

Our Food Obsession

By David Beagan

Food is an integral element of any culture. Historically the production of food has preoccupied the American labor force. In 1790, nine out of ten workers were employed as farmers. People's primary job was getting enough to eat. Just 50 years later, in 1840, it had shifted to merely two out of three workers who were employed to grow food. Another 40 years saw this drop to less than half, and another 30 years after that, in 1910, it was less than a third. At the end of the last century we were witness to this figure dropping to less than three workers out of a hundred.

This remarkable achievement of industrialization and ingenuity also coincided with the transformation of food as an occupation to food as a preoccupation. In extreme cases, this preoccupation has turned deadly. The mental condition anorexia nervosa compels its victims to control their food intake to the edge of starvation, sometimes resulting in death. At the other extreme are people who are super obese. Some of these people weigh in excess of hundreds of pounds over ideal body weight -- some even topping out at over a thousand pounds. The term "morbidly obese" is not just hyperbole, it describes a very real consequence of this lifestyle.

In between these extremes are millions of people who struggle to lose weight. One estimate is that thirty billion dollars each year is spent on the weight loss "industry." The facts are simple, food intake and physical exercise are responsible for an individual's body weight. (Though evidence is mounting that there can be significant variation from individual to individual). But too many people have trouble accepting these simple facts and are looking for some trick, some way to fool the basic biological mechanisms. Hence we have a multi-billion dollar weight loss industry that is there to either trick us into losing weight or to trick us into believing that they can. This denial of reality along with capitulation through acceptance of being "fat and happy" is leading to an epidemic of obesity in America.

This epidemic has huge consequences. Resources are wasted in the production of the extra food. More resources are wasted in dealing with the health consequences of the weight gain. Beyond these economic physical considerations, are the emotional and psychological effects of carrying an excess amount of weight. It might seem ironic that just when Americans are heavier than ever that television, movies, and magazines bombard us with images of bodies that that are hyper-perfect, sometimes a perfection achieved through digital manipulation. Is this causing the American psyche to enter a state of profound inadequacy, a feeling that, "no matter what I do, I'm not

good enough?" Dr. Phil McGraw, host of the like-named television show has stated what I think is a rather profound insight. He says that we should not confuse body image with self image. This might seem an overly pithy, trite saying, but despite its brevity, what he is saying embodies a profound truth. Each of us need to recognize our own value regardless of our physical appearance, whether that appearance embodies an overweight body or a body that is perceived to be inadequate in any way. But to say we need to recognize this is not to state it strongly enough. This recognition of the value of oneself needs to be ingrained into each of us the same way that we know how to speak or walk, it must be something that is part of us and comes automatically. This is something more fundamental than the superficial and sometimes destructive notion that everyone needs to have self esteem.

Of course for many of us, it is an ongoing process of growth, and is not easily acquired where it is lacking. But three things we can do to promote this, treat each person we meet with dignity and respect even returning unkindness with kindness. To extend this courtesy to others is to also extend it to ourselves. The second thing, for those who have kids or have a young person that looks up to them, is to instill in children a sense of self worth and the worth of others. Yelling, criticizing, and ignoring children can destroy a child's sense of worth. Speaking calmly, but firmly, setting boundaries, praising accomplishments even little ones, and interacting with them builds their self worth. This will help insulate them from food issues and will form them into adults who in turn pass the good influences forward. Lastly, all of us need to lead our children, by example, into healthy eating and exercise habits. I know there is a movement out there that wants to push people into correct eating choices -- this will never work, people must freely choose their course.

America's dysfunction with food is a symptom of an underlying sickness in the minds of the American people. Obesity is a consequence of people who use food to deal with loneliness, disappointment or even simple boredom. Perhaps in the coming century, we'll look back at present day eating habits with amusement. Perhaps something like we now look back on the general acceptance of smoking that was prevalent several decades ago. We now look back at the absurdity of someone being able to freely smoke right next to another person, perhaps without even a cursory, "mind if I smoke?" Hopefully then we will look back and say, "You mean back in 2009, people would actually eat themselves into a condition of obesity and sickness back then?"