

The Importance of People

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Because the author of the following parables is a distinguished teacher, historian, and novelist, he is a creative inquirer and brilliant reporter of characters and events. He can reach into the past and bring great personages to everyday life. He can touch tremendous happenings with a wand of the little things that have caused and accompanied them. He can even reverse the conventional process followed by scholars and artists to describe men in action. Instead of always illumining the general notion with specific instances, he sometimes takes cases so particular as those of the pushing parsnip and the apathetic eggplant and raises them to the heights of a universal principle.

Harold Benjamin

Of Students, Teachers, and Vegetables

THE PARSNIP

MY WIFE was preoccupied with the parsnips which we have once a year. There are people—not many, but a few—who, in our esteem, stand improved by infrequent meetings. However, with increased contact, all affection for them seems to disappear. They are the parsnips of the human race. For, indeed, the parsnip is a unique vegetable. It is as highly individualized as an onion, but without the onion's humanity. If the onion is the Irish of the vegetables, the parsnip is the proud and haughty Yogi.

But to get back to my wife and her parsnips. An annual event is not to be taken lightly. Frying eggs is a mechanized affair, occurring daily. But parsnips demand thought. Otherwise they stand revealed in all of their unsocial tendencies. And the real business of cooking is to thwart the parsnip in that.

My wife puckered her brow in thought. Then, she got down her faithful copy of *The Delirium of Cooking* and turned to the parsnip section. She read aloud: "For a portion sufficient for ten add one-half teaspoonful of Worcestershire Sauce."

"Certainly," said I, "go ahead and add it."

"But there are only two of us."

"That's easy," said I, being of a scholarly nature. "Two is, or are, as the case may be, one-fifth of ten. One-fifth of one-half is one-tenth."

She rallied quickly. "Of course," she said, "That's it, one tenth of a teaspoonful."

She reached for the bottle of Worcestershire Sauce, prepared after a recipe which had been in the family of a nobleman in the country since timidity disappeared from Texas.

"How do you measure one tenth of a teaspoonful?" she asked.

"You don't," said I, "Besides, what would be the use? It would be as futile as trying to get a college degree by attending classes only on Wednesday following the election of a Republican to the presidency."

"What's the use of having a cookbook then?" She is, you see, committed to the authorities.

"Not the slightest when it reduces Worcestershire Sauce to the futility of one tenth of a teaspoonful. I'd use enough to make some advance on the parsnip terrain, or I'd use none at all.

Why," I asked, warming to my theme, "use it at all except to offset the parsnip conceit with the Worcestershire ego?"

"You use it to bring out the parsnip flavor."

"Nonsense," said I, "You don't want to bring out the flavor. That's the trouble; it's already out. What you want to do is to overpower it; and put it back in. It's like education," said I, loosening my tie and unbuttoning my shirt collar. "The child comes to school, a veritable parsnip, untouched by culture's subtle concoctions. In his raw state he won't do. He's too parsnippy. We put in a little of the tincture of this and a little of the extract of that, and then we stir and shake and exhort. We must be careful not to destroy totally the native parsnip in him. If we did he wouldn't be a parsnip at all, and if he weren't a parsnip he would become something far worse, since nature had ordained him for parsniphood. We must save the parsnip, but alleviate its pungency. We must not take away its basic flavors but we must soothe them, make them over into a new but precious gentleness. The mission of the Worcestershire Sauce is to transcend the gusty flavor of parsnip flesh with its restrained piquancy of the spirit."

I looked around. My wife was plunging a teaspoon, upon which appeared a thin film of Worcestershire Sauce, obviously one tenth of a teaspoonful, into the pan of parsnips. I sighed. We make our educational advances, oh so slowly, perhaps in increments of one tenth of a teaspoonful. That's why we evolve so slowly from the parsnip stage. But perhaps it's the only safe way to evolve.

THE EGGPLANT

My wife is not at all bad in the preparation of eggplant. She has real expertness in the infusion of other

and alien substances into the eggplant mass so that by the time it reaches the consumer it has a pleasing and tantalizing taste instead of the vast monotony of insipidity that is its eggplantish nature.

I like to stand around in the kitchen and watch what is going on, though that is all it ever amounts to. I like to give advice, though up to now none of it has reached objectivity. Back in 1939 I did reach and get the right utensil without further instructions, though that seems to have been forgotten.

Anyhow I was standing there the other day and watching her do a chore of character education on an eggplant. It was perfectly fascinating the number of things which she put into that eggplant. It made me think of Boston, though with one important difference. Boston was just as piquant, perhaps even more so, before they ever put in Dublin and Lisbon and Rome and Warsaw. When she got through with it that eggplant was a veritable United Nations of the Vegetables, with a mineral principality or two included. The only purpose served by the eggplant was to give the other things a habitation and a name. But out of the exchange the eggplant got a personality.

"We have some garlic," said I. "Aren't you going to put it in too?"

"Why?" asked she, a trifle impatiently.

"For the same reason you have already put in peppers, and onions and corn and tomatoes—"

"I put those in for flavor, and if you put in enough garlic to do it any good at all, it would completely ruin it."

I still think she was a little unfair to garlic. She seemed to think that garlic's main ambition was to rule and ruin. But there have been times when I have found a vagrant hint of it echoing

through the vast caves of taste to be a pleasing matter.

But she would have no garlic in the eggplant. Celery? Yes. And a pinch of marjoram, and wild thyme, and an infinitesimal fraction of a teaspoonful of Worcestershire Sauce; and some fried chicken gravy; and some mono-sodium glutamate, which is said to be of a sociable disposition despite its horrible name. In fact, she is inclined to put in anything capable of integration; of cooperation in the maintenance of the proper gustatory balance; of helping to remove the eggplant from its tasteless and tepid state into a sort of unified and delectable pungency and personality. And in the end by some strange and fine metamorphoses the flavor of the eggplant itself most pleasingly leads all the rest.

And so it is in a teacher's life. The true teacher will always be alert for the

eggplant among students. They can be helped just as well as the parsnips. The one needs toning down, the other building up. The one needs the cutting edges of his personality dulled a bit; the other needs his flatness reformed into some mountains, ravines, and knobs. Both are responsibilities enormously delicate and challenging to any true teacher.

"I have a sausage cake left over from lunch. I wonder if it wouldn't help," said my wife musingly. Her tongue and her lips were in motion, and a contemplative look was in her eyes. She was making an effort to discover whether a small complement of sausage would render an eggplant socially more desirable.

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