

Murray Elias Denofsky

Food: A Fantasy

Once there was a land where people had a very strange attitude towards food. Privately, everyone wanted and needed food, of course, and enjoyed having access to a variety of tasty dishes, but publicly the fiction had to be maintained that they had no interest in food and never ate, or, at least that, if they did eat, it was only one type of food, and this the blandest, most utilitarian dish that would suffice to sustain life. But even this dish, they must never be seen eating, and must never talk about, even to family members. The penalty to public disclosure of their diet, or, even more, to being seen eating in public, would be complete loss of face. Some people would ridicule them, others would be highly offended. They would be accused of having committed the grossest of improprieties, and everyone would forever after shun them. They might even be in danger of being arrested on a morals charge. People would gossip behind their backs, "Katherine eats!" or "I saw Andrew eating, of all things, the other day!" Someone unfortunate enough to be caught eating several times might be lynched, even stoned to death by their neighbors and family members. And to seek to eat well was considered the lowest of all motivations.

Another unfortunate aspect of this society was that not all people had access to food, or, if they did, they might not be able to get anything but the minimum amount of a single, very tasteless kind of gruel, just enough to keep them from dying of starvation. Those who did have access to food had to obtain it in secret, and never reveal the source to anyone else, because that would amount to admitting that they ATE. Further, they did not even want to reveal such secrets, for all sources of food were jealously guarded. Anyone who revealed a food source to someone else, especially a tasty food, would be considered a fool, for, you see, there was an unspoken, universal competition to be believed to be eating better than other people-- as long as it could not be PROVED.

Everyone who had anything good to eat reveled in their success, and took pride in being better off than many others, but would pretend that they did not eat, or even WISH to eat. If a person was suspected of eating well, everyone envied them, and treated them with the greatest

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respect. They were accorded high status, and would only hang out with other people of similar status, for everyone detested the unlucky ones who were on a starvation diet, or those who naively took seriously the popular wisdom that enjoying food was sinful. But they would all deny that food had anything to do with this respect and status.

So nobody wanted to help anyone else get ahead of them, or even catch up to them, in this competition. If asked about it, they would say, "I don't really care if that low-down so-and-so scrounges some food and secretly eats it, but I'M certainly not going to be the one to help them get it." Everyone knew that all people needed food, everyone in their heart of hearts knew that tasty food was one of the greatest joys of life, if not the greatest, and that nothing was worse than having too little to eat, having to endure hunger pangs all the time, or having only the most revolting, neutral gruel to eat. Everyone knew that most people were eating at least something, and, preferably, the best things that they could find.

And, in fact, it was not disallowed to be displaying gourmet delicacies, as long as you did not let on that you ate them. It was a great source of self-esteem for it to be known that you had access to these things that everyone privately coveted, and people would enjoy going out in public carrying trays of meat and pastry, and laughing at the poor hungry slobs who would gaze greedily at it. These envious ones of course could not afford to let anyone notice that they were looking at the food, for this would bring a self-righteous lambasting; "What are you looking at, you lowest of the low! You disgust me! Can't you think of anything else?"

But within this country there was a minority of people who had a somewhat more enlightened attitude. These people admitted that people had a need to eat, and even that it was natural to want good things to eat. They professed to disdain the general hypocrisy of the culture they lived in. They claimed merely that eating was a private thing, not something to be shared with others. Decent people don't eat together, give away food, or talk about it in too graphic terms. It's OK to enjoy it, as long as you keep it to yourself. They said it was sad that some people couldn't get enough to eat, or had to subsist on gruel, but, after all, there was nothing that they could do about it. Those people would just have to work things

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out for themselves. And so a lot of people, perhaps even a majority, had to slog on thru life on gruel, slobbering longingly at the displays of delicious goodies flaunted around them, and dreaming of the unseen joys other people had, dining every night in their private dens.

There was one person in this land who thought differently. He believed that eating was a wonderful gift of God, and should not be denied or hidden, but shared joyously in public, and that even strangers should be invited to join, even those despised unfortunates who were starving, or on choking on gruel, in fact, especially these people. He called sharing tasty food with them LOVE. But everyone else would have been horrified at his licentious ideas, a philosophy they mockingly referred to as FREE love. For years he was utterly powerless to advance his idea, because he himself was one of those poor who had no source of food to speak of. Had he spoken up, it would have been the end of him. But then, by dint of years of secretly conducted research, he discovered rich lodes of incredibly luscious food, and suddenly became the culinarily wealthiest person in this country. So admired was he by everyone who saw the marvelous fare he always now carried around with him, that his reputation became firm and untouchable.

He was now in a position to do what he had always wanted to do—completely reform the values and life of that land. No longer would anyone have to do without the nutrition and pleasures that great food brought. He declared a universal right to these resources, said they were divine, that nothing was worthier than eating, even in public places, and that it was a blessing to give of one's best food to as many other people as one could, especially to those in the greatest need. Once he set the new standard, other people gradually started to follow. Some grumbled that the new practice was unnatural, evil, or just a passing fad, but they eventually joined the bandwagon, because the new class of generous, open-minded individuals were beginning to gain great gratitude, love and respect from the needy, and they were afraid a revolution might be in the offing if they continued denying and holding back what they had hitherto kept for themselves and enjoyed in private. To their surprise, they found that they actually liked eating with their friends and relatives, and it made them feel good to see the joy they spread among the starving masses with their gifts of food. Soon it became the greatest honor a person could receive to throw a public banquet to which anyone could

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come. Thus a new golden age began in this land, and human nature was changed forever.

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