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DINNER WITH THIN PEOPLE

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I was at dinner the other night with a group of thin people. Most of these people were in their forties and fifties, professional, with plenty of what they call 'discretionary income.' Only myself, my husband and another person were of average weight and fitness.

About halfway through the meal, I realized that the conversation during the entire pre-dinner drinks-and-appetizer portion of the meal, as well as so far in the meal itself, had been about food—about what they ate, how much they ate, what was wrong with our diets, and where one acquired the best food items. The other parts of the conversation were when, where and how they worked out, how they lost weight, or how others had lost weight. Still other bits of conversation focused on how foods were prepared and various TV food-preparation shows. When it came to the meal itself, however, I noticed very little food was actually eaten. There were a variety of complimentary comments to the chef, but all plates held only a small amount of each item and there was no going back for seconds—except for me, of course, who went back to the buffet for a 'just a little more' of the potatoes (which were simply delectable, by the way), which trip had to be peppered with self-deprecating comments ("I really shouldn't be doing this, but—"). This experience led me to think that perhaps the entire American population is suffering from a food disorder—at best, 'guilty eating', and at worst, the fringes of anorexia.

We are blessed with an abundance of food in this country. And one has to wonder whether the very fact of this abundance leads a society to habits of neurotic eating. After all, if we didn't have it, we couldn't eat it. And if it weren't enough, we would make do with what there is. An interesting map on the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations site shows that we here in the U.S., along with western Europe, are among the highest daily caloric consumers in the world. We even beat out Canada, Australia, and Brazil. The fact that there is so much available causes us to utilize food in rather precarious and issue-oriented ways. And then—inevitably—there must be this dictate of not-eating it, of finding rationalizations to not eat it, and then, to influence others to not eat it. Then, also, begins the problem of body weight as a competitive game, to which many of our young women fall victim—the 'if I excel, then I must excel in losing weight, too' frame of mind. In fact, athletes in general are statistically at greater risk of developing eating disorders, and women in particular. It is said this has to do with the influence of the media on women's body image, but I contend the influence is much broader in the culture—that is, the whole culture of affluence and abundance, with a dash of competition. The National Eating Disorder Association quotes a study by Shisslak & Estes in 1995 that suggests 35% of "normal dieters" progress to pathological dieting, and 20-25% of those then progress to partial or full-syndrome eating disorders. This would put a considerable number of us at risk.

On the near side of this issue is how many people have become so deeply involved in the preparation side of food—food as entertainment, as it were. The food-prep industry has its gurus, its hallowed equipment, its esoteric lingo of products and preparations, even its TV shows. At the very time we are hearing government dictates on how chubby we are and how we must stop eating so much, we have people with money and time pouring huge amounts of cash into gourmet items and cookware. For whom are these people cooking these magnificent meals with this

magnificent equipment and with these magnificent ingredients? You have to wonder. Perhaps, as our nation become even richer, we will see vomitoriums spring up as they did in Ancient Rome.

And again, I found another odd issue from this food-conflicted society in which we live—the growth of ‘food tours’ for vacationers, tours to restaurants where food is sampled, during which culinary schools are visited, and at which the work of great chefs is enjoyed. Again, the vomitorium idea suggests itself. The more you look for food-issues in American society, the more you find them.

It was at this same dinner that one person mentioned something about watching old sit-coms from the 1960’s, and how Patty Duke looked quite chunky in the show, and he realized that standards of how we look were so much different back then.

Indeed.

Marilyn Monroe would be sneered at and labeled a heifer—at least online— as Kate Winslet and others are now labeled. Ordinary people with ordinary weight for their age and structure are now disparaged for not being appropriately ‘thin.’ And I heard a sarcastic line on a popular animated comedy series, “American Dad”, where the teenaged boy says of his female companion, “You’re so thin—that must mean you have value!”

In our quest to be ‘healthy’—or at least attractively thin—we have become unhealthy in our minds. We judge others based on their weight—and not even on their weight, but on our exalted ideal of what all people should weigh, at all times and in all circumstances. We have become intolerant of difference, and in fact, resentful of our own natural instincts.

How sad is that?

On an even further edge of this issue is how many hours Americans put in at work, how much daily stress we bear, and how little opportunity we have to fuel ourselves, in quiet and calm, with simple, nourishing foods that we have chosen for ourselves and prepared on our own time. The National Restaurant Association states that “Americans are starting to take back their mealtimes,” this, after a whopping 66% rise in restaurant industry sales between 1997 and 2007. The nation with the highest productivity on the planet should not be the same one with the most overworked, poorly-nourished, stressed-out population who cannot afford the time to wholesomely indulge in one of the most basic human endeavors that sustain life.

Better we should take this condition of ‘abundance and excess’ in our gastronomic lives and turn it to more worthy goals besides self-congratulation, thoughtless criticism, or stoic denial. Better we should look to use this excess to feed the world, in places where such excess is not known or even dreamed about. Better we should share the wealth, rather than let it destroy our better natures.

These are just thoughts. I do not say them to encourage people to indulge in overeating, nor ignore their exercise, nor even to succumb to the constant advertisement of foods that are no good for us but make others rich. I throw the ideas out there to see what we can do with them—to state a hypothesis—to start a brain-storming session. We are not what we eat, and we are not what we weigh. We are complex systems of self-awareness—or should be—and we are problem-solvers to the nth degree. Let us use these fine qualities to live well and live well together. Let us strive to make the best use of them.

For myself, I will eschew Thinness as competitive sport. Though I’m careful of how much I eat, I enjoy the bounty that America possesses. But I’m not that interested in food itself, caloric content, fat intake, glycemic index, percentage of body fat, or muscle mass. Food is only fuel to me. I have a life going on. And besides that, I have a short attention span. I will remain a spectator of the sport. And I may even chomp a bag of popcorn as I watch. Without the extra butter, of course.

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J. Lang Wood's stories, essays, and travel articles have been published in journals across the country and online, such as *Crimson*, *Island Sun News*, *Songs of Innocence*, *EWG Presents*, *Monthly Stories*, *Perigee Arts Magazine*, and *Quiet Mountain Essays*. She has also won a short story contest given by a local environmental organization. When not writing short pieces, she writes women's fiction and mystery novels set in places she knows well and loves.