



Simon Carey Holt

Gastronomy and Spirituality

Black and white, urban and rural, educated and illiterate, we are made to eat. While we are certainly divided by what's on our plates, the need we bring to them is the same.

Having swapped his apron for a cleric's collar, Simon Carey Holt reflects on his transition from chef to minister, and shares his perspective on the purpose of food.

The white linen was pressed and laid with care, the stemmed glassware sparkling above the polished silver and French napery. The wood-panelled walls, soft lighting and high ceilings provided an elegant space, while a cellist played Bach in the corner. Seating for sixty guests was arranged around the outer edge of a horseshoe of tables, each place marked with a gold embossed name card. The most elegant floral arrangements speared the air above candelabra spaced with mathematical precision. A red carpet, straight as an arrow, marked a direct pathway from the doors of the kitchen into the heart of the room.

The gathering was a monthly event, organized by one of Melbourne's exclusive societies of gastronomy. A members-only affair, participants met to eat – twelve courses matched with carefully selected wines. On this occasion I had been invited to cook. I was honoured. To be included on a list of the city's promising young chefs made this my moment.

The ritual of the night was my presentation of each course as I walked the red carpet. Once in the centre of the room, I was to provide an explanation of the food before guests were served. On my first foray, I was met with a standing ovation. My head swelled. I had made it. However, as the night progressed and the applause continued, it dawned on me that the red carpet was not really for me. These people were giving a standing ovation to the potatoes. I left that night more troubled than affirmed.

I am a lover of food. Though I resist the "foodie" tag, I have a strong and sustained interest in the rituals of eating. From my earliest days in the professional kitchen I've been fascinated by food's endless beauty. And as I have gotten older, I have come to appreciate more deeply just how central food is to the experiences of family, community, covenant and culture. It embraces needs and longings of both body and soul. Indeed, eating is a spiritual act. That said, it's also the source of more troubling truths. The fact is, while we dine on degustation menus and quaff wines from vineyards near and far, there are neighbours who live with levels of food insecurity and hunger alien to our cosseted world. Even more, when we do talk of eating as a spiritual experience, most of what we say has to do with the privileged life of those who have enough. It is a conversation that divides.

The sobering truth is this: global obesity is sharply on the rise, while hundreds of millions continue to go without. Hunger-related disease and death continue to take a staggering toll. Christian faith proceeds on the assumption that we are made in the image of God, all of us. We are united – rich and poor, well fed and hungry – by our common humanity as children of God. It follows, then, that the substance of our conversation on eating as a spiritual act should have to do with our commonality not our difference.

To eat is to be human: from the opulent fare of gastronomes to the sparse diet of subsistence farmers, a uniform need for "daily bread" underlies our eating. It unites us in our humanity. According to the creation stories of Genesis, God is concerned to provide everything needed for our nourishment and survival. Black and white, urban and rural, educated and illiterate, we are made to eat. While we are certainly divided by what's on our plates, the need we bring to them is the same.

Hunger is dehumanizing: persistent hunger violates the human body for it causes to fail what is meant to flourish. Wherever there is sustained food insecurity and unmet hunger, the human body and the community of which it is a part is diminished. Indeed, when we understand that we sit together at a global table, united in our need, the presence of persistent hunger at any of its corners diminishes us all.

Food is for sharing: the real joy and delight of food is found not in hoarding but in sharing it together. To applaud the potatoes or obsess over the provenance of the goat's cheese is to entirely miss the point of food. At worst, it's idolatry. Food is provided to nourish our bodies and draw us together into communities of interdependence. Miss that memo and we're in serious trouble.

My love for a beautifully set table and fine food is never lessened. But I am ever more conscious that my eating habits should be those that celebrate the broadest understandings of community. The spirituality of Jesus challenges persistent food habits that exclude the poorest and corral the rich. Should our red-carpet table practices ever close our eyes to the breadth of human need and experience, we walk a dangerous path.

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