

Food and Spirituality

by Mary "Tyrle" Rooker

Many who practice shamanism claim that it is okay to eat animals as long as proper prayers are offered and the animal was slaughtered in a sacred way. I disagree, and here I explain why.



With two easy, \$10 garnishing tools, "Tyrle" quickly turned collard greens, beets, and carrots into a healthful meal that is spiritually aligned!

My life's spiritual journey deepened and shifted dramatically when I discovered shamanism in 1993. I became a full-fledged shamanic practitioner in 2001, and my spiritual consciousness continues to grow. My spiritual practice embraces both shamanism and Unitarian Universalism. What's food got to do with either one? A lot—and for me, it's so much more than about "saying grace" before meals; it has become central to both my shamanic and my UU spiritual paths. What a journey it's been!

At first, I couldn't see what food had to do with shamanism other than my "helping spirits", a.k.a. "spirit guides", telling me it had to do with my journey questions to them about the "rightful or appropriate place of humans in the universe."

Clarity began to emerge in 2010 when I took on the task of coordinating the "Ethical Eating" program¹ (a new role) at my Unitarian Universalist church.

I love feeling that my diet is aligned with my nature-based spiritual values! I also enjoy amazing health and delicious whole plant foods.

The national Unitarian Universalist Association's initial concerns were how our food choices affected world hunger, human health, climate change, animal rights, social justice issues such as the rights of farm workers and slaughterhouse employees. These are fairly typical UU social justice activism, no surprises there. But even though I'd been vegan since 1993, I hadn't really looked at most of these issues, let alone studied them. But as the Ethical Eating coordinator, I felt a need to become thoroughly familiar with all aspects.

My exhaustive research since 2010 has led me to conclude that we are indeed most closely related to the Great Ape family. Further, our anatomy² strongly indicates that animal parts and products are not the food our bodies were or are now designed to eat and best not consumed at all unless we have no choice.

My shamanic lens caused me to see food issues very differently than most people do. Unlike many vegans, I would advocate that we eat other animals—if it were indeed our proper place in Nature to do so. I am opposed to lions becoming vegan, because their rightful place is as predators. I am opposed to humans eating animal parts and byproducts like eggs, dairy, and honey because, among other reasons, that is not our rightful place. We seem to have a bad case of "predator envy."

Many who practice shamanism claim that it is okay to eat animals as long as proper prayers are offered and the animal was slaughtered in a sacred way. They cite the American Indian hunting lifestyle as proof that meat-eating must be natural. Dr. Rita Laws, author of "Native Americans and Vegetarianism"³ in the *History of Vegetarianism*, corrects some stereotypes about American Indians. She reports that most, like her own Choctaw people, were farmers and primarily vegetarian. Hunting was a hobby among most Indians, not a vocation, with meats eaten only rarely.

Dr. Laws asserts that dietary changes were from the introduction of European meat-eating customs, the introduction of the horse and the gun, and the proliferation of alcoholic beverages and white traders. Meat was not the food of choice, and its consumption was not revered, as in modern times when Americans eat turkey on Thanksgiving as if it were a religious duty. Dr. Laws calls on American Indians to move away from the European influences that did away with a healthier style of living and "return to the corn".

In any case, most of the animals we eat were not slaughtered in a sacred way—far from it. Even if they were, we are still out of our rightful place. How can an act be sacred when it violates our compact with Nature and the Great Wheel or "Sacred Hoop" of Life? When we are out of synch with our proper place, we violate our relationships on several fronts:

- with ourselves, because we are not in alignment with our true Nature;
- with the predators whose place IS to eat such prey animals; that is, we're "stealing" their food;
- with the prey animals we eat that aren't "ours" to eat and whose bodies we have genetically altered;
- with the plants we are supposed to be eating, who "need" us to eat them;
- with other humans, who are starving because of climate change imbalances;
- with those yet to come, human and other than human, because we are destroying their future; and
- with all beings, including elements, because we are creating massive, disturbing imbalances in the Great Wheel/Sacred Hoop of Life.

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The shamanic aspects were not the only big surprise from my studies—dietary changes were also in order. I had been vegan since 1993, but I was not eating the healthiest vegan diet. I was addicted to grains and beans, which I filled up on, leaving little room for many vegetables. I was about 15 pounds overweight. That's not too bad, but I felt like I had to set a good example, and that meant a high standard.

Besides, what I was learning made me realize that vegetables are the healthiest and largest component of any healthy diet. When former President Bill Clinton went vegan *with no oils* in 2010 to reverse his heart disease, I studied oils and realized that they were not exactly a health food either, just not as bad for you as animal fats. And oils cause most vegans to get way too much omega 6 fatty acids, which likely contributes to heart problems and a host of serious diseases.

The health value of grains, even whole grains, came into question. I was also eating way too many processed foods with flours and sugars and far too many vegan desserts. If I was going to be a role model for veganism and healthful eating, it was clear that I was going to have to make some changes. The first change I made was to start eating greens and to increase other cruciferous vegetables like broccoli, cabbage, and cauliflower. Then I eliminated refined grains, including breads, tortilla chips, bagels, and crackers, except for occasional exceptions when eating out. I even cut back on whole grains like brown rice to make room in my stomach for more veggies.

Then it was time to tackle my sugarholistic ways. I had often joked that sugar was “the other white powder,” but it's not a joke. I wouldn't have attempted eliminating it if I hadn't learned the neuroscience of food addiction and willpower in my studies. Armed now with realization that I was an addict and knowing the secrets of breaking addictions, I took it on. I knew that any sweeteners in my diet would keep the addiction going, so I quit everything but fruit itself, not even fruit juice. It worked! Residual pain from old injuries in my knees and left shoulder disappeared – a welcomed health benefit.

The only unhealthy food left was oils. I found healthy fats in raw nuts and seeds and avocados. Surprisingly, this change seemed to generate the most health benefits! I

was suddenly able to think more clearly and track conversations, remember points I was trying to make and not lose my train of thought. The veins on my hands still stick out, but only about half of what they used to. Restored skin tonicity is also apparent in a disappeared droopy eyelid and in the greatly reduced pores on my nose and cheeks; these used to be quite large, but now look normal. The many liver spots are also gone. I have less insomnia.

And, although I felt like I was eating more food than ever, I lost about 1 pound every 3 weeks for final total of 13 pounds weight loss, 127 to 114, back to what I weighed when I was 25. (I'm 5'2" and 62 years old.)

Oddly, I now eat a much larger variety of healthy plant foods than ever before. And my taste buds have adjusted, so everything tastes better than ever to me. My doctor was always pretty impressed with my health, but my blood pressure had become higher than desirable (130/80) in recent years, when it had always been 110/65. After the changes, it was back down to its old, healthy range! Other numbers, which had been good, now also looked even better.

So many more people are going vegan or near-vegan these days and asking me for help and information. To make it easier to deliver

that free assistance for my fellow Unitarian Universalists and others, I added a food website to my shamanic site, with links to the massive amount of information I accumulated from my research. It's <<http://www.shamanicspring.com/food.html>>. Enjoy good health *and* a diet aligned with nature-based spiritual values!

Mary “Tyrtle” Rooker enjoys sharing the delights of simple, delicious, healthful vegan foods. She offers food workshops at the Takoma Park Food Co-op and eats from her backyard, which she converted to a small native plant food forest and wetland ecosystem with the spring beneath her home. Her shamanic school provides classes, movies, and journey sessions at beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. Her Green Party political activism, her “core” Euro-American shamanism, and her vision push the edges of mainstream consciousness and consensus reality.

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The author, Mary “Tyrtle” Rooker, with several journey drums, taken at a shamanic journey group session.

Some American Indian leaders are encouraging other Indians to move away from meat-based European dietary influences and “return to the corn”.

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- with ourselves, because we are not in alignment with our true Nature;
- with other humans, who are starving because of climate change imbalances...

¹ The “Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice” portion of the Unitarian Universalist Association website is online at <<http://www.uua.org/environment/eating/index.shtml>>.

² The anatomy info on my website can be found at <<http://www.shamanicspring.com/health.htm#anatomy>>.

³ The article on American Indians by Dr. Laws is available online at <http://www.ivu.org/history/native_americans.html>.