Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: Food as an entry-point to sustainable happiness

Lesson By: Elizabeth Flesh, Hoover High School, San Diego, CA

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 10th grade ELA; 9-12 ELA/Humanities; students in academies of Visual and Performing Arts and Health Sciences; 9-12 Health and Nutrition

Duration of Lesson: Two weeks

California Content Standards for English Language Arts:

Reading Comprehension: 2.5 Extend ideas presented in primary or secondary sources through original analysis, evaluation, and elaboration.

Writing Applications: 2.4 Write persuasive compositions:
   b. Use specific rhetorical devices to support assertions (e.g., appeal to logic through reasoning; appeal to emotion or ethical belief; relate a personal anecdote, case study, or analogy).
   c. Clarify and defend positions with precise and relevant evidence, including facts, expert opinions, quotations, and expressions of commonly accepted beliefs and logical reasoning.
   d. Address readers’ concerns, counterclaims, biases, and expectations.

Listening and Speaking Strategies: 1.1 Formulate judgments about the ideas under discussion and support those judgments with convincing evidence. 1.2 Compare and contrast the ways in which media genres (e.g., televised news, news magazines, documentaries, online information) cover the same event.

Lesson Abstract:
Students will embark on a journey of health and nutrition towards sustainable happiness. They will document the food they eat and why, and the determination in making food choices that will guide their process of understanding sustainable happiness. This lesson concludes a Nutrition Unit including persuasive writing. Gandhi’s concept of sarvodaya is included as a continued path on the journey of sustainable health and happiness.

Guiding Questions:
1. Why should I care about the food I eat?
2. What are some outcomes I may face with my food choices? Who am I affecting with my choices?
3. If I want to change my eating habits, how can I find accessible food that aligns with my understanding of sustainable happiness?

Content Essay
How does one define their own happiness? A question frequently asked, but perhaps infrequently considered in earnest. In our western industrialized society, happiness has become synonymous with economic success and the accumulation of stuff. Our media networks are a constant reminder that the more stuff we consume, the happier we become. We have worked ourselves into a frenzy of accumulation as products become easier and cheaper to buy. In many
capacities, we have lost the true meaning of happiness, which has its roots in the heart and soul, where the antithesis of wealth and accumulation lies. Our food health has also been linked to the values of mass consumption and consumerism. With the plethora of fast food chains, venti-sized Starbucks drinks – with whipped cream, and alcohol and drug consumption, we have spiraled into a world of feeding our impulses, “I deserve this venti caramel frappucino because it makes me happy, and I deserve to be happy.” In privatizing our concept of food happiness, we continue to isolate ourselves from humanity, thus eliminating the possibilities of true happiness. We disconnect ourselves from each other and ourselves with the self-disrespect in consuming chemicals, genetically modified food, and pesticide-laden produce. We disregard humanity and all living creatures, as well as the eco-system and our global environment when we blindly consume in order to feed our own unsustainable happiness.

What if happiness could be sustainable – in that the choices we make provide a long-term sense of happiness to not just ourselves but to the entire living world, one that is thorough and aligns with our core values. Dr. Catherine O’Brien, education professor at Cape Breton University noticed these disconnected components and in 2005, crafted the concept of sustainable happiness. O’Brien created, “A new concept…to merge principles from sustainability and findings from happiness studies. It is defined as ‘happiness that contributes to individual, community and/or global well-being without exploiting other people, the environment or future generations’” (O’Brien 1). With this definition and concept of sustainable happiness, we can return to true understanding of happiness and the self, choosing to reject the consumer society we live in. O’Brien continues to state, “Happiness is at the heart of who we are and what we do but in a consumer society, where consumption and happiness are inextricably linked, individuals confuse the ‘path to the good life as the good life’. Our unbridled pursuit of happiness is often at the expense of other people and the natural environment” (5). High school students are at the climax of media-focus and pressure to consume. This translates to students making unsustainable choices about the items they buy (or their parents buy) and the food they consume (hot cheetos!). Therefore, sustainable happiness is an essential part of education – our students need to relearn the definition of happiness, and begin to make choices that can facilitate a more sustainable and healthy planet.

**Gandhi and sarvodaya**

Gandhi taught sarvodaya – the well-being of others – which has become a major component of sustainable happiness: we can truly live a life of sustained happiness when we know that we are living in a way that benefits others, rather than exploits, degrades, disrespects. In the preface to the Gujarati translation of John Ruskin’s *Unto This Last*, Gandhi discusses sarvodaya and states that while,

> People in the West generally hold that it is man’s duty to promote the happiness – prosperity, that is – of the greatest number. If in the pursuit of this happiness, moral laws are violated, it does not matter much. Again, as the object is the happiness of the greatest number, people in the West do not believe it to be wrong if it is secured at the cost of the minority. The consequences of this attitude are in evidence in all western countries (Gandhi 1).

Gandhi’s depiction of the West is still relevant today. However, neither Gandhi’s message nor the contemporary leading ecologists and psychologists believe that we are doomed to
destruction. Through education, we truly can feel empowered to honor ourselves and others, as we understand and live according to true happiness. Gandhi continues, “The exclusive quest for the physical and material happiness of the majority has no sanction in divine law. In fact, some thoughtful persons in the West have pointed out that it is contrary to divine law to pursue happiness in violation of moral principles” (1). This is at the heart of sustainable happiness. We are not truly happy when we make decisions that disregard others. In fact, sustainable happiness creates awareness, “to the consequences, both positive and adverse, of how individuals, communities and nations pursue happiness. In a globalized world, everyone’s actions have repercussions on distant lands and people” (O’Brien 6).

**Sustainable happiness through food**

Food health is woven into O’Brien’s concept of sustainable happiness and Gandhi’s concept of sarvodaya. As we have the choice to decide what food we eat, from where it comes and who has been in contact with the food, from its beginning to our meal at the table, we see that we are completely connected to all life. Catherine O’Brien states, “Sustainable happiness reinforces the fact that we are interconnected and interdependent with all life on the planet, even life that is yet to be born” (6). True happiness is enjoyed in meeting a farmer, who also runs a small farmers market. When you know her, sit in conversation with her, and she tells you the tomatoes in your sandwich were picked — by her — this morning, you see the pride in her eyes, the love for her work, and the labor of love she willingly endures in order to give people one of life’s greatest gifts: health. This farmer is happy. She works hard, with her hands, and can sustain her family. You are happy. You have chosen food that is fresh and will provide your body with all the nutrients needed to live in healthy abundance. You also know that you are providing this farmer the opportunity to continue her passion and life’s work. There is so much joy in this process, and the fullness that is felt is not from harsh chemicals or preserved fillers, but in the connection with a human being, and the sustained joy in eating delicious food.

Teaching high school students about nutrition and health is both essential and delicate. They are in the midst of determining life values and negotiating who they are and who they will become. Additionally, they are not in complete freedom and control with their food choices, but at the will of their families, socio-economic and community circumstances, and their cultural traditions. In creating a lesson on food health and nutrition, students first must be informed of the facts, especially regarding food and drink teens consume that are proven detrimental to health and wellbeing. For example, students and teacher make predictions about the amount of sugar — or high fructose corn syrup — in a 12oz can of Coca Cola or Arizona Iced Tea (particularly popular with this generation of urban teens), a 20oz bottle, a 32oz Big Gulp, and a 64oz McDonalds special, then work in groups to determine accuracy of the predictions. Students count ingredients in a bag of Hot Cheetos and investigate evidence discovered linking Red 40 food dye to cancer and other health and developmental concerns. Students engage in research surrounding food health. One example, Milton Stokes M.P.H and R.D., in his article, “The Hidden Health Risks of Food Dyes,” states,

The three most widely used culprits—Yellow 5, Yellow 6 and Red 40—contain compounds, including benzidine and 4-aminobiphenyl, that research has linked with cancer. Research has also associated food dyes with problems in children
including allergies, hyperactivity, learning impairment, irritability and aggressiveness.

Once the information has been shared and students understand the scientific and nutritional facts of the food choices they make, we can begin the process of guiding students on a path towards a more internal and organic approach to their food health, nutrition beliefs and opportunities. For example, students identify what vegetables best promote healthy bone, teeth and hair growth, as well as brain function and muscle development. Additionally, they determine how a person can select and prepare nutritious foods that taste delicious. It is in this place where the idea of building sustainable happiness through our food choices exists.

It is important to help students see for themselves – and within themselves – the decisions they make for their health, the health of those around them and the sustainability of our planet. Also, to serve as a guide for adolescents to create their own meaning within the facts empowers the students to really wrestle with, identify and adopt a true definition of happiness that can be related to other areas in their lives. Gandhi’s message of ahimsa is very important to this process. Students will not – and should not – determine their own happiness from a top-down approach, just as Gandhi did not believe in forcing a system on the people of India. True swaraj – freedom – comes from understanding and developing the self. The concept of connecting happiness to food health may be abstract for some high school students, especially as the definition of happiness – sustainable happiness – is profoundly different from the happiness our society preaches to this generation. However, in believing in the interconnectedness of all living beings, and in connecting our inherent sense of compassion with Gandhi’s concept of sarvodaya, this population of adolescents can begin to make decisions that reflect true and sustainable happiness.

Bibliography:

Teaching Activities:
1. Students begin a food journal they will keep for a week: what are you eating? What are your choices? What is your eating pattern? Who do you eat with and how? Do you get to choose what you eat? What do you choose?
2. Students view the documentary, I Am, and discuss after the identities in happiness.
3. Free-write regarding film and a question tying the idea of happiness to food
4. Teacher describes Gandhi’s concept of sarvodaya, create concept maps and discuss the connection in food happiness
5. Students and teacher create Interdependence Map surrounding our eating habits
6. Students and teacher read and discuss *The Talisman*. Free write response
7. Walking tour of City Heights: What options do we have for food? Is this normal for a community like ours?
8. Read and discuss *NY Times* article, “When the Uprooted Put Down Roots” free write
9. Watch 14-year old anti-GMO activist Rachel Parent’s interview on *The Lang and O’Leary Exchange Show*, discuss the power of the youth
10. Read “Youth Food Justice Program” on IRC website; Field trip to the New Roots community garden on 54th, south of University; tour with IRC employee
11. Saturday field trip to the City Heights Farmers Market
12. Students write a letter of gratitude to self: thankful for being able to make choices, thankful for… and how their decisions about food can connect to the concept of sustainable happiness

**Materials Needed:**
- Bell-work journals
- Copy of the documentary, *I Am*
- Free-write prompt for *I Am*
- Article, “Sarvodaya”
- Large pieces of butcher paper attached to create wall-sized Interdependence Map
- *The Talisman* guiding questions created by Dr. Andrew Moss
- Free-write prompt for *The Talisman*
- Permission slips for three field trips
- Copies of *NY Times* article, “When the Uprooted Put Down Roots”
- Free write prompt for *NY Times* article