

Dim, Sum, Tapas and Stone Soup

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(Smorgasbord Sunday)

Nora UU Church, Hanska, MN

We here at Nora love to eat. There can be no argument on that point. Monthly pot-lucks, weekly mini-pot-lucks during winter, coffee hour treats, work-day potlucks. At meetings when no food has been planned or provided someone is sure to scrounge through the freezer or refrigerator and emerge with a few cookies or left-over bars. And of course the mother of all the church-feasts is Smorg. I was astounded by my first Smorg last October and I'm astounded all over again this year. So much planning, so much preparation, so many hundred volunteer hours--all for the love of Nora, the love of tradition, the love of food.

If you ask my mom, she will tell you I was destined for ministry from a very early age, when as a toddler I'd walk around the house with *The Upper Room* magazine under my arm, "going to church." My conscious love of church began a dozen or so years later, in a church kitchen. My high school youth group met on Sunday evenings and whatever the program for the week--anything from ultimate frisbee to a conversation with the minister--our meetings always began in the kitchen where we cooked and ate a meal together. We made endless soups, spaghettis, tacos and pizza--all according to dictates of the stone school of cooking. It was our youth group version of the church potluck. A single dish, but created by, flavored by, and dependent upon the whim of the ever-varying group of teens who each added an ingredient. Those hours in that kitchen, perched on stools at a high center work top, tending simmering pots on an outdated, industrial gas range, chatting with peers and adult advisors, eating the fruits of our own concocting--those hours in that church kitchen revealed to me the thread that entwines food and the soul, food and community, food and the spirit in a holy tangle that cannot be unraveled.

Fast food strips on the edges of cities, aisles of frozen single serving diet meals, shelves of cans and bottles of nutritional supplements only convince me more that food is a sacrament and that not treating it as such does great harm. Such food-like-substances, such imitation dining experiences may fill empty stomachs and sustain life, but rarely fill empty hearts with anything other than excess salt and fat and cholesterol, rarely sustain a lively spirit, or satisfy a hungering soul.

Food, in order satiate, to nourish body and soul for the long haul, to excite the taste buds and destroy neither heart nor muscle nor internal organs, must be recognizable as

a product of nature. Michael Pollan, author of *Food Rules*, notes that genuine food has the ability to rot. Wholly satisfying food is also prepared thoughtfully, seasoned with personality, served with joy, presided over by Love. Authentic religion shares these characteristics. I wouldn't say it has the ability to rot, but it is certainly organic, growing out of particular times and cultures, fed and influenced by specific conditions, universally local in its forms and expression. Authentic religion, abundant religious life, nourishing spiritual practice demand thought, seasoning, joy and Love.

Holly Whitcomb, in this morning's reading, notes that writers, poets, theologians and cooks through the ages have envisioned creation as a feast offered by the holy Mystery. I see religion, with its myriad theologies, practices, traditions and disciplines as a similar feast spread before us, with options catering to every taste and choices bordering on the overwhelming. Faced with such abundance and a heartfelt invitation to eat our fill, we follow many paths to the table.

I had dim sum last summer with a Chinese American friend and her Chinese Scots boyfriend. As we enjoyed the miniature servings of dumplings and shrimp and turnip cakes (well, I didn't *enjoy* the turnip cakes, but my friends did), as we ate the Chinese Scots boyfriend, the son of a chef, told me that one according to legend dim sum evolved from an emperor's demand that he never be fed the same dish twice.

That, it seems to me, is the exact approach some folks take to the religion banquet. Always on the look-out for the new, the exotic, the perfect religious *something* that was missing from all his or her previous religious communities or spiritual practice, easily captivated by the novel experience, the untasted flavor, and just as easily left hungry again, searching for something more satisfying, more flavorful, more...more. Collecting a pile of small, empty plates--books no longer read, prayer rugs no longer used, chimes no longer sounded, candles half burnt, communities wondering where he has gone, where she had gone--this consumer of religious dim sum is on to the next restaurant, waiting for the next cart of steaming delicacies to be wheeled by the table.

My first encounter with tapas, the Spanish version of tasting plates, was in equal parts delightful and frustrating. Twenty or so Unitarian Universalist ministerial colleagues gathered around a long table, talking, laughing, sipping wine and sharing endless baskets of crusty bread and plate after plate of exotic flavors and textures, we took turns ordering from the menu dishes to delight ourselves and offer our companions. It was communion--a meal shared in love and the spirit of fellowship. The experience marred only by a single colleague who, despite having cast her vote for the tapas restaurant enthusiastically, was reluctant to enter into the accepted protocol of the setting.

This colleague wanted to order her three favorite small dishes, eat them and only them, and not share them with anyone else at the table. She wanted full control over her own meal and desired no part in the community selection or community economics of the rest of the group. Not, as it is said, that there is anything wrong with that. At times each of us wants what we want, nothing more and nothing less. And there are times that the condition of our bank account calls exactitude in paying for our own portion and not kicking in for a bottle of wine that was mostly drunk by others. But perhaps joining a group headed for a tapas restaurant is not the wisest choice in such instances.

These, too, are approaches to the religion banquet--both tapas and the resistance to tapas. For some of us the buffet of religion is too much. Too many choices, too many varieties, too much unknown and untried. For some of us, the holy rests in the familiar, the traditional, in the words and the practices and the rituals that have stood the test of time, nourishing and filling us many times before, and before us, our mothers and grandmothers, fathers and grandfathers. For these religious diners, the recipe-box is sacred and well-thumbed, honored favorites worn and sticking out above the less used card.

The religious tapas eater on the other hand, like the dim sum aficionado, savors variety, novelty, a mélange of spices, shapes and textures. But no mention here of never wanting the same dish twice. Favorites are devoured with the same gusto as experiments. And the sharing, the companionship, the laughter and the wine and the hearty bread reminiscent of eucharist, are at least as central to the experience as the tasting plates themselves. For some, religion is a blend of the familiar and the novel, comforting, satisfying, surprising and arousing all at once. But the most vital ingredient is community, the sharing of the experience with fellow diners, beloved partakers of the feasts. Some may eat more than others, drink a bit less wine. Some dishes will leave some diners reaching for a drink of water to wash away the tastes, but all will be well around the table; other dishes will be ordered again and again, disappearing as fast as they are served, and all will be well around the table. If we are together and we are sharing the religious life, the life of service and seeking and celebration, all will be well around the table.

Stone soup is perhaps the metaphor best suited for religious feast as served up in individual Unitarian Universalist congregations. Without a common book of prayer to order our worship, without a book of discipline to set forth common guidelines and rules, without a mass handed through the ages and practiced round the globe, we gather our congregations and craft our worship and build our traditions in ways as locally flavored as that pot of Chinese stone soup. Here with a dash of liberal Christianity, there with a great dollop of humanism, over there a bouquet of paganism. Here Norwegian grown,

there with Puritan roots. Each man, woman and children walking through the doors and approaching the table adds his ingredient, her herb or spice to the pot. The basic stock may be made from the same stones in every congregation--the purposes and principles, perhaps, or the historical insistence on the unity and boundless love of the divine--but the stews simmering in Hanska, in Bangor, in San Antonio, in Winnipeg, and in Oak Park are as different, one from the other, as the cities themselves. Yet each is hearty, each feeds the soul, sparks the imagination, nourishes the heart.

Four basic groups. The food pyramid. The revised food pyramid. Whole foods. Raw foods. Slow food. Localvores. Five a day. All you can eat. Grazing. Three square.

Meditation. Sitting. Walking. Evensong. Corporate worship. Deeds not creeds. The still, small voice. The Word of God. Dances of Universal Peace.

In the religious life, as when caring for the needs of the physical body, there are many ways, many recipes, many paths to the table. Two feasts are spread before us--the feast of creation and the feast of religion. We are invited to the tables. May we trust our appetites to guide us to wholeness. Amen.