

Ascension Notes



Toast

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Mother took raising her children seriously. Food, and the regulation of eating habits was an important part of family culture as she created it. Being a nutritionist way ahead of popular cultural acceptance was a factor in her unfortunate tendency toward dietary fanaticism.

There were practical rules. If you didn't finish your dinner, you didn't get desert. You ate what was served. You could not put jelly or jam on your first piece of toast, only on the second. We always had a salad with dinner. These rules were mitigated by the months of exotic cookie, fruitcake and candied popcorn ball preparations that we participated in as a family prior to Christmas. Similar elaborate preparations were made for other holiday celebrations.

You should also know that Mother was writer who would cease her work prior to the children's arrival home from school to often bake something so the house smelled wonderful and we would have a snack. Now you are going to be shocked to learn that someone so caring could also be a fascist but we're all contradictory and contrary critters.

I remember that my response to the rigidity of rules was passive resistance. There was a time in my grade school era when I was so sick of being constrained by rules that I started eating more slowly than everyone else...then more slowly... then more slowly yet. You see, we couldn't leave the table until everyone had finished. Heh heh. I was a jailhouse lawyer even then. The response to my intransigence was to make a new rule. If I hadn't finished my dinner a half an hour after everyone else it was taken away and I didn't get dessert. This was enforced by using a baking timer which was turned to a half an hour just when everyone finished. It ticked away the minutes of my passive revolutionary spirit until the reverse Pavlovian ding of the timer signaled the end of salivation. During that period of my life, I seldom got dessert.

Well, that's merely the contextual preface, now here's my little tale. We had one of the first electric toasters with an automatic pop-up feature. While this feature, of which my mother was inordinately proud, did work... sort of...some of the time, there was an unfortunate tendency to rely on this feature to provide perfect toast. It didn't. Much of the time the toast was burned. I can still hear the sound of a knife scraping off the char echoing down the corridors of time to this day. Heaven forefend that we should throw it out. "Waste not, want not," don't you know. The sound of scrape, scrape, scrape was always followed up with the maternal admonition, "A little charcoal never hurt anyone."

And so it was I found myself, many years later, with tears of laughter streaming down my face, reading an extract from a scholarly study that concluded the char on burnt toast is a carcinogen! She was trying to kill us after all. I knew it!
Happy Mother's Day.