DOING IT WELL

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Eating as a Spiritual Act

By Simon Carey Holt

I love to eat and I love to write. My professional years in the kitchen remain an important part of my story, past and present. My life at the keyboard, though sporadic, is life giving. So why is it that when asked to bring these two acts together—to write about eating—I stumble? Surely a cascading flow of words will pour as smoothly as a good wine. Not so.

I am in the midst of writing a book on eating. In fact, I've been 'in the midst' for too long. The presenting struggle is always time, but when time is available I stare uncomfortably at the screen. Any thoughts I have are a jumble in my head. And when formed, the words stick in my throat; my fingers fumble on the keyboard. The truth is, it feels indulgent.

The act of eating is a troubled business. I've spent too much of my time in its shadows, professionally and otherwise, to view it romantically. For the most part it speaks of monotony, and at its more refined edge—the edge that fascinates—it reeks of decadence and excess. Surely the investment good writing demands could be more profitably targeted to subject matter that really matters. So says my head as I stare at the screen.

Occasionally, though, I am prodded to think again, and it is this prodding that keeps me at the keyboard. Marion Halligan, one of Australia's most intelligent food writers, is a wise and moderating voice in an otherwise pompous genre. For Halligan, eating is a conversation, a relationship, a way of being in everyday life. Its beauty is its simplicity, its

ability to bring us together, and its connection to the earth's rhythms and seasons. In a long forgotten Quadrant essay from the 1970s, Halligan critiques the style and approach of restaurant reviewers in the Australian press. Part way through she says this:

> 'Writing about food is not a totally satisfactory activity. It has too many intimations of decadence, in a world where so often the mere presence of food is such an event that the consideration of its elegance would be an obscenity. The only justification of our preoccupation with food is that, since we do eat a great deal, we should do it well.'

It is the exhortation to 'do it well' that has kept me struggling for words that take eating seriously; words that treat eating as the significant act it is. To do it well, according to Halligan, is not to eat extravagantly, but to do so mindfully, respectfully and justly. Indeed, in this age of culinary infatuations, global food crises, celebrity chefs and Biggest Losers, the need to reflect more seriously upon eating is pressing. It is this idea of eating well—eating as a spiritual act—that I want to explore.

Aspiration to 'the good life' is a common drive today. Though variously defined, flip through the pages of lifestyle magazines that promote it and its sure to include a beautiful home, luxurious vacations and quality food and wine leisurely imbibed with an urbane circle of good looking friends. This fashionable expression of the good life is an indulgent and colour-coordinated habitat of personal comfort, visual beauty, social connection and culinary indulgence.

According to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates, the most important questions we can ask are to do with the meaning of our lives. 'What sort of life is worth living?' he asks; 'What constitutes the good life?' Unlike many contemporary assessments, Socrates understood the good life as the most fundamental expression of our morality: our sense of what is right and, subsequently, how we live in relationship to others. The question addressed to Jesus—one that sparked his story of the Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel—was 'what must we do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus' answer, fashioned through his questioner's recalling of Jewish tradition, was that we should love God with heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves. 'Do this,' Jesus said, 'and you will live.' In other words, embody these two loves in your life and you have the key to life in all it's fullness: the good life. If this is so, then eating well takes on significance beyond taste, abundance or beauty. To eat well is to eat in such a way that the good life, God-dependent and self-giving, is embodied each time we do.

Theologian J Shannon Jung argues that affluent societies like ours—those infatuated with more self-serving assessments of the good life—are in danger of losing the real joy of food when we fail to notice what food is. We do so, he says, when we lose sight of food's source and purpose.

Firstly, food's source is God. Food does not come from the supermarket. It's not the creation of a chef, no mater how talented. It's not even the result purely of a farmer's hard work. Before it is anything else food is a gift, given to sustain and enrich our lives. The farmer, household cook or chef may work as a co-creator and co-provider with God, but God remains the source. Secondly, food's purpose is relationship. Eating expresses our common humanity. Food is what brings us together and holds us there. There is barely a relational aspect of life that is not formalized, ritualized, celebrated or facilitated by the acts of eating and drinking. The truth is, food is the great leveler; it is our common need and is made to share.

With this in mind, I want to suggest that to eat well it to eat both joyfully and generously, and that the challenge to do so is pressing in whatever context we eat.

Eating Joyfully

To eat joyfully is to eat consciously of our dependence upon the earth and with gratitude for the richness of God's provision. Its delight is birthed in the daily disciplines of attention and gratitude—being attuned to the simple goodness of the earth and naming our dependence upon it. In a culture of plenty, however, attention falls faster than a soufflé and gratitude disappears with it.

'Why are we so bored and dull?' the poet Frank Ohler asks, 'Why do we appreciate water most in the desert, health only during sickness, our friend when he leaves, our love when she dies?' Indeed, it is this boredom born of excess and the absence of felt need that inspires the development of fashion and fad in eating. The birth of gels and foams on restaurant plates feeds our need for entertainment when the imagination is numb to the simple joys of good food shared with others. I am not averse to creativity and beauty in food preparation. I have contributed my share of ornately carved ice sculptures to the buffets and banquets of life. But surely we must ask

ourselves, again and again, from where does this come? And what is this for?

When I hold an apple in my hand and bite into it; when I sit down at the table with my family for a simple meal of pasta and salad; when I join my friends at a restaurant for an exquisitely prepared meal of several courses—in any and all of these I eat well when I relish the beauty of what's before me and articulate my gratitude for it. In an age and place of abundance, such joy requires choice. It does not come easily or naturally but flows from a decision —made and remade—to notice and name what is good. The words of Thomas Howard have long challenged my own sense of joy at the table:

> 'The idea that ordinariness should be so fraught with heaven, and that a thing like mere eating should open out onto vistas that we thought were the province of religious mystery—it is all too heady. Not that we are transported every time we sit down to our cornflakes, any more than we are stuck down by Cupid's dart every time we come across our spouse. But the thing which forms from time to time and we are given to see when our vision is roused—that eating is a mysterious thing, or that our spouse is fairer than Aphrodite—it is there all along, cloaked in the demure mantle of ordinariness.'

Eating Generously

To eat generously is to eat in relationship with others. This is why the table is so important to food and why TV dinners and the McDonalds drive-thu will never satisfy at a deeper level. The shared table is an expression of our connectedness, a place to acknowledge our mutual humanity and need. It's not just a family table or one shared with friends; it's a global table. And it's because of this that the experiences of poverty and hunger are so dehumanizing. When those at this end of the table have food in abundance while those at that end have barely enough to survive, we are all diminished.

According to the most recent data, Australians will spend in excess of $19.3 billion at restaurants and cafes this year. Despite a significant drop in our spending on clothes and housing, the money we commit to eating with friends is on the rise, from just 12% of the average household food budget in the 1970s to 42% today. There is much about this that is good. It illustrates our continuing commitment to relationship and demonstrates a broader dissatisfaction with the creep of suburban cacooning that so marked the last two decades. The extraordinary proliferation of sidewalk cafes in our cities and their outlying suburbs filled with people in conversation day and night is evidence of our city in community. What's more, our spending supports one of the fastest growing and most culturally diverse employment sectors in Australia.

With all that acknowledged, we come back to the stark inequities that mark our national and global tables. As never before, our table life marks a clear demarcation between the haves and have-nots, the socially included and excluded. When I watch those who come for dinner on Sunday night to my community's back-lane café—a place that provides hot meals and conversation for neighbours who will otherwise go hungry—I am uncomfortably aware of the difference between those who sit here and those who eat at the restaurants that I most aspire to. As a keen observer of all things culinary, I am well aware of the obsessions, infatuations and excess that colour the world of fine cuisine. I love it and I loathe it. What's more, as a lapsed member of Slow Food (Australia)—a potentially revolutionary movement calling for all food on the global table to be 'good, clean and fair'—I have seen first hand how revolutionary commitments are watered down to a local preoccupation with organic food fairs and gastro tourism for the wealthy.

To eat well is to eat generously, to ensure our own table habits, in balance, are inclusive and as much about our neighbours as they are about ourselves. For me that is expressed in the discipline of sitting routinely at tables that speak more of of hospitality than of exclusivity, more of sharing than of personal indulgence, more of social and economic diversity than uniformity.

I travelled recently to one of the burgeoning cities of South East Asia to teach on the connections between daily work and Christian faith. I spent the majority of my time with two very different working communities. At one end of the spectrum, I was

with company executives from manufacturing industries. These were men and women who owned and operated large companies employing up to 10,000 workers each. They were chauffer-driven and enjoyed a high standard of living. We met together at a beautiful seaside resort. I was deeply impressed with their willingness to address many troubling issues in their industries from the perspective of their Christian faith.

At the other end of the spectrum, I was with an organization working among the street cleaners, stallholders, and sex workers in one of the most densely populated and poverty-ridden regions of the city. Our training seminars were held in cramped rooms high above the crowded streets with the constant noise of the city humming in the background.

At the end of my stay, I was invited to two farewell meals on the same day, lunch with the company owners and their spouses and dinner with my new friends from the city streets. Lunch was at one of the city's most exclusive restaurants, a lavish establishment with Gucci, Prada and Chanel stores alongside. As a dining space, it was magnificent. The interior was extraordinary and no expense had been spared. The restaurant manager was a committed Christian with whom I shared conversation prior to our arrival. He was struggling to understand his own call to discipleship in such a high-end industry. But the food he served was simply stunning: course after course of the most beautifully prepared and presented plates. I felt overwhelmed by the creativity of the food, not to mention the generosity and warmth of those who hosted me.

It was clear, though, not everyone in the restaurant was feeling the same sense of privilege. To the right of our table were two young women who, for the duration of their meal, did not speak to each other but texted incessantly. They treated the service staff with disdain and the food before them as if it were a take-away tray from McDonalds. To our left was an obnoxious group of businessmen—Australians and Americans—who also treated the waiters appallingly, ordered lavishly but barely touched a thing, and complained loudly about every dish that was served. Their sense of entitlement was boorish and embarrassing.

That night, I boarded a train to a poor neighbourhood on the edge of the city. My hosts met me at the train station then guided me up dark laneways, over people asleep on the footpaths, through crowded tenements with laundry hanging on makeshift clotheslines. We finally arrived at our destination, a small café tucked behind a row of run-down market stalls. The interior was small and crowded, faded posters blue-tacked on the walls, steam wafting across the ceiling. I was guided past the smells of the kitchen to a so-called 'private dining room' upstairs. In fact, it was someone's living room hurriedly rearranged for the evening. Twelve of us crowded in around a large table and enjoyed a feast of some the most mysterious but delicious food I've ever tasted. The chef had attended one of my public lectures. Only a year before he embraced the Christian faith and had since achieved some extraordinary things through his restaurant with unemployed young men in his suburb. He was obviously nervous at my arrival. He hovered over our table barking directions at the waiter. When I told him, through an interpreter, how delicious the food was, he beamed with relief and delight. The joy of that night—the company, the tastes and the togetherness—was palpable. It's a meal I'll never forget.

I don't conclude with this story to draw easy contrasts between wealth and poverty or excess and simplicity. The challenge of eating well is much more complex than that. Rather, I want to illustrate the point that eating well—eating joyfully and generously—is both the opportunity and the challenge of every table.

Bon appétit!