Moses was a rancher. The story goes that long before he became a famous Biblical patriarch who led his people to freedom from slavery, he was a simple rancher. And this simple rancher was said to have been tending his flock on the side of a mountain one day when he came upon a small forest fire – a burning bush. He was fascinated by this miracle that the bush was burning but was not consumed. He approached it with some trepidation, and suddenly the voice of God rang out from the sky, “Moses! Stop right there and take off your shoes, for the ground on which you are standing is holy ground.”

How odd for God to tell Moses to take off his shoes at a time like this! God was about to tell Moses that he’d be leading the Israelites to freedom. God was about to tell Moses God’s own divine identity. But before any of this could happen, Moses’ shoes had to be off.

It’s as if the tradition is telling us that for Moses to walk on holy ground with the heaviness, clunkiness, and sharp-edgedness of shoes would have been a sacrilege. Moses had to have the humility and intimacy of his bare feet in direct contact with the earth before he could begin his conversation with the divine.

Our sun is a fire that burns like that burning bush. For all intents and purposes, it burns without being consumed. And the light from that great fire travels all the way to earth and gets transformed by green plants into substances that we can then eat. Plants grow in the ground and they turn sunlight into food which literally becomes our bodies. Surely any ground in which such wonders happen is holy ground. Perhaps we should all be taking off our shoes in awe.
Our relationship to the earth and the plants and food that come from it is a very strange thing in this country. If any of you have read Fast Food Nation, you'll know just how strange it is. The flavor of a McDonald’s french fry doesn’t come from the french fry itself but is manufactured separately in a flavor manufacturing plant in Dayton, New Jersey and then added to the french fry later. But beyond just fast food, almost all the food we eat is manufactured somehow as a product by a corporation. It’s kind of a weird thing that the foods that we need to survive are products, like iPods are products. And yet, they are.

Here’s a quote from an article on agribusiness by Richard Manning in Harper’s magazine:

“America’s biggest crop, grain corn, is completely unpalatable. It is raw material for an industry that manufactures food substitutes. Likewise, you can’t eat unprocessed wheat. You certainly can’t eat hay. You can eat unprocessed soybeans, but mostly we don’t. These four crops cover 82 percent of American cropland. Agriculture in this country is not about food; it’s about producing commodities that require the outlay of still more energy to become food.”

So most of the food we eat does not arrive directly at our dinner table from a field somewhere. Most of it travels a circuitous route that involves processing and re-processing, packaging, and being shipped long distances. We mostly eat things that are only distantly and dimly related to plants that once actually grew in the ground.

Most people in this country buy food, all clean and packaged in supermarkets and have no real sense of connection to food as plant or animal. Ironically, the closest many of us come to any intimacy with the natural world is often during the holidays (like Thanksgiving) – the one time of year when some of us buy a whole turkey. It looks surprisingly like a bird, minus the head and feathers and feet of course, but it does kind of look like a bird. And with slight queasiness and uncomfortable jokes, we are forced to deal with it as such. It has blood. It has giblets. At least most supermarkets have the decency to put the giblets in a plastic bag so that we don’t have to actually touch the bird’s gizzard if we don’t want to.
Our alienation from the food that we eat and the holy ground from which it comes is, to my way of thinking, a kind of spiritual impoverishment. It means that we cannot fully experience what our 7th principle calls “the interdependent web of all existence.” It means that we can’t understand our place in that web. It means that we can’t really feel the gratitude that we would feel if we really understood, deep down, that we literally owe our lives to the delicate cycles of nature and the hard work of farmers.

For millennia, religious people around the world have assigned religious significance to the foods we eat. Many traditions designate certain foods as “kosher” and others as “not kosher.” The terminology and the specific food laws differ between different religious groups, but there is a general agreement that it matters what we eat. It matters spiritually and it matters in that eating certain foods and not others is part of what defines oneself as a religious person.

There is a movement today among religious liberals to re-imagine kosher laws from the perspective of an ecological spirituality -- to say that it does indeed matter what we eat and our food choices do express and shape our religious identity. But here the significance of food is not rooted in ritual or tradition as much as it is rooted in a sense of our responsibility to tread lightly on our holy ground.

I want to suggest that for Unitarian Universalists, eco-kosher food is food that is grown sustainably – food that, in its production, does not pollute our rivers and oceans; food that, in its manufacturing and transport, does not use more energy than it yields, food that in its growing does not destroy the earth in which it grows. Food that is eco-kosher is food that is grown and prepared and eaten in ways that support the healthy, natural cycles of the interdependent web of existence.

It used to be that we ate such food pretty much all the time. Farms in this country used to be small and family-owned; the soil had to be cared for through crop rotation and allowing fallow periods. Farmers could only plant crops that were appropriate to the amount of rain and the type of soil available. But a turning point in our relationship to the land came with the counter-intuitively-named “green revolution.” According to
Manning, “With the possible exception of the domestication of wheat, the green revolution is the worst thing that ever happened to the planet.”

In the 1960’s the supply of unfarmed, arable land in the U.S. ran out. There was no more “farming frontier.” There were no new fields to be ploughed, no new farms to be started on new land. In a Capitalist system that needs constant growth to survive, this was a crisis.

The crisis required a drastic solution and the solution was the modern day factory farm. Crops are now genetically modified to grow twice their natural size, fields are pumped full of fertilizers and pesticides, land that is too dry for the crops we want to grow is irrigated with water diverted from rivers and lakes far away.

Iron is mined and oil is drilled to manufacture and fuel the giant farm machinery that ploughs and fertilizes and harvests the massive acres and acres of monocrops. You can be sure that the farmers who do this work wear shoes.

The amount of fossil fuel energy it takes to accomplish all this is massive. According to Manning, today’s food industry spends ten calories of fossil fuel energy for every one calorie of food energy it produces. The waste is staggering. If the whole world ate the way Americans eat, all global fossil-fuel reserves would be gone in less than ten years.

In the Gulf of Mexico, the runoff from nitrogen fertilizers has created a dead-zone the size of NJ where nothing can live. 80% of our grain gets fed to cows, which are then pumped full of chemicals and raised in cruel living conditions. It takes 35 calories of fossil fuel energy to make one calorie of beef in this way.

The Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations is one of the liberal religious groups declaring that our relationship to food and agriculture in this country is a problem with religious significance. In the 2008 General Assembly in Ft. Lauderdale, UUA delegates selected “Ethical Eating” as the Congregational Study/Action Issue. This means that between 2008 and 2012 Unitarian Universalist congregations across the
country are educating themselves about this issue and taking action. They don’t call it “keeping eco-kosher,” but it amounts to the same thing. The UUA is encouraging us to pay attention to our personal food choices, look at our church’s food purchasing practices, and do political advocacy work. We are currently forming an Ethical Eating group at All Souls (a sub-group of both the Peace & Justice Task for and Green Souls) to be part of this Unitarian Universalist movement and to promote an eco-kosher ethos here. Let me know if you’d like to be part of this group.

In researching this issue, I called up two non-profits that deal with issues related to industrial agriculture and I asked them, what do you recommend that I ask this congregation to do? (Interestingly, both of the people I randomly spoke to were Unitarian Universalists!)

Both people I spoke to and everything I’ve read says that the most important thing is this: exercise your power as consumers and buy your food from local, organic farmers. This is the single most effective thing we can do. Support sustainable agriculture, buy food that’s less processed, eat lower on the food chain, and eat less meat. This is the most practical way of keeping eco-kosher as a community.

Obviously there are grey areas in deciding how to do this. You can’t get local food in New York in the winter and we should remember that some farms grow their crops sustainably but don’t have the official “organic” designation. So you have to feel your way through this. But however we do it, I hope we can do it with an awareness that what we eat is a religious matter and it matters. What we eat connects us with the holy ground on which we live.

People sometimes joke that the only Unitarian Universalist sacrament is the sacrament of coffee and donuts after the service (or in our case, Entenmann’s). I think we can do better than that. Let’s ask ourselves, what should Unitarian Universalists eat after a Sunday service? By moving toward keeping eco-kosher, food can become spiritually meaningful as we slowly reconnect with where it came from and with the people who grow it.
I invite all you, over this holiday season and beyond, to try to make food choices that express your Unitarian Universalist values and your gratitude for the fragile gifts of nature. If this is not something you normally think much about, the holidays are both a hard time to start and a great time to start. Hard because during the holidays, we want food to be about pleasure and celebration and to not have to think too hard about it. But it’s a great time to start for the same reason – we are so food-focused during the holidays – people get together and eat constantly -- that it is the perfect opportunity to talk about these issues, experiment with different foods, and talk about why you’re experimenting with them. And if your co-workers complain and demand to know why you’ve brought a lentil salad instead of a meatloaf to the office party, try out the phrase: “Because I’m a really religious Unitarian Universalist and I keep eco-kosher.”

In the meantime, may we all practice greater mindfulness in the food we eat and the products we buy. May we find a greater and greater connection to the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. And may we all metaphorically take off our shoes – for the ground on which we are standing is holy ground.