Food as a Catalyst for Social Interaction: How One Meal Changed My Life

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Class hadn’t even started yet when I realized I was the odd one out. We were sitting in a circle and everyone had turned to each other, talking in Spanish like old friends. I sat there staring at the blank page of my notebook trying to tune into a nearby conversation and decode what I could from my elementary knowledge of high school Spanish. What had I gotten myself into? While applying, I thought it would be a fun and eye opening experience to be part of a bilingual writing environment. I sat there with no idea why I had been selected; I was sure that it had been some marvelous mistake. I worried about what my classmates were thinking about me. I am a white upper middle class American who speaks English at home and has never traveled outside of the U.S. How could I possibly think that I fit in? I was worried that we would be speaking and reading only in Spanish and I would embarrass myself with my less than decent knowledge of the language. It was time for introductions, and we went around the circle. Venezuela, Colombia, Puerto Rico. Every country each student identified as home in beautiful, flawless Spanish made me feel more and more inadequate as both the students and places grew more exotic. Blandly, I opened my mouth and said “Hey, I’m Abby, I’m from New York, and I am a Marketing and Political Communication double major.”

For most of last semester, I struggled with my feelings of inadequacy in the class, and have rarely conveyed these feelings to anyone. I have also struggled with the process of putting these feelings and experiences into words. However, the experience I had a few weeks ago made me fully realize that all of my worrying and anxiety was for naught, and that this class was changing my life in more ways than just through my writing.

Culture

A decent portion of day-to-day life is spent preparing for, thinking about, planning, and consuming our meals. Food is much more than a necessity of physical survival. It transcends into an emotional and even spiritual experience. Throughout history, humankind has developed rituals and a culture around food to make it a social experience. There is an undeniable connection between the food we eat and the relationships we have, affecting us as a society, as a family, and individually. Food can affect our social relationships and act as a method of cultural exchange.

According to the Encyclopedia of Human Relationships, anthropologists have traced connection to food back to early in our evolutionary history, when food was scarce, and great efforts were made just to obtain a reasonable amount of food to eat. During this time, sharing food became a means of gaining access to more resources, aide survival, or increase mating benefits (Eriana). Societies used several major strategies of food sharing, sometimes in combination with one another, to gain access to these benefits. The kinship model describes food sharing between kin; it predicts that food sharing should be more prevalent among individuals who share a biological closeness. According to the reciprocal altruism model, sharing is an important way to keep food on the table during
times of scarceness and allows for gestures of goodwill between families and tribes. A final model of food transfer is described as tolerated scrounging, in which individuals give up their food to another person without expectation of return (Eriana).

As infants grow, mealtime often becomes a family ritual. Mealtimes help us socialize about food and food related rules. Routines at mealtimes teach children about the way in which meals are consumed, how food is served, how to leave a dinner table, how and when to eat snacks, permissibility of wasting food, and how much and what kinds of food to eat. Parents, grandparents, caretakers, and peers teach these habits that are developed at an early age and persist through adulthood (Eriana).

Besides being just an educational opportunity, mealtimes are also for individuals to come together and share an experience as a group. They provide opportunities to talk to one another and connect, discuss daily concerns and issues, give opinions, and have conflict. Even having regular meals together can provide stability to a family, which is important in maintaining family cohesion and healthful eating, especially for daughters. In other words, nutritional quality is enhanced in more cohesive, functional family environments (Eriana).

**Immersion**

Since I had spent a lot of this semester and last semester feeling like an outsider. I expected that cooking this dinner would only highlight my feelings of isolation. Yet, walking into that kitchen, I was met with hugs and kisses on the cheek. Rather than by excluded, I was welcomed, like one of the cogs in an already running machine. I found that cooking forces people to engage in conversation. This gave me the opportunity to talk about my family and my own background, which I had previously thought was insignificant and dull in comparison to my peers. Through this opportunity to cook with my classmates, I found that I was included. I discovered that the passion for the meal and for the atmosphere worked to unite us. It doesn’t matter that my classmates all come from Venezuela, Colombia, or Mexico, and that I’m from plain old Long Island. By coming together to create not only a meal, but also the experience of the meal, I’ve found that I am accepted and included beyond what I had previously thought. Our differences don’t serve to separate us when we come together with a shared passion.

**Realization**

Food is a catalyst for social interaction. Never have I felt so sure of an idea as this. Prior to the meal, I rarely spoke to anyone in my class. I saw nothing in me that would make my classmates interested enough to talk to me. I didn’t speak Spanish, we weren’t of the same heritage, I didn’t live in the same building as they did. There was nothing I deemed worth enough to serve as common ground for them to engage in a conversation with me. Through this meal I realized that I don’t have to give people a reason to want to talk to me, and my classmates are wonderful caring people who want to get to know me as I am. The clearest effect I felt as a result of this meal came about during my writing conference. I subconsciously felt so comfortable with the people in the room that I let my thick, Long Island accent slip out as I was speaking. I come from a part of Long Island that views that accent as low-class and distasteful. For apparent reasons I learned over
time to adopt a more non-regional dialect. I only let it slip when I am tired, upset, or comfortable that the people I’m with will not judge me. I think I somehow understood this concept that as they had shared with me, I must share with them.

This meal was more than just a way for me to connect with my classmates. It opened me to a new world of self-expression and intellectual pursuit. I have been able to get in touch with my own unique history and culture. Through this, I have a deeper understanding of how my upbringing has influenced me as an adult, and I better understand the person I am today. In my academics, I have been reminded that there are always more than two sides to a story, and that it is always worthwhile to dig deeper and research motivations along with hard facts. Since the meal I have also been making efforts to allow myself to be more open with those I trust, becoming the kind of person I have always wanted to be. Our class has an atmosphere to it that encourages each student to be confident in what his or her “big beautiful brain” tells them to write, as professor Tamera Marko says. I feel as if my voice is worthy of being heard, and not silenced by insecurity.

“Tell me what you eat, and I’ll tell you who you are,” wrote renowned gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in 1825 (“The Meaning of Food”). Food is the only way to really get to know a culture and learn about a people. Our traditions, beliefs, and values are passed from one generation to the next in the context of our cultural dishes. When we share these dishes, we share what we are proud of and thus open up a door for interaction that isn’t possible in other contexts.

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References
