

**A SHARED TABLE:
FOOD AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION**

by

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"We're anxious about serving, but the simple blessed fact is that no one ever comes to dinner for what you're cooking. We are all hungry and thirsty and happy that someone's predicted we would be and made arrangements for dealing with it. We come for the opportunity to look up from our plates and say "thank you". It is for recognition of our common hungers that we come when we are asked"

Tamar Adler, *An Everlasting Meal*

"It's about a spirit or quality of living that rises up when we offer one another life itself, in the form of dinner or soup or breakfast, or bread and wine."

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Shauna Niequist, *Bread and Wine*

"...hospitality to strangers remains a highly valued moral practice, an important expression of kindness, mutual aid, neighbourliness, and response to the life of faith...the joy of being welcomed warmly."

Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room*

Spiritual Direction has a long history, helping people identify the Holy in their life journeys. Gathering around a table to share food, has in all cultures and epochs, been a way for people to connect. There is a link here, between the two. Many times, during a meal and during the after-meal lingering around a shared table, the Divine can be felt and seen at work. Both these experiences can be more deliberately coupled to provide a wonderful way to have a deeper awareness of God and to share a delicious meal.

A shared table can be the tool that enables us to create a space for spiritual direction to occur. The table can be used for group spiritual direction through a curated meal with a designated guide or as spontaneous Holy listening moments around food. When we come together, around a table, there are echoes of history. We gather to become a community for a time, to share what we have gathered from the outside and bring it inside, and to share our lives with each other. For some, gathering around a shared table has held echoes of otherness, sacredness, of moments to be remembered.

"...the pleasures of the table are for every man, of every land, of every place in history of society; they can be a part of all our other pleasures and they last the longest, to console us

when we have outlived the rest.”¹

In spiritual direction we endeavour to journey with an individual, or a group of people, into holy awareness. When that happens around food, around a table surrounded by the ordinary sounds of plates and utensils and glasses clinking, something ordinary can be transformed into something holy. It is in holding space for each other, in the slowing down of the day, that we create a place for encounters with the Holy, and with the deepest parts of ourselves and those around the table. In a similar way we gather around the Lord’s Table in a variety of forms; the ordinary is transformed into a substantive feast with sacredness as its key ingredient. “Hospitality is a lens through which we can read and understand much of the gospel, and a practice by which we can welcome Jesus himself.”²

When we offer spiritual direction to one person, we can attend to them in offering them a space that is thoughtfully organised which enables the directee to do their own work of engaging with the Holy. For example, a small table can be set with a well-brewed cup of tea, or a coffee that offers its fragrance to the room. Providing a beautiful jug and glass of fresh water is an even simpler table setting. Being attentive to the ingredients and to the offer of hospitality in this simple manner is also communion in a broader sense. (See Appendix A)

There is also the hosting of a meal as a vehicle for spiritual direction, for an encounter with God; a gathering around a table of community and food that can help each of us to pay attention to God’s personal communication, to respond to this personal communication, to grow in intimacy with this God and to live out the consequences of this encounter (Barry and Connolly). For there to be engagement there can be a Spiritual Director guiding the meal and focusing on how aspects of the meal bring us closer to God. There are many aspects to consider for example: the physical elements used in the meal, the provenance of the food, the stewardship of the Earth and its workers, how our senses respond to the taste sound and texture of the food. Where is God in the room? Where am I? This is spiritual direction.

In the Gospels, Jesus was often on the way to a meal, at a meal, or just leaving a meal. He gathered and ate with “suitable” and “unsuitable” people, encouraging the close community of the disciples and the ordinary men and women who wanted to “taste and see that he is good.”

¹ Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Psychology of Taste*, 1825, quoted in SLOW, p. 74. Honoré, Carl. *In Praise of Slow* (London, England: Orion, 2004).

² Pohl, Christine D. *Making Room: recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MA: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), p. 8.

On the road to Emmaus, the disciples were journeying home feeling disillusioned. The journey was familiar and ordinary. A companion joined them, they offered hospitality as was their custom. Both of these were ordinary acts within the realm of their lives. And then:

“We were not sure ourselves
but know for certain
when bread was broken
time was fractured, too
And when we rose and left the table
we were different
ourselves yet more than selves
rose up to leave”

(See Appendix B for the full text: Emmaus Poem by Nancy McDonald)

This is the link we seek, the link between breaking of bread, revelation and leaving the table transformed by the encounter.

“Hospitality is a skill and a gift, but it is also a practice which flourishes as multiple skills are developed, as particular commitments and values are nurtured, and as certain settings are cultivated.”³

Gatherings could begin in our homes as we learn to feed each other. Sara Miles, who has experienced this in her extensive work among the poor in San Francisco, shares the following:

“Learn, little by little, meal by meal, to feed yourself and the people you love, because food is one of the ways we love each other, and the table is one of the most sacred places we gather.”⁴

This practice of love could also occur in a retreat environment. When participants are at spiritual retreats, participants are directed towards a focus on silence and solitude, exercises in meditation and centeredness. There is another aspect of spiritual direction that could be incorporated into the retreat model: that of feasting and gathering around a shared table. A

³ Pohl, Christine D. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MA: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), p. 9.

⁴ Miles, Sara. *Jesus Freak* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), p. 51.

meal curated from its inception encourages the participants to taste and see, to wonder about the gifts of plants and animals sacrificed for their provision, to delight in the aesthetics of the table and the companions of the moment. They ask how the Sacred Presence can be felt, tasted and sensed in the moment.

Whatever setting is chosen, the food around which we gather could be the simplicity of bread or the complexity of Heston Blumenthal's banquets. Our companions could be old friends or newly met strangers. It is the table which unifies and defines the sacredness of the moment.

There are parallels in the Bible with the shared table, like the Last Supper. Jesus takes the bread, the wine: he brings the disciples' attention to them. "Look at these, notice these, listen to me. Here is something very ordinary, I want you to remember me by these humble ingredients," Jesus says. The momentous is reflected in the everyday raising of bread and wine to our lips and remembering.

"Therefore loving God,
Recalling your great goodness to us in Christ,
We celebrate our redemption with this bread of life
And this cup of salvation.
Send your Holy Spirit
That these gifts of bread and wine which we receive
May be to us the body and blood of Christ,
And that we, filled with the Spirit's grace and power,
May be renewed for the service of your kingdom."⁵

For two thousand years the church has celebrated this meal with various levels of pomp and ceremony. It is celebrated as an act of remembrance following Jesus' request: "do this in remembrance of me". Although there is theological debate over the exact nature of the holy elements, this feast is the gathering of those who at that very moment find themselves in the

⁵*A New Zealand Prayer Book, He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa.* (Auckland, William Collins Publishers Ltd, 1989). "A Service of Holy Communion," p. 729.

sacred space, and who are sharing the humble ingredients which Jesus asked us to lift up and eat, begin part of a community of people, worthy and unworthy, who came to remember Him.

My favourite communion meal has been the one in which we take part in Point Reyes (USA), at the Cowgirl Creamery once a year. A few of us gather at the appointed time. Our friend Steve buys a delicious baguette, a bottle (or two) of the local Sonoma County wine. We sit outside; it's usually overcast and not too warm, around a rough-hewn picnic table. We become something other than the sum of our parts. Steve brings our attention to a meditation on the gospels, on Jesus. We regard Jesus, we wait to hear from him. We break up the baguette and serve each other. Steve prays for us, for the table, for Jesus to be present among us. We open the wine and serve each other portions of it into disposable cups and we sit and sip. We gently move into reflections, thoughts, we share our encounters with the Holy. It is the best of communions for me.

How then can we turn a gathering around food into a spiritual practice which nourishes and fulfils all we need and want in our spiritual journey? Part of the answer to the question comes in the form of the food itself. The Slow Food movement which started in Italy in 1985 has come to symbolize the ideals of a life of integration, centeredness and awareness of what we do in mind and body and spirit.

“The movement stands for...fresh, local, seasonal produce; recipes handed down through the generations; sustainable farming; artisanal production; leisurely dining with family and friends.”⁶

When we care about the provenance of the ingredients we invite into our homes, we are also thinking and caring about the environment they were grown in. We begin to look at the long-term effects of cultivating plants and growing meat, we begin to look at the sustainability of our local farms, our regions and national ethos of food production. We begin to engage with wider environmental issues and the state of our planet. All this because we chose carrots from our garden, the silver beet from the farmer's market and refused imported strawberries in July. Whatever we put together as nourishment on a daily basis, whether a simple soup of leftover roast vegetables, or a daylong hangi, we begin at the beginning. We begin where we are.

⁶ Honoré, Carl. *In Praise of Slow* (London, UK: Orion, 2004), p. 52.

These concepts can be part of our gatherings when we put together the two concepts of spiritual direction and a shared table. As we create a place of sanctuary for those who come to the meal, we start with the heart's desire to listen and connect. For example, we can open the meal with a commendation of the space to the Spirit and then let the food flow from course to course. The first mouthfuls are savoured. (see Appendices C and D for menus). The meal's curator (guide) reads a colourful description of the ingredients, where they came from, tells us the story of what we are encountering on our plates. Then a pause. We can sit and enjoy, think, muse, but above all, listen. We invite God to speak. Then there is a time for reflection, to open up to those around us. We relax into the table setting, admire the wine, the view, the room. We finish that course. Then the guide gently draws our attention back to the food as the next course is served. With grace they invite our attention to the ingredients, to those who provided and cooked them with such creativity. We quieten in our seats and take in each morsel. Where is God in this? How does our spirit engage in this feast? Be it a Michelin-starred menu or just-baked, warm bread, we can centre ourselves at the table and be part of a bigger, supernatural event which is greater than the sum of its parts.

In any spiritual direction session, whether in a group or with an individual, this directing of focus, flavours and holiness can be achieved through the sharing of food or drink. We are looking for moments of religious experience and encounters. We are waiting for the heart-work to occur, as curators in a process of noticing the Holy. As Tamar Adler (author of *An Everlasting Meal*) points out, "most people just want to take part in something, to be presented with the opportunity to take part, for a space to be curated for them".⁷ It's not about our ability to cook and serve perfectly, it is about the availability of the space, and the preparation that goes into it.

From what we've read and experienced, and from the example set by Jesus in his time on earth, we recognise that food has the power to be a unifying force regardless of culture or country. Reaching out within our own families with the promise of a shared table can begin a journey of restitution and reconciliation - both with the human and the Holy. As we practice remembrance through eating together and wielding knives and colanders together, we can minister to those around us by preparing a meal to share, and noticing each other in true community. And as a final note, Don Postema and Sara Miles have two wonderful quotes:

"Remembrance really means wake up, call to mind, reawaken! It means paying attention to him every time we eat a sandwich or drink a glass of wine. He invites us to remember we are God's covenant people every time we receive a piece of

⁷ Adler, Tamar. *An Everlasting Meal* (New York, NY: Scribner, 2011).

bread or take a sip of wine during the Lord's supper. We are to taste and see that the Lord is present and good! Paying attention and receptivity come together to a meal of grace."⁸

"...anywhere there's food, spirit and matter intersect. And the power to feed - and particularly to share food with people outside your tribe - always has the potential to transform lives."⁹

⁸ Postema, Don. *Catch your Breath* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1997), p. 58.

⁹ Miles, Sara. *Jesus Freak* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), p. 21-22.

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- "Emmaus Poem" by Nancy McDonald
Published December 29, 1999, from <https://www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/2569/>

“A Kitchen Takeover Menus,” provided by my sister-in-law Yanil Andrew, who has participated in many of their feasts in Tauranga.

<https://www.kitchentakeover.co.nz/>

Website:

<https://www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/2569/>

Much inspiration drawn from:

Chef’s Table, Netflix.

Appendix A

Three Tigers and One Earl (How to brew a great cup of tea)

Always buy the best teas you can afford. And please, loose leaf tea.

For many years, my go-to black tea has been Tiger Tea. And I enhanced the brew by adding some Earl Gray. I have found Earl Grey Supreme and Earl Grey Blue Flower from StirTea to be full of aroma and flavour. In the supermarket, there is Earl Grey from Twinings or Pomeroy's. Find the one you love. Try and find a tea scoop in a second hand shop. It's an old fashioned tool but seems to deliver the right amount of leaf for the tea. A tea cosy is also worth the investment as it keeps the tea hotter for longer.

I find the small ritual of making a pot of tea is akin to contemplation.

To Brew:

Warm a teapot with boiling water for a few minutes.

Into the warm pot scoop 3 scoops of Tiger tea and one of Earl Gray.

Let it brew for 3-5 minutes. (When you know your pot and the strength you like your brew, you will know how long it takes for you to achieve this combination. Start with a timer, eventually you will just know when the brew is done).

Cover teapot with a tea cosy and enjoy the brew.

Tea Cosy Patterns:

<https://www.ravelry.com/patterns/search#sort=best&inline=&query=tea%20cosy>

Appendix B

Emmaus Poem by Nancy McDonald

A strange place to make a new beginning
here
on a dusty road
not leading
much of anywhere
in the time when the ritual seasons
have already turned
and at dusk
almost dark, in fact
what an unsuitable place and time
to begin
And the two of us
plodding along
dull-headed
wet-witted
after three days of regretting
and recounting losses
Our bodies
hobbled and our souls brokered
we moved like confused moths
near an extinguished wick
The fire was gone.
And now we mourned
Was it sorrow
for ourselves or him that we most
valued

The answer?
we may never know
nor does it matter now

We were teachers who planned too closely
parents who engineered the form
We left no room to enjoy the exploration
and the moment of the child
Now in this twilight of being
we were voiceless
Our metaphors and tropes
failed us in this sullen grief
No hope, but God

and to hope in Him
seemed hopeless
missed the opportunity provided

Why would God knock twice
Then, at this point
a stranger
joined us
Did he make a third
or were we still just two?
We were not sure ourselves
but know for certain
when bread was broken
time was fractured, too
And when we rose and left the table
we were different
ourselves yet more than selves
rose up to leave

Bones of fire now support us
so full of love that
it hurts our lungs to breathe
These the bodies
which the third one left us
we dare not guess the features
of our souls
This road to nowhere goes
on forever
out from Emmaus into a waiting world
Who is this that we carry now
in witness
What name names does He bear
that we can call Him in the night
It is a secret
But this we share with you
o children
When you see Him
you will recognise the face

Published December 29, 1999.
from <https://www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/2569/>

Appendix C

Hunter Gatherer Winter Menu by Shane Yardley

Gifts from the chef

Rabbit rilette with backyard fig chutney

Smoked kingfish cheek pate on golden amaranth cracker

Wild mushroom arancini with woodera powder and Te Puke truffles

Parsnip crisps with freeze dried white balsamic vinegar

From the Field

Handcrafted horopito focaccia with dandelion pesto

Wine match: emilie Laurance Blnc Brut (NV), Loire Valley

From the Ocean

Astrolabe caught fish, crayfish bisque, saffron potato, confit fennel, sourdough crackers and roasted garlic rouille.

Wine match: Bolger reserve Chardonnay (2017), California

From the Bush

Wild boar loin, twice-cooked shoulder, celeriac puree, caramelised apple, sauteéd tree spinach, black garlic, picked blackberry jus.

Wine match: Lime Rock Gruner Veltliner (2018), Hawkes Bay

From the Orchard

Mandarin lollipop, lime gel and kawakawa sugar

From the Hive

Smoked deer milk creme caramel, rhubarb compote, rhubarb and aperol sorbet, bush honey meringue

Wine match: first Knight Ambrosia Honey Liqueur (NV), Gisborne

The Menu: kichentakeovernz

Appendix D

Menu for a feast

GIFTS FROM THE CHEF

Record-breaking smoked marlin pate on wild fennel seed cracker
Tauranga moana tuatua fritters with green Tabasco mayonnaise
Spear fished Mayor Island porae coconut ceviche
Quail eggs dusted with foraged nasturtium salt

FROM THE FIELD

Homemade corn & plain sourdough breads served with whipped manuka smoked butter

FROM THE SEA

Tauranga Moana line-caught kahawai with escabeche marinade, wild stream watercress, beetroot, horseradish and buttermilk
Wine match: Blank Canvas Sauvignon Blanc 2018

FROM THE FOREST

Wild venison loin rubbed with horopito, juniper and orange, roasted, pureed and pickled pumpkin, Julia's foraged dukkah, wild woodear mushroom and burnt onion ash, and nightshade berries
Wine match: Blank Canvas Syrah 2015

FROM THE HEDGEROW

Chickweed, amaranth, speedwell, borage and purslane community garden 'weeds' with green apple frost

FROM THE ORCHARD

Foraged kawakawa ice-cream with roasted white chocolate mousse, backyard caramelized feijoas and passion fruit
Wine match: Blank Canvas Meta Riesling 2018 From the ocean

Appendix E

Bread recipe handed down in my family.

Abuela's Bread Recipe

Ingredients:

2 Tablespoons yeast
2 ¼ Cups warm water
1 teaspoon white sugar
2 Tablespoons oil
1 Tablespoon salt
5 cups high-grade flour (can be any combo of white and wholemeal four)

Method:

In a big bowl place the yeast and water and sugar.

Once it bubbles up, add 3 cups of flour. Let it rest on the bench until it fills the whole bowl. Will be spongy and wet looking dough.

When it's risen, add 2 cups of flour, the oil and the salt. Tip onto a bench and knead for 7 minutes. EXTREMELY important to be this long, set a timer. Can also be kneaded by an electric mixer for the same length of time.

Resulting dough should be silky smooth and not sticky at all, the bench will be clean with no dough left on it. Same with the bowl, the dough cleans its own bowl.

Shape it into an oblong lump and place in a baking tin. Cover with a tea towel and leave to rise in a warm place. Once it has a nice tummy above the edge of the tin, it's time to bake it.

Bake in a hot oven: 200 degrees. Should take between 30-40 minutes. Will be nice and golden on top. Each oven is different, so the first few might be trial and error.

Tip out onto a cooling rack. Important to do this or else it will sweat on a solid surface and the crust goes soggy.

When you knock on its bottom, it should sound hollow. If it doesn't it needs a wee bit more baking time.