

Food for Thought

By Dr. Serena Patterson and Monika Grünberg, RCC

*“What man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?”
Matthew 7. 9*

It's a rainy November morning, and Serena sits at the kitchen table, writing, as Monika transforms Jack-o-Lanterns into soup, muffins, pie, and freezer bags of pumpkin mush. She fills jars of cabbage to ferment into sauerkraut. She processes the last of the local tomatoes, peppers, and cilantro into salsa, then seals it into half-pint jars. Monika puts up the harvest, and Serena writes about it. Each is invited to sample, edit, comment on or enjoy the other's work. It's a sort of collaboration, but it's not without its tensions.

We actually thought of writing about food this month because it's what we've been arguing over the most lately. Maybe it was the night that the pantry shelf collapsed. Or the never-ending stream of obesity-related news headlines (do we need to say that none of these headlines proclaim good news for the pear-shaped among us?) Or Serena's "forgetting" to carry lunch, again, and buying sweets.

We are both, to borrow a phrase from Alexander McCall-Smith's Botswanan character Mma Ramotswe, "traditionally built ladies". We are struggling to be healthy, and to nurture ourselves well despite the onslaught of cultural and familial concern that our bodies are, by definition, signs of failure.

Here is something that we agree about. Shaming people for their body size is wrong. Yes, obesity is often a sign of a body in trouble. And yes, obesity has been on the rise for several decades now. But the shame that is heaped upon individuals, the fear of fat and the blaming of "obesity" (although they really mean "the obese") for everything from rising airline costs to the collapse of socialized medicine, is wrongheaded and destructive.

Shaming assumes that somehow, if we could just make fat people realize the error of their ways, they would stop overeating and become thin. Or perhaps they would get on their bicycles and become thin. Obesity is treated as an individual failure that could be reconciled if the fat people would simply curb their appetites and work harder.

The first problem with this is that it greatly oversimplifies the causes of body shape (be it linear or round). Each individual's shape is the product of several factors: their genetic heritage, their daily habits and opportunities for movement, their general health, conditions that affect the metabolism and storage of fat (such as an under-functioning pancreas developing into diabetes), and, perhaps least powerful biologically but most meaningful in the social context, what and how much they eat. The roundness of one body may result from an



entirely different combination of factors than the roundness of another body. In short, if you haven't lived in the body you are looking at, don't judge how it became the shape that it is. You could well be wrong.

The second problem with blaming individual weakness is that it is working at the wrong level of analysis. The overall *average* size and shape of people in the post-industrial world has increased dramatically. This indicates a problem at the systemic, not the individual level. To use the language of medicine, there may be a problem, but we're looking to treat the wrong patient.

Post-industrial society has an illness, a dis-ease. The symptoms include obesity as well as cancers, heart disease, family breakdown, depression, and chronic anxiety. One root cause is the devaluation of labor, which creates a time famine among working people, along with a proliferation of cheap consumer goods, and cheap fast food, to throw into the gap where nurturance and creativity belong. Another root cause is the mobility of the industrial workforce, which has broken the ties of extended family and replaced communities with vast expanses of urban anonymity. The nature of business has changed, as local stores and cafes have given way to chains of look-alikes. Our sense of place and belonging, both within the web of human relationships and within the web of nature itself, is endangered.

Time is expensive but mass-produced goods are cheap. It's no longer a sign

of wealth or success to buy prepared food; it's a sign of poverty in the commodities that we are most short of: time, energy, creative zest, and knowledge of how to make things ourselves. Yet mass-prepared (fast) food is designed not to truly nourish, but to silence a craving. So the craving is fed, but not the body, and the nutritional deficit gap remains.

Food is about nurturance in its most primal form, and nurturance is tied to deeper issues still about being loved and worthy. Just how comfortable are we with nurturance? Do we know what nurtures our bodies, our minds, our hearts, and our loved ones? What are we afraid or ashamed to take in or to give? Food can be part of a universal language for expressing the full range of human needs. What are we hungry for?

The issue of being worthy of good things is, of course, closely tied to shame. It is interesting to watch people (ourselves included) when we eat alone; when we have to take care of our own nourishment needs without reference to other people. Do we cook for one? Do we seek out company by leaving home and going to a café or fast food joint? Do we hide, hoping that no one will see us eat? Do we remember to eat? Do we read, watch TV, read the paper, or concentrate on experiencing the food itself? If we are ashamed to need nourishment, then our relationship with food will be affected. Whether we respond by tuning out the voice of hunger, or



whether we stuff that voice with low-nutrient, quick fixes of fast food, the issue is still, “what am I hungry for?”

We are hungry for so many things: movement, creativity, the outdoors, spirituality, and, of course, time. The technology boom was supposed to at least give us time. But it didn't. Driving replaced walking—to the store, to work, to school. As adults abandoned the outdoors for their cars, it became an unsafe place to play. Television, Game boys and X-Boxes fill the craving for play, but they lack in so much that is nourishing. And they are a major contributor to the rise in numbers of overweight children and adults.

We see obesity as a symptom of unique forms of post-industrial famine. Famines of time, zest, worthiness for nourishment and the knowledge, including the self-knowledge, that is necessary for creativity. Famines of connection: with each other and with the outdoor world. Famines of spirit. Fast fixes, including drive-through food, temporarily relieve the symptoms but actually increase the real deficits.

What can we do, as individuals, to resist the lure of fast fixes that fill us up but don't nourish? What can we do about the risks of obesity, and the famines that underlie it? We can:

- Stop, listen, and think before impulse buying. Ask, “what am I most hungry for? How will this nourish me? What impact does it have on my world?”
- Rediscover or reinvent the ritual of saying thanks for food. This reminds us that food is sacred. And if it feels wrong to bless the food in front of us for the nourishment of your body, maybe it's the wrong food.
- Support local food. Buy local produce. Choose a locally-owned restaurant for lunch. Get to know the people who produce and create the food we eat on a personal basis. Say thanks to them, too.
- Cook. Better yet, teach someone else to cook. Cook for the whole week on Sunday, if that helps the time crunch through the week.
- Plan. If you are inclined to forget to eat until your body is desperate enough to reach for a vending machine, make sure you have some alternatives handy: nourishing foods that you can eat right away.
- Get out and play. Or walk. Or just sit on the stoop and watch. Invite children.
- Forget words like “skinny” and “obese”. Banish shame. Cherish every body as the temple of a spirit, and as lovely and worthy of good things that both satisfy and nourish.

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