

HOW I LEARNED TO COOK

Michael Tino

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I suppose that some people learn to cook by themselves. I would imagine that some people learn cooking alone in the kitchen, hunched over cookbooks, translating written words on a page into the sensory knowledge—the familiarity with smells, feel, sound and sight (taste, I think is a given)—that the process of cooking requires.

I suppose that some people are able to figure out by themselves when the bread dough is just soft enough, just moist enough, just sticky enough, to be kneaded.

Perhaps there is someone who has figured out the lessons of wood and fire that José Andres learned from his patient but stern father.

It is possible that by trial and error, or more likely by luck, someone has determined by themselves the proper size to which walnuts need to be crushed in order to make a proper Christmas walnut sauce.

I suppose it's possible, but I can't imagine it. Especially the last one, which has vexed generations of children in my family, going up the line through my mother and her mother and so forth. To me, knowledge about crushing walnuts at Christmas is something best passed on in person.

It requires patience to demonstrate how best to use the ancient mortar and pestle that makes its way out of the closet once a year—gently but firmly, pushing in from the edges so that half of the walnuts don't end up on the counter.

And to me it's somehow beyond language to describe the consistency one seeks in the walnuts—crushed enough to melt in the sauce, whole enough to add texture. I couldn't imagine learning something like that by myself. My mother had to teach me.

Over the course of my life, I've learned a lot about cooking. From my mother, from other family and friends, from classes in college, and from hands-on experimentation (not to mention hours and hours watching the Food Network), I've become a pretty decent cook.

Truth be told, I can make every dish in my family's traditional Christmas meal without notes. Yet every Christmas, when my family gathers again, I return to the role of *sous chef*, student, apprentice, walnut crusher.

And I'm OK with that—I understand that in the Christmas kitchen, everyone has a role. And I understand that in order to eat pasta with walnut sauce, someone has to crush the walnuts just right.

Further, it brings me great joy to spend that time in the kitchen with my family, and I look forward to it every year.

When I first read the story I chose for today's reading, from a book entitled "How I Learned to Cook," I knew that within José Andres' story of paella was something profound about how we come together as a community.

Each of us here has a part to play in what we do together. Each of us has a place in the proverbial choir. Each of us can and must be a part of the ministry that happens in this congregation—for without it, our collective spiritual meal will not turn out right.

There is a cartoon a friend gave me a while back that I found while cleaning my office when I moved this summer. It depicts two church pews, in which sit six people. Five are grizzled, grumpy people with sour looks on their faces, bedecked in the ribbons and medals of war veterans, but dressed in their Sunday best.

One man sits amongst them wearing no ribbons at all, and looking quite uncomfortable as the woman to his right stares at him eagerly. The caption is this: “by awarding medals to anyone who serves on a committee, the Winslow Presbyterian church dramatically increased the congregation’s volunteerism.”

Were this Fellowship to adopt the Winslow Presbyterian system, there is no doubt that many of you would be weighted down by the number of awards you would receive. But this is not the only reason why this cartoon reminds me of this congregation.

It is because I understand that there is weariness here—a weariness caused by doing the things that need to be done for too long, perhaps a little by the task of maintaining things until some new energy came along. A weariness that causes us to look at others with just a little too much eagerness—sometimes with the same stare as the woman in the cartoon, a stare that doesn’t give people much room to say “no” when asked to do things.

There is certainly a culture here that makes people feel obligated to do more—and makes it hard when life throws us for a loop (as life will, from time to time) to step back and admit that we need a little room to breathe.

Now, I’m not going to pretend that one service could ever solve that. But I do see a way to combat that weariness. To heighten the joy we have in being together. To help us understand that some of us need to crush the walnuts, and some of us need to stoke the fire. To help us understand that some of us work before the meal, and some of us pitch in afterwards—and in the meantime, we all get fed.

The truth is this: many of you are weighted down by all of the figurative medals you wear here every time you come to this Fellowship. It is time to make the rewards of being part of this congregation less burdensome and more inspiring.

I believe that we need to spend some time understanding the concepts inherent in a culture of “shared ministry.”

First among these is the notion that each of us is created with certain gifts and called to use those gifts in ministry to others, and the idea that part of the work of our religious community is to help us find and act from that calling.

The Presbyterian minister and theologian Frederick Buechner once wrote that, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” This is how I want you to begin to think about your place in this congregation: you are called to be where your joy and others’ need intersect.

Note that inherent in determining your calling is finding your deep gladness. The first step in finding your calling is noting what brings you joy. Is it singing, or leading, or working for justice in our community, or spreading the

word about our faith? Is it being with children, or watching and discussing movies and plays, or spending time in nature?

What is it that brings you joy? Pure, unbridled, ecstatic joy? What is keeping you from doing that?

Doing what brings us deep gladness renews us. It gets us out of bed in the morning, it fills us with peace. Your time here should be a time of deep gladness. You should walk into this Fellowship and proclaim “Yes”... not “I wonder what I’m going to be asked to do today.” We should shout “yes!” and know that in this congregation is held our deepest gladness—a source of joy for our lives.

Here, we should feed on joy and revel in gladness.

Finding your deepest gladness is step one in finding your calling. But there is more. The next step is identifying the hunger in the world that your gladness can meet. And while I’m all for finding our calling in the world, today, my scope is narrower.

What is the deep hunger in this congregation that meets your deepest gladness? What do others here need that would be a joy for you to give them? What is your calling—your ministry—at within this congregation?

Understanding that we are each responsible for one another here is the essence of shared ministry.

The Rev. Roy Phillips writes of shared ministry this:

“The premise is that a person’s gifts, values and arenas of expression are the source and ground of an individual’s life ministry, that people are energized and fulfilled when they interact with their world from that core of themselves, that they will be most effective when they are helped to live from that inner center.”

Shared ministry is not about doing what needs to be done because it is there. Yes, there are always things that need to be done in the life of a congregation—and yes, in a small congregation, those things often fall on the same people again and again.

But if our involvement here consists merely of doing chores, it will not be a ministry. It will not be something that we do from the core of our beings, from the place of our deepest gladness.

Used effectively, the concept of shared ministry benefits both the individual and the community. By encouraging each person to live from the core of their being, each of us brings joy and purpose to our relations with the congregation. Through being intentional about connecting people with the right experiences for them, the congregation gains the best and brightest parts of every person, and becomes much much more than the sum of its parts.

So if you’re willing to accept that we need to bring ministry and intentionality to our involvement with this congregation—where do we start?

The process of moving towards a culture of shared ministry requires looking deep within ourselves, examining our treasured life experiences, our deepest held values, our weaknesses and wounds—from which come our sources of empathy and connection with others, our styles of learning and teaching, our motivations and our emotions.

Shared ministry means being honest and open about what we need and about what we want, and knowing the difference between those two things.

It means treating the work that needs to be done as opportunities to discover new gifts and talents in ourselves—and admitting when we're overwhelmed and afraid.

It means letting other people here be human, and not faulting them for their imperfections—lest we are faulted for ours.

It means exploring what our gifts and skills are—and using those gifts and skills in service to this congregation. Church consultant Jean Trumbauer writes,

“One of the major fears that church members express about exploring their gifts is that they will ‘have to do more’ to insert more activities into an already full schedule.... Rather than doing more, we are called to be more intentional about what we do.”

In making a commitment to shared ministry—to evaluating our gifts and finding our call, and to seeing our involvement in this congregation as a ministry to others—and not a chore that needs to be done—we are also making a commitment to growth—our own personal growth as well as the growth of the community together.

Growth in spirit, growth in commitment, growth in gladness and growth in connections.

The Rev. William Ellery Channing, often hailed as the founder of American Unitarianism, in an 1838 speech developed the idea of “self-culture,” which encapsulated the processes of developing ourselves, of discovering our passions and forming our personal mission from the core of our being.

Just as horticulture concerns itself with the growth of plants, self-culture is all about personal growth—literally the cultivation of the self. In this address, he proclaimed that this expansion is the ultimate power of human beings. In his words:

“...self-culture is possible, not only because we can enter into and search ourselves. We have still a nobler power, that of acting on, determining and forming ourselves. This is a fearful as well as glorious endowment, for it is the ground of human responsibility.”

We must create fertile ground here for the culture of selves.

If we do all of this, we just might find that all of those things we've been doing all along—the things that made us tired, the things that needed to be done—those things will still be done. We just might find that they weren't the right things for us to be doing all along.

And when we step back, we might find that someone else is ready to step in—that another member of this community is ready with the piles of cherry and olive wood, ready to keep the fire burning.

Instead of trying our best to make our loud hippo selves sit quietly, we might find a natural knack for making sound effects and leading big, stomping dances.

We might find that each of us has something to contribute to the whole—and that every inglorious step is important.

We might find some joy in being together—some joy in growing together, some joy in the spirit of this congregation. We might all find our place in the choir.

And isn't that what being a Fellowship should be about?

May it be so.