

Joan and I went to the farmhouse last weekend. I love being there, because it smells like fried chicken and biscuits and gravy and makes me think of Joan's mom, Ruby Apple, who believed in the curative powers of lard and was never sick a day in her life until her 92nd year when she died of a bowel obstruction, which now that I think about it, could probably have been resolved with a healthy dose of lard. I don't know why we didn't think of that then. Maybe she'd still be with us. She was one of these farm women who believed the fate of the world rested solely upon on the next meal. You worked hard, and ate vast quantities of food, and would live a long time, and lard was the key, lubricating the joints, making the blood nice and slippery so it would flow easily through your veins. There are now people in our family who are vegans and vegetarians, which I'm glad Ruby isn't alive to see.

I was talking with a young man a few weeks ago and he was complaining about his church and thought maybe he would start attending here, which alarmed me. It's like marrying someone who cheated on their spouse to be with you. How could you ever trust their commitment? So I said to him, "Why don't you like your church?"

He said, "I'm not being spiritually fed there."

Have you ever heard someone say that? *I'm not being spiritually fed.* I hate that phrase with a red hot intensity.

As soon as he said that, Ruby Apple's spirit descended from heaven and filled me and I asked him, "Well, are you eating more than once a week?"

He said, "What do you mean?"

"Well, if you're only eating once a week, I can see why you wouldn't be spiritually fed. What are you doing the rest of the week?"

Nothing, as it turned out, which explained his malnourishment.

I don't care how good a spiritual feast a church sets out on Sunday morning, if we only eat once a week, we're going to be spiritually famished.

It made me think of spiritual sustenance, and I wondered to myself if he were reading good books, or helping others, or spending time in meditation, or praying, or discussing important matters, and thinking lofty thoughts.

Was he caring for the poor, or visiting the lonely? Was he spending time in nature, sharing meals with friends, devoting time to the people he loved, reading the Bible, associating with people who looked and thought differently from himself? Did he have a passion for justice? Was he nurturing the next generation? Was he making it a point to be inspired by something grand and beautiful each day? Did he practice gentleness of heart and endeavor to live at peace with everyone?

Because I must say, everyone who does those things regularly and faithfully will never say, "I am not being spiritually fed." They will sit down daily at a spiritual feast.

Early Quakers believed preparation for Sunday's meeting for worship began Monday, that the week was to be spent readying ourselves to gather on Sunday. So when God spoke to us during worship, we were familiar enough with God's voice to recognize it.

Since its start, Quakerism has said that if you want to be spiritually fed, you must start preparing the meal long before.

No one can do that for us.

No one can eat for us.

No one can exercise for us.

No one can be spiritual for us.

But we can always tell, can't we, when someone has spent time preparing the feast. They bring a depth and richness to the table of worship.

Think for a moment of the best teachers you ever had. Picture them in your mind. Weren't the most engaging, thoughtful, transformative teachers the ones who spent time preparing for the classroom? So when they walked in the room, they were ready to teach. As opposed to the worst teacher you ever had, who had been using the same lesson plan for twenty years, who walked into the classroom acting as if they had just been told they had to teach. No preparation, no prior thought, no groundwork. Unable to light the fire of enlightenment because they were wet kindling.

Several years ago, I was giving a talk at a Catholic retreat center and I happened to mention my childhood priest, Father Edward McLaughlin. When I was a teenager, I thought Edward McLaughlin was the world's most boring man. Listening to him speak was just agonizing. I would beat my head against the pew to render myself unconscious. Then he moved away when I was fifteen and I was spared. I didn't mention this in my talk, of course, I just mentioned his name. But afterwards, a man approached me and said, "Wasn't Father McLaughlin a wonderful priest! I was a teenager when he came to pastor our church and it just opened my world. I learned so much."

"Edward McLaughlin, right?" I asked. "Short. Kind of chubby. Bald."

"That's the one," he said. "Wasn't he amazing!"

So of course, it made me wonder why our experiences of worship with Father McLaughlin were so different, why that man left full and I left starved, and the only thing I could think of is that he had been preparing for the feast all week and I hadn't. In fact, I had spent the week trying to figure out how to get out of going to the feast, and he had spent the week anticipating it, building up to it, preparing for it, awaiting it.

I'm telling you this to let you know that if you come here expecting someone else to feed you, you're going to leave here spiritually famished. But if you come here, having prepared through the week to dine at the common table of our worship, you will be satisfied. It will be just like when Jesus blessed the loaves and the fishes. "Everyone ate, and were filled." (Matthew 15:37)