nothing. Jesus suggested that “Mary has chosen the better part.” Not that the food and hospitality wasn’t welcome – but at some point, the doing has to end, and we all need to stop, be still, and give

thanks. Too often we hurry through our days and forget to *notice* our days. We are so busy cooking, we forget to eat. So taking a few minutes to actually eat a slice of pie gives us a welcome pause to consider the grace of our present moment. And baking a pie can be like a prayer or a mantra – while our brains and bodies are doing something rather rote and mechanical, our spirits have time to connect with the innermost corners of our hearts and the loving arms of the Divine.

Next, pie is a great equalizer. It appeals to, well, everyone –all classes, all ages, all genders and orientations and shades of color and faith and belief. All cultures have some sort of pie. And underneath the particular foodstuffs we use to make our pies across cultures, the process – cooking, sitting, eating, remembering, sharing – is universal. Is simply human.

Pie evokes a sense of hope and comfort, a sense of our inherent worth. I once worked in a soup kitchen in Durham, North Carolina, where pie was on the menu. We were serving a rather plain meal to those who gathered, and there were the sadly-expected blank, despairing looks on the faces of the people that passed through the line. But when we handed them a slice of pie, their eyes lit up and smiles tugged at the corners of their mouths. *Pie*, I heard some whisper. For a moment, these people found a bit of comfort and a bit of grace.

Pie gives us bounty out of scarcity. The origins are unknown, but it's thought that the first pies – and the millions that have come after – were created to make much out of little. We can make a pretty substantial pot pie out of a little leftover turkey, a couple of potatoes, a little bit of corn, a few peas, and barely a cup of flour. What doesn't seem enough to feed two people suddenly can feed six. In our world of single serving convenience foods, pie reminds us to share, and that sharing even the least of what we have we can make something that nourishes us all.

Pie is forgiving. I have had some bland pies, and undercooked pies, and overcooked pies. But somehow, it is impossible to throw away a slice of pie. You scrape off the burned crust, you eat around the uncooked center, and you add a little whipped cream. Pies don't have to be perfect to be loved. In fact, we may love them more because of their imperfections. Imagine if we approached each other the same way.

And when we bring wounded hearts together over a slice of pie, we talk. Pie gives us something to do while we work out our hurts and frustrations with each other, in a safe, comforting, flavor-filled atmosphere.

Poet Diana Serbe describes this safe space with these words:

Kitchens are tolerant.

They are conciliatory, and their acceptance of life's messiness forges bonds between friends and neighbors,

unites families that have stopped speaking,
patches strained marriages.

Accustomed to sticky spills, broken dishes, sloshing water and acrid smelling
cleaners, kitchens shrug their shoulders at the vagaries of human behavior.

Kitchens know all,
see all,
accept all.
Kitchens are home.

And when they are perfumed with food
they are the best places in the world for thinking
or for letting secret tears slide into a sauce,
for talking to oneself,
for laughing out loud even when alone.

Ultimately, what pie teaches us is that when we live our lives as though our whole lives
are sacred, insight and inspiration can come from the most remarkable places. So whether
you take Grandmother Bear as a metaphor for God or a manifestation of Spirit or the actual
voice of an animal guide, we should remember to see one another, to be present to one
another, to open ourselves to amazing grace, to stop, be still, give thanks... and eat more
pie.