

22 November 2020

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

One of my larger childhood memories is having to sit at the supper table for hours (or so it felt). I was not allowed to 'get down'. I could not run to the living room to watch 'Hockey Night in Canada'. I could not ride my bicycle before the sun went down. And I could not finish constructing my latest Meccano contraption, whose hundred parts were strewn across the floor of the bedroom I shared with my brother. ("Keep that stuff on your *own* side!")

Well, that's not quite true. I *could* rush off to do any of those things. To gain my release, I had only to 'clean my plate' by finishing every last morsel of the food I'd been served. I suspect, gentle reader, that if you rummaged deeply enough, you'd find a similar scene buried in the vault of your memory too.

A Matter of Taste

This torture was sure to happen when spinach was served. *Boiled* spinach, mind you, dark and sickly green, and as soggy as a drenched dishrag, lying like roadkill in the middle of my plate. Not the pre-washed, smooth-leaved spinach, the 'chic' kind that virtuous vegans eat by the bagful. No, it was the spongy, wrinkly kind that, no matter how much it's washed, is still gritty with dirt.

"We all eat a peck of dirt before we die," said my Gran. "Then I shall die very young," I replied.

To complete the nightmare, there'd be a slab of liver adjoining the spinach on my plate, fried to death and resembling scuffed shoe leather, whose taste and texture it mimicked. I'd drown it with ketchup in a desperate attempt 'to get it down' so that I could 'get down' from the table. To this day, I stare in disbelief at anyone who looks up from their menu, smiles at the waiter, and announces, "I'll have the liver!"

My mother had taped a yellowed copy of 'Canada's Food Guide' to the refrigerator door. I think it was from the 1940s. Patriotic parents, it insisted, should make their Canadian urchins eat liver and spinach at regular intervals. Otherwise, they'd grow up like morally deficient American children who only eat junk food and get cavities. It was all part of the 'war effort', I guess.

Later, I was horrified to learn the noxious functions the liver serves in higher mammals. "Who'd eat that organ, *voluntarily*?" I thought. But then, years

later, in England, I found myself tucking into kidneys and steak, encased in pastry and smothered in gravy, with a pint of Guinness to wash it all down. Delicious.

“You *do* know what kidneys are for, don’t you?” my finicky younger self asked my sophisticated older self.

“I know. But aren’t they good?” I told myself.

Then there’s haggis and black pudding. “All Scottish cuisine is based on a dare,” said some old wag. Probably an Englishman.

The Joy of Difficulty

My mother was, in fact, a superb cook. Her skill in the kitchen was one of her many, many talents. Her pastry, alone, would earn her entrance into the kingdom of heaven, were I in charge up there.

Now, it’s true, she did inoculate me forever against boiled spinach and fried liver. Please don’t send me your recipes. That experiment failed. I can’t be redeemed.

But it’s a small loss. For in the same way, she and my father, and many of my best teachers, encouraged me in the discipline we need to feel the joy of discovery, and to broaden our taste for the many flavours life offers. These are two of life’s great joys.

The first rule of this discipline is not to quit the game too soon, but to stay at the table, to taste what we do not like, to clean the plate, and to try it all again. How else will we discover the pleasure of acquiring *new* tastes? But the ‘acquiring’ part takes time. Sometimes, it only happens by trying, and trying, and trying again.

This is all part of the larger work of acquiring a mature taste for life itself. Our lives can be told as a series of episodes in which we undertake a journey or task, but we encounter some difficulty along the way. It frustrates us. It bruises us. We don’t like it. We wish it away, in vain. We toy with the idea of giving up, giving in, or running away.

But an almost forgotten voice rises from deep within us. It says, “You cannot get down from the table. Not yet. Try again.” We do. And joy breaks in.

Music to my Ears

My good friend, Chris Vais, who died many years ago from A.L.S., had a discerning ear, a well-developed aesthetic, and a deep love for contemporary music. I miss him still.

Whenever he purchased some new music – it was usually a cassette tape back then – he’d don a pair of unwieldy earphones, push ‘play’ on his stereo, and lie down on his chesterfield. He’d listen to both sides of tape, without interruption from beginning to end, and with a great effort of concentration. If there were lyrics, he’d follow along, and meditate on them as the band sang them. Then he’d listen all over again.

Though I was a slow pupil, and stubborn (what else is new?), he tutored me in the music he discovered and loved. “Here, listen to this,” he’d say, tossing me a cassette tape from a new band he’d discovered. I would.

“So, what do you think?” he’d ask the next day.

“Nah. Didn’t like it,” I’d say. “I liked the one you gave me last week better.”

“Really?” he’d say, smiling a bit awkwardly, for he was a gentle soul, and he shied away from quarrels. “Well, I don’t think that band will last. But this one you didn’t like? There’s a lot in there. Listen again.” I would.

Chris was always right about this. He taught me that, most of the time, it’s the music we respond to right away, music that’s ‘effortless’ and ‘easy’ and ‘popular’, that bores us all too soon. It turns into ‘elevator music’, a shallow soundtrack in the background of our lives.

Such music as has no ‘staying power’. It climbs the charts, then sinks to oblivion. It’s thin and substance-less. After a few ‘listens’, there’s nothing much more to discover in it. Like a bowl of whipped cream, it tastes good, yes, but all its pleasure is supplied ‘up front’, in one swift sitting. There’s no nourishment. You can only eat so much before its sweetness makes you sick.

The music Chris loved was usually the kind that sounded unpleasant, and difficult at first. Only after many ‘listens’ and ‘I-don’t-like its’, would it begin to yield its treasures to me. But then it gave more and more, and it never would bore. It had substance. Chris’s genius was to locate this substance, to hear it in the music before others did, even on the first ‘listen’.

He taught me to try, and to keep on trying, until the music got through to my deaf, dull soul. “The secret,” he said, “is to let the *music* teach you how to listen to it. It will show you how to enjoy it. Let it jostle around inside you. It

wants to re-arrange your organs of perception. You have to let it stretch and change you from within."

What Chris taught me about listening to music holds true in every sphere of life. Some of life's greatest joys only happen after we've faced difficulty, but not given up; when we've learned to love the people, places, and activities that we did not, at first, find it easy to love, enjoy, or appreciate.

Perhaps *we're* the difficult ones, and stubborn too. But if we persist, and do not "get down from the table" too soon, we may, in time, through repeated trials and many errors, find pleasure where we'd tasted disappointment, discover substance in things we'd prematurely judged 'hollow', and stumble upon love in relationships of discord, and friendship in people we disliked.

What changes? *We* do. But only if we're open to being changed. If we are, we'll be in for something unpleasant at first. "The truth will set you free...but first it will makes you miserable!" (Who said that? Probably the same smart aleck who made that crack about Scottish cuisine. I'm starting to like him.) Difficulty, tasted and swallowed, can "jostle around inside us and re-arrange our organs of perceptions."

And yet, let's admit it. Sometimes our spiritual, emotional, and mental equipment is just too damaged. We're beyond healing and learning. How can we be redeemed? It's too late for me where liver and spinach are concerned.

Or is it?

Yours in the faith,
Andrew