

Eating Well: Seven Paradoxes of Plenty

BY MARY LOUISE BRINGLE

Eating well is not just about what we do or do not put into our mouths. Far more, it is about the complex ways we attend to the health of our bodies, our spirits, our communities, and our planet. Eating well first requires that we hunger and thirst after righteousness—for then, and only then, will we be fully satisfied.

Roger and Sally have just returned from a holiday cruise, booked for them by members of their family as an anniversary present. “How was it?” their children clamor, eager for a report on their gift.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Roger replies. “We sure *ate well!* Everywhere we turned on that ship, there was food and more food: an omelet bar for breakfast, pastries mid-morning, an all-you-can-eat buffet for lunch, appetizers at happy hour, steak and lobster for dinner, ice cream sundaes for bedtime snacks....” He pats his stomach contentedly, remembering the delights.

The next morning, one of Sally’s friends telephones to get another update on the adventure. Sally, too, pats her stomach as she ponders her response, but in an emotion closer to dismay than satisfaction. “Oh, the cruise was a lot of fun,” she reports, “but just between the two of us, I don’t feel as if I’ve *eaten well* in weeks! All that high-calorie food constantly available, and so little opportunity for exercising it off....”

In these varying reports on their cruise, Roger and Sally reveal a basic tension in our attitudes toward food—a tension in how we interpret that deceptively simple phrase “to eat well.” For Roger, “eating well” implies enjoying an abundance of food, the richer the better; immediate physical pleasure is a key criterion in determining what is “good.” For Sally, on the

other hand, “eating well” means not abundance but moderation, fueling the body to maintain a balance between intake and outgo; short-term, physical pleasure is not so much a concern for her as is longer-term health and well-being.

Before leaping to take sides with either Roger or Sally in this debate, we should note that *both* their attitudes have something to recommend them

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from the vantage point of Christian moral theology. Roger’s relishing of abundance echoes biblical injunctions to “delight in fatness” (Isaiah 55:2), to eat and drink in eager anticipation of the final “wedding supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9). His perspective might be termed *celebration-centered*, reminding us that

pleasure in and gratitude for the good gifts of our Creator stand as hallmarks of a fully embodied devotional life. Roger’s attitude echoes that of the scholastic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, who cautioned that rejecting the pleasures of food, given by God for the nourishment of our bodies and spirits, constitutes one of two types of sin opposing the virtue of temperance: the sin of *insensibility*.¹

Most of us, though, are probably more familiar with moral exhortations regarding that other sin opposing temperance: the sin of *gluttony*. Akin to our Puritan forebears, Sally knows how easily the pleasures of food and drink can tempt us to harmful excess. Her perspective, in contrast to her husband’s, might be called *stewardship-centered*. Taking care of the health of her body—as, indeed, of the limited resources of the planet—gives her an agenda that is more abstemious than indulgent. Feasting on “fat things” with Isaiah leaves her feeling not so much grateful as guilty. She finds her biblical precedent in Paul, who pronounces woe upon those “whose god is the belly” (Philippians 3:19) and advises disciplined regard for our bodies as “temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 6:19).

In Roger and Sally, we see the first of seven “paradoxes of plenty”² in interpreting what it means for us to “eat well.” Properly understood, it means *both* pleasure and restraint. Drawing upon the guidance of traditional Christian moral theologians, we recognize that eating well is not just being well-fed, sated on a “feast of fat things”; but neither is it simply eschewing omega-6 fatty acids in favor of omega-3s. We are intended to delight in the good gifts of the creation—our own bodies included—and also to steward them with care. After all, the virtue opposed to both insensibility and gluttony is *temperance*, whose roots relate not to abstinence (as various “temper-

ance movements" have misled us into thinking), but to *tempus*, or *timing*: recognizing that there are times to feast and times to fast, times to be hungry and times to be full, times to be concerned with feeding ourselves healthfully and joyously, and times to be concerned with feeding our neighbors as ourselves.

I refer to this pleasure/restraint duality as a paradox of "plenty," because only in a culture of some affluence do we have the luxury of pre-occupying ourselves with such matters. In an economy of scarcity, we would simply eat what was available when it was available, concerned not so much with eating well as with eating at all. This contrast, however, points out a second paradox: even in our land of relative abundance, nearly twelve percent of households, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, continue to be "food insecure": regularly lacking enough resources to meet basic dietary needs; running out of food, especially at the end of the month; and eating poor quality and unbalanced diets, creating the seeming disparity that some of the physically fattest among us are in fact the most *ill-fed*.³

Dollars illustrate this paradox of scarcity-within-plenty in a disturbing way. According to the National Institutes of Health, we in the United States spend \$33 billion annually on weight-loss products and services, including low-calorie foods, artificially sweetened beverages, and memberships to commercial weight-loss centers—just slightly less than the \$40 billion voted by the summer 2005 G-8 summit of the eight industrialized nations to write off debts for the globe's poorest countries.⁴ Such statistics show a marked imbalance in our priorities. In the early centuries of Christianity, people undertook fasts so that the foodstuff they saved might be used to help "feed their neighbors as themselves." In the twenty-first century United States, we rather undertake expensive diets to compensate for our high-processed food, low-exercise lifestyles; all the while fourteen million children lack the resources that would keep them from going to bed hungry every night. Former slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass once famously remarked that none can be free until all are free. Might we consider as a parallel that none can truly eat well until all eat well?

Eating—that seemingly most personal act—is thus rife with political implications. Should we simply stop buying our low-fat, low-carb, low-calorie foods and spend the money we save in efforts to eradicate hunger? If only solutions were so straightforward: but we are, instead, dealing with *paradoxes of plenty*.

A third paradox points out that as a national population, we *do* need to work at reducing our weight and eating less harmful fat, fewer refined carbohydrates, and fewer calories overall; yet the more we try to control our weight, the less we seem to succeed. According to the National Center for Health and the Centers for Disease Control, nearly two-thirds of adults and children in the United States are overweight; nearly one-third are obese. The Surgeon General reports that obesity, with its related problems of unhealthy

eating habits and sedentary behavior, accounts for 300,000 deaths every year, roughly twice the number of people who die annually from lung cancer.⁵ Countless hours of productivity – including productive labor on behalf of the poor and the poorly fed – could be recovered were we to be better caretakers of our bodies, as Sally’s stewardship-centered approach to food and diet would have us be.

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Never in our nation’s history have we spent so much time, energy, and money in the pursuit of thinness, and never have our statistics on weight and weight-related illness spiraled so far out of control. Simply put, paradox three stresses that current practices of dieting are as much a part of the problem as of the solution to the dilemma of eating well. Studies repeatedly show that 90 to 95% of individuals

who diet regain their weight within one to five years, because such endeavors play havoc with our metabolism as well as our mental health: instead of training us in sustainable lifestyle change, they create a psychology of deprivation which almost inevitably leads to rebound self-indulgence. Yet, like alcoholics who have not yet learned that “insanity consists in repeating the same behaviors and expecting different results,” we keep embarking on diet after diet, convinced with each new attempt that *this* time, at last, the endeavor will work.⁶

Odds are, it will not. Unless, perhaps, we are one of those people at the opposite end of the spectrum for whom diets work all too well, setting in motion the life-threatening dynamics of a serious eating disorder like anorexia nervosa. Then, what begins as a simple weight-loss diet escalates into an acute fear of being fat and an overpowering desire to be “thin” and “in control,” with the two states perceived as synonymous with one another. Sadly, our size-obsessed culture seems to produce two categories of people: those whose yo-yoing efforts at short-term weight loss result in longer-term weight gain and all its related ailments, and those whose overreaching efforts at weight loss result in emaciation and a host of other mental and physical consequences. What our culture has *not* shown itself capable of producing is the ability to eat well, practicing both celebration and restraint, pursuing the well-being of the wider community, and promoting our fullest individual health.

Truth to tell, we are focused on the wrong issues. Even the newly burgeoning “faith-based” diet industry seems unfortunately geared toward promoting the possibility of losing weight and achieving slenderness as the desirable by-products of a life of better-ordered habits of food consumption. To put this in terms of a fourth paradox of plenty: the issues that are *most* likely to prove motivational for people whose food-lives are a source of distress are the issues *least* likely to be conducive to lasting spiritual as well as physical shalom. A call to pursue fitness and total-body flourishing does not seem to inspire us to action; the prospect of losing five pounds *does* – even if those pounds will come back redoubled; even if their loss will fuel a self-defeating, energy-sapping obsession with weight.

Uncomfortably enough, people with distressing food-lives abound in our faith communities: a 1998 study by sociologist Kenneth Ferraro of Purdue University found that religious participation in the United States – specifically, participation in Christian denominations such as Southern Baptist and Pentecostal/Fundamentalist (Church of Christ, Assembly of God, Church of God, and Fundamentalist Baptist) – correlates with overweight and even obesity.⁷ In other words, those believers who claim the most literal belief in the revealed word of Scripture seem nonetheless to discount its injunction to “glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20) through good stewardship of our health and fitness.

Of course, such believers could respond that they are adhering to other biblical teachings: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink.... Is not life more than food...? (Matthew 6:25); or even, “the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7). Assuredly, such alternate teachings stand as invaluable correctives to a culture overly occupied with what we put into our mouths and with how we appear as a result. The difficulty, though, is that many faith-based diet programs send a very mixed message. They aim to help their adherents overcome unhealthful compulsions to eat in response to spiritual rather than physical hungers; their laudable goal is to enhance physical, emotional, and spiritual fitness. Yet by touting weight loss (and even, in some cases, condemning certain body sizes as clear signs of sinfulness), they feed into the very preoccupations they aim to combat.⁸

Herein lies a fifth paradox of plenty: at least insofar as we can presume to know the mind of God based on the revelation of the Old and New Testaments, God both does and does not care how we eat. The scriptural “proof-texts” cited above, like the Christian moral exhortations to both celebration and restraint, allow us no simplistic answer to the question of what constitutes eating well. Still, it seems self-evident that the God of grace revealed in Jesus could not conceivably love people any more or less based on their physical size. Furthermore, since none of us can know the metabolic or other challenges our neighbors are dealing with in their personal approach to

food, it seems a form of “false witness” to judge any particular body weight as clear evidence of “disobedience.” The true witness of Scripture is that God wills our good—in our bodily life on earth, as in heaven—and that God expects our grateful, joyous, and responsible attention to all we have been given here below.

Unfortunately, though, we live in a world that has fallen far from the goodness our Creator originally intended—and this both is, and is not, our

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fault. The paradox of original sin is that we are born into a world in which evil is already present and inevitable, yet we are also accountable for the ways in which we perpetuate that evil. This theological assertion echoes in a sixth paradox of plenty: we both are and are not to blame for the ways in which our food-lives have increasingly spun out of control. Innocent, we are born into an environment

that invites us to feed ourselves poorly, to obsess about eating and dieting, to abuse our health in multiple ways. Guilty, we accede to the invitation.

Recent studies suggest a multitude of factors, both within and beyond our control, that figure in the current epidemic of unhealthy weights and lifestyles. Obvious ones include a lack of exercise and a surfeit of high fat foods; less obvious ones include sleep deprivation, certain medications, and “endocrine disruptors” in synthetic environmental chemicals that contribute to hormonal changes affecting our appetite and weight. Thus, we do not simply live in toxic *cultural* surroundings that “supersize” our portions while promoting “microsized” body images as the standard of beauty, we also live in toxic *physical* surroundings. Not just our hormones, but also the neurotransmitters in our brains are being chemically disrupted—resulting in widespread depression, as well as in attempts to self-medicate with substances like drugs, alcohol, and food.⁹ In the short run, eating certain foods does make us feel better; in the long run, though, the results may not be so happy. We can scarcely be faulted for the toxicity that undermines our health in so many insidious ways; yet we *can* be faulted for not using our intelligence and will to mount better campaigns of resistance.

This leads to the seventh and final paradox of plenty: what often seems like an individual problem—that is to say, what we eat and what we weigh—can only truly have a cultural solution. Thus, the next time any of us are tempted to join the massive numbers of our fellow citizens who are

embarking on yet another weight-loss program, we would be better served to attempt a more multifaceted approach to the dilemmas of eating well.

First, we need to work at combating “mind pollution,” critiquing the media-generated images of a single, “micro-sized,” and unrealistic standard of beauty that encourages us to be superficial and harsh in our judgments of ourselves and of one another. Second, we need to promote a new image of beauty as *vibrancy*, as vigorous flourishing within the limits of individual bodily givens, acknowledging that some responsibly nurtured bodies will inevitably be larger or smaller than others as part of the variety of God’s creation. Such an image of vibrancy should foster in us a rediscovered joy in movement and a re-attunement to cycles of hunger and fullness that mark the natural rhythms of our lives. Third, we need to acknowledge and honor our dependency on one another and on the earth: putting money aside from less healthy food purchases to feed hungry children; eating lower on the food chain in order to minimize pain to others of God’s creatures and maximize the yield of the land; and recognizing that when we recycle, purchase food without unnecessary packaging, and use water and fossil fuels as sparingly as possible, we help to combat the environmental toxicity that makes it difficult for others – particularly, for future generations – to eat well. Finally, we need to cultivate in our families and faith communities a deepened spirituality of mindfulness and patience, supplanting tendencies toward heedless action, impatient and ultimately ineffectual “quick fixes,” and the mistaken conviction that consuming goods will ever fill the empty places in our God-hungry hearts.

In the final analysis, eating well is not just about what we do or do not put into our mouths. Far more, it is about the complex ways we negotiate a path through the paradoxes of plenty, attending to the health of our bodies, our spirits, our communities, and our planet. Eating well first requires that we hunger and thirst after righteousness – for then, and only then, will we be fully satisfied.

NOTES

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIaIIae, question 142, article 1, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, Inc., 1947).

2 Harvey Levenstein uses the phrase “paradox of plenty” in his social history of eating in the United States from 1930 to 1990, but he develops the concept in significantly different directions. See *Paradox of Plenty* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

3 Food Research and Action Center, www.frac.org/html/hunger_in_the_us/hunger_index.html (accessed August 4, 2006).

4 See the websites of the National Institutes of Health (win.nidk.nih.gov/statistics/) and America’s Second Harvest (www.seconddharvest.org).

5 For more information on weight and weight-related illness in the United States, see www.americansportsdata.com/weightlossresearch.asp. Data on causes of death can be found at www.fjnotebook.com/PRE6.htm.

6 The quote about insanity, used in Alcoholics Anonymous, has been variously attributed to Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, and Rita Mae Brown.

7 "Firm Believers? Religion, Body Weight and Well-Being," *Review of Religious Research* 39:3 (March 1998), 224-244.

8 Marie Griffith observes, "Though the Christian participants in devotional fitness regimens surely are well-meaning and moral, the implications of this growing fixation are sobering. These programs have not provided a robust solution to the much publicized obesity epidemic, nor is there evidence that they counter the persistently high rates of eating disorders in the populace. All of us, I believe, are enmeshed to a greater or lesser degree in this ideology, simply as people who live and struggle amid this culture's confused norms of right and wrong, healthy and unfit, beautiful and ugly. At our best, we may try to refine or contest these in some fashion, but still we daily (if unintentionally) help reproduce contradictory standards for others." R. Marie Griffith, "Heavenly Hunger," *Food and Hunger*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 13 (Fall 2004), 62-71, here citing 70-71. This article is available online at www.ChristianEthics.ws.

9 On hormonal changes, see a summary of studies from the *International Journal of Obesity* in Roger Dobson, "Too Fat – But Is It My Fault?" in the July 15, 2006, issue of *The Times Online*, www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,8123-2269040,00.html (accessed August 7, 2006). On disruption of neurotransmitters, see Michael Norden, *Beyond Prozac* (New York: ReganBooks, HarperCollins, 1996).



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