

Martha Stewart, Emeril, and the Naked Chef: Cooking, Dining, and Religious Education

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This presentation will explore the various ways that preparing, cooking, and dining together may be a way of approaching anew the act of teaching and learning, forming and nurturing people in the gestured rituals of one's faith community.

Story: It is December; the students come together in the kitchen in my home. With one person in the kitchen, the kitchen is large enough; with eight people in the kitchen, the space is tight, but electrifying as the graduate students in my Curriculum and Pedagogy class are making Valencian paella for the last-class-of-the-semester banquet this night. What I hope to create this evening is a convergence of words and food. My inspiration is the writer Rubem Alves who writes that "lectures are meals: words are distributed to be eaten." And like the dinner party, a lecture or seminar also has an etiquette, a ritual that holds it together. Alves continues: "Words will have to be well cooked, carefully prepared in advance, with due consideration for the eating habits of the guests... Words must be digestible. They also are to be assimilated, incorporated." (in The Poet, The Warrior, The Prophet).

My other inspiration for having dinners, grand Babbette Feast like dinners, is Martha Stewart. In her cookbook What to Have For Dinner, she writes this in her Introduction: "Dinner is too important to skip or to take for granted. It can and should be a time to enjoy the ones we love, a time to share the good things of life" (p. 9). Dinner together as a class seems a good and almost natural way of sharing the good things of life, even life as a graduate student.

After a semester of talking about curricular theories and pedagogical moves, I hope to mix lectures and presentations together with preparing, cooking, and dining together on this

December evening. Some students who are novices to the kitchen look forward to this event as they self-identify as “not very good cooks.” But as and with the community of the class—students and teacher—all of us become great cooks this evening.

The cooking, the lessons on curricular theory, the eating, and the pedagogical habits we discussed and focused on in class throughout the semester co-mingle tonight among the students and teacher. Jerome Bruner’s understanding of the culture of education, and Martha Stewart’s idea of the ideal culture for a holiday affair play off of each other. Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligence theory burbles forth while students set the table artistically, pour the wine, the water, and discuss quantity of measuring cups in the Naked Chefs’ (a.k.a. Jamie Oliver) British cook book, while another student sings and plays Christmas carols on the piano. The conversation roams from the latest gossip among the Divinity School students, talk about strange meals never eaten before as we prepare the sausage, shrimp, fish, chicken, tomatoes, rice, clams, and mysterious spices to the clay pot, amid a leafy green salad and Sangria, to the preparations for the holidays in everyone’s respective churches. At the resplendent dinner table, illuminated by candlelight, there is a communal prayer, a pause, and then the first tentative tastes of an exotic dish, followed quickly by the exclamation of “oh my!” as savory and salty, sweet and tart co-mingle upon our tongues, as we think about other times we’ve tasted such spices. The spinach salad is the only “known” quantity on the table for most students. Like Emeril Lagasse, I too am happy as people are getting involved with food, “excited about food, and cooking food” (from Prime Time with Emeril, p. 1). More Sangria and water are poured. Green, red, and white candles are dripping onto the table, the wax caught by the dish underneath them. The Baked Alaska and coffee are a hit as we evaluate the course with one another, teacher and students, method of instruction and course

content, with the ever-practical question, “How will I use this in my congregation? My parish? My family?”

A mixture of *techne*, *praxis*, and *phronesis* becomes evident as we prepare, cook and eat this meal together. The *techne* is in the preparation and cooking of the meal together, as well as setting the table. We all shop for the ingredients, going into different parts of the grocery store to find the mysterious items (some students have never had cumin in a meal before).

Praxis was made evident by working as a community together, students with teacher in the hot, small kitchen. Students are leaving the individualistic world of graduate studies and sharing ideas and lives with one another as they prepare meals, going back and forth between recipes, the theories they learned this semester and

Phronesis came forth in the way our lives intersected with one another, shaping our very character, enhancing virtues of caring and sharing as we simply pass the butter, the bread, the coffee, the Sangria, lifting up concerns and joys about the class and one another. Students discussed issues

The meal together was more than just food, “a substance one stuffed in one’s face when hungry—like filling up at a gas station” to quote chef Anthony Bourdain (p. 9). Rather, it was a way, a portal, and a practice, which revealed and unleashed the community-in-waiting that was just a meal away the entire semester. To quote the Naked Chef Jamie Oliver, “It’s not just about eating. It’s about passing the potatoes around the table, ripping up some bread, licking my fingers, getting tipsy and enjoying the company of good friends.” (Oliver, p. 1).

This meal and time together with students is the catalyst for this presentation on preparing, cooking, and eating a meal together, and how the gestures of such a feast embodies practices that may call us to explore again the centrality of meals with communities of faith as times of building up, shaping, and nurturing the faith within our respective religious communities. I will consider in what ways today's televised cooking shows and media resources on fine dining may provide a way of seeing in what ways religious educators may use a meal, like a banquet or buffet, as the context for forming and nurturing growth in our respective faith traditions. By exploring and naming some of the links between cooking and dining that may lend insights into how religious educators may teach the gestures of our faith traditions, according to the rituals of our congregations or parishes. Obviously in considering approaches to food preparation and dining etiquette in general, there will be references to Eucharistic ritual practices and Passover Seder rituals of the church and synagogue in particular, in teaching and embodying the rituals of faith communities. In the end, I hope that we may consider anew the ways the lessons of one's faith are embodied in the gestures of the life of the faithful away from the dinner table, the Lord's table, the community of faith's table at a potluck or fellowship dinner, and the altar.

Gestures of Meals, Gestures of Faith:

In M.F.K. Fisher's book, Here Let Us Feast, one of the first passages of Scripture she references in this marvelous collection is Psalm 23: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows, Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long (vs. 5-6). Writing about the pleasures of food, of dining, of tables, Fisher continues to explore the place of food within the biblical context. She references the story

from Genesis, with the fruit on a certain tree in the Garden of Eden, and the restrictions about eating from that one tree. From there, Fisher jumps to the New Testament, to the Gospels, and the stories of loaves and fishes, very good wine in a wedding feast in Cana, and the bread and wine that became sacramental in the lives of Christians. Fisher writes: it grew clear to me that the priests and the storytellers, the great singers and the teachers, everywhere and always showed their people real food, real wine, to prove to them the truths of spirituality nourishment. A great catch of fishes from an empty sea, or water springing from a dry stone: such things were told of over and over to sustain men (and women) whose hope of Heaven dwindled and grew faint as their stomachs cried out” (p. 7).

In a cursory review of food in the Old and New Testaments, it is readily apparent the centrality of food preparation, the cooking of the food, the presentation of food, the eating a meal together, served as ways for the Holy to be made known to God’s people. For example, after the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, there was a moment in which Abraham and Sarah made a meal to satisfied the hungry needs of the strangers (Gen. 18). Between Laban, Jacob, and God, a covenant was sealed with a sacrifice and eating of bread (Gen. 31). Throughout Leviticus, there are rules on the preparation and distribution of food, including the Year of Jubilee. Moses and Aaron, along with the Israelites, as they wandered through the wilderness, depended upon God to provide food—manna--and water. And the prophets wrote repeatedly of the importance of food, the land, and the providential will of the Almighty.

In the New Testament in general, and particularly in the Gospels, food and drink were important ways that the truths of Christian faith was embodied and nourished. Stories abounded about Jesus eating with tax collectors and prostitutes. There was the story of the

great wine at a wedding feast in Cana. There was the parable about the vineyard owner and the laborers. Another parable of the great banquet feast revealed much about the dominion of God's love, embodied in the Messianic banquet. In Luke we read that two disciples were on the way to Emmaus when they broke bread with a stranger, and their eyes were open. And in the closing section of John, we read of Jesus preparing breakfast for hungry disciples. In the Acts of the Apostles, as well as in First Corinthians, there are allusions to food, and even a squabble about the purity of food among the disciples. And it was the Apostle Paul who held us the bread and wine which were prominent in what has come to be called among many "the Last Supper," based upon the Passover meal that Jesus shared with his disciples (Luke 22:7-22).

It should as come as no surprise that meals together are at the heart of a community of faith. Jean Vanier writes that forgiveness and celebration are at the heart of community. They are the two faces of love: "Celebration is a communal experience of Joy, a song of thanksgiving. We celebrate the fact of being together; we give thanks for the gifts we have been given. Celebration nourishes us, restores hope, and brings us the strength to live with the suffering and difficulties of every day life" (Community and Growth, p. 200). This is reiterated by Margaret Visser, who writes that "we use eating as a medium for social relationships: satisfaction of the most individual of needs becomes a means of creating community" (The Rituals of Dinner). Likewise, historian Michel Jeanneret writes that we live in a divided world, "a world in which physical and mental pleasures are compartmentalized and ordered into a hierarchy: they either conflict with each other or are mutually exclusive...the banquet feast is the one thing that overcomes this division and allows for the reconciliation of opposites...(In banquets) the combination of words and food in a convivial

scene gives rise to a special moments when thought and the senses enhance rather than just tolerate each other...at table we rediscover, in the imagination, elements of original happiness and unity” (in Feast of Words).

Again, in eating a meal together is more than stuffing food into our mouths. Eating together is a chance for community to be discovered, to be nurtured, to be healed, and to be celebrated:

Discovering and Re-Creating Community: In his stunning critique of fast-food chains in Fast Food Nation, Eric Schlosser writes about the transience of eating in such a diner, like McDonalds, Burger King, or Wendy’s: “Hundreds of millions of people buy fast food every day without giving it much thought, unaware of the subtle and not so subtle ramifications of their purchases. They rarely consider where this food came from, how it was made, what it is doing to the community around them. They just grab their tray off the counter, find a table, take a seat, unwrap the paper, and dig in. The whole experience is transitory and soon forgotten” (p. 10). After this description, he writes that we should be concerned about such a life, because “you are what you eat” (p. 10).

We are what we eat; we become a certain kind of person in part because of the way we eat. For example, many of us, eating is a lonely, individualistic experience. We eat breakfast in a hurry, dashing out the door; we eat lunch by our computer, writing the next lesson or article; we get home late, stick something in the microwave, and eat it alone on the counter, while our sons and daughters graze over the breakfast cereals for dinner that night. Or we may be the fast-food junkie that Eric Schlosser writes about as we have fallen into the convenience of eating fast as we live our fast-paced lives. Writes Joan Chittister: “when schedules get hectic, the family meal is the first thing to go. When plans are being made, being home for

dinner is seldom a priority. When work and practice and shopping and meetings get extended, family meals are the first victims. When people live alone, no one gets invited in for dinner” (from Wisdom Distilled from the Daily, p. 174).

Yet meals may also be a place and time that community may be discovered or created. Not only do we become what we eat, but we become *where* and *with whom* we eat as well. Meals become a place in which asking for someone to pass the salt, the butter, a certain dish becomes a way of communicating and linking us together with one another. It is also hard to remain an enemy with someone as you eat bread and share a meal with them. In a meal, we have an opportunity to meet others. Vanier writes that it is hard to remain ‘behind the barriers of one’s depression when we have to ask for salt. The need for food encourages communication” (Community and Growth, p. 206).

One of the continuous calls among a people is to become a religious community, to be part of a faith community, to find or discover a community where grace and forgiveness abounds. It is possible that through meals, and the ambience of those meals, that community may be more easily located or placed, among a people, who literally and figuratively share life together.

Nurturing Community: Vanier writes that anyone who runs a household knows that a good meal takes careful work: from drawing up the menu, to buying the food, to cooking it, to setting the table and presenting the meal attractively. Everything has to be thought of: the wine, the flowers, who sits next to whom, the way conversations can be encouraged....it is good to have times when everyone can share in conversations of general interest and laugh together” (p. 206).

Nurturing a community of faith takes such preparation and accommodation. In preparing a meal, in bringing a feast together, an important element or aspect for such a gathering is the practice of memory. When far away from a recipe and cooking in a different environment other than my home's kitchen, I often have to pull from my own memory the recipe for a meal in a strange environment.

Meals themselves can be a place of deep memories unleashed for those who are eating at a table. Food has a way of stirring one's imagination, one's memory, reminding a person of past meals and their association with other people at those meals. It is the repetition of those meals in different settings that feeds those memories, that keep them alive.

Richard Pillsbury writes about the memories stirred up in a meal shared with his older brother. They continually tell each other that even though they grew up within the same household, they had different parents. Their memories vary widely from each other: "it is not important whose memory might be more accurate, or whether either is accurate for that matter. The point is that every single day we did share time together that built a bond between us, which lasted a lifetime of living on opposite sides of the nation and leading quite different lives. Will grabbing a hamburger at McDonald's create the same depth of relationships? It is difficult to imagine that it would" (p. 26 in "Thoroughly Modern Dining" in National Forum).

Another aspect of the nurturing of a faith community members in a meal comes in the geographical location of a meal, which can nurture memories. For example, I have shared breakfast with some Southerners who get excited about eating grits when eating in the North, and defensive about any comments regarding the taste of grits on a Northerner's tongue.

Likewise, in the Passover meal, a people's faith is nurtured as the words and the food are closely united. As was the ancient practice of Christian monks who listened to the Word of

God read while eating a meal, thus ingesting both for daily sustenance, at a Passover seder, there is the celebration and remembrance of the Passover. Memories are stirred anew as people remember where they have eaten such meals in the past while focusing on their current situation, all the while remembering the roots of this meal.

Memories are stirred up and nurtured within an eating of a meal, no matter how grand or simple the fare. Nourishment comes in those moments when the entire faith community becomes aware of the current of life, of love that is flowing through it.

Healing Community: Michel Jeanneret wrote that the word “banquet” comes from the French, who alluded to Plato and *Symposium* in which Le Banquet, or “le banquet eucharistique” is the equivalent of the “Eucharistic Feast” in devotional English—“feast,” with its overtones of “love feast” and “feasting with friends,” might be a closer English alternative” (From Feast of Words).

The sense of being part of a feast with friends proves to be most awkward at those meals in which we find ourselves sitting next to or across from our enemies, or those we have offended. A sense of isolation and alienation exists between two people, and the feast of friends is not readily identifiable. While food can be a major way of reestablishing community when it is broken, it takes careful preparation, openness to understanding anew the concerns of others, and a willingness to sit at table with those in which a sense of wrong-doing exists.

In the Eucharistic practices of the Christian church, the breaking of bread and pouring of wine is done so in remembrance of one who was greatly wronged by many people, namely Jesus Christ. In the Presbyterian Church (USA) Book of Common Worship, in preparation for sharing the Eucharist, it is written that Christ, born of Mary, shares our life: Eating with sinners, he welcomes us. Guiding his children, he leads us. Visiting the sick, he heals us.

Dying on the cross, he saves us. Risen from the dead, he gives new life. Living with you, he prays for us. With thanksgiving we take this bread and this cup and proclaim the death and resurrection of our Lord. Receive our sacrifice of praise...pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, that this meal may be a communion in the body and blood of our Lord...make us one with Christ and with all who share this feast” (p. 296). Implied in this prayer is the conclusion that Christ died for us, healing a rift that existed between humanity and God that was made whole by this sacrifice of Jesus’ life: “Dying on the cross, he saves us.” In this meal, a healing balm is omnipresent, healing other relationships as we are made “one with Christ *and with all who share this feast*” (my emphasis).

Celebrating Community: Richard Pillsbury writes that “special foods and special occasions seemingly have been synonymous from the beginning of time. The ranking cook in the household...got out the pots and prepared the honoree’s favorite foods. The household gathered around the groaning board, and the family created a special time to remember the occasion for all the year and maybe a lifetime” (from “Thoroughly Modern Dining”, p. 25). Celebrations like this have a way of marking us, naming us, and shaping our very identity, throughout time.

Celebrations are important. Special meals for special occasions are significant. It could be a loud and crazy affair during a holiday, like Mardi Gras, Shrove Tuesday, Epiphany dinners, or quieter but solemn affairs like a Sabbath dinner. They can also be quiet one to one meetings over candlelight, where people, after all, don’t have too much new news to share, but the non-verbal gestures can sometimes forge unity more strongly than words.

In the end, I agree with Jean Vanier, who writes that our communities of faith should be “signs of joy and celebration...Communities which are sad are sterile; they are places of death.

Of course our joy on earth is far from complete. But our celebrations are small signs of the eternal celebration of the wedding feast, (the banquet feast) to which we are all invited” (Vanier, Community and Growth, p. 211). At our celebration dinners, our banquet feasts, our Passover seders and Eucharistic rituals there is an opportunity for education in the faith that creates a common ground for all who are called and wish to gather together: those who are rich or poor, straight or gay, disabled or non-disabled, men and women, young and old, of all ethnic heritages, from all corners of the globe. Sometimes we have to wait for a long time for everyone to be able to join a celebration, but the wait is usually worth it.