

The Truth in Chickens
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It's good to be back; so many familiar faces. New faces, too. I served as an intern here in 2013-14. You were so gracious. I was ordained in February of this year at my home church in Rochester, Minnesota, and am working as interim minister now in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where we are moving toward a yoked position with Sioux City. I drive a lot.

Most of you know I came from a career in journalism, working as a writer and editor for many years. There's lots of overlap. It's all about words and people; I like both.

Along with writing and with talking with people, I have been an advocate for local food for a long time. I worked part-time at a food co-op while I was in seminary. I shop at the co-op and at the farmer's markets in Rochester and Sioux Falls. I support CSAs.

I buy chicken and pork and beef from a local farm run by long-time friends. I have known the names of the cows whose parts have been in my freezer.

I like to keep my food dollars close to the ground. But more than that, I like the connection with the land, with those who grow my food, with what sustains me.

Though I do not do it so much now anymore, I have been a hunter at times in my life, and I have

justified hunting with the argument that if I am going to eat meat, I should participate in the process by which other beings become food. I think of the “hunt” as the very first step in an honest meal.

I have kept a garden, I can the tomatoes, dry the peppers and freeze things as I can. The wide network of gardening, farming, butchering, shopping and cooking that keeps me fed is important. I think this is holy work. This is community. This is communion.

One of the best things for me in this career change is to be able to use things I have experienced in my life in other contexts, now in a new way. Many of you have heard me tell some of those old stories. Stories are really what I am all about. Now here is one more I have not had a chance to share with you before. I wrote it a few years ago when I worked at a newspaper in Iowa. It is a story of the land, of the people on that land, of their connection with it, with each other, and with the divine.

It is a story of common bonds, of very ordinary and extraordinary circumstances. It is about the sharing of daily bread. The names have been omitted here to protect the not-so-innocent. And I have edited this slightly to improve its readability. But if you held this version up against the story originally printed in the Ames Tribune in May 2006, you would know it as the same story.

Heresy in the Mackey Methodist Church. Shame. A few years ago, someone suggested that in the name of convenience, for the sake of time, they use instant

potatoes for the annual chicken and mashed potatoes dinner served to the Boone Lions Club. Devil, get thee behind me! There shall be no false gods here.

No, the annual Lions club dinner, served again Tuesday night to an appreciative crowd of about 30, was righteously authentic. Green beans and bacon, real mashed potatoes, gravy, Jell-O salad, homemade pie and fried chicken -- chicken raised within two miles of the church -- cooked by the women of the congregation and served up on long tables with table cloths and coffee and rolls in the church basement.

"This is a little piece of Americana," says the church president. "There's a very personal relationship with the community and with the land here."

Very personal. There are 16 members of the Mackey Methodist Church. Two new couples, with kids, brags the Reverend. They meet every Sunday, 9:30 for Sunday school and 10:30 for service. A timeless faith keeps them coming.

The president is an example. He grew up here. Upstairs in the sanctuary, standing in the rows of painted wooden pews, beside the hand-made quilt with the stitched-in names of congregants, he remembers, as a boy, tossing wads of paper from the balcony during Sunday school at whoever sat below.

Outside the window are tall trees planted years ago by the Methodist youth and by the president himself. The church yard holds his friends and

relatives. Two newly painted planters sprout geraniums.

Guess what they are, the Reverend says wickedly. The bases of the old outhouse, a two-holer.

The men are steeped in stories. This church was built in 1885. The basement was dug underneath, by hand, in 1949.

The pews are painted now because the women's dresses stuck to the original varnish.

In the 1970s, the president counted 99 worshipers one Sunday before his brother walked in to make 100.

In the 1980s, the furnace plugged and blew, everything was covered in black soot, "It was Satanic in here," he says. But elbow grease and a cleaning crew restored everything to its godly state.

You can feel close to God here. A patchwork of green and black earth rolls across the fields outside, purple sky reigns overhead.

This church is the last rock upon which the town of Mackey once stood. The story goes that a man came to town to buy dynamite one day long ago. He had a shotgun. Somehow, the gun went off, that sparked the dynamite, and in an instant, the town disappeared.

The church is all that's left.

It survives on the fortitude of its members, says the Reverend. That and a couple of big events. One is this dinner served to the Lions. This year, each member of the ladies circle brought three chickens and two pies. And one gal brought 50 salads.

The other event is a chicken and noodle supper served to the wider community -- indeed, they'll take anybody -- on the third Wednesday of October. Dinner is served from 5 to 7 and a bazaar follows at 7:30 with a live auction of handmade items, the same as it has been for 100 years.

And as for the chickens. These are not chickens that have ever known cellophane or Styrofoam or the little diaper thing they throw in the package to soak up whatever leaks out. These are not chickens whose lives have been spent, wasted, stacked 12 high in long rows in a hot metal building with electric lights and fans blowing day in and day out, chickens that have never made that long drive to eternity in a crate on a semi, or whose corpses have been subjected to that washing machine device that removes all the feathers.

No, these are chickens that have known green grass, laundry on the line, dogs barking at cars and the steady rhythm of chores. These are chickens raised on corn and table scraps, chickens whose eggs have fed children in jeans with PF Flyers on their feet and a bike in the yard, lying there where it was dropped when dad hollered from the barn.

Or at least they are the progeny of such chickens, their owners now as leathery as old rhubarb

leaves. Even so, these are chickens of brighter days. These are chickens of opportunity, American chickens, free and richly blessed, chickens of privilege, chickens of wealth. Even in death, these are chickens that ran free.

If it's not too self-indulgent to say so, I like that story. It's my attempt to channel Norman Rockwell.

It connects for me the big meaningful parts of my life – food, community, family, spirit.

What I want to do now is to connect this with some even larger meaning, some truth. And it strikes me that it hits on some themes wrapped up in the UU core affirmation of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Free in that I do not believe my actions are predetermined. I do not believe that they are guided by the invisible hand of God, nor are they the result of the totality of circumstances that has gone before and which surrounds me now, and which by the law of causality leaves me with no choice but to do the thing I do.

I do not believe either of these things. I believe I do have choice.

Choice to make decisions about my food dollars. Choice to make my spending mean something. "Free-range" applies to me as well as to chickens.

And with ability comes responsibility. Responsible in that, like all those who find connection

in the church on a green hillside in Iowa, I respond to and affect all those around me, those with whom I am in communion.

Sometimes, in my exercise of ability, I do not always act truly. I break faith. My shotgun goes off. I drift away like some 84 congregants who no longer attend. I lose the truth.

And in the tension of that disconnect comes meaning. Meaning given shape in story, the story that spun out from this seminal day, the story that brought the Mackey Methodist Church into my personal history. And the story that – like a chicken with its head cut off – achieved a life of its own.

Here is, as they say, the rest of the story.

A few days after this column ran in the paper, I received a distressing call. Turns out things hatched that I did not expect. The chickens, confessed a very apologetic woman from the church, had come from the supermarket.

Somehow, I had failed to ask the right question. I had let my assumptions run away with me.

In journalism, that kind of error is inexcusable. For this story in particular, written by the editor of the paper himself, and one in which I had taken considerable license in waxing on and on about these chickens, this was really, really bad. I was not happy, shamed, pissed off, and embarrassed, all at the same time.

I cannot blame my sources. I don't actually remember now if someone had told me these were local chickens. And even if they did, they might not have known where the chickens came from that year.

Or if they did, maybe they believed that the fiction of local chickens was harmless enough and that the truth of community and the need to sustain the church trumped a little elaboration.

But this isn't about them. This is about me, and what I learned once again.

The most important lesson is to keep asking questions – it is an old rule of journalism which I should not have forgotten. I have no excuse. I needed to keep on asking, to make sure I understood, to challenge not just the evidence before me, but even my own assumptions, especially when all the “facts” seemed to line up so perfectly with my chicken-dinner world view. That should have tipped me off right away. Comfort is an affliction.

Here in this church, we are the religion of questions, right? Unitarian Universalism and the tenacity of a good reporter go hand in hand.

From the time of Servetus, through Joseph Priestly, through the Enlightenment and its influence on the framers of this nation, through the fertile 1800s, through the rise of humanism in the 20th Century, and even now, as the light of liberal religion shines in what seems like a sometimes stormy and nonsensical world, reason has been our guide.

We are a church of no creeds, no inflexible answers. We believe that critical thinking is not just allowed, it is necessary. Asking questions is how religion stays alive in the world, how it stays relevant.

We are all made up of the stories we tell ourselves. Religion is the story about the really big things, about what is most important. It is a story about loving, about dreaming, about truth.

But sometimes, parts of the story can become no longer true, or at least they become less helpful in understanding.

As in how Servetus began pushing at the “sense” of the trinity.

And how John Murray asked how a loving God could send anyone into eternal hell.

And now, that same questioning comes in how we push back on the notions like traditional marriage or the supposed end of racism in America.

We are the ones to do this. We are the religion where all your answers are questioned. We are the ones whose forbearers challenged the conventional wisdom. They were bold. We should be bold, too.

If we stop asking questions – about belief, about the world, about who we are – then the whole “truth” of the story begins to run on a separate track, it achieves a life of its own. Like the chicken story.

The role of reason is to ground the story, to keep it real. We ask questions. We wonder why. It's a constant test.

The story of the Mackey Methodist church is a beautiful story, full of community, of resilience, of finding a place in the world.

But some small part of it became stuck. I don't think their story is irrelevant yet. But I should have kept on asking questions.

And as always, as we challenge the conventional wisdom, the most important questions are the ones we ask ourselves.

In this story, I was the one who fell down. I became suckered in by my own storytelling. It sounded so good when I said it.

The whole idea of organic, free-range chickens is seductive; it is a story I tell myself and then come to believe.

Food critic Michael Pollan writes of his own questions about "Rosie," the " `sustainably-farmed' `free-range chicken.'"

He must have seen this on a carton of eggs somewhere, I know it says something like this on the eggs I buy from the store.

But Pollan keeps digging and what he finds is that Rosie "lives in a shed with twenty thousand other

Rosies, who, aside from their certified organic feed, live lives little different from that of any other industrial chicken.”

Her “free-range” lifestyle is afforded by a door at the end of her coop, unlatched during the last two weeks of her life.

Pollan watches that unused door. And he writes: “I finally had to conclude that Rosie the organic free-range chicken doesn’t really grasp the whole free-range concept. The space that has been provided to her for that purpose is, I realized, not unlike the typical American front lawn it resembles—it’s a kind of ritual space, intended not so much for the use of the local residents as a symbolic offering to the larger community.

“Seldom if ever stepped upon, the chicken-house lawn is scrupulously maintained nevertheless, to honor an ideal nobody wants to admit has by now become something of a joke, an empty pastoral concept.”

Yikes. It makes me think twice about my own high-mindedness. How real am I? Am I not just an over-privileged white guy with dollars to spend on boutique foods? Is this all just an elaborate excuse to justify my love of bacon?

The crucible of reason best contains our own fabrication.

I have to ask, what part of my story am I telling myself that is no longer true?

What part of your story are you telling yourself that is no longer true?

Rev. Kendyl Gibbons writes, "We who would save the world must first save ourselves."

The legacy of Unitarianism and Universalism is just this, I think. We believe in truth. We believe there are many ways of coming to it, many windows, one light. Reason guides us to the light. We keep asking questions. We keep seeking.

Belief is not separate from reason, it is part and parcel with it.

As we tell our stories, we must make them about true things or they will fail to be about truth.

Doubt is not the enemy of faith, it is its guardian.

This story fails because it was not about true things. But there are such chickens out there. Our job is to find them.