

Appetite: Essays by readers

Readers Write in the [March 18, 2015](#) issue



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*In response to our request for essays on appetite, we received many compelling reflections. Below is a selection. The next two topics for reader submissions are **song** and **lies**—[read more](#).*

My mother panicked about driving anywhere, so I learned at age eight to plan our car trips. I was rewarded with ice cream or cookies, just as I was when I came home from school feeling sad. “Have a cookie,” my mother would say, “and you’ll feel better.”

One day while she was mowing the lawn, I checked the pantry and found several boxes of yellow cake mix. Yellow cake was my favorite. “OK,” I said to myself. “I know where the mixer is.” I checked the refrigerator for eggs. There were plenty.

I launched my plan carefully. I pulled a chair to the counter to take down our mixer. I got a box of cake mix from the back of the pantry. I mixed everything while keeping an eye on my mother outside. If she caught me, she would spank me hard and then quote scripture: “God will visit the sins of the father unto the third generation.” I wasn’t sure what that meant except that God was angry at me, too.

I dreaded punishment, but I loved cake batter. I cleaned up quickly, took the bowl into my bedroom, and closed the door. My mother was still mowing. I sat on the floor and began to eat. I was in heaven with each bite of the creamy batter. I ate and ate.

When I realized I could not finish before she came back to the house, I decided to hide the bowl on my closet shelf. When the time was right I would sneak it back into the kitchen.

Time passed, I forgot my plan, and then one day I checked the closet. The bowl was gone. My father called out, "Sheryl!" It was the first time I'd seen him this angry with me. He told me that keeping secrets and lying were bad. Then he spanked me and sent me to my room.

At 13 my weight bordered on obese and eating had become a compulsion. My mother was furious. "I will not have a fat child. My grandmother weighed over 300 pounds, and I will never have a fat child!" The family physician prescribed diet pills, which gave me energy and helped me restrict my eating.

But now my appetite shifted to pills, and when I could no longer get them I binged and purged. I'd go without food, then treat myself to ice cream, cookies, or cake. My weight went up and down.

My adult life held the emptiness of my childhood. I ate when I was angry, sad, alone, and afraid. Food was my source of comfort, and the absence of food was punishment. Because my binge eating was secretive, my dishonesty about food also took a toll on my soul. At 51 I was tired and desperate.

I decided to reveal my secret to my husband. At that point I could begin to deal with the real emptiness and accompanying fear, shame, anger, pain, and loneliness. I found a new way of living when I found a recovery community. In order to recover on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level, I had to change more than my eating. I had to find a way to trust God with my life.

My compulsion with food had separated me from others and from God. I'd been self-reliant to a fault. My struggle to be filled, to be complete, was really a spiritual struggle, and the appetite I needed to develop was spiritual. It was my soul that needed filling.

I began to read about other people's spiritual journeys. Reading *Holy Hunger: A Memoir of Desire*, by Margaret Bullitt-Jonas, I came to understand spiritual struggle. As she said, "Sharing a story, whether rough draft or tearful confession, can be redemptive."

I now begin each day with a simple prayer for serenity, courage, and wisdom—trusting that I will do God's will. This, along with my 12-step discipline, now shapes my appetite.

Sheryl Fancher
Sumter, South Carolina

One day in the summer of 1979, my family and I were eating in a restaurant somewhere in the southwestern United States. We were on a road trip from St. Louis to Orange County to visit my aunt, uncle, and Disneyland.

I was a six-year-old child full of fears. All kinds of things—walking down stairs, sliding down slides, being around large dogs—created terrific anxiety. But on that summer day, something else paralyzed me: I had a panic attack when I discovered my first loose tooth.

We didn't call it a panic attack then, of course. At that time very few people thought children could suffer from anxiety. I wasn't able to articulate my symptoms to my mom and dad. I may have mentioned a stomachache, but there were few words to describe the intensity of nervousness I felt.

What I remembered most during that dinner was a complete loss of appetite. Mom and Dad offered other food choices, but it was no use: my anxieties masked all hunger.

Similar episodes occurred throughout my sixth year. I was afraid I'd choke as I was eating. Now I understand that the choking sensation resulted from panic-induced shallow breathing. Nausea raged within me. As first grade began, I was eating less and less.

Mom would puree foods for me—anything to help me find my appetite and peace of soul. I was taken to the doctor and persuaded to eat enough to keep up my strength and health.

Eventually I learned to live with the anxiety attacks and became accustomed to eating. Yet even as an adult, with the help of a diagnosis and appropriate treatment, anxiety can sometimes squash my hopes for enjoying dinner. Even if Jesus himself were multiplying the food for me or sharing his last meal with me, I might be too nervous to eat.

[Michelle L. Torigian](#)
Cincinnati, Ohio

I spent my freshman year falling into the trap of believing that there is such a thing as an ideal student who “has it all together.” Worse, I believed that unless I became that student, my work in college would be for naught. This idea worked to my advantage most of the time: I completed my academic work with vigor, spent wonderful hours practicing organ, and enjoyed remarkable friends. However, the pressure to be an ideal student meant that I also needed to look the part.

I got serious about running and began to restrict my diet in order to become more physically fit. The two-mile jogs that had once been a joy morphed into longer and more frequent runs.

I’d wake up early for a run and dress slowly so that I could examine my body for any changes. As I pulled on my running tights, I noticed that they seemed more snug than usual. Had I shrunk them in the dryer or was I gaining weight? I critiqued my stomach. Not flat enough. I vowed to do 20 extra crunches after I returned from my run.

One day I went to worship after finishing a run, and I learned the power of what I was to receive at Christ’s table. I needed that bread in more than just a spiritual sense. I was counting on it to get me through the last two hymns without passing out. I hoped the communion assistants would tear off a generous hunk for me.

For someone who viewed carbohydrate-heavy foods as “poisonous,” this starchy, dense bread did not taste bad. This was miraculous to me. Every time I ate that bread I was fed so deeply that a piece of me healed. There was no guilt, only a delicious moment of sacred wholeness.

*Alexandra Mauney
Northfield, Minnesota*

I grew up Catholic in the deep South. I knew plenty of Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists who could offer heartfelt, articulate prayers on the spot. We Catholics were more comfortable with prayers we had learned by heart. At the Catholic mass, the Gospel reading was followed by a sermon to elucidate the finer theological points and highlight daily concerns. While I cherished the rituals and traditions of my church, I craved a more personal relationship with Jesus.

In my forties I challenged myself to reach for that relationship. I dug into the Bible on my own and then began searching for a Bible study group. In the first one I attended, the women were very concerned about bringing their unchurched husbands to the Lord. I was too, but I thought that a genuine conversion of the heart was preferable to coercion. I moved on.

The next group spent a lot of time criticizing members who took their children to Sunday school but didn’t attend church themselves. I left. I began to understand that the journey was part of the discernment process, and I made peace with that process. I kept looking for a group until I found some early risers with whom I could share the Word.

Since I became a student of the Bible, the Word has made its way into my daily life. My Bible is pink, purple, and lime green. My bookmarks are photos of loved ones. I write sermon notes and reflections with brightly colored pens. I sometimes look up topics. When my husband lost his job, I turned to the Bible for comfort and found Hebrews 4:16: “Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (NIV). I visualized my prayers rising up before the throne of the one true God, and I felt peaceful.

When I took a job as a barista, I carried a quote from Colossians in my pocket: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men.” This reminded me that every coffee, and every connection, was for the Lord. That thought strengthened me when I was weak.

I still attend mass. I love the reverence and the beauty of it. Yet I also attend an evangelical church where I am nourished by the Word-based teaching. I need spiritual stamina and practical application when I face job loss, health issues, or my own teenager. I have found my balance in Bible study.

Mary Liwanag
Park City, Utah

My mother and her siblings recently finished sorting through the papers, photos, and journals my grandmother left behind. They found a weekly schedule that my grandmother had written in an attempt to manage the care of five adolescent children. Holding the schedule in my hands, I asked my mother if they really had had waffles every Saturday morning.

Sure, my mother said. Her mother would leave the waffle iron plugged in beside the batter bowl so that the kids could make their own waffles.

By the time I was born, Gramma Pat had put away the waffle iron, but she kept a log of chocolate chip cookie dough in her freezer and would slice it into rounds and slip them onto a baking sheet when we grandchildren came to visit.

Our other grandmother, Gramma Inez, kept her pantry stocked with store-bought macaroons and the kind of rye crisps that recalled her Swedish roots. When I knew her she rarely cooked, but our older cousins remembered that she was the kind of baker who never tasted her cookie dough. How can you make cookies without tasting the dough?

I’ve come to know my grandmothers better through the food memories of other people. Gramma Pat mashed rutabagas every Thanksgiving, and the root vegetable became a part of her legacy—along with those frozen logs of chocolate chip cookie dough.

My fiercest memories of my grandmothers are my own. The morning of Gramma Pat's funeral, my mother and I slipped into a grocery store to buy snacks. My mother picked up a rutabaga and cradled it in the crook of her elbow, her grief nestled there with it. Later my uncle held that rutabaga while he delivered the eulogy.

Not long before Gramma Inez died, my mother and I gave her a bath. I was ten years old, holding my grandmother up so that my mother could sponge the skin that sagged across her stomach. I felt sad and already starved for the love of a grandmother who would never watch me grow up. Later she asked for scrambled eggs. I stood on the step stool and scraped the spatula back and forth across the skillet, nudging runny yolks and whites together, then sprinkling them with salt and pepper. Gramma Inez said they were the best eggs she'd ever eaten. I think of her when I cook scrambled eggs.

When a friend has received terrible news or lost a family member, I get out the KitchenAid mixer and watch the ingredients whirl together. As I cook or bake, I remember the grandmothers who fed us, one waffle, one cookie, and one egg at a time.

Hillary Moses Mohaupt
Lansdowne, Pennsylvania

It was our first youth mission trip, and I wasn't sure if the youth from our midsize rural congregation would have an appetite for inner-city ministry. Would they have a servant's heart or would they long for their more insulated existence?

We arrived with butterflies in our stomachs, but soon became immersed in the lives of the young children we were serving. We shared meals together. We played dominoes and read books. We were swimming buddies on swimming day and companions on a field trip to the zoo. Our days were spent not on what we wanted for ourselves, but on what we wanted for the children with whom we were entrusted.

Our week came to an end much too soon. As the last of the children left for their homes, we gathered for our final worship service. We passed around a box of discarded game pieces, numerous marbles, lost puzzle pieces, broken pencils, torn

pages from books, and other tokens. Each of us selected an item from the box and told the others why we'd chosen it. One girl explained that a puzzle piece would remind her that these children were a piece of her spiritual journey. "This experience," she said, "will always remain a part of my heart. It is already an important piece of this journey I am on." We left with an appetite for more, hungering for more opportunities to be the hands and feet of God.

*Daniel Sather
Holgate, Ohio*

I bought my BMW 335i hardtop convertible on a sunny spring day. My dad was with me. It was a father-son thing. I had come of age: midforties, married, two kids, a successful physician at an academic medical center. The temptation was great: I was drawn to the gleam of the ruby paint, the throaty hum of the engine, and even the nifty gizmo that made the roof retract into the trunk.

As I told my dad, a hardtop convertible—unlike the cloth top—could be driven in colder weather. Right? There were only a few hardtops on the market—Mercedes-Benz, Volvo, and BMW. The Volvo had only 227 horsepower, and the Mercedes didn't have a backseat for the kids. That left the BMW.

The price was outrageous, especially for a guy whose grandparents were practical New England farmers. But better to buy the sports car now than to wait until I was in my fifties. Just think how much it would cost then! My dad rolled his eyes.

There was a fair bit of Calvinist guilt here. I am also a pastor. For more than 20 years, I've served urban congregations that didn't have enough money for even a part-time pastor. At one church we fixed the leaky pipes with duct tape. What would my congregation think?

Purchasing a BMW involves at least three of the seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, and pride. Where did this appetite come from? Was I being superficial? Was it a status thing? A desire for a toy or a reward for hard work? Was I just a middle-aged guy trying to speed away from his mortality, wearing a baseball cap to cover his sunburned pate? All of the above. I wanted a fast car. I was done being practical.

Now I'm saddled with this car—a possession that, in many ways, defines me and possesses me. Years later, I am still paying it off—and I recently noticed the first dent. It costs a couple hundred bucks just to change the tire on this car.

I am moved when I hear the story of Zacchaeus. Jesus called to him, ate with him, accepted him, but nudged him to be more. Zacchaeus's wealth and status defined and even possessed him. Yet Jesus called him to something more.

Benjamin R. Doolittle
Kensington, Connecticut

When my wife, sons, and I walked into Myrtle's apartment, I felt as if I were slipping into a sleeping bag: the space was cramped, yet somehow snug and comfortable.

Myrtle welcomed us at the door and ushered me and my family to sit on the sofa with flowery, earth-toned upholstery and the malachite-colored overstuffed chair at one end of the room while she fussed in the kitchenette at the other end. The oven door thumped and crockery clattered as she carried on a conversation while finishing her preparations. Myrtle put the food on the small wooden table with an odd assortment of chairs around it. Two of the chairs were high-backed, the color of black walnuts, wooden and worn, with scrollwork carvings across the top and slender spindles for the back. Three more mismatched folding chairs with scratches on their gray enamel provided just enough places for the five of us.

I had just announced to the parish that I had accepted a call to a church in my home state of Iowa. We would be leaving the small North Dakota town where we had lived for seven years. When Myrtle, a member of my parish, heard the news, she immediately told my wife and me that she had to have us over for a meal before we left.

Two years before, Myrtle's only son, Bob, had helped her move into her tiny apartment shortly after her husband died. Since Bob lived in western Montana, it was one of the few times he had come to see her after his father's death. For the most part, Myrtle had to depend on friends in the community to look out for her.

Myrtle called us to the table. A plain white bowl filled with boiled potatoes waited for us next to a few slices of ham on a platter and a saucer with a stick of butter on it. A brown bowl heaped with yellow kernels of corn, still steaming, accompanied a blue plate piled with slices of freshly baked bread, smelling of yeast and whole grain flour. Ivory-colored chunks of canned pears suspended in a glistening layer of lime-green Jell-O filled a square aluminum cake pan.

It was a simple meal, but my wife and I knew that it had taken an elephant-sized bite out of Myrtle's Social Security check. It humbled us to eat a meal with Myrtle, knowing that what she served us, as plain and simple as it might be, put a strain on her budget.

She asked us about the town to which we were moving. "Is it a very big place?"

"It's a pretty small farming community," I said. "There are only about 300 who live in town. The church is actually about twice the town's population. A lot of the members are farmers."

"I am sure that you'll like living closer to family," said Myrtle. My wife and I agreed that it would be a lot easier for our parents to visit us in our new location.

"Still, there are a lot of people here who are going to miss you," said Myrtle. Her watery eyes stared down at an empty plate.

"We are going to miss you, too," I replied with a slight crack in my voice. I expected that we would put Myrtle on our Christmas card list, but that I might never see her again. A surge of sadness seeped through me, replacing the excitement and anticipation I had been feeling about our move.

When we finished the meal, Myrtle gave us gifts—a plate with a simple verse printed in blue lettering on it and a terry cloth towel with a decorative edge that she had hand-embroidered.

When I took the plate from Myrtle, I read from its face. "For food before us, for family beside us, for love around us, we thank you, God."

Neither item was the kind of thing that my wife and I would have chosen for ourselves. Nevertheless, we both gave Myrtle a hug when we received them from her.

“Don’t look at the flaws,” said Myrtle, regarding the embroidery. We didn’t. We knew these things were gifts of love, and I still feel a lump in my throat when I think of them. Myrtle did more than fill our stomachs that evening. There was something sacred, something holy that she shared with us in that simple meal.

Arlyn Norris
Treynor, Iowa