Yerusha Academy—Institute for Deep Ecumenism

Making Food Sacred: The Intersection of Faith, Sustainability, & Labor Justice in the Food Sector

Paper Title: "**Hunger Maims: Eating as Meditation on the Wisdom of Emptiness"**

Presenter: **Marvin Lee Anderson, PhD** May 28, 2024

Abstract:

The focus of this paper is not to discuss the egregious gap between the hungry and overfed, but rather how this consequential contrast between plenty and scarcity lays bare the fundamental assumptions in how we specifically imagine, conceptualize and evaluate notions of plenty and scarcity and their corresponding images of fullness and emptiness.

We begin with reference to the biblical narrative on how ***'Hunger Maims'*** by acknowledging the grim reality for millions of people whose lives and communities are at risk of being devastated if not destroyed by drought and famine. "The imagining of famine," according to Torah scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg," makes it impossible to live well, even in good years."

Second, we will review how ***'Hunger Shames'*** by drawing on the socioeconomic implications of Jesus' fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer in countering agrarian indebtedness—"Give us today our daily bread." Third, we will examine how ***'Hunger Proclaims'*** the restitution of socio-economic justice in light of fourteenth-century Dominican theologian Meister Eckhart's probing Scriptural re-interpretation of Jesus' fifth petition.

This paper concludes with the prayerful anticipation of how ***'Hunger Reframes'*** our mundane act of eating as a meditation on the wisdom of 'emptiness.' The term 'emptiness' in the Buddhist context is problematic for Westerners. We will argue that our pervasive fast-food and consumerist marketing on eating "All you can eat!"—readily promoted in restaurant discounted buffets—is antithetical to the Abrahamic and wisdom faith traditions' understanding of true satiety, blessing and 'grace.' This reverential attitude towards eating, cognizant of the transitory nature of being human and surviving on 'our daily bread,'—approximates or parallels the wisdom of 'emptiness' in Buddhism. (It complements the renewed religious and secular practice of dietary fasting.) This paper welcomes a robust Q&A response and plenary discussion following the formal presentation.

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As I ponder the first three words in the title of our conference, "Making Food Sacred," I can't think of a better opening quotation than the observation from the late Kiowa novelist, essayist and poet, N. Scott Momaday, who passed the threshold this past January 24, 2024, just shy of his 90th birthday. It captures the contradictions on why food is no longer considered sacred. (Momaday's novel *House Made of Dawn* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969):

"In our society as a whole we conceive of the land in terms of ownership and use. It is a lifeless medium of exchange; it has for most of us, I suspect, no more spirituality than has an automobile, say, or a refrigerator."[1] Just as we now think that food comes from our refrigerator after buying it at the grocery store, so we succumb to the comparable consumer fiction which Heidegger had in mind when he suggested that our technological society looks at the natural world as a huge filling station.[2] The land in all its agricultural bounty of produce on which we depend for food is no longer envisaged or even conceptualized as the place and origin of our food. The tens of thousands of often minimum-wage laborers who raise and facilitate the production and distribution of food are invisible to us, as are the frequent unacceptable conditions under which they work and often inhumane means of CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations) in their factory assembly-line production of meat. Worse, no image better conveys the

[1] N. Scott Momaday, "A First American Views His Land," in *National Geographic Magazine*, July 1976, 18.

[2] Cited by Huston Smith, "Tao Now—an ecological testament," in *Earth Might Be Fair: Reflections on Ethics, Religion, and Ecology*, ed. Ian G. Barbour (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), 64.

profane reductionism of the act of eating to this 'lifeless medium of exchange' than the drive-through car lanes in which fast-food outlets design their delivery

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of food orders to accommodate busy motorists. I've done it, you've done it. We're all guilty. We're filling up, mindlessly oblivious to what and how we are feeding and fueling our bodies.

While I recognize the pressing moral and ethical questions surrounding famine and hunger, the focus of my paper today is not analyzing the systemic causes and injustice perpetuating the gap between the hungry and overfed—as important as that is. In my brief time, I wish to focus instead on examining how this stark and consequential contrast between plenty and scarcity—often the difference between life and death—lays bare the fundamental assumptions in how we specifically imagine, conceptualize and evaluate notions of plenty and scarcity and their corresponding images of fullness and emptiness.

We begin with reference to the biblical and historical narrative on how ***'Hunger Maims'*** by acknowledging the grim reality for millions of people whose lives and communities are at risk of being devastated if not destroyed by drought and famine. Second, we will review how ***'Hunger Shames'*** by drawing on the socio-economic implications of Jesus' fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer in countering agrarian indebtedness—"Give us today our daily bread." Third, we will examine how ***'Hunger Proclaims'*** the restitution of socio-economic justice in light of the fourteenth-century Dominican theologian Meister Eckhart's Scriptural re-interpretation of Jesus' fifth petition.

This paper concludes with the prayerful anticipation of how ***'Hunger***

Reframes' our mundane act of eating as a meditation on the wisdom of 'emptiness'—as intriguing and elusive that may sound to you and me. Following my formal presentation of about 40-45 minutes, I would welcome hearing and responding to your own questions and insights in a plenary discussion.

For those who are not familiar with *The Hunger Games* trilogy of young adult dystopian novels authored by Suzanne Collins, the trilogy's narrator and protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, lives in District 12, the poorest region of Panem on the outskirts of the affluent Capital city. It's where people regularly die from starvation.[3] As suggested in my title, the malnutrition and often starvation resulting from ravenous hunger threatens to maim, if not claim fatally, the lives of countless innocent women, men and children. In addition to failed crops and drought exacerbated by climate change, unjust government policies, market inequities and fluctuations, the threat of imminent famine is often a direct result of armed conflict and war, as appallingly now witnessed in Gaza and Sudan and around the world.

We begin, first of all, with reference to the biblical and historical narratives on how ***'Hunger Maims'*** millions of people in the wake of perpetual drought and famine. Our immediate discomfort and aversion to thinking about the ravages of hunger is matched by our fleeting impatience in viewing news images of gaunt and emaciated bodies, women and children in particular. We seldom use the word 'maim', but I deliberately chose this word. As the French philosopher

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hunger_Games

Gaston Bachelard notes, “Words, in our scholarly cultures, have so often been defined, redefined and pigeonholed with so much precision in our dictionaries

that they truly become instruments of thought.”[4] Bachelard then laments that those words have lost their power to move us internally and imaginatively, beyond abstractions. He’s right, they have. When I consulted one of my thesauruses on words synonymous with ‘maims’, the symptomatic physicality of the somatic violence rendered by starvation becomes more palpable, poignant and arresting: [hunger] “cripples, wounds, disables, incapacitates, mutilates, savages, etc.”

Famine caused by drought is a recurrent theme in the Bible (Genesis 12:10, 26a, 41:54,

43:1; 2 Samuel 21:1, 1 Kings 18:2-5; 2 Kings 4:38, 8:1; Jeremiah 14:2-6, 17:8; Acts 11:28).

But famine might also be caused by other natural disasters (Deuteronomy 28:22, 1 Kings

8:37; Joel ia-2:27; Amos 4:6-10) and by war (2 Kings 6:24-29, 7:4, 25:2-3; Isaiah 1:7, 3:4 Lamentations 4:8-10). Food was intimately associated with and dependent on international relations, being one of the primary constituents of trade (I Kings 5:9-11; Ezra 3:7; Ezekiel 27:17; Acts 12:20). In the wake of failed crops and drought, people were forced to trade not only their treasures for food (Lamentations LH), but also their own sons and daughters (Nehemiah 5:1-5).

[4] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 35.

In her classic book, *Purity and Danger*,[5] renowned anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that substances like food, which pass back and forth across the human body's boundaries, are well suited to expressing ideas having to do with more abstract boundaries. Thus, it is necessary that we contextualize the recurrence of famine and

precarity of food within the ecological as well as social and political boundaries of ancient Israel.[6] The desert that surrounded the Promised Land was not only a symbol of desolation and chaos, but an existential and undeniable reality, a source of death as well as new life. Rainfall in ancient Palestine was marginal and irregular. Drought could last up to four months during the summer, bordered by periods of a couple of months between April and June and later September and November in which either ferocious cyclones or the hot, dry, dusty wind of the *sirocco* blew in from the deserts, destroying vegetation.[7] The scorching winds of the *sirocco's* intense dryness and fine yellowish dust were no less oppressive and exhausting.[8] The rains might also fail in winter. Since surface water was scarce, prolonged droughts such as those described in 1 Kings (17a) could render whole areas of Palestine almost uninhabitable.[9]

[5] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo.* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul Limited, 1966).

[6] Gillian Feeley-Harnick, *The Lord's Table: The Meaning of Food in Early Judaism and Christianity*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), 167.
[7] Ibid., 167-168.
[8] https://ferrelljenkins.blog/2015/02/14/dust-storms-afflict-egypt-palestine-and-israel/; https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/encyclopedia-of-the-bible/East-Wind.
[9] Feeley-Harnick, *The Lord's Table*, 168.

The premonition of seven years of famine which Joseph predicted from Pharaoh's dream is attributed to the severity and blight of the east wind, possibly if not likely the *sirocco* (Genesis 41:28). For our purposes, Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream epitomizes the catastrophic nature of hunger and famine in the ancient world as much as our post-modern world. Suddenly, at the very outset of the seven famine years, "there was famine in all the lands."[10]"The seven years of abundance that the land of Egypt enjoyed came to an end, and the seven years of famine set in…" (Genesis 41:53-54) The midrash speaks of a terrifying

transformation, from prosperity to gloom, "from joy to sickness—'In the time it took them to sit down at table, there was no bread to be found.'" The abrupt and instantaneous arrival of famine is explained by the fact that all the corn immediately rotted at the end of the seven good years [11]—the putrid odor of rotting corn a sensory harbinger of an uncertain future.

Joseph does not play the role of the sycophant; his words to Pharaoh are bleak: "The plenty will no longer be known in the land because of the famine that will follow, for it will be very grievous" (Genesis 41:31]). In the words of the Torah scholar and author Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, "The very prospect of hunger and death can erode all values… Even in the good years, there is no enjoyment of plenty, under the shadow of impending hunger. Cultural values that normally thrive in prosperity are eroded by the anticipation of brutal times ahead…The

[10] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 290.
[11] Ibid.

imagining of famine makes it impossible to live well, even in good years." Citing the medieval Italian rabbi Seforno, Zornberg knows why: "One who has bread in his basket [that is, one whose future life is assured] is quite different from one who has no bread in his basket."[12]

Second, we look more closely at how ***'Hunger Shames'*** by reviewing recent biblical research on the socio-economic implications of Jesus' fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer—"Give us today our daily bread"—which might be more accurately translated as "Give us bread in abundance today." That is clearly a different emphasis. Our habituated familiarity with the Lord's Prayer in the history of Christianity has eclipsed both the precarious socio-economic context

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and prophetic urgency of Jesus' powerful message. According to biblical scholars like John Dominican Crossan and others, the agrarian and social context in Jesus' day was characterized by indebtedness and an increasing level of impoverishment and hunger. "Agrarian debt," in the analysis by Jesus scholar, Douglas Oakman, "was pushing the peasantry of Jesus' day either entirely off the land (wage-labor on estates) or into client dependency relations on the land vis-àvis the Roman overlord…"[13] In his unequivocal plea for daily bread and the mitigation of debt, Oakman maintains that "*Jesus' message spoke to an immediate need in concrete terms*. As with peasants generally, Jesus had little concern for priestly mediations of the divine, or purity in the priestly sense, and

[12] Ibid., 287.
[13] Douglas E. Oakman, *Jesus, Debt, and the Lord's Prayer: First-Century Debt and Jesus' Intentions.* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), 71.

was paramountly concerned with changing the material circumstances and the institutions that controlled them."[14]

Jesus' intimate experience of God was immediate and in little need of mediating institutions. This characteristic would be construed by later Judean tradents, that is, all those scribes, translators, commentators, preachers and teachers who bring the biblical past text into the present, of the Jesus materials as convincing evidence of Jesus' (messianic) authority and status.[15] While Jesus' aims have been and continue to be hotly debated, his words seem to reiterate the thrust of Israel's core traditions, especially Moses and the prophets (demanding justice for the powerless). Like every one of the prophets, Jesus pleaded for the rights of those who were literally as well as spiritually hungry in early Roman Palestine. Social

conflicts were endemic in early Roman Palestine, but contrary to the centuries of Christian anti-Jewish and antisemitic interpretations, such conflicts should not be construed naively or polemically as "Jesus (or Christians) versus the Jews." The Herods or the Judean elites in Jerusalem were often the object of popular enmity, as not only the gospels, but also Josephus and later rabbinic traditions would show.[15]

Despite the ambiguity and contested hermeneutics of the so-called "politics of Jesus," I would concur with Oakman and other scholars that the

[14] Ibid., 44. [15]
Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

import of Jesus' petitions in the Lord's Prayer, the fifth in particular for our discussion, revolve around what all peasants worry about most—subsistence, daily and annually—and managing the daily threats to subsistence beyond their control.

"Peasants everywhere work the land and consume its produce. Who is a peasant? One who opens the front door and sees the entire year's food-supply in the yard and the fields. The harvest will not come easily, and the entire peasant family will participate in the daily and annual work-routines." We've heard about the adverse effects of natural disasters like drought and famine in the biblical narrative, but equally important were predatory social relations. The deleterious impact of the urbanization and commercialization of agrarian relations proved stressful on the peasantry.[16] Absentee landlords owning large estates drove traditional peasants into tenancy or off the land altogether; commercialization led to the production of agrarian products that did not serve the peasant family's daily or annual food needs. Tax collectors thrived as elites demanded a share in the peasantry's so-

called surplus. Landlords living afar off, controlling large estates, were ignorant of the dire conditions in the villages. Taxes and rents, unable to be paid, led to paper indebtedness. Subsistence became more and more insecure.[17] It was precisely socio-economic conditions like these that Jesus addressed head-on, and his political critique of them is interwoven in many of his parables.

[16] Ibid., 4.
[17] 18 Ibid.

Third, we fast forward to the apex of late medieval Christianity in order to hear how ***'Hunger Proclaims'*** the restoration of socio-economic justice. We turn to the fourteenth-century German theologian and Dominican priest Meister Eckhart's Scriptural commentary in re-interpreting Jesus' fifth petition in the Lord's Prayer. Meister Eckhart, who lectured in the same Chair of Theology at the University of Paris as his predecessor, Thomas Aquinas, wrote: "Give us today our daily bread." …Regarding the word "our," Chrysostom… explains it in a twofold way: first, that we might understand that bread is given to us so that not only we might eat but that we recognize others in need, lest anyone say "my bread" is given to me instead of understanding that it is ours, given to me, to others through me and to me through others. For not only bread but all things which are necessary for sustaining this present life are given to us with others and because of others and given to others in us. Whoever does not give to another what belongs to the other, such a one does not eat his own bread but eats the bread of another along with his own. Thus when we justly eat the bread we have received, we certainly eat our bread; but when we eat evilly and with sin the bread we have received, then we are not eating our own bread but the bread of another. For everything which we have unjustly is not really ours."

If I may, let me repeat Eckhart's injunction, "… that we might understand that bread is given to us so that not only we might eat but that we recognize others in need, lest anyone say 'my bread' is given to me instead of understanding that it is ours, given to me, to others through me and to me through others." We hear the preacher Eckhart's pointed emphasis in highlighting the insight that any

assertion to claim this as 'my bread' is illusory and oblivious to the fact that what food I have the opportunity to eat is based on the fact that "it is ours, given to me, to others through me and to me through others." It is not mine. Fox reminds us of Eckhart's further reference in the same sermon when he stresses the two words, "our bread": "It should also be noted that in the first three petitions, whenever the things of God are spoken of, they are spoken of in the singular— "your name," "your kingdom," "your will"—but in the other four petitions the plural form is used: "our bread," "our trespasses," "do not lead us," "deliver us."

In his commentary on this sermon, the prolific author and theologian Matthew Fox writes: "We too often think *my* instead of *our*. And yet this prayer—the only one Jesus left behind—does not have a single *my* in it. It is all about, indeed it entirely presumes a we—not me—consciousness. *Note first of all that the word is "our," not "my," because the prayer is very pleasing which is motivated by love and not by necessity.* Prayers of necessity are often my-oriented prayers: Help me! Save me! But prayers of an *our* consciousness demand love, a consciousness that goes beyond my own needs to others' needs. It requires compassion and a getting beyond the puny I. Even when we petition for human needs in the final four petitions, *the plural form is used of "our bread,"*

"our trespasses," "do not lead us," "deliver us."[18]

The tenuous and precarious socio-economic situation facing peasants in Jesus' day resembles a distant historical mirror of what peasants are still facing today, even though their way of life is in serious decline around the world. In his

[18] Fox, 504-505.

new book, *Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World*,[19] Patrick Joyce laments a comparable litany of the patterns of exploitation and vulnerability to the whims of nature and the market as the ones we've just recounted in ancient Israel and Palestine. Joyce is an academic historian and emeritus professor of history at the University of Manchester, and son of an Irish peasant. In sum, Joyce's historical litany is sweeping: "The food they [peasants] produce has been expropriated by their overlords, by marauding armies and by totalitarian states. They have been conscripted as cannon fodder; entangled in debt and dependency as sharecroppers and serfs; starved, sometimes deliberately, in famines and prisons; forcibly converted to their masters' religions; herded onto collective farms and slaughtered mercilessly when they revolt."[20]

We are thinking about and hearing this week about laborers in the food sector and ruminating on what makes food sacred and who makes that food sacred. Since my graduate days four decades ago studying the dubious

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agricultural and environmental legacy of the Green Revolution and the rise of industrialized agriculture, some generalizations on the precarious plight of those laborers in the fields have not changed. While peasants and small farmers, for example, can be called 'producers' and can even be said to belong to market economies, the fact remains that they are not really within the market system.

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[19] Patrick Joyce, *Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World*. Great Britain: Allen Lane, 2024.
[20] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/20/books/review/remembering-peasants-patrick-joyce.html

The production and distribution of food has been historically relative to those who have profited by it on the market; for the most part, it has not been relative to the needs of the malnourished and starving populations. They, in fact, who have produced for the market have been in turn at the mercy of the market system. Those who have produced the food have often been the ones who cannot afford to purchase that food, and in some cases, are most likely to go without it.

Joyce refuses to indulge the romantic idealization of the peasantry from the 19th century onward by academics and fascists alike, as the embodiment of the nation's "blood and soil." He knows all too well this is just another form of expropriation of peasants and peasant culture. "What he seeks to explore is, rather, the cultural richness that these generations harvested, always against the odds, from the barren soil of oppression and contempt." To his credit, "Joyce shows how the supreme value of the peasant is generational survival: The great task is to hand on to the child the land the peasant has inherited, making one's own existence a kind of interlude between past and future."[21] Joyce's apt naming of the primacy that peasants have historically placed on generational survival resonates with my own extensive historical research on medieval and early modern peasants and rural communities and on the harrowing stories of surviving generational trauma among many of them in the wake of drought and famine. I can cite my own ancestors among them. Recalling Zornberg's above observation that "The imagining of famine makes it impossible to live well, even

[21] 22 Ibid.

in good years."—I would not be here speaking to you were it not for their decision to flee the famine in their mid-twenties in late nineteenth-century Sweden.

We conclude this paper with the prayerful anticipation of how ***'Hunger Reframes'*** our mundane act of eating as a meditation on the wisdom of 'emptiness.' We shift our attention from not being able to eat because of drought and famine, often exacerbated by predatory social relations, to eating as a meditation on the wisdom of 'emptiness.' The term 'emptiness' in the Buddhist context is problematic for Westerners. "It does not mean 'vacuum,'" as the American Zen Buddhist master, Robert Aitken, suggests, "but rather it is the void that is full of potential. It has no bounds."[22] Predicated on the Buddhist concept for ultimate reality, Sunyata, it implies "absolute nothingness." Sunyata contains the two characteristics of wisdom (*prajna*) and compassion (*karuna*). Decades of Buddhist-Jewish-Christian dialogue have yielded rich inter-religious and philosophical insights on the meaning and wisdom of 'emptiness' and 'nothingness.' This specific inquiry warrants another paper by someone far more familiar and steeped in Buddhist thought than me.

In my closing words I wish to focus on how what I've called the wisdom of emptiness might be discerned in the consequential contrast we've seen between plenty and scarcity—and the corollary assumptions we bring to how we imagine, conceptualize and evaluate their corresponding images of fullness and emptiness.

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[22] Robert Aitken, *The Morning Star*: *New and Selected Zen Writings*. (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker Hoard, Publishers), 76.

Notions of plenty, abundance and fullness have clearly been taken over as blanket endorsements for pursuing and legitimizing the excessive material consumption equated with the American Dream. Meanwhile, notions of scarcity and emptiness are taboo and likened to not 'making it'; they are the anathema of success and the antithesis of self-fulfilment.

First and foremost, we need to recognize how the pernicious and pervasive nature of consumerism has not only permeated how we think about eating and how we actually eat, but it has significantly contributed to the profanation of the acting of eating and the meal itself. Until we recognize and exorcise our often addictive behavior and attitude towards eating, we continue to acquiesce to the illusory assumptions about food with which we have been indoctrinated since childhood.

If you recall my opening quotation from N. Scott Momaday on the spiritual bankruptcy of our relationship to the land, he writes: "In our society as a whole we conceive of the land in terms of ownership and use. It is a lifeless medium of exchange; it has for most of us, I suspect, no more spirituality than has an automobile, say, or a refrigerator."—Momaday then comments, "And our laws confirm us in this view, for we can buy and sell the land, we can exclude each other from it, and in the context of ownership we can use it as we will. Ownership implies use, and use implies consumption." Hence, "we can buy and sell the land [and food, too, and] we can exclude each other from it," as we just heard in Eckhart's biting rebuttal of 'my bread' consciousness.

"Ownership implies use, and use implies consumption," writes Momaday.

Likewise, “In a commodity-based society,” writes Sulak Sivaraksa, the Buddhist Thai activist twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, “profits are dependent upon the consumption of goods. It is therefore not surprising that the transnational corporations that control many aspects of our society promote an ethos that equates the act of purchasing with the process of becoming an actualized being. Consumerism provides an artificial means of defining our existence by suggesting that we arrive at a sense of identity through the process of acquisition. It becomes a perverse corollary to the Cartesian proof of personal existence: ‘I buy, I shop, therefore I am.’”[23]

Akin to my opening image of drive-through car lanes for fast-food chains, the expectation promoted by those chains and restaurant discounted buffets is that “All you can eat!” will indeed appease your immediate hunger without interrupting your busy schedule. The sophisticated marketing of fast-food panders to our learned consumer habits of having everything on our own terms, with the anticipation of being filled, if not fulfilled. The underlying assumption is that hunger and an ‘empty stomach’ are therefore problematic and something to manage, not unlike the automobile we are required to service and schedule regular maintenance, which in turn, ironically, allows us to we pick up our order in the drive-through car lane.

The consumerist addiction to eating mistaken for ‘satiety’ guised as ‘fullness’ denies the very nature of hunger and how it works. It is antithetical to

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[23] Sulak Sivaraksa,“Consumerism vs. Community,” *Inquiring Mind*, Vol. 16, No.2, Spring 2000, 17.

the Abrahamic and wisdom faith traditions' understanding of true satiety, blessing and grace. As Margaret Visser, the Canadian author of *Much Depends on Dinner*, reminds us in her book, *The Gift of Thanks*, "'Grace' is a distinctively Christian concept, but other religions have ideas that are similar: Judaism has *hesed*, God's loving kindness, the original of 'divine grace,' and Islam has *baraka*. Indeed, grace—roughly speaking, the spiritual or non-material aspects of giving and gratitude—is found in abundance in all societies, including modern secular ones. If it were not, these societies…would begin to fall apart."[24]

The prevalent attitude towards mindless eating without gratitude robs us of the truly sacral experience of eating when we are thankfully savoring in-themoment the divine mystery and sensory pleasure of what a meal provides. In addition, Margaret Visser reminds that the German word *danken* (English "to thank") is related to *denken* (English "to think"). "'Thank' and 'think' are one…Gratitude is not only an emotion, but also a matter of thought—a form of awareness. It arises from realizing what has been done for us by others, from appreciating their kindness and our good fortune…"[26] That includes the pleasure of being served in the generous and loving act of hospitality of those who feed us. Not the curt, understandably stressed minimum-waged employee at the window of the fast-food outlet handing me my order through the driver's window.

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[24] Margaret Visser, *The Gift of Thanks: The Roots, Persistence, and Paradoxical Meanings of a Social Ritual* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008), 379. [26] Ibid., 173.

This reverential attitude towards eating, cognizant of the transitory nature of being human and surviving on 'our daily bread'—is epitomized by Joyce's praise of the peasant's frugality and discipline in ensuring generational survival. In my judgment, it approximates or parallels the wisdom of 'emptiness' in Buddhism, but it is a wisdom uniquely borne and nurtured by generations of rural and agrarian people who have lived on and off the land unless or until they are forced off it. This capacity for gratitude is eloquently captured in the Kentucky poet and farmer Wendell Berry's poem, 'Prayer after Eating': "… May my brain be bright with praise of what I eat, in the brief blaze of motion and of thought. May I be worthy of my meat."[25]

I would like to close with some relevant observations by one of my favorite writers, the late John Berger, a revered storyteller, essayist, novelist, and avantgarde art critic. He was born in England in 1926 and lived and farmed in a small village in the mountains of the Haute-Savoie region of France since 'self-exile' from 1962 until his death in 2017. They are taken from his essay, reminiscent of Berry's poem, entitled, "The Eaters and the Eaten," which was one of the primary inspirations for this paper. Written nearly fifty years ago (in 1976), Berger's contrast between the bourgeois and the peasant is dated and contextual, given that Berger lived in France for over fifty years. I draw from it not to suggest a simplistic, literal correspondence or equivalence between the European concept of bourgeois with middle or ruling class elites in North America, or between the

[25] Wendell Berry, *The Country of Marriage.* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 12.

European image of peasant with farmers or other rural people in in North America.

"On a world scale," Berger points out, "the distinction between bourgeois and peasant is closely related to the brute contrast between plenty and scarcity. This contrast amounts to a war… [though] the distinction is not between the hungry and the overfed, but between two traditional views of the value of food, the significance of the meal and the act of eating."[26] Berger begins his essay by dismissing the widespread idea that 'the consumer society' is a relatively new phenomenon. Rather, "Consumerism is intrinsic to nineteenth-century bourgeois culture. Consumption fulfills a cultural as well as an economic need. The nature of this need becomes clearer if we look at the most direct and simple form of consumption: eating."[27]

Although meals have a regular and symbolic importance for the bourgeois, Berger observes, "to discuss eating is frivolous…The bourgeois does not think of the act of eating as a fundamental one." The bourgeois' principal meal is usually dinner in the evening, which comes after the day's work and marks the transition between day and evening. Meanwhile, the principal regular meal for the peasant is usually at midday. Not surprising, the peasant meal is in the middle of the day, surrounded by work before and after. "It is placed in the day's stomach."[30]

[26] John Berger, *The Sense of Sight: Writings by John Berger*. Lloyd Spencer, ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 27-28. https://www.are.na/block/10127114
[27] Ibid., 27. [30]
Ibid., 28.

To the peasant all food represents work accomplished. The work may or may not have been their own or that of their own family, but if it isn't, the work represented still resembles their own. To the bourgeois, however, food is not directly exchangeable with their own work or livelihood. Food is a commodity they buy.[28]

Once the occasion has arrived, the feast for the peasant begins with food and drink. "It does so because food and drink have been reserved or put aside, on account of their rarity or special quality, for just such an occasion. Any feast, even if it is impromptu, has been partly prepared for years. A feast is the consuming of the surplus saved and produced over and above daily needs. Expressing and using up some of this surplus, the feast is a double celebration—of the occasion which gives rise to it, and of the surplus itself."[29] Hence, the feast is characterized by its generosity from the surplus saved up for the occasion, and the convivial spirit which accompanies it. "The feast for the bourgeois [meanwhile] is an additional [and calculated] expense. What distinguishes its food from that of an ordinary meal is the amount of money spent. The true celebration of a surplus is beyond them, because they can never have a surplus of money."

Berger concludes his comparisons of "two modes of acquisition, of possessing, through the act of eating. If one examines each point of comparison, it becomes clear that the peasant way of eating is centred on the act of eating

[28] Ibid., 29.
[29] Ibid., 31-32.

itself and on the food eaten: it is centripetal and physical. Whereas the bourgeois way of eating is centred on fantasy, ritual and spectacle: it is centrifugal and

cultural. The first can complete itself in satisfaction; the second is never complete and gives rise to an appetite which, in essence, is insatiable."[30]

The expropriation of the celebratory feast by the consumer-driven rise of this insatiable appetite has wiped out the traditional religious and ritual meaning of the feast. Instead of the maxim, "We are what we eat," we are led to believe our worth is conferred by what we can afford to eat and indulge in eating. Berger complains: "The bourgeois overeats. Especially meat."[31] The double celebration inherent in a feast, especially for those who know the pain and suffering of drought and famine, invites a spirit of generosity and hospitality from those who, empty of material wealth and security and land ownership, give from that place of emptiness. I think every one of us today can recall instances in which we have been recipients of that kind of hospitality.

While ambivalent about using the problematic term of "kingdom," John Dominic Crossan names both the "Kingdom of Nobodies" and "Kingdom of Undesirables" announced by Jesus as recipients of divine favour.[32] In his

[30] Ibid., 32.
[31] Ibid., 30.
[32] John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 266ff., 276ff.; "The Historical Jesus: An Interview with John Dominic Crossan," *The Christian Century*, vol. 108, no. 37 (December 18–25, 1991), pp. 1201–1202.

invitation to this atypical feast in Luke 14:12-14, Jesus' parabolic wisdom of emptiness is palpable. It is precisely those nobodies and undesirables that Jesus is inviting:

> **12** He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. **13** But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, **14** and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

Thank you.