



The Most Amazing Prize

WHEN I WAS SIX YEARS OLD, I ENTERED A coloring contest and won the grand prize. I don't even remember what I actually colored to win, but I do remember thinking the prize I had won was the most amazing prize in the history of prizes!

I won an all-you-can-eat pizza party at Pizza Haven restaurant in the Flour Mill. My entire family got to go, along with the Webb family, our neighbors from down the street. Eating out was a rarity when I was growing up. Sure, we'd stop to get a peanut butter chocolate chip cookie at the Great American Cookie Company, on Saturdays while running errands downtown, but eating a full meal out at a restaurant was a splurge. So when that Pizza Haven pizza party rolled around, and my whole family, plus our family friends, got to go out to eat together, it was a cause for celebration. A night on the town, dressed up, ready to dine.

For the very special occasion, I wore a purple corduroy jumper, white tights and a lilac turtleneck. I can still see that outfit so clearly in my mind. The feast was on a Saturday night, and it was torturous to wait the whole day until it was time to go to dinner. Entering the Flour Mill and walking down the winding hallway toward the doors of the restaurant, I felt like royalty with my court. It was a magical evening.

Little did the six year-old version of me know, but dining out and celebrations built around food, would become increasingly common not just in my life, but in society in general. From family celebrations, to work dinners, cocktail parties and dates, food is always at the center.

There is something comforting about gathering to celebrate, around food. One of the most important events on my calendar occurs every Sunday night at 5:30, when my extended family gathers together for a family dinner. On and off over the years, as my sisters married and had kids, and the family grew larger and busier, we dabbled with family dinners with an inconsistent regularity. When my dad got sick, four years ago, one of my sisters requested that we recommit to Sunday night family dinners, cherishing the chance to spend time together. All throughout the summer, we gathered at the end of each weekend, spending time preparing food, talking, laughing and eating together. When my dad died four months later, we kept the dinners going, realizing what a lifeline they were to us.

Every Sunday, fifteen of us gather around the table at a family member's house - often spilling out onto decks, the backyards and the family rooms - rotating where we meet each week, and assigning different dishes to bring. While the menu and location changes, and oftentimes there are one or two extra friends joining us, the agenda never changes: to share a meal and share our time with one another, reminding ourselves that in the choppy sea of life, we have a home port to which to return, in order to feed our growling stomachs as well as to feed our weary souls.

Left to the natural rhythm of our busy lives, it is so easy to become adrift from those we love and care about, whether they are family or friends. Rarely do our calendars *finally* or *suddenly* clear up, providing a window of opportunity to spend time together; rather, if you want meaningful relationships, you have to sacrifice and work at making them happen. The old saying is true that no one gets to the end of their life and wishes they had spent more time at the office, more time working and more time neglecting those who love them. When it comes down to it, really, is there any ingredient more important in the recipe of our lives than those who love us, care for us and stand by us? Isn't gathering with them more important than making that next big deal, or achieving that next rung on the ladder of success?

To me, there is nothing better than when the kitchen is a mess from cooking and every dish from the cupboard sits dirty in the sink, waiting to be loaded into the dishwasher. Yes, the work to scrub the dishes, wash the pans, sweep the floor and return the kitchen to tip-top shape is time consuming, but isn't it so much better to have a sink full of dishes and a kitchen to clean, knowing your loved ones were fed and your spirits filled, than to always have that perfect, clean and unused kitchen?

As we celebrate our local food and drink scene in this issue, may it not just be a chance to learn about new restaurants and interesting food trends. Instead, may it be a chance for you to plot your gatherings with friends and family. Pick a new restaurant you'd like to try, schedule an outing to a previously unknown food truck, venture out to try a locally made yogurt or whiskey, or take a loved one to your favorite tried and true restaurant.

Whatever you do, don't put off until tomorrow what you have the chance to do today. As someone who's been lucky enough to do it, and wants to continue to do so with others, let me assure you, spending time with your loved ones is the greatest prize you'll ever win. You may even say, it's the most amazing prize in the history of prizes!

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