

SONG OF THE TASTE

by Gary Snyder

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Eating the living germs of grasses
Eating the ova of large birds

the fleshy sweetness packed
around the sperm of swaying trees

The muscles of the flanks and
thighs of soft-voiced cows
the bounce in the lamb's leap
the swish in the ox's tail

Eating roots grown swoll
inside the soil

Drawing on life of living
clustered points of light spun
out of space
hidden in the grape.

Eating each other's seed
eating
ah, each other.

Kissing the lover in the mouth
of bread:
lip to lip.

— Gary Snyder

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On "Song of the Taste"

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The primary ethical teaching of all times and places is "cause no unnecessary harm." The Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists use the Sanskrit term "ahimsa" "non-harming." They commonly interpret this to mean "don't take life" with varying degrees of latitude allowed for special situations. In the eastern traditions "cause no unnecessary harm" is the precept behind vegetarianism.

Non-vegetarians too try to understand and practice the teaching of "non-harming." People who live entirely by hunting, such as the Eskimo, know that taking life is an act requiring a spirit of gratitude and care, and rigorous mindfulness. They say "all our food is souls." Plants are alive too. All of nature is a gift-exchange, a potluck banquet, and there is no death that is not somebody's food, no life that is not somebody's death.

Is this a flaw in the universe? A sign of a sullied condition of being?

"Nature red in tooth and claw?" Some people read it this way, leading to a disgust with self, with humanity, and with life itself. They are on the wrong fork of the path. Otherworldly philosophies end up doing more damage to the planet (and human psyches) than the existential conditions they seek to transcend.

So again to the beginning. We all take life to live. Weston LaBarre says, "The first religion is to kill god and eat him" or her. The shimmering food-chain, food-web, is the scary, beautiful, condition of the biosphere. Non-harming must be understood as an approach to all of living and being, not just a one-dimensional moral injunction. Eating is truly a sacrament.

How to accomplish this? We can start by saying Grace. Grace is the first and last poem, the few words we say to clear our hearts and teach the children and welcome the guest, all at the same time. To say a good grace you must be conscious of what you're doing, not guilt-ridden and evasive. So we look at the nature of

eggs, apples, and ox-tail ragout. What we see is plentitude, even excess, a great sexual exuberance. Millions of grains of grass-seed to become flour, millions of codfish fry that will never — and *must* never — grow to maturity: sacrifices to the food-chain. And if we eat meat it is the life, the bounce, the swish, that we eat, let us not deceive ourselves. Americans should know that cows stand up to their hocks in feed-lot manure waiting to be transported to their table, that virgin forests in the Amazon are clearcut to make pasture to raise beef for the American market. Even a root in the ground is a marvel of living chemistry, making sugars and flavors from earth, air, water.

Looking closer at this world of one-ness, we see all these beings as of our own flesh, as our children, our lovers. We see ourselves too as an offering to the continuation of life.

This is strong stuff. Such truth is not easy. But hang on: if we eat each other, is it not a giant act of love we

live within? Christ's blood and body becomes clear: The bread blesses you, as you bless it.

So at our house we say a Buddhist verse of Grace:

"We venerate the Three
Treasures"
(Buddha, Dharma, Sangha)
"And are thankful for this meal
The work of many people
And the sharing of other
forms of life."

Anyone can use a Grace from their tradition, if they have one, and infuse it with deeper feeling and understanding, or make up their own, from the heart. But saying Grace is not fashionable in much of America now, and often even when said is mechanical and flat, with no sense of the deep chasm that lies under the dining table. My poem "Song of the Taste" is a grace for graces, a model for anyone's thought, verse, song, on "the meal" that the fortunate ones on earth partake of three times a day.