

Looking for Happiness? Find a Companion and Eat

Eat with your kids.

That's what every parenting magazine and book will tell you. They cite studies that prove that family dinners can be linked to everything from lower obesity rates to higher school grades. They say that conversations during the meal provide opportunities for the family to bond, plan, connect, and learn from one another, and what's more, they assert that family dinners will make both parents and kids more contented all around.

Despite the frozen pea juggling and pureed soup spillage that a toddler brings to our table, I tend to agree.

But. I want to add that it doesn't matter if you're related to the folks you're eating with. If you want to be happier, all you need is a companion to share your mac and cheese. Shared DNA or wedding bands are optional.

A year ago, I tore an article out of "Ode Magazine" on exactly this subject. I was fascinated by an assertion made by British chef Hervé This suggesting that "eating together makes us happier and healthier." The article goes on to cite a report from the "British Medical Journal" that says that what matters is that we're eating *family style* at a properly set table. The evidence came from researchers at Wageningen University. They'd studied nursing home residents and found that sociable meals prevented a decline in the elderly residents' physical capabilities and increased their quality of life. Additional, the study revealed that sociable eating conditions lead to a more "patient-oriented" as opposed to "task-oriented"—attitude on the part of the staff.

Bottom line here: it's not just the calories that feed you. It's the people you're with.

So it was a pleasure, the other day, to discover that eating together and companionship are intimately, etymologically related.

I was in Denver, eating lunch with a poet friend. He had a sandwich. I had pita slices and baba ganoush. We toasted being together with our root beers, and he said, "Here's to companionship." Knowing my interest in words, he pointed out the obvious roots: *com*, meaning "with," and *pan*, meaning "bread."

He spelled it out for me, "Companions are literally those who eat bread together."

How lovely. It seemed so good to be true—perhaps a folk etymology, like some urban legend, that rises out of convenience and cleverness. But it *is* true says the "Oxford English Dictionary." And I've been delighting in the thought ever since. Of *course* we should break bread with our friends. Even with our enemies. There have been many meals in which, over pizza or chili, I learned to enjoy someone who before drove me nuts.

Wine helps.

And it's why, I think, the Writer's Guild's annual Walking Words dinner, which takes place in Telluride this weekend, sells out every year. There's something inherently wonder-full in eating together and sharing an experience.

"True happiness," wrote English poet and essayist Joseph Addison, "arises in the first place from the enjoyment of one's self; and in the next, from the friendship and conversation of a few select companions."

Add food, and you've got even more happiness.

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And perhaps my favorite part of our family meal is the moment before we lift our spoons. We take a few minutes, well, seconds really, for what my son calls “thank you grace,” in which we go around the table and identify something we’re grateful for. And gratitude is well documented as one of the clearest paths to joy.

As far as I know, there are no studies linking grace to getting As in school. But I don’t need no stinkin’ study to know it feels good when he says that he’s grateful for leaves. Or skid steers. Or mommy.

So find a companion, blood relative or not. Grab a loaf of bread. Some dip. And dig in.

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