

Conversations with My Kids

Food, Alcohol and Becoming More Aware of Present Experience Generally

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

A few people have contacted me and indicated that while what I write is interesting and useful, it is far too long and uses language that is too technical. They have accordingly encouraged me to try to follow the KISS (keep it simple stupid) principle. Accordingly, I am experimenting with recording some of the conversations I have with my kids and am as a result finding a more accessible presentation style. Some of the same people who asked for easier to read versions of my material have indicated this approach works for them. So, here is another conversation summary. As is the case with all of my pieces of this sort, most of the content of this summary is drawn from actual conversations with my children. In this case, approximately 90% came from one breakfast conversation. However, material from a couple of others the day following was included, lots of extraneous material has been excluded and I have taken some creative license to "smooth" things out. The content summarized here represents a small fraction of what we talk about.

The breakfast conversation just noted occurred with my 10-year-old son and 12-year-old daughter over breakfast this morning at the Rimrock Hotel in Banff, Canada. We were having what they will likely perceive as their most exotic breakfast to date. We were in Banff as a result of a function my law firm held there yesterday. My wife is out of town, so I took our two youngest children with me. After the function ended Sat. evening we went for a soak in Banff's hot springs fed pool, and then hit the sack at about mid-night. The hotel is in a world-class setting, and is a world-class hotel. The following day (today) we ended up going back to the hot pools and then riding a gondola up to the summit of Sulphur Mountain where we had lunch with a spectacular view of three watersheds.

At breakfast I let the kids order, as I virtually always do, without any coaching. One ordered pancakes with fruit and whipped cream on the side. The other French toast with the same side order. I had two poached eggs with toast, and coffee. It was great coffee. It did not take long for them to slow down as the calories they were tucking way soared into the stratosphere.

Teresa (as I take my first sip of coffee): Did you know that Dallin [14-year-old brother who is not there] drink coffee to stay awake at school?

Dad: No. Does that bother you?

Teresa: Not really. But it is bad for your nervous system, isn't it?

Dad: From what I have read, as long as you don't drink too much it is a healthy stimulant for most people. In fact, for some people whose brains don't work as fast as

would be ideal, it can be quite helpful. I drink about two cups a day. One first thing when I get to work, and the other after lunch. Now that I am used to it, I like how it tastes, and find that it helps me focus on my work a bit better than before. I don't have any problem with Dallin drinking a little coffee. It might even help his basketball game to be thinking a little more quickly on the court. That is another think coffee has been shown to help. By the way, has Mom talked to you guys about that French cooking book she is reading?

Both: No.

Dad: It is really interesting. The idea is that you eat less, eat more slowly, design your meal to let you experiment with contrasting flavours, and so you enjoy each mouthful more and end up eating less. This is another aspect of the culinary arts you were talking about Teresa [She has expressed interest in becoming a "culinary artist", that is, designing dishes that look interesting, making wedding cakes, etc.]

Teresa: I don't get it.

Dad: Well, think of it this way. I read somewhere that it takes something like 20 minutes for our stomachs to communicate how full they are to our brains after we take a bite of food. So, if we eat quickly we take in way too much before our brains can figure that out, and we feel sick. How are you feeling, by the way, Kieran?

Kieran: Kind of sick.

Dad: I thought that might happen when I saw your plate of food arrive.

Teresa: Mine was too much too. So what does Mom's book say about this?

Dad: The most important idea is that we should eat slowly. North America is one of the worst places in the world for eating too fast, and too much. The French, accordingly to this book, make eating part of an important social experience. You put down your fork or spoon after each bite, and talk to the people you are with. Kind of like we are doing now. Did you notice how much less food I ordered than your guys did, and that you are almost finished while my plate is still half full?

Both: No.

Dad: Well, check it out. That is what happened, isn't it.

Both: Yes.

Dad: The next idea is that you set up your meals with the amount of food that you know is going to be healthy for you, which is much less than the portions most restaurants serve these days. And, you try to have a wide variety of different flavours on your plate. Some flavours contrast nicely with others. I am just learning about how that

works. For example, you may have really strong or bitter flavours like wine, coffee, bitter olives etc. as well as things that are quite sweet, like asparagus, baby corn or sweet peas. The differing textures of foods also come into play – soft, crunchy, etc. You would take a sip of coffee, then something sweet, then a sip of wine, then a bite of meat, and between each bite or sip you would chat with the people who are with you for between thirty seconds and a minute. After you have had an amazingly small amount of food, you feel full. I am full right now after some water, half a cup of coffee, a piece of toast and one egg. That is because my stomach has had time to let my brain know how much I have eaten. Mom and I are both trying to eat this way now. Oddly enough, I discovered this before Mom started reading her book as a result of starting to drink wine with some of my meals. That forces me to eat more slowly since the only way to enjoy wine is one tiny sip at a time – it is kind of like a spice you add to your food. Or, kind of like the oil and red vinegar we dip bread into sometimes. It is a strong taste that you only want a little of at a time. And then you want to like the flavour roll around and then fade away on its own in your mouth for a while. The taste changes as it fades away in this fashion. So, you wait before taking the next bite.

Teresa: The portion sizes at Moxies [a restaurant chain she likes] are crazy. I can hardly ever finish and usually feel sick.

Dad: The biggest portions I have ever seen were in New York. Mom and I both had salads in a restaurant there that were enough to feed three people.

Teresa: I remember hearing about that.

Dad: This ties into what we have talked about regarding alcohol. The same mentality that causes North Americans to eat too much and too fast causes binge drinking, particular in older teenagers and university students. People in Europe think this is amazingly stupid. They think North Americans have no class when they get stumbling drunk. Alcohol in most parts of Europe is enjoyed with food, in a social setting like we have been talking about. It is not about getting drunk. It is about enjoying the taste and sensation spectrum that alcohol adds to the food and social experience. If you get drunk, you are an idiot.

Teresa: Why would someone want to get really drunk?

Dad: That is hard to explain. As silly as this seems, we tend to do what those in our dominant social group do. And if all your friends think it is cool to get stumbling drunk, guess what you are likely to think is cool?

Teresa: The same.

Dad: Remember that stuff we were talking about the other day? What was it? Oh yeah – sumo wrestling. Remember? You had asked me about that for your school project, and we ended up talking about how the Chinese women used to bind their feet to make them smaller because at that time in China small feet were for some reason

thought to be attractive; and how sumo wrestlers got bigger and bigger until they were eating so much that they were really unhealthy; and how professional athletes use steroids for the same reason; and how perhaps some of the anorexia problems girls have relate to the same kind of thing?

Teresa: Yes.

Dad: No one really understands how these things get started. What starts a new fashion trend? Cool people – fashion or power leaders – deciding to do something? No one really knows. But anyway, individuals within a group of humans tend to compete with each other and once something becomes desirable within the group – like having smaller feet; or being skinny; or being really big if you are a sumo wrestler – as time passes the people compete with each other to get smaller, or bigger, or whatever, and some people end up doing incredibly stupid, self destructive things in order to get what they think will be the approval of others within their group. It seems that this is something we all deeply need – the approval of others within our group. This might have to do with the evolution of humans within groups. For most of human history, if an individual was not doing something that the group valued, he was not contributing to the group's survival. People who did not contribute and were not valued by the group tended to be pushed out of the group, and for most of human history that meant death. So, those who survived tended to be those who wanted to contribute to the well being of the group, and they were the only ones who had kids. Their kids tended to be like them because of how genetics work, and so most of us are like that. And, the only way to tell whether you are making a valuable contribution to your group is to see whether other group members applaud in some way what you are doing. When survival was the group's main preoccupation, this served an important function – it helped ensure the group's survival. Until recently, that was the case. For the last while in places like the US and Canada, however, survival has not been the issue. So, this need to get the approval has run off in all kinds of strange directions. It is likely what makes girls starve themselves, woman to have all kinds of weird body enhancing surgery which is sort of like the old Chinese foot binding, athletes to take steroids, sumo wrestlers to eat themselves to death, etc. You are not old enough appreciate how deeply ironic this is. And, the same desire to have people approve of you is what keeps people in religions like Mormonism from being able to understand how ridiculous their beliefs are. They can see how silly other religions are, but can't see the same thing in themselves ...

Teresa: Hold on. You can turn every single conversation into something about religion. Let's not start talking about that.

Kieran: I did not understand any of what you just said.

Dad: Sorry. I got a little carried away. Talking to you guys is helping me to put some things together that I have been thinking about for a while.

Getting back to what we were talking about before – eating slowly and all of that – the most important concept is awareness. If you eat slowly, thinking about what each bite REALLY tastes like, and focussing on enjoying the company of the people you are with, you become more aware of a lot of things. Your body becomes more sensitive to how much food you are eating, and how much you really want to eat. You become more aware of different tastes. You enjoy the company of the people you are with as you get to know them better. Remember how we usually eat at home? It is quick, and then everyone scatters to do other things. Being with the people around the table is not important. The food has to be eaten quickly so that we can do more stuff. We have become human doings instead of human beings. I am not even usually been home at dinner time, am I?

Both: No.

Kieran: We eat, and then you get home and eat by yourself.

Dad: And how long does it take me to eat dinner?

Teresa: Five, ten minutes. And then you usually go do something else.

Dad: Just watch what is going to happen. I will be at home more and more often for dinner, and we are going to spend more time just talking, like we are right now. Teresa, remember how you have said that I make friends easily – like those people I was talking to at the pool? I am interested in people. I want to know what they think and how they experience life. I really do. Those people were from Poland. They had lots of things to tell me about what life is like over there, why Poland is different from East Germany, etc. When you are really interested in what other people think and how they experience life, they tend to like you. I am more interested in my family than anyone else, and once we are together and talking it is easy and fun to do more of that. So, we will do more of that.

Teresa: That would be great, if we can do it.

Dad: I understand why you might think it won't happen. All I can say is wait and see. I don't have as many commitments during the evenings now that I no longer do Mormon things.

Let's talk about the food thing some more. The basic idea there is self-awareness. This does not stop with food and drink. But that is as good a place to start as any. Here comes the religion thing again. I apologize.

Teresa: Sigh.

Dad: The single biggest change I have experienced since leaving Mormonism is becoming more aware both of myself and of all kinds of things around me. It seemed before that I lived my whole life trying to prepare myself for what was coming next. I

always rushed through what I had in front of me and missed most of it. I needed to get good grades so that I would have a good job, and missed most of the wonderful experience of being a university student. Then, I had to work hard to make a lot of money to buy a house for our family, and missed most of the excitement of being a young lawyer in a great law firm, doing great work. Then, I had to be a good Bishop so that I would qualify for the Celestial Kingdom and provide a good example to all of you; etc. All of this rushing forward and sacrificing the present to earn a blessing of some kind in the future meant that I did not notice much of what was happening right in front of me. Something I have noticed in the last little while, for example, is that I did not used to simply enjoy the feeling of my body during a workout; I was focussed on the effect the workout would have on my conditioning – the future benefit I would get because I had worked out. Now I just enjoy the feeling of the workout. And, it was hard for me to just sit and talk to you guys like I am now. I was always running around doing things that I thought were important.

Kieran: Yeah. You are way nicer since you stopped being Mormon.

Dad: It is not just Mormonism that does this kind of thing to people. It is any belief system that tries to control people by getting them to think about the future all the time and promises them unrealistic things in the future or even after death if they will sacrifice their time, money etc. now. Mormonism just happens to be the thing that did that to me, and so to you. I am so much happier living the way I am now than I was before. I hope that I can make things work better for you guys too.

Kieran: Don't worry. This is way better. This is the best trip to Banff I have ever had.

Dad: Do you think Mom is happier now?

Teresa: It is hard to tell.

Kieran: She says "no" a lot more now. [He then imitates his interaction with his mother] I used to say "Mom, I want this" and she would always just say "yes". No, she just says "no".

Dad: Good. That is what I like to hear. You guys need more Vitamin "N". But have you noticed that Mom is doing more things? She is taking classes again, and working out more, and we are planning trips together. It seems to me that those things make her a lot happier than she used to be.

Teresa: Not that I have noticed.

Dad: Fine. We each have our own perspective on these things. Well, I guess we are about finished.

Teresa: We have been finished for a long time.

Dad: You haven't enjoyed talking?

Teresa: Oh yes, I have. But let's go now. Can we go back to the hot pool?

Kieran: Yeah.

Dad: OK. Let's get going.