

NOTE: I'm rewriting this whole essay right now. Please hold off on offering any more feedback until I'm ready to share. I'll update it here. Thank you all!

The closest thing to happy memories I have of my childhood are of Sunday morning breakfast. This was my family's sermon, gathered around the red plastic tablecloth designed to protect the wooden table but, in doing so, hiding any possibility of true beauty in our weekly rituals. My dad, usually gone before we woke up on weekdays, would spend mornings cooking pork sausage (always Jimmy Deans frozen sausage patties, never links), scrambled egg beaters (straight from the box to our pan), biscuits (always Betty Crocker from the frozen tube), and orange juice (from concentrate). The caramel smell of pork fat transforming through the Malliard reaction shifted my state from sleep to alert instantly. I raced to the table to put as many sausage patties onto my plate before my brothers could get them.

Like much of my childhood, I don't have any memories of the conversations which held those gatherings. I couldn't tell you if we talked regularly or spent mornings in gluttonous silence, only acknowledging each other with grunts and stabs as we competed for the last bit of eggs or the last sip of orange juice. What I do remember is that that weekly gathering was the closest thing to a moment of relationship we had. When I think about it now, I'm sick to my stomach, recognizing that the food that was the foundation for that gathering was driving us further from any idea of honest connection. It was killing us: physically, morally, and spiritually.

The food in our kitchen was a visceral example of the packaged food revolution. Every week, regardless of what was happening in the world, we could always have our egg beaters, sausage, biscuits, and orange juice. There was never any variation in that experience. My dad had that meal down to a science, so the last pork sausage was on the plate just as the egg beaters were done. Once those hit the table, like clockwork, the biscuits came out of the oven, and the orange juice was chilled to the perfect temperature.

I have no idea where the pork for that sausage came from. I don't know where the wheat for those biscuits came from, much less what else was in that package to allow it to remain consistent months after it was packaged. At the time, I couldn't have cared less. Food was a vehicle for getting calories, ideally in a meal that followed the food pyramid. Nothing more than that. Today, I know better.

Now that I have my own family, I've reinvented the family breakfast in our household. Every weekend, I wake up to catch the first greetings of the sun as I make pancakes, eggs, fresh fruit, and the occasional croissant or biscuit.

I know that the eggs I'm scrambling come from Black Dog farms 20 minutes away. They're real eggs, laid by Freedom Ranger chickens. Tim & Kira offer me a dozen every Saturday. Those chickens have a coop, but also get to run around the entire farm. They're an integrated part of the permaculture setup. They help Tim clear out the remains of other crops, and their fertilizer adds nutrients to the soil in a continuous cycle that Mother Nature designed thousands of years

ago. These specific eggs I'm scrambling have extra creamy, dark marigold yolks this week. Those yolks are a direct result of the late frost, which allowed the feed to develop more sugars and nutrients before being cut down. Occasionally I even get a double yolk. On those mornings, I'll leave it unscrambled until my children wake so they can experience the delight I do rather than simply rushing to the table to be fed.

I know every ingredient in those homemade pancakes. This wheat is grown here in Montana by farmers practicing Regenerative Agriculture long before it had a name. They grow Kamut, Spelt, Soft White, and Durum wheat mixed with other crops. They intersperse cows, chickens, pigs, and other animals into their fields, which help the land remain prosperous. By that simple fact of a continuously cycled system, they have added 100x more nutrients than the packaged wheat in the grocery store aisle. I don't personally know these farmers, but I know the packager who brings me the wheat blend in my weekly order. Her slightly crooked smile and bouncy blond white hair greet me every Thursday. I remember our unfinished conversation comparing wheat in France vs. what we get here in Montana. The wheat species in France are over 300 years old, without a break in those heritage lines. How cool is that!

As I mix the pancake batter, that conversation mixes with the milk, bought from A2 cows to help my children digest it smoothly. I believe my kids savor the memories as much as the ingredients.

The fruit is a mixture of blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, peaches, plums, or apples. It changes based on what is ripening now. Some weeks we've picked it ourselves at local farms or neighbors' houses. Other weeks it comes from the farmers' market, brought by those same farmers who blessed us with the eggs for this week's meal. The flavor, texture, smells, and colors change with the seasons and the weather.

This week the raspberries are especially tart. That flavor comes from the extra flavonoids and phytochemicals adapted specifically to protect them from curious bunnies at the farm. Interestingly, the bunnies never got into most of the raspberries. Still, the first row of raspberry bushes, sacrificed before the farmer wrangled the bunnies, transferred that information to the entire crop, resulting in the tart pop in my mouth as I sample the first berry before filling the bowl. The berries have adapted to the rabbits, the soil, the air, and us. I, too, have adapted to the berries, as this tart pop would have disgusted my childhood self.

On those mornings when we get biscuits or croissants, I buy those from a local baker. I don't know these ingredients, but I know that baker. They always come from Wild Crumb, where Lauren makes the best croissants in Bozeman. My children and I (I don't go unless they're up and coming with me) are always greeted with a smile and the unique details of this morning's bounty. We know that today's croissants have an extra crispy crust, while the inside hints at sourness from last night's experiment. I don't tell them my son wants a ham and gruyere croissant, and my daughter likes raisins. They know his toothy grin and her curls as well as their orders.

As we build our own family rituals, food holds that same foundation it did in my childhood. But in our tradition, we choose intentional food that grounds us. Every ingredient in our weekly feast supports my children's brain development. The eggs, A2 milk, and berries help my son manage his ASD. The pancakes, eggs, and spices help my daughter soothe her eczema. These foods nourish our bodies, they are medicine, as they nourish us morally and spiritually.

Every food in our diet is grown by artisans, environmentalists, neighbors, and friends. Eventually, I plan to grow a lot of it myself. The food adds to the beauty of nature, rather than destroying our environment, as industrial agriculture does. Where industrial agriculture is responsible for 40% of our emissions, these foods draw carbon and methane from the air and enrich the soil as part of a continuous natural cycle.

DECIDING IF/HOW TO ADD THIS SECTION

Choosing to join this revolution requires intention, creativity, and comfort with discomfort. Getting to know Tim, Kira, and Lauren meant I first had to admit I didn't know what I wanted and let them teach me. As someone who grew up being rewarded for being the smartest kid in any room, that was hard the first few times. I've had to slow down and make presence for meandering conversations about the weather, the animals, the seasons, and whatever else that farmer is thinking about. There's no packaging these lessons into 5-minute quick questions.

Before I decided to live this way, I valued the freedom of spontaneity. I loved waking up on Saturday morning and deciding to drive the 2 hours to the beach for the day. Today, that spontaneity means I miss the eggs, the berries, or the sprouting beans. Instead, I'm left searching the grocery markets with everyone else who didn't make time for the bounty all around us. I require time, place, and patience, which my old self despised.

When last week's bounty brought too few eggs, no berries, and vegetables which are as strange to me as those Betty Crocker tubes (what do I do with squash blossoms anyways), the desire for consistent confidence in my kitchen almost pulled me directly to the store. Memories of failed kitchen experiments filled me with shame and the dread of not knowing how to feed my children that day. I've learned that a failed meal is simply a meal, not an indictment of me. I may get rewarded with protruding tongues and pushed-away plates instead of my gold star.

Choosing to live closer to our food means my children know the reality of nature. The nature of our ancestors has replaced Mufasa's Pride Lands and gentle guidance. I can't lie when my daughter asks why our dog killed the neighbors' chickens, especially when she saw the blood and feathers in his mouth and the self-indulgent smirk on his face. That conversation, one of many, stretches my parenting confidence daily.

When we gather, we participate in our own prayer. Not the type my children learn at Sunday school, but the prayer of being connected to a place through our food. We are a part of nature, and our food helps ground us in that relationship. That prayer, silently brought from the plants to

our bodies, reminds us of the sacred connection we share with all living things. It's as ancient as the indigenous ways of knowing which taught it to us. We could never be separate from nature in this meal.

My parents could never understand the spiritual nature of this weekly ritual. For their generation, nature was to be conquered, and food was an experiment to gleam every last ounce of efficiency from. Those lessons were passed down through my generation and still are taught to my children's friends. When I share a glimpse into my sacred relationship with food, most people change the subject in the same way they avoid homeless people on the street.

Occasionally, someone lights up and shares their own journey with food. They tell me of starting a farm or of foraging in the local trails for their food. They love the chickens which gave them eggs, the cows that have shared their milk, and the pigs that have become their sausage. They love where they live, what they eat, and even how they died. They are as connected to God in those moments as any mystic ever has been.

The revolution is happening. Every day, more people are waking up to the sacred relationship to what they eat. Like me, they usually start with a "what the F is that" moment when reading the ingredients of a favorite food. Then they start to wonder what isn't listed. Eventually, they realize they're no longer counting calories. Instead, they're demanding authenticity and connection in when they eat. No two of us have the same revolutionary prescription, but we all share intentionality when we choose our food. It's still small, mostly a congregation of weirdos like me. But we're a welcoming group. There's an open seat at my table and a spot in my kitchen for the next weirdo.

Graveyard

It starts with a rejection of processed food. But before they realize it, they're no longer satisfied with whole foods bought at the grocery store. They've learned to demand more authenticity and connection in their life. It's still small, mostly a congregation of weirdos like me. But it's happening, and it will be live.