



Eating Heaven
Spirituality at the Table

Simon Carey Holt

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To my mother

Marie Winifred Peta Sue

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Preface

I can only hope this book is easier to read than it was to write. Though I have wrestled with its words for a string of years, I have been pinned to the mat and unable to move more times than I can count. The challenge has not been so much my inability to write as beautifully as I imagine one should. Thankfully my aspirations for writing are much humbler than they once were. The challenge is more to do with the subject of the book and the question of its merit.

The act of eating is a troubled business; to write about it is fraught. I've spent too much of my time in food's shadow, professionally and otherwise, to view it romantically. For the most part, table life speaks of monotony and ordinariness, and at its more refined edge, decadence and excess. Surely the investment demanded by good writing could be more profitably targeted to a subject matter that really matters. Or so the conversation in my head goes.

Routinely, though, I have been prodded to think again, and it is this prodding that has kept me at the keyboard. Marion Halligan, one of Australia's most intelligent food writers, is a wise and moderating voice in what can be a pompous genre. For Halligan, eating is a conversation, a relationship, a way of being in everyday life. Its beauty is its simplicity, its ability to bring us together, and its connection to the earth's rhythms and seasons. In a long-forgotten essay from the 1970s, Halligan critiques the style and approach of food writing in the Australian press. Part way through she says this:

Writing about food is not a totally satisfactory activity. It has too many intimations of decadence, in a world where so often the mere presence of food is such an event that the consideration of its elegance would be an obscenity. The only justification of our preoccupation with food is that, since we do eat a great deal, we should do it well.

It is Halligan's exhortation to 'do it well' that has kept me struggling for words that take eating seriously; words that treat our life at the table as the significant thing it is. According to Halligan, to eat well is not to eat extravagantly, but to do so mindfully, respectfully and justly. Indeed, in this age of culinary infatuations, global food crises, celebrity chefs and Biggest Losers, the need to reflect more seriously upon eating is pressing. It is this idea of eating well – eating as a spiritual act – that I have tried to explore.

Writing is a solitary business, yet a book is never written alone. I am indebted to the people who have journeyed with me through this book's living and writing. To those who hosted my earliest, stumbling days in the professional kitchen, especially Graeme and Anna, I owe more than I can name. I came alive in their kitchens in a way I had never been before. I only wish I had the insight at the time to tell them. To those who have submitted to formal interviews and informal conversations around the subject of this book, those whose stories appear in its pages and those that inform it: thank you. To the congregation at Collins Street that has allowed me such generous leave for writing, and especially my colleague Carolyn Francis who has stepped in with such competence: thank you. To Philip and Stuart, my gracious hosts at Clevedon Manor in Castlemaine where I've found a home to write these past three years: thank you. To the team at Acorn Press, especially my cheerleaders Rena Pritchard and the late John Wilson and my editor Kristin Argall, who have graciously and patiently encouraged me in the writing process: thank you. And to my dear friend Dianne Brown, the person who has so consistently embodied what this book is about and lives a life at the table that gathers so many others into its sphere of grace. Without knowing her influence, she has inspired me with the most tangible reminders that this business of eating is important far beyond what's on the plate. Thank you, Di.

I am deeply grateful to my family, my children Ali and Nathaniel and my wife Brenda. Not only have these three allowed me to feed them these past two decades, they have shared a table and a home with me, absorbed my weariness and forgiven my imperfections, inspired my writing, and

kept me grounded in the most ordinary wonder of life. What's more, without logic or reason Brenda's confidence in me has never failed.

Finally, this book is dedicated to my mother who at the time of publication has just celebrated her eightieth birthday. My own life at the table is so intimately tied to her: her love, self-giving, faith and unfailing optimism. Cooking has never been Mum's first love, not even her second or third. Her faith in God has always been first in her life, as have been the people, so many people, whom she believes God brought her way. Whatever energy and time she has invested at the stove, more years than I can know, she has given out of love. I am forever in her debt.

Simon Carey Holt

Melbourne

CHAPTER 1

An Introduction

Eating and Spirituality

This morning I had eggs for breakfast. It's a Friday ritual and I am a creature of habit. After making coffee for my beloved and sitting with her to breathe the quiet morning air, I shower and dress, wake my two children, pack their lunches and make them breakfast. Cajoling them out the door on a Friday is more challenging than usual, but eventually they depart. My beloved follows close behind. Once they've all left, I leave too. It's on my way to the market, another Friday routine, that I stop in at a local café for my ritual meal: poached eggs on sourdough with mushrooms, and a strong flat white.

Though my café of choice is not as hip as others close by, it's a comforting place as a café should be, one with a feeling of intimate yet open space and a view of the cobbled pedestrian laneway out the front. Each week I sit at the same table, a long communal one of dark and solid wood surrounded by stools. I nod and smile at those around me. Occasionally we chat. In a simple and momentary way we are bound by this shared object and space. The waiter is a young woman, Australian-born of Japanese descent. Warmly as always, she greets me by name. If it's available, I read the morning paper. If it's taken, I revert to the book I've brought with me. It's a simple meal in an ordinary place, but I've come to value that half-hour ritual as a spiritually significant one; as significant and sustaining, in fact, as any routine practice of my life.

Eating is a sacred business. Whether it's eggs on toast in a café, cornflakes scooped down at the kitchen bench, a sandwich shared with colleagues in the cafeteria, or a leisurely family dinner at the dining room table, eating is a spiritual act. Granted, to define eating in this way has the sound of wistful nonsense. Indeed, sitting down at a table to eat is an activity so grounded in the ordinary, so basic to the daily routines of life, we rarely ponder it beyond the simple inquiry, 'What's for dinner?' However, scratch a little deeper and you discover in eating one of the most meaning-laden activities of our lives, one so immersed in human longing and relationship that it's a practice of sacred dimensions.



This is a book about eating and the tables of daily life that play host to it. It's a personal book; it arises out of my own story. I am a product of the table. Raised in a close-knit, working-class home of father, mother and a busload of sons on the suburban edge of Melbourne, my most enduring memory is of family life around the table. I recall sitting there night after night, year after year – the food, the laughter, the arguments, the stories and prayers; all so mundane, but formative in profound ways.

I am a trained chef. With my father's encouragement I left high school to begin my apprenticeship in the kitchen. Though my career was never salubrious, it was life giving. I felt at home in the kitchen in ways I had never felt elsewhere. Through the specialties of pâtissier and garde-manger, I found the most wonderful avenues for the creativity that had simmered internally for so long. Though my culinary career is now past, my passion for food – its beauty, variety and endless possibility – endures as a defining aspect of who I am.

I am a person of faith. In fact, I am a minister of religion, engaged professionally in understanding and communicating what it is to seek meaning and transcendence in life. I cannot avoid the formative influence the Christian faith has had upon my life and my view of the world, nor do I wish to. Though in writing this book I have no particular barrow to push – this is not a veiled attempt to proselytise the reader – I am intrigued

by what's going on in the deepest part of who we are, individually and communally, when we sit down at the table to eat. And I am intrigued by the growing interest among people all across Australia in nurturing a synergy between what they eat and what they value.

I am a teacher, a lecturer in a tertiary institution, and a researcher in urban sociology and spirituality. For the last fifteen years I have been exploring with students – those from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds – what it means to live with an awareness of the sacred in everyday life. What's more, I am fascinated by the role food plays in any society as an expression of culture and a maker of meaning. I read far too much about the history, anthropology, sociology and psychology of eating.

I am a husband and a father, a primary carer and cook for my small family. I make breakfasts, pack lunches and prepare dinners day after day. We eat in as a family and invite others to join us. We eat out, enjoying the delights of a wonderfully diverse city. In the midst of all of this, I have a growing sense that the tables of everyday life, whether in or out, are potentially holy places, altars at which sacred transactions take place.

Whether from an overtly religious perspective or not, it's important that we value what takes place at our tables, finding ways to embrace them more intentionally and intelligently than we presently do. It is this conviction that motivates the writing of this book. In an age of fast food, microwave ovens and fragmented schedules, the dining room table sits routinely empty in many households, a museum-like tribute to a quaint practice of long ago. Indeed, times have changed and so much of life has improved along the way. But what has been lost? The quest for meaning, intimacy and community seems ever more urgent. The table beckons. It beckons because, at its core, the table is about such fundamentally human things as intimacy and family, identity and communication, reconciliation and romance, covenant and community, redemption and friendship, sustenance and celebration, beginnings and endings. The table beckons because it plays host to so much more than biological necessity.



Of course, the basic proposition of this book is a troubling one. As a religious professional, I know how fraught it is to propose eating as a spiritual activity. Even among those who share my religious inclinations, perhaps even more so, enfolded something as routine as eating into one's moral or religious framework is an awkward embrace, and for good reason. There are yellow lights that flash caution.

Firstly, eating has traditionally held a suspect place in religious conversation. Initiate a discussion around eating in a Christian context and two words commonly rise to the surface: *gluttony* and *fasting* – one the sin of doing it too much and the other the spiritual virtue of not doing it at all. One is left with the impression that eating is, at best, a spiritually neutral activity and, at worst, a downright hindrance to deeper pursuits.

Secondly, for many people, eating is tied to so much that is painful and spiritually destructive in human experience. The prevalence of eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia are tragic reminders of this. In a society obsessed with Biggest Losers, body image and a never-ending stream of faddish diets and celebrity waifs, food is increasingly judged the enemy to self-acceptance. Consequently, addressing eating as a spiritual act is a tough call.

Thirdly, when we look honestly at the international table, we can't ignore the tragic inequity of food distribution throughout the world. We watch the evening news, shifting uncomfortably in our seats as we see children in far-off places with distended tummies and sunken eyes. While we endlessly graze, these children are dying through lack of the most basic nutrition. The injustices of our world are no more graphically displayed than at the global table, where the rich feast endlessly while the poorest sit on the floor hoping desperately for some crumbs to fall their way. All very well for those of us who live in places of plenty to describe eating as a spiritual act, to make food a fetish only because we've never known its lack. Frankly, it can sound too much like the self-indulgent claptrap of consumerist spirituality that pervades our well-padded lives.

Fourthly, and perhaps most immediately, the dynamics of ordinary life makes dinnertime in the average home feel anything but spiritually profound. Sitting any household down to the intimate proximity of the

table at the end of a long day is a hazardous move. First, simply finding it under the pile of domestic debris that gathers can be challenge enough. Once seated, what happens there can be loaded. Rather than a site for elegant repose and uplifting conversation, the dinner table can morph into a battleground; the venue for disagreements, heated negotiations, frayed tempers and raised voices. The clashing of wills over uneaten vegetables, arguments over who does the dishes and who did them last, and the constant reminders of the generational gaps and power struggles that mark most households are all sobering reality checks. It can make one cynical about an overly romanticised view of the shared table.

These challenges acknowledged, it remains my conviction that the table is sacred space and that what we do there is spiritually significant. I do not cling on to this notion in spite of the aforementioned yellow lights but precisely because of them. For each one illustrates not the spiritual poverty of eating, but its potency. What we do at the table expresses most tangibly what we believe, what we value and how we understand ourselves in relation to the world around us. In the words of theologian L. Shannon Jung, food today is ‘a cultural, spiritual, and moral casserole’. Indeed, eating is a social and political act of profound consequence, one that expresses tangibly our community identity and citizenship. And as one of the most routine activities of life – one that marks the rhythm and flow of every day – eating is embedded at the heart of what it means to be human.



To explore this spirituality of the table, I invite you to sit with me for a while at a number of tables, those that commonly play host to our experience of food. We begin at the kitchen table, the place where our earliest identity is shaped, manners learned, tastes and prejudices inherited, and our understanding of interdependence begins. It’s a significant table of formation, a place of intimacy and power that is both constructive and destructive and everything in between. From there we move outdoors to the backyard table, the place of vegetable gardens,

beer and barbecues, and the most local expression of culture. It's a table laden with far more than sausages and coleslaw, one that embodies our shared and overwhelmingly suburban view of the world and each other. Next we'll sit at the café table, the one that has mushroomed on the pavements of our cities and suburban shopping strips; a table that plays host to the city in community and to our common aspirations for the good life. Then it's indoors again to the more exclusive five-star table reserved for those who can afford it, the one set with white linen and wine glasses; a table that feeds our in-built need for beauty while dividing society's 'haves' and 'have-nots' in ever clearer ways. From there we travel the short distance from the restaurant dining room to its kitchen, the work table where the chefs, waiters and dishwashers vie for space, recognition or just a decent wage; the one where dreams of recognition, success, even celebrity, simmer as relentlessly as the stock. Next stop is the festive table, the one at which we mark, grieve and celebrate the significant moments of life: the beginnings and endings; the celebrations and losses; the transitions, accomplishments and disappointments. It's then on to the multicultural table, one that embodies the diversity of our communities and all that binds us together; and one that just as easily highlights the cultural gulfs that mark the eating landscape of our cities. Finally, we'll sit for a while at the communion table, that more explicitly religious one that sits at the centre of churches like mine. For some, this will be a familiar table and for others a foreign and uncomfortable place. Regardless, whether we remain there or not, it's one that helps us better understand why all tables are spiritually charged, rich with possibility for all people regardless of tradition or belief.



My Friday morning eggs were overcooked today, not the perfectly formed whites and deliciously runny yolks I've come to expect. There was someone new in the kitchen I noticed, and I was irritated. As I poked my fork discontentedly around my plate, the elderly gentleman across the table asked me to pass the sugar. He is there most Friday mornings

in his three-piece suit that looks almost as old as he does. A perfectly folded handkerchief protrudes from his top pocket. We have spoken briefly on many occasions, enough for me to know that he has come out of retirement to assist his son in the setting up of his own legal practice, but not enough to know his name. He often looks tired, but today the weariness was marked.

‘How are you this morning?’ I asked.

‘Yes, well thank you,’ he responded in his usual polite and deliberate way, ‘just a little tired. It is Friday!’

‘Hmm,’ I answered, looking at him, reminded again of my own grandfather who had passed away years before. Though Grandad was a farmer, tall and lean – so different in stature and profession to this elderly, small-of-frame, urban solicitor – the lines on their faces were remarkably similar and tone of voice so very much the same.

To be honest, café conversations are never easy for me to navigate. Finding the right balance between interest and interference is a juggling act that requires more wisdom than courage. Not an extravert by nature, I often remain on the more distant side of the line, but today I prodded just a little more.

‘The business going well?’ I asked.

‘Oh yes,’ he said, looking down at his bowl of muesli with yoghurt and poached fruit. He was as routine in his order as I was in mine. ‘But not so good for my son,’ he continued after a moment’s silence, ‘His wife has just left him ... left him with the boys. It’s all very sad.’

‘I am so sorry,’ I responded, putting down my knife and looking more intently at him. ‘I am so sorry.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, returning the gaze. ‘I’m sorry too.’

We pushed our cutlery around on our plates for some long moments. It was not an awkward silence. It felt more like an appropriate one, until, without looking up, I said, ‘You never stop being a dad, do you?’

‘No, you certainly don’t,’ he said. ‘I lie awake now just as much as I ever did when he was a boy.’

‘I bet you do,’ I replied, looking up at him again.

‘Still, life goes on, doesn’t it?’ he said, exhaling deeply as he lifted the

teaspoon from his coffee. 'Life goes on.'

As my old friend went back to reading his paper and I returned more intentionally to my eggs, their overcooked state didn't seem as important as it had those few minutes ago. As I had thought to myself so many times before, eating is never just about the food. More often than not, eating is the lubricant that makes so many other things possible.