

Running Head: WE ARE HOW WE EAT

We Are How We Eat

Ashley Wilkins

Fuller Theological Seminary

### Abstract

Current food production, preparation, and consumption practices are disordered; rather than contributing to mental and spiritual health, they detract through physical disease, social injustice, and disconnection from thick narrative identity. Furthermore, current practices divorce humanity from two of their most basic spiritual tasks, to care for Creation and to join together at in redemptive table fellowship. Therefore in this paper, food is understood as a pervasive aspect of daily existence connected to psychological and spiritual health is proposed in order to highlight narrow or insufficient understandings of the underpinnings of psychological and spiritual health.

My own growing awareness of food production and preparation led the increased interest in the impact of food, which ultimately resulted in the research for this paper. During early graduate school, the opportunity to participate in a community supported agriculture program allowed me to explore food as a lifestyle which contributed to all aspects of my being including mental and physical health. Several like-minded friends contributed to an understanding of the spiritual implications of agriculture and food. Alongside my own growing awareness of food, increasing numbers of blogs, books, news columns, and popular media have addressed contemporary food practices and their potential negative effects. Within this plethora of literature, connections have been made to industrialism, lifestyle, and physical health. However, psychological or mental health connections have not been clearly made.

No explicit connections have been made between food practices and psychological health. This paper posits that the impact of food practices on mental health is broad and overarching rather than cleanly aligning with one theoretical orientation, research construct, or etiological understanding. Food practices are understood as relating to connection or disconnection from thick narrative or cultural identity. Those who experience and engage such an identity are involved in connected, vulnerable communities. Those who are disconnected from such a placed, traditioned narrative identity display the disconnection inherent in the food practices of a industrial consumer lifestyle. Consumerism is described as disconnecting from the complex relationships between people and the land, people and animals, and people and each other.

Agrarian writers and theologians support conclusions about the negative impact of contemporary food production and consumption practices with analogous arguments targeted on the holistic spiritual health of individuals and faith communities. A brief overview of ecology from the agrarian perspective proposes a context of Christian agricultural ethics through which following theological statements can be viewed. With that understanding, faith identity is reviewed, holding in mind the role of the land, the promised land of Israel, in God's covenant with his people. Specifically, the responsibility of the people to care for, tend, and cultivate the land is emphasized to stress the foundational aspect of land in the faith identity. Finally, food practices are viewed as redemptive, establishing table fellowship and as a redemptive practice that strengthens God's people as a Church in contemporary times in order to reiterate the mundane aspect yet crucial impact of food practices.

Implications for the local food and faith communities are made. First, practical implications are made. Next, suggestions are offered for the Christian church, particularly that connection results in the promotion of justice. Finally, use of food practice and connection in psychological interventions is discussed. Connected food practices ultimately promote participation in the memberships of Creation, and a healthful, flourishing life.

*“All things by immortal power,  
Near or far,  
Hiddenly  
To each other linkéd are,  
That thou canst not stir a flower  
Without troubling of a star”*

- Francis Thompson

If indeed the whole of creation is connected in such a way that all actions impact all else, then any disorder in our mundane activities and practices creates a problem for some other aspect of creation. One of the most mundane human activities is to interact with food. Eating, one of the most basic daily activities, affects the organization, structure, and nature life through the production, preparation, and consumption of food for sustenance. Food practices hold enormous potential to impact individuals as well as community and global systems through the ways they promote connection or disconnection. Of specific interest to this paper is the way that food impacts on psychological and spiritual health<sup>1</sup>.

Current trends in the production and consumption of food occur in the context of an increasingly broken people and an increasingly broken land. Around the end of WWII food production and consumption became increasingly manufactured, drawing on industrial principles of the factory and increasing esteem of science as food expert (Pollan, 2006; Berry, 2009). Concurrently, the pace of life, spurred by more and more efficient technologies, accelerated. Paralleling technology-driven changes in pace of life were changes in food production and

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that food practice also has extensive impact on ecological and economic health including land or soil health and the ecological sustainability of current farming practices. Although these topics are also pressing, they are outside the scope of this paper. For those interested, many of the cited authors address these topics, and there are many written resources beyond those listed in this paper that discuss the nuances of popular perspectives.

consumption, aided by manufacturers seeking to gain economic profit through the global distribution of easy, ready-made, name-brand food (Pollan, 2006). This increased pace of life and globalized commodification of daily activities has contributed to the fragmentation of traditional structures of relating and subsequent isolation of people from the communities they would otherwise have engaged. Both community fragmentation and pace of life have been connected to increasing levels of psychological non-health including depression, burnout, anxiety, adrenal burnout, and physical illness (Swenson, 1992). In the face of global production, distribution, and consumption of food (Chanda, 2007; Giddens, 2003; Pollan, 2006), people are unsure of their identities, and disconnected from a cultural narrative, a narrative which has included food culture and production (Berry, 2002; Giddens, 2003). As a result of participation in contemporary food culture, people are left increasingly unhealthy and broken, not only those who consume, but those who produce.

Food production systems have contributed to injustice and damage against those who participate within it. Consumers are unaware of this reality because marketing and processing practices serve to keep the populace disconnected and distant from those who produce their food and unaware of the injustices meted out by the very work they do (Pollan, 2006; Berry, 2009; Cavanaugh, 2008). The producers, domestic and international farmers, ranchers and laborers are subject to market demands (Cavanaugh, 2008; Schlosser, 2001). As such, these people are treated as interchangeable pieces of a machine whose purpose is to make the industrial profit high and thus exploited (Pollan, 2006; Berry, 2009; Schlosser, 2001). For example, less than half of those who work the land own the land they work (Berry, 2009). Workers in meat packing industries are viewed as interchangeable; roughly one-quarter experience major injuries on the job, and many are abused or threatened by supervisors (Schlosser, 2001). The exploitation is not a recent

historical development. From the use of slavery, to the exploitation of developing nations for inexpensive food commodities such as sugar, tea, and coffee, distant laborers have long been forced to produce under subpar conditions and at their own economic loss (Chandra, 2007).

Currently food production practices include: government subsidy of intentional crop overproduction which drives down prices domestically and internationally (helpful in part for the consumer but debt/bankruptcy-inducing for the producer) and increases competition such that farmers continue to increase yield in order to make ends meet, industry production of non-viable seeds which need to be rebought annually, and reliance on international markets with less than living wages for laborers (Chandra, 2007; Giddens, 2003; Cavanaugh, 2008; Pollan, 2006). Few stop to think that food imported inexpensively often contributes to international systems of serfdom that leave laborers with little food to feed themselves and land owners with luxury, widening existing poverty gaps. The injustice done to producers, both farmers and laborers, as well as the visible impact of production and consumption on eaters is indicative of societal disconnection from the multi-faceted impact of daily actions.

Within Christian history, food production and consumption began as a topic of theological discussion for the Israelites (Davis, 2009). Israel was charged with the care and cultivation of the land as well as maintaining just policies for those who till the land (Genesis 1, Leviticus). In the New Testament there is abundant use of agricultural and table imagery, particularly the use of the Eucharist table as one of transformation and redemption. As food practices have negatively impacted the land and the people of God, it could be postulated that humanity is metaphorically pushing away from the table of God, ignoring the responsibilities of Israel and neglecting to “love thy neighbor” (Matthew 22:37-40). Therefore, my thesis is as follows: the degree of connection or disconnection which people and communities experience

with regard to food practices of production, preparation, and culturally understood consumption is symptomatic of psychological and spiritual health inasmuch as those practices are intricately connected to the development of a healthful identity and cultural narrative which supports the participation in the Christian practices of transformative/redemptive love.

In the course of this paper I will argue that food practices, integral elements of daily life, are symbolic and symptomatic of psychological and spiritual health. First, I will provide a snapshot of my own budding awareness of food practice and the agrarian movement to demonstrate my changing experience of food practice as connecting to more than physical health. Next, I will highlight one of many possible connections between food and psychology, namely the role of food practice in the development of identity and thick cultural narrative. Then, I will integrate an emerging psychology of food with a theology of food, arguing that food practice is one of earliest covenantal expressions between God and God's people, and that food practices, from production to consumption are daily responses to God's commandments and redemptive actions. Finally, I highlight new and re-newed rhythms, such as community meals and meal preparation, for local church and daily life, as they relate to promoting connection through psychological health and participation in robust faith life.

### **Agrarianism for Beginners**

The summer before I came to Fuller, I read my first food book: Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*. I was surprised, reading through the pages, to realize that corn growth in the United States is both heavily subsidized because of its financial and ecological unsustainability, and that the corn, not of an edible variety, formed the basis of most supermarket foods. It was at that time that I increased my awareness of the ingredients in my food and started simplifying what I ate, eating mostly things that I "would have found my grandmother's

kitchen.” (Pollan, 2008). I began thinking alongside Pollan that eating was an agricultural, ecological, and political act (2006), and with the eventual support of friends began to think that it might be a theological one too.

Months later, a friend mentioned that I might try buying my produce from a community supported agriculture (CSA) box. So I subscribed to Abundant Harvest Organics, and officially began my adventures into the world of food. Immediately I needed to change the way I thought about food preparation and consumption. The CSA did not allow for modification of box contents, and so I began searching for recipes with obscure vegetables, preparing soups and stews, and freezing leftovers. I quickly learned which fruits are in season during the winter months (citrus) and what to do when you receive 20 peaches at once (cobbler or freeze). I also discovered that cooking is time-intensive, creative, and a great opportunity for community.

In the first very challenging year, my lifestyle changed drastically because of the food I ate. I found myself making time to prepare basic sustenance by chopping, sautéing, and roasting. Others joined me – a family who shared the box, and friends who ate the results – and the necessary weekly slowing of my life through cooking became part of my rhythm of self-care and understanding of who I was. It was not surprising that my body was healthier. Unexpected was my realization that sharing the time cooking and eating with others contributed to feeling calm and connected with myself and my neighbors. Over the course of the following year, the community around me, and some of the farmers, helped connect the farming, harvest, and abundance of good food to God’s provision of a fruitful land. The process of food became inherently connected with my understanding of psychological health and connection, but also with the fulfillment of the mission of the church.

### **Connection, Eating, and Psychological Health**

Mental health connections are wide-ranging and broad. If Berry is to be believed and “all things are connected. The context of everything is everything else” (2002, p. 177) then there is no doubt that food practices impact mental health and have implications for the practice of psychology. However, with connections of that magnitude it is myopic to locate practice as impacting only one aspect of psychology. Rather, I would suggest that production, preparation, and consumption of food be considered an essential, elemental action, with far reaching impact on all humanity does and is in the world. Food practice would relate to psychology much like an umbrella covers all underneath it, or a tree trunk eventually connects to all of the branches. The overlap is not clean or elegant. The connections are not clear-cut. It is probable that no one psychological theory, research construct, or clinical application parallels food practice. Yet it seems that such a daily action must connect. However, exploring the wide-reaching impact of food practice is beyond the scope of one paper. Therefore, an exploration as food practice as relating to identity, narrative, and cultural development follows.

**Thick narrative, identity, and culture.** Food has traditionally been an integral part of community and identity. From the type of food that is produced, to the way it is prepared and eaten, food is elemental to narrative, identity, and community. “Thick” descriptions of culture are “historically particular, symbolically complex, and ethically maximalist” (Dueck & Reimer, 2009, p. 123). Thick cultural narratives lead to nuanced, embedded identities that have texture and layers that reflect cultural values of faith, habit, and action.

Cultivation and production of food provide the first place for connectedness with cultural narratives surrounding complex, nuanced understandings of health and connectedness. Cultural rhythms relating to harvest, slaughter, and planting, as well as land, plants, animals, and humans have traditionally emerged from connections to place-specific needs (Berry, 2002). It is the



personal response to those needs with specific actions, such as planting particular plants and raising particular flocks, which formed food cultures over time (Berry, 2009). Not only has responding to these needs promoted land health, and the formation of culture, but embedding oneself in seasons and cycles has allowed the producers to remain humane and intentional about potentially desensitizing and violent actions such as slaughter (Pollan, 2006). This personal connection to land creates a communion, a cultural understanding of connectedness to a place, a people, and a way of life (Berry, 2009).

The field of Indigenous Psychology offers an example of a particular form of thick narrative that provides ample opportunity for connections to eating and food. Indigenous psychologies necessarily depend on the indigenous culture, language, and behavior producing the psychology (Dueck & Reimer, 2009); many cultures place great value in connection to location, heritage, ancestry, and community/interdependence. Indigenous North American spirituality specifically emphasizes the connection and interdependence of all things, and uses the concept of orientation, relating orientation to being connected to a particular place. Within this narrative, lack of connection to the land could lead to disorientation, which “also goes deeper into a fundamental distortion or *who one should be* and *what one should do*” (Wirzba, 2011, p. 41, italics original). Identity or culture within indigenous psychology would then be dependent on holistic ways addressing food.

Food preparation also provides the opportunity to connect with a nuanced identity and cultural narrative. Not only do many cultures have specific practices surrounding the preparation of food dishes, but the action of cooking itself allows space for reflection, and thoughtful celebration of cultural narrative and connectedness. Elizabeth Ehrlich provides a powerful example of how food preparation can lead to thick identity in her book *Miriam's kitchen: A*

*memoir*. Ehrlich's experience of watching her mother-in-law prepare kosher foods and connect the food to her deep faith and experience of pre-Holocaust Poland proved a turning point in Ehrlich's own cultural and religious identity formation, ultimately changing her emotional and mental health as well.

Berry (2009) claims that "eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds" (p. 10). However, the United States, for reasons mentioned above and described in greater detail below, lacks the robust, thick narrative of food culture found in nations such as France and Italy (Pollan, 2006). Eating food, both the types of food eaten, as well as the manner in which a meal is presented and consumed has traditionally taken part in the context of culture and heritage. In this way, eating introduces a person to the place they are in (Berry, 2009). Certain dishes have myths or stories about them, and one can imagine that "such storied food can feed us both body and soul, the threads of narrative knitting us together as a group, and knitting the group into the larger fabric of the given world" (Pollan, 2006, p. 408). Engaging thus to a particular location through the food and food customs would build an ever thickening nuanced understanding of place, time, tradition, and heritage and connect individuals on multiple levels to others around them. Without these connections to food traditions and the inherent thick narratives, individuals disconnect and "slowly lose the ability to be alive and responsive to the world. Rather than interacting with a place and making deep, abiding connections, [they] become more and more passengers always going through, but hardly into, a place" (Wirzba, 2011, p. 41). Without placed connections, and knowledge of one another and the world through thick narrative cultures, healthy communities cannot lastingly form.

**Connection to community.** Healthy communities are made of placed people, having thick cultural narratives, who have knowledge of one another and the place in which they are

located (Berry, 2002). These different types of connected relationships, between the people and the land and people with each other, engage the practices of food production, preparation, and consumption in ways which support community life and cultural flourishing.

Farming practice which engages a traditioned, embedded narrative impacts community life through the promotion of new social, economic, ecological, and agricultural relationships (Berry, 2009). Producers aware of their interconnectedness cannot separate profit margin from the runoff of fertilizer chemicals into drinking water (Pollan, 2006) nor can communities separate the cheap price of imported produce from the destruction of a local farmer's livelihood. Communities aware of their connectedness enact cultural values that promote food production which supports the flourishing of the community and perpetuation of the community's identity.

Preparation and consumption also occurs within the context of connectedness and community functioning. Community, evoking thoughts of related words such as commune and communion, implies a sense of connectedness and belonging that often can be found around a table or in a kitchen. Popular images of communities include colleagues savoring a lunch break, families and friends enjoying a summer barbeque, or people partaking in the long, lingering weekend dinner. Christian communities in particular find their most basic form of connection around a table and sacramental meal. Wirzba (2011) described eating as inherently hospitable and communal, as did Berry (2009) who stated: "you can eat food by yourself. A meal, according to my understanding anyhow, is a communal event, bringing together family members, neighbors, even strangers. At its most ordinary it involves hospitality, giving, receiving, and gratitude" (p. 185). In the practice of connection through hospitality and giving, communities acknowledge that connection is vulnerability.

Eating is the daily confirmation that we need others and are vulnerable to them. When we eat well, we honor and accept responsibility for the gifts of God given to each other for

the furtherance of life. We move more deeply and more sympathetically into the memberships of creation (Wirzba, 2011, p. 77).

Several poignant examples exist of communities who have acknowledged the importance of traditioned, connected food consumption. All over the country, chefs are rebuilding local food economies, buying directly from community farmers, and connecting with one another around a local, traditioned food culture (Pollan, 2006). Individuals and families are buying produce directly from those in their communities, identifying their consumption practices as civic actions that protest faceless organizations which destroy the complexity community connectedness (Pollan, 2006). In Italy, the Slow Food movement arose as individuals recognized the “infinitely superior pleasures of traditional foods enjoyed communally” (Pollan, 2006, p. 259). These examples counter the deep disconnections resulting from thick narrative and cultural identity and from flourishing communities found in industrial food practices.

**Consumerism and disconnection.** In contrast to a thick or developed sense of identity, a thin identity is linear, universal, and without context (Dueck & Reimer, 2009). It would seem that food as it is often currently approached reflects a “thin” narrative, without context or particularity. Thin narrative leads to a disconnected, industrialized approach to food production and preparation/processing. Without a thick narrative surrounding food practice, individuals are subject to the images presented by marketing, which seek to develop new habits of “need” for highly processed and brandable foods. These new food products, for the sake of competitive business, necessarily disregard the connections between food and the land in which it is cultivated, as well as the people who produce and prepare the food.

Food is typically portrayed as a consumer commodity and thus part of the free market economy. As a commodity, food marketing relies on brand names, labels, and processing into convenience items in order to create a profitable product distinguishable to the consumer from

another company's product. Commodities, in the words of Wendell Berry, act "like a filter, stripping qualities and histories from the harvest of a particular farm and farmer" (2009, p. 60). To compensate, marketing seeks to sell a story or vision that rarely portrays the reality of the food's production or processing (Pollan, 2006). What it neglects to show is the injustice perpetrated against the farmers and ranchers, indebted to the government and reliant on subsidy, the laborers, and the meat industry workers, who work in conditions as terrible as the animals are forced to live (Pollan, 2006; Schlosser, 2001; Wirzba, 2011). Furthermore, the description of food as a good gives individuals the illusion that producers have direct control over the production and processing of the food item, which in reality is a multi-step process dictated by industry and profit margin which is virtually untraceable from harvest to table (Pollan, 2006). Modern food production is thus based on a series of disconnections, including people from the land, people from the "habitat" of their food, people from each other or the producers of the food, and people from their historical, traditioned relationships with food preparation (Berry, 2002). It follows that, in disconnection and isolation from food production and preparation, individuals are disconnected from the effects of their consumption practices.

Industrial food consumption practices likewise promote disconnection. When consumers are not participators in the communities producing their food, they are unaware of the connections and relationships between their eating and the rest of the world (Berry, 2002). This disconnection falsely supports the myth that food consumption begins with a transaction between the store and the self, and is driven solely based on appetite (Berry, 2009). From an industry standpoint, the consumer is thus necessarily detached from origin of the consumed objects, in order that they will "need" and purchase more. "Shoppers are often reduced to purchasing the

meanings they enjoy” (Wirzba, 2011, p. 19). Ironically, in purchasing a meaning, consumers further disconnect from the thick narrative of tradition, culture, and identity.

Disconnected from a unifying cultural identity or narrative rooted in place, communities are fragmented as consumers seek lifestyles that will provides increasing amounts of their objects which momentarily satisfy and provide meaning. Often this lifestyle is fast-paced, and many of these consumers seek to eat food that is convenient, fast, and easy. Those who eat quickly, without the benefit of preparation or consumption of food with others, are likely to lack time and energy to prepare their own food, let alone spend hours building a relationship that brings enjoyment. A lifestyle that fast-paced necessarily precludes the time spent in meaningful or invested relationships that promote connection and community. When disconnected from other people and the effects of consumption, the logical next step is that consumers are disconnected from humanizing emotional reactions in the face of the hurt caused to other human beings or to the land. Someone disconnected from a thick narrative identity and out of connection with a community would be less likely to notice or feel impacted by the damage inflicted by food practices on another person, community, or country. To disconnected consumers, awareness of food practices may seem insurmountable or illogical. However, I would argue with Berry (2009) that:

...to eat with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake might sound like a burden, but in practice few things in life can afford quite as much satisfaction. By comparison, the pleasures of eating industrially, which is to say eating in ignorance, are fleeting. (p. 11)

### **Connection with the Provider and Creator**

Food practices and the ways they connect or disconnect establish how interdependent and vulnerable we are on the land, and on those who farm the land for our daily existence. However, without God’s initial creation and provision of healthy land, food production would be

impossible. Abundance and fertile land are symbolic of a world ripe with God's provision, a provision that highlights humanity's ultimate vulnerability and need for connection to and participation with the Creator of all life-giving sustenance. Therefore, food practice provides an opportunity to:

...grow food and eat in a way that is mindful of God is to collaborate with God's own primordial sharing of life in the sharing of food with each other. It is to participate in forms of life and frameworks of meaning that have their root and orientation in God's caring ways with creation (Wirzba, YR, p. xiii).

Through participation there is connection to God, to one's neighbor, and to the practice of a sacramental table.

### **The first and greatest commandment.**

The most important one ... is this: 'Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:29-30 TNIV)

This commandment, named by Jesus as the most important one, describes a life of complete devotion to God using all personal faculties, practices, and resources. The prominent organic, agricultural, and pastoral imagery in the Bible suggests that food practices are ways to fulfill the first commandment.

God, in a faithful covenantal relationship provided a fruitful promised land to Israel. Israel was to then faithfully participate in the covenant by caring for the land, cultivating and tending it (Leviticus). This participatory action in God's created order connects those who actively receive God's provision with God through whole-life worship and establishes identity as the people of God. However, Israel, both the historical Jewish nation as well as the current body of believers, have repeatedly disconnected from God and not fulfilled this commandment. Davis (2009) follows the description of Israel's treatment of the land throughout the Old Testament. Her work highlights Israel's: consequence for disobedience is the loss of habitable land (Genesis

1), responsibility to consume responsibly and without waste (Exodus), need to responsibly participate in the holiness and complexity of the created order (Leviticus), and punishment for neglecting the land and Jubilee (Jeremiah, Hosea, and Amos). She also highlights how images of shalom include agrarian pictures of fruitfulness and wholeness. Unfruitfulness was the result only in the face of Israel's disobedience or non-response. God's provision and Israel's non-response is visible throughout the Old Testament, first in Eden, then with manna, and then again with a fertile promised land (Davis, 2009). Likewise, current food production practices treat Creation as disposable and non-distinct, useful for conquering and human purposes which counters biblical exhortations to cultivate, care, and tend (Berry, 2009; Davis, 2009). By shirking the responsibility to care for the land, both Israel and our contemporary society have chosen to forsake participation in God's abundant care for creation. Disconnection, resulting from food production practice, is the result, both from God, and from actualizing the fullness of identity as God's people.

Food production necessitates the recognition of limits, and acceptance of sacrifice. The land is limited in the amount of food that can be produced, and the season in which the food grows. Attempts to extend beyond that limitation result in dead, barren land. Contrarily, Sabbath acknowledges limitation, attributing to God the abundance of production, not to our own busy work. "Sabbath is not a reprieve from life but the putting to an end of the restlessness that prevents deep engagement with it" (Wirzba, 2011, p. 46). Sabbath is paradisaical, a celebratory restfulness that connects with God's holiness in time (Heschel, 1951). Time spent in Sabbath renews not only the person, but the land, to continue the work of cultivation. In this recognition of both human and soil limitation, humanity fulfills the first and greatest commandment of loving God. Recognizing God's gift and provision of good land, and honoring that through



action towards the gift and towards connection with God is the beginning of health. Through connecting with God in food production Christians can move towards fulfilling the second commandment.

**The Second Commandment.** “The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12: 31). Voices like that of Wendell Berry remind us of the justice of our daily interactions with food production. He reminds us of the connection of all of the parts. “It has become increasingly clear that the way we farm affects the local community, and that the economy of the local community effects the way we farm; that the way we farm affects the health and integrity of the local ecosystem” (Berry, 2009, p. 89). Disconnection results from food production practices which promote the injustices described above: unsanitary or abusive working conditions, growing indebtedness as a result of government oversupply mandates and corporate control of seed viability, importation practices which impoverish both the local farmer and the international farmer, and so on. This disconnection represents the ways in which food production practices are injustice, and do not loving one’s neighbor as oneself. Few would want to experience any of these conditions, preferring to prosper and gain profit, the exact desires which created the initial disconnect.

Neighborliness has a space and time, a community aspect which acknowledges the gift God has provided in the land and the agriculture (Berry, 2002). As such, the preparation and consumption of food likewise provides rich opportunity for connection with neighbors. Not only does eating join us to those who cultivated the land and grew the food, but it joins us to those with whom we have the opportunity to products of their labor. Preparation, is slow, it takes time. Thus, there is time for wisdom to pass between the generations over the tasks of cleaning, chopping, and preparing (Titus 2). If preparation responsibilities are shared, there is time to live

life together, to support through hardship, and to share resources with those who are struggling. Preparation naturally leads to consumption, which done in connection necessitates hospitality, sharing with the less fortunate neighbor, and participation in a common table (Matthew 25). When production, preparation, and consumption of food are thus redefined, eating becomes a connecting, transformative, redemptive, even Eucharistic act which promotes connection to neighbor, and indicates robust faith life.

**Redemptive Eating.** Participation in the lived experience of an eating community is inherently connecting and therefore transformative. “Eating joins people to each other, to other creatures and the world, and to God through forms of ‘natural communion’ too complex to fathom” (Wirzba, 2011, p. 2). In the process of eating, it is possible to appreciate again and again God’s provision. God’s provision for eating, first with manna, then with a fertile promised land, and then later Jesus’ body to be remembered in the Eucharist, provides precedent for eating to become a central act of faith.

Daily acknowledgement of the ways in which God’s good provision allows for sustenance transforms a mundane experience into a faith practice that asserts the person’s membership in creation. Eating, although the connection is not clear with contemporary practices, is an action that reasserts health-giving membership in creation, a joining to others and to the earth (Berry, 2002). The eater is no longer a consumer, choosing based on preference or desire, but a member aware of his or her connection to the neighbor who produced the food through God’s provision. In this way, “to eat with God at the table is to eat with the aim of healing and celebrating the memberships of creation” (Wirzba, 2011, p. 11). Eating with acknowledgement of membership and in connection with one’s neighbors thus becomes “a

sacrament, as eating is also, by which we enact and understand our oneness with Creation, the conviviality of one body with all bodies” (Berry, 2002, p. 133).

Meals become thrice daily holy celebrations filled with hospitality, communion with one another, and feasting together through the breaking of bread. Hospitality is not limited to the desirable and healthy, but to the marginalized, the impoverished, and the aversive “least of these” (Matthew 25). As such, eating has Trinitarian implications where breaking bread is not simply the sharing of sustenance with one another, but a daily Eucharist aimed at the transformation of individuals and communities (Wirzba, 2011). Traditionally Eucharist is the consumption of bread and wine that consumes the partaker into the body of Christ (Cavanaugh, 2008). “The act of consumption of the Eucharist does not entail the appropriation of goods for private use, but rather being assimilated to a public body, the body of Christ. ... When we consume the Eucharist, we become one with others and share their fate” (Cavanaugh, 2008 p. 95). Eating sacramentally is eating in awareness of the shared, connected reality of all of Creation. A connected Creation necessitates redemptive transformation of brokenness into wholeness. Food practices which embody wholly loving God and loving one’s neighbor are movements towards healing and transformation. Meals that become sacramental over the breaking of bread with the entire community, including the marginalized, also seek healing. In the words, once again, of Wendell Berry,

To try to heal the body alone is to collaborate in the destruction of the body. Healing is impossible in loneliness; it is the opposite of loneliness. Conviviality is healing. To be healed we much come with all the other creatures to the feast of Creation. (2002, p. 99)

### **How to Eat Well**

By now it should be clear that food practices, although not clearly implicated in psychological research or described in psychological theory, are as connected to psychology as

they are to faith life. Wendell Berry's assertion that all things are connected in complex ways cannot go unheeded. As such, Christians and psychologists alike would do well to promote connection.

One way to integrate the above psychology and a theology of food is to become active as individuals that unreservedly promote active engagement with food production, preparation, and consumption. To revisit my own initial journey with food, within my first few months, my nascent understanding led me to believe I should nourish the particular local "vine" thorough my food practice. I participated in a specific local food life through buying food from local farmers, fruits, vegetables, meat, milk, and eggs. Further, I ate seasonal foods, which forced awareness of the beauty, bounty, and variety of creation! I intentionally shared preparation responsibilities with my neighbors, and grew creative, strong relationships, a rhythm that although new to me is re-newed in the eyes of history. These food practices located my physical and mental health and my practice of faith in a particular agricultural food community. Those who wish to do likewise can begin to produce their own food, or purchase from growers with whom they can talk. Additionally, urban dwellers can learn which local chefs engage in place-specific purchasing and preparation. Those who are civic-minded can look into government policies that prevent small-scale meat production. As highlighted in multiple recent popular books, large-scale meat production has created the opportunity for shocking spread of disease and perpetration of unsanitary practices that are protected by the money of industrial interests (Pollan, 2006; Schlosser, 2001)

The church (or Church) and the psychologist can likewise promote connection through food practice. That is to say, churches can participate in local food communities promoting neighborly food production practices rather than those which perpetrate injustice. Furthermore,

the local church body can strengthen connection, culture, and community life because of the rhythms which emerge as a result of the food preparation and consumption. Taking time to eat and prepare meals as communities is visible act. In this time, the visible church can connect with the lonely, feed the unhealthy, build vibrant communities, invest in youth, Sabbath together, and provide friendship and fellowship to another. Even without fast, hectic lifestyles, many lack human connection and experience crippling isolation in a culture focused on the individual. Church communities that return to the complex cultural narratives of food in traditions, history, and text, fulfill an ethical imperative resounding from the Old Testament that demands that God's people engage in specific ways with the earth and the broader world. These churches combat individualism and isolation with participation in biblical definitions of identity including neighbor, vine, and membership in Creation. This identity is incongruent with isolation and promotes connection and healing.

The psychologist can also engage food practices as metaphor or intervention in the therapy or consulting room. Daily practices offer rich information about beliefs, worldviews, and life rhythm. Therapeutic and consultation interventions would seek to engage the areas of shallow identity and disconnect with a broader community, narrative, or culture. The end goal would be to cultivate connection and healing. Connected, whole people would in turn promote wholeness and connection in the people and communities around them. Berry succinctly summarizes this concept by proclaiming:

Only by restoring the broken connections can we be healed. Connection is health. And what our society does best is to disguise from us is how ordinary, how commonly attainable, health is. We lose our health – and create profitable diseases and dependences – by failing to see the direct connections between living and eating, eating and working, working and loving. (2002, p. 132)

When people and communities are connected to each other and to God through the production, preparation, and consumption of food, the natural outcome is a life that acknowledges membership in Creation. Membership, introduced above, is an apt concept for the application of a combined psychology-theology of food and clearly implies unity. Membership highlights the unavoidable connection between the people in our nation, and in other nations, who farm the land with little prestige or profit and those who enjoy the yield. Therefore, knowing how food purchases directly and indirectly treat growers is not a privilege reserved for the wealthy or civic-minded; it is the responsibility of those who consume food. Membership also includes honing our understandings of generosity, loyalty, commitment, and love to those around us. This exhorts churches and individuals to begin cultivating and sharing produce so the marginalized, oppressed, and downtrodden may eat well. Membership means that the health of the land, individual, community, and church are interrelated and that health must be had for all if for any. Perhaps membership means that we must begin by sitting down with those around us, in our neighborhoods, and eating real food, produced and prepared by real people, together. To join together, in membership with those around us may start to address the spiritual and psychological brokenness.

### **Conclusion**

Thompson's poem claims that stirring even a flower troubles a star, that all things are connected. Discussed specifically in this paper are the ways that psychology and theology are connected to food practices. The practice of neighborliness in food production, and the act of people breaking bread together are signs of redemptive spiritual health through connection and membership. If connection and membership are signs of health in faith, then connection and membership with regard to traditioned food practice is simultaneously indicative of our current

levels of psychological health. Everything is connected; mundane, daily choices impact and interact with spiritual, emotional, psychological, and physical health. In this way, we truly are how we eat.

## References

- Berry, W. (2009). *Bringing it to the table: On farming and food*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint.
- Berry, W. (2002). *The art of the commonplace: The agrarian essays of Wendell Berry*. Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard.
- Berry, W. (1981). *The gift of good land: Further essays cultural and agricultural by Wendell Berry*. San Francisco, CA: Northpoint Press.
- Cavanaugh, W. (2008). *Being consumed: Economics and Christian desire*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Chanda, N. (2007). *Bound together: How traders, preachers, adventurers, and warriors shaped globalization*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Davis, E. F. (2009). *Scripture, culture, and agriculture: An agrarian reading of the bible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dueck, A., & Reimer, K. (2009). *A peaceable psychology: Christian therapy in a world of many cultures*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.
- Ehrlich, E. (1997). *Miriam's kitchen: A memoir*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Ehrenreich, B., & English, D. (2005). *For her own good: Two centuries of the experts' advice to women*. New York, NY: Anchor Books.
- Giddens, A. (2003). *Runaway world: How globalization is reshaping our lives*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pollan, M. (2006). *The omnivore's dilemma: A natural history of four meals*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Pollan, M. (2008). *In defense of food: An eater's manifesto*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.



Schlosser, E. (2001). *Fast food nation: The dark side of the all-American meal*. New York, NY: Perennial.

Swenson, R. (1992) *Margin: Restoring emotional, physical, financial, and time reserves to overloaded lives*. Colorado Springs: NavPress.

Wirzba, N. (2011). *Food & faith: A theology of eating*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.