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Diet Therapy

The Meaning of Food

By Harriett Bruce Moore*

While biologists, biochemists, nutritionists, and home economists have made enormous gains in understanding the physiologic role of foods in both normal and unusual body states, their patients remain unpredictable—sometimes co-operative, sometimes resistant, sometimes plain unruly. The things we eat are first of all necessary and influential in survival and well-being; they are secondarily symbols. Nevertheless, to humans the symbolic aspects of food are often of primary significance, and a given food will be refused, regurgitated, or traumatic if its symbolic significance makes it unacceptable to the eater. On the one hand, it can be intensely craved, sought, and dreamed about if its symbolic significance is positive.

It is reported[1] that Gandhi (in whose culture cattle are sacred) decided to eat beef, on the basis of a rational, intellectual conviction that the nutritional excellence of beef was a factor in the physical and energetic superiority of the Western World. His efforts were futile, however, since he became very ill on beef.

Many pregnant women find it impossible to drink the milk they know is a source of the very important calcium supplies they badly need. Rather than tackle the symbolic significance represented, obstetricians prescribe calcium tablets.

These two examples of rejecting rationally desired foods demonstrate an important aspect of symbols: they are likely to be charged with emotions, and, to a considerable extent, not amenable—*even voluntarily*—to the intellectual knowledge or goals of the person concerned.

Eating, sleeping, demonstrating love and affection are some of the areas of life where the therapist, counselor, or practitioner meets head-on the nonrationality and the complexity of symbolic elaborations on physiologic patterns. These physiologic areas are particularly prone to irrational embellishments, perhaps because they reach back into infancy, and are complexly patterned long before there is any autonomous intelligence or maturity with which to perceive the difference between the act itself and its accompanying feelings, social circumstances, contradictions, and coincidental motives. If we comprehend some of the symbolic meanings of food, we can make strides in devising ways of influencing food habits toward more beneficial nutrition.*

FOOD IS SOCIALIZED

Food and eating, in and of themselves, are looked upon as symbolizing interpersonal acceptance, friendliness, sociability, or warmth.[2] Throughout all societies, this symbolic undertone can be perceived; from the "breaking of bread" or sharing salt of early Christian Europe, to the banquet as an occasion for expressing honor (the testimonial dinner), un-

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usual joy (the wedding breakfast), or mutual bonds (the political party banquet), to the first marks of socialization in the infant who offers a friend his "sucking thumb." Without getting caught in the mazes of psychological details, we can understand that eating is in the beginning a matter of two people—the feeding adult and the eating new-born—and that this is in contrast to sleeping or defecating, which are isolating and commonly solitary experiences. To express rapport and communion we urge one another to eat, just as we seek to drive away the impulse to sleep at a late party.

The association of eating and friendship is very deep in us. We see it dramatically and pathologically in psychogenic obesity, where the patient demonstrates repeatedly and tragically that food has become a *necessary* element in emotional feelings of well-being, comfort, or contentment. It is as blatant in anorexia, at the other extreme; here the person is at or near starvation out of a profoundly irrational predicament wherein refusing food is a concomitant of basic distrust and resentment of those who feed him (usually the mother, of course). It is, however, not only the ill and the maladjusted who have these beliefs; one sees them in the forced or apologetic refusal of an hors-d'oeuvre by the weight-watcher, in the ritual of "If I'd a-knowed you were comin', I'd a-baked a cake," in overeating at children's parties, picnics, and business luncheons.

A middle-aged man was treated for a painful injury, in a hospital which offers wide food choices to its patients and takes pride in its menus. He repeatedly spoke of the kindly staff *along with* the excellent food, and how he regretted that he could not force himself to eat his (delicious) meals, and thereby "worried" the dietitian and nursing staff. He explained that his pain was too consuming of energy for him to respond to appetite and hunger.

A head-hunting tribe in the Philippines customarily gives a banquet at which everyone, including the victim, has a wonderful feast and time. Only slowly do they move in on the victim, as gaiety is transformed into group hysteria. Their apparent duplicity stems from a deeper paradox; they will take the head of an outsider whom they admire or love, feeling that preferable to letting him leave.[3]

From the most mundane sources we can document similar ideas of the equation of feeding with high regard. In a study of cake mixes, an interviewer came upon a rather bitterly ambitious young woman, striving to gain social prestige through devotion to her church's activities. She had this to say about one obligation she had assumed:

> "For them I shop for mixes at 10 or 11 cents a box—the young people at those suppers don't know the difference."

Most of us cannot quite go along—her attitude runs counter to widespread feelings that a food gift should have at least normal value. If we agree or excuse her, it's on the basis that any cake is better than none, or that even so small an investment may be a sacrifice for her. In either case, her motives illustrate how providing food typically suggests the giver is warm, nurturant, helpful, or kind.

The symbolic meanings of food have clear implications for people who select or serve food to strangers. *We accept food best from those we consider our friends or allies.* We most enjoy eating with people who are close and emotionally desirable to us—our parents, good friends, children. "No one cooks like Mama," they say; an unspoken parallel is that food tastes particularly good when also shared with Mama. In the greater world of experience, it still holds true that we are most accepting of new food, new table companions, or new cooks when the people involved seem congenial and acceptable to us. Perhaps this is a reason why the family doctor has traditionally got more acceptance of prescribed food changes than the specialized home economist and dietitian; the physician has the advantage of an already-established friendly relation with his patient, whereas the nutrition specialist has to try to obtain the patient's acceptance even while she gives the dietary advice. (Let's be candid: she sometimes doesn't.)

In these ideas is implicit another aspect of the symbolism of food. To some extent, *we distrust the food given us by outsiders, by strangers.* If there is potential or real enmity, the

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distrust rises rapidly; witness the widespread skepticism toward caviar, German foods, wine, etc. Because certain foods are closely associated with particular kinds of people, we can transfer our emotional views of the people to their foods—and we *do*. Although this tendency is most sharply seen in psychiatric patients, it can be documented in the common attitudes of most people.

"I always have an upset when we eat at my mother-in-law's. There's something about the way she cooks—no matter what it is—that just doesn't agree with me."

"I wouldn't want to go to Europe, and besides, the food would make me sick."

"Aren't you afraid to take your kids to Florida? They'll probably get sick from the strange food."

Such remarks are commonplace, and not only in our society. A Mexican man who visits the United States suffers regularly from gastrointestinal disorders: he can't tolerate our healthful, well-balanced food habits. The psychologist is impressed with these complaints, as opposed to the amiability with which we suffer through the discomfort of overeating at a family dinner or festive occasion. Why should the pain in one situation be so distressing and in the other produce a humorous comment on how much we are enjoying ourselves?

At the extreme of this rejection of food associated with outsiders is the underlying or only hinted idea that the stranger's food may be poisonous. This is indeed what we imply in categorical predictions that Welsh, Turkish, Swedish, Jewish, Southern, Indian, or whatever food will not be suitable; and it is the same conviction which operates in the severely anorexic patient. Not rational, to be sure—yet it is apparent in consumer research that people choose among the available evidence to fit their preferences, and that the readily mouthed ideas of "danger" in the food of alien groups are built mostly of phantasy, bolstered up with a grain of fact or an odd anecdote.

It is not surprising then to come across situations in which the patient not only doesn't follow the prescribed diet, but privately believes that he would harm himself if he did so. If the authority-figure, the specialist, who advised him seemed alien and unconcerned with him as a person; if the food is one he considers outlandish (in both senses of the word); if it tastes unpleasant to him, he can easily conclude that it isn't good for him.

TO EAT IS HUMAN: TO FEED, MATERNAL

This brings us to another symbolic aspect of food—namely, its motherliness. Feeding is not only kindly and warm in its emotional meaning to the one who accepts, but he is most likely to see the giver as somehow glossed with the meaning of "mother." Consumer research and interviews ranging from the feeding of infants to the vagaries of dried eggs affirm and re-affirm the central role of the mother in teaching *what* foods, when, how much, why, and with what feelings one eats. Ask any question about any food, and a substantial number of answers, from son as well as daughter, contain the phrase, "Well, my mother always. . ." Turning it over, we see just how the mother behaves in this situation. Here are two quotes from different homemakers:

"And my husband *loves* rice pudding—without raisins. Ugh! It always seems to me just like eating cockroaches when I see raisins in a pudding. . . ."

"We don't like coconut cake at all. It's so stringy, it feels so awful in your mouth—I can't bear it!"

Certainly, it is true that an unusually objective or sensible mother can learn not to instruct her family in her own likes and dislikes; numerous housewives do prepare foods for their families which they themselves enjoy little or not at all. Nevertheless, the simplest tendency is otherwise; and it is noteworthy that the women quoted above were *not aware* that they were assigning dislikes or tutoring their families in food rejections out of their own preferences.

In dealing with her family, the mother is not simply an adult carrying out the food preparations she believes desirable. Nor can she be looked upon as a brain which records and translates professional advice into appropriate dietary routines. The fulfillment of her self-esteem is heavily at stake in feeding her family, and her emotional investment may or may not be an asset to the professional advice. It may enable her to withstand her own feelings, and to carry out instructions in spite of misgivings;

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or it may inwardly contradict and deny the validity of the advice, either in its details or at its source.

This was vividly shown in studies on the feeding of infants. Depending upon the mother's educational, social, and (sometimes) ethnic background, she posits quite different kinds of people as *eligible* to advise her about her children's foods. The truly uneducated, unsophisticated woman believes her mother and her neighbors are the best sources of help—the ones who really know. As anyone who has worked in a public family clinic or infant station knows, the young mothers who come there are already a bit unusual—many of their friends would not. The modestly educated and knowledgeable mother is inclined to put her faith in advertisements and business—these people have to know, she says, they can't stay in business if they give poor advice or don't prepare their foods and baby supplies properly. It is mostly the somewhat privileged mother of middle-class or better background who has faith in what the doctor says, or what the "lady" at the food clinic tells her.

These attitudes are, to be sure, only predispositions to believe. In an emergency, in an important personal situation, these women may turn to more substantial and new figures of middle-class professional stature—much as the missionary doctor makes his important impact under conditions of distress or disease. But under anything like the normal circumstances, the symbolic language of food is resilient enough to reject new meanings from new speakers.

THE LANGUAGE OF FOOD

So far, we have talked mostly of food in general, without regard to its specific form, flavor, or constitution. That is not maximally useful; hunger teaches us to eat, experts can only build variations or patterns with the basic physiological energy and purpose. But when it comes to *what* we eat—the substance, the recipe, the preparation, the context, the menu—there is a diversity of specific meanings and understandings which justifies the simile of a language. As cooks, we can please, excite, shock, amuse, reassure, intimidate, or bore people; as eaters, we can certainly express similar feelings, either momentary and mood-like or permanent and irrevocable. For the meanings of foods are coherent and relatively stable; they are usually understood by all parties concerned; and they are infinitely varied on their themes by individual likes, preferences, experiences, and motives.

One clear example, which we all more or less rely on, are the relative meanings of meats and vegetables. Meats are masculine, vegetables are feminine. The steak is probably the most masculine food in our society—in some, raw steaks or raw meats with sauce are the extreme. In eating or serving meats, we all accept the notions of energy, activity, and even aggression. In America, the relationship of meat to masculinity is highlighted by our past and present frontiers, by hunting, the diets of cowboys and prospectors, and probably by the national wealth which enables most people to subscribe to this happy legend (which may, to be sure, be based in physiological facts). At bottom, we observe, are essentially ideas which often operate in cannibalism—by eating strong, active, powerful creatures, the eater partakes of that strength and power. In her highly modified way, the housewife subscribes to these ideas: she is most concerned with the meat which she serves, and it is the center of her meal, both menu-wise and economically.* To have a strong and active husband, to give her children strength and power in their muscles and bones, she relies on meat. It is a testimony to the strength of this symbolism that eggs have never been able to make the grade—though most housewives rationally know eggs are a good substitute for meat, they are a "last resort" and don't let a cook feel she has "done right" by her family. Intellectually, she knows eggs are full of protein, like meat; but in the language of food, they are insipid and innocuous, best for invalids, breakfast, or as an addition to meat or other foods. What makes a cake rich won't make a person

* Meat also heavily determines her attitudes toward grocery stores. See Zober, M.: Some projective techniques applied to marketing research. *J. Marketing* 20: 265, 1956.

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strong, is a way of expressing her nonrational thoughts.

The masculinity of meat perhaps becomes more apparent when we consider the vegetable side of the picture. A nonmeat salad is the epitome of femininity. Consider the difference in expectations when one prepares a meal of steak and baked potatoes and when the *pièce de résistance* is salad. Men customarily complain at such a meal, feeling that they have been overlooked, insulted, or pulled into a hen affair. At best, they know they are expected at this meal to be refined and gentle, to watch their manners, and to restrain most of their assertive impulses and habits. This might be a luncheon for the minister, or a party of women who are tolerating husbands, or an effete affair demonstrating gentility to the world. The men probably expect to leave hungry, and to rush out for a hamburger or steak sandwich—but the women will presumably be satisfied and enjoy the daintiness of not feeling satiated and ruminative over a distended stomach.

With this broad classification, other differences in symbolic language can be discerned. For example, muscle is considered more masculine than viscera, beef more than lamb, mammals more than domestic fowl, etc. In our society, there is an antipathy for the nonmuscle or viscera of animals: sweetbreads, brains, liver, heart, or intestines are generally looked on as somehow inedible, and arouse faint undertones of disgust. In part, this seems to be the immigrant turning his back on the hardships of another continent, except that it occurs in Americans who have no ethnic past to run away from. Such dishes are, also, often looked on as exotic, effete, and liked by people of questionable vigor and action. (It can be seen throughout such attitudes that the American notions of masculine energy and activity are strongly related to the habits and experiences of early frontiersmen.) Liver, perhaps because of its widely known, dramatic relation to red-bloodedness, is the least "cursed," but it too is considered something which women and children are more likely to benefit from and find likable.

Among the fruits and vegetables, potatoes are (obviously to everyone) at the hearty end of the masculine dimension. Frying makes them still more symbolic of activity, physical strength, and impulsiveness—as, indeed, it seems to heighten such meanings in most foods. Fruits are probably more feminine than vegetables, although the overlapping is great and such a general statement can be misleading. Oranges, for example, are widely displaced by orange juice; oranges require more energy to eat than is suitable (while we happily chomp on fried chicken and chuckle over Henry VIII's table manners).

More individually, fruits are readily used to symbolize love and affection. The apple for the teacher, the gift basket of fruit, the eulogies of the grape, the "peaches and cream" compliment, etc., show the widespread tendency to find in fruits symbols of beauty, sexuality, esteem (the "fruits of victory," the golden apples of mythology), and luxury. Fruits somehow express some basic accomplishing (and/or reproductive) notions—compare "fruition" and "bearing fruit" to "vegetate" and "vegetation." The one set of words conveys a lushness, an extraordinary coming to ripeness, a sensuality and fecundity which are absent from our observations and feelings about vegetables—even though they too are seasonal, come to ripeness, spring up in marvellous shapes and colors. Obviously, we say things with fruit which we can never communicate through the symbols of other foods.

Another interesting set of dimensions in the language of food is that of age and maturity. Two examples may suffice: olives and peanut butter. Putting it bluntly, olives are for grown-ups and peanut butter is for children in America. We all accept the fact that children have to "learn to like olives," that their flavor is not innately attractive to humans—in spite of some physiologic evidence that infants cannot discriminate tastes well and can therefore begin life by liking almost anything. Do children in southern Italy have to be trained to like olives? Do the infants of any food-scarce area have to be taught to eat any food which their elders consider palatable and nourishing for them? It seems unlikely. In our society, for example, the psychologist often observes the slow and even painstaking way in which a

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small child is taught that candy is *especially* good and should be prized above fruit, cookies, crackers, or other snacks. Withholding it, doling it out for good behavior, beaming with expectation of the joy about to be experienced, all tutor the child in the particular symbolisms of candy. If we as adults had the same feelings of particular lovability for olives in children, we would probably have few examples of struggling to develop a taste for them in later life.

Even so, we know that olives symbolize sophisticated or adult taste. So does liking seafood in a large part of the country—and one way a prosperous people can increase their standard of living is to take on such delicacies, much as shrimp has become a rather commonplace dish in the last decade. These foods mark maturity, experience, some element of sophistication and being "cultured," and the adolescent often sets himself busily and conscientiously to acquiring a liking for them.

Running the other way on the age dimension is peanut butter. Children *love* it, say grown-ups. In our research, a few children privately denied their mothers' insistence that, "like all normal children," they would eat themselves sick on it if allowed to do so. Still more dramatically, there have been reported several instances of children being violently punished for eating too much, or for sneaking, peanut butter. What emotions are at play here! Peanut butter symbolizes childhood, especially in its active, impulsive, and somewhat rebellious aspects. It is more for little boys than little girls, although they often go along in seeking out the basically exciting and rather rambunctious feelings which can be tapped by wadding peanut butter on a cracker or piece of bread and mushing it around one's mouth. Grown-ups, on the other hand, widely decline to partake of so undisciplined and primitive a symbol. They find it "stickes to the teeth," "is bad for the skin," "is too fattening," etc. They often express some disgust in an "Ugh!" followed by, "and when I was a kid I ate it by the pound, literally!"

SUMMARY AMD COMMENT

In these examples I have tried to suggest some of the nonrational expressions and meanings which are accepted parts of food and eating. While I have touched on only a few examples, the findings of psychological research are that every food is invested with meaning—sometimes undramatically, sometimes so importantly that its very mention sufficies to define the occasion (e.g., champagne). Our food preferences and reactions say many things about ourselves, either as we choose food to eat ourselves or offer it to others. These meanings are rarely esoteric—they are part of our cultural heritage, which most commonly the professional nutritionist and home economist shares with his or her clients. Nevertheless, the differences are sufficiently important—and their consequences—that it helps to understand, either by introspection or questioning, what the patient's emotional reaction will be to new foods or to dietary modifications. Serving nonrational motives simultaneously with rational needs is a way of speeding up and increasing dietary recommendations, whatever their nature.

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