

Refusing Corned-Beef Hash

Memories of my childhood influenced how I approach children when I became an adult. I think children are as intelligent as adults, with at least as much common sense, entitled to most of the same rights as adults, tempered by their adults' consideration for the children's long term good. As an adult, I don't eat foods I don't like. I think a child should have the same right to refuse foods she or he considers unpalatable and to have rules modified to fit each child.

When I was a child, I didn't like corned beef hash. My mother cooked it often, because it was inexpensive and nutritious enough to power all members of her large family. A dinnertime arrived when I wouldn't eat that particular culinary effort. I wasn't defiant. It was simply that, after years of eating corned beef hash because I had to, I finally found the stuff impossible to eat.

Our dog was no longer allowed in during corned beef hash dinners, because I'd been caught slipping my portion under the table for canine consumption. My mother told me, "You're going to stay at the table until you eat all your dinner."

That time at the table was important in my growth and learning. I began to understand that, though physical activity is wonderful, I had patience and the ability to find resources inside myself that made it possible to sit in one place, doing nothing, and to be happy about my situation. My brothers and sister checked on me once in a while, to see how I was lasting, but they were forbidden to speak to me. Night descended. My mother turned the lights on, and still I sat at the table, quiet and relatively still.

Eventually, my mother said, "Well, it's your bedtime. You'll have to go to bed hungry."

In fact, I wasn't particularly hungry. I had eaten other parts of our dinner, and I spent a sedentary evening, so I was fine until breakfast. I didn't think of the evening as a contest between me and my mother, but as an issue between me and corned beef hash.

My time at the table was well invested. I never again faced corned beef hash. If that was the main course, my entire family understood that I had paid my dues, and for this meal, I would be given something else to eat.

When Laura and I raised our daughters, Juniper and Amanda, eating wasn't a problem. Amanda and Juniper were healthy and active, and they

ate just about anything we fixed. We insisted they try everything we offered them, but if they didn't like something, we excluded it from future offerings.

Laura read an article advocating adult supremacy, put to work at the table. "Eat everything on your plate. No food between meals." That seemed to her an orderly approach to existence, and she put it to work in our family. Juniper was sturdy, and she ate large enough meals, she could power through her active days with only three meals, or for a long time, two, breakfast and dinner. Amanda was thinner, and she didn't eat large meals. She needed something between meals. When Laura's plan for no food between meals had been in effect for a day, Amanda appealed to me with a look of deep desperation, "I'm hungry."

I told Laura, "The plan from that magazine is an example of exercising adult will simply because we're in a position of authority. It isn't based in love and mutual respect. There's nothing moral, natural, nor necessary about three regularly scheduled meals for anyone that doesn't work for, and it definitely doesn't work for Amanda."

Laura immediately saw the truth of what I said, "You're right. We'll feed her."

We quickly served up small amounts of everything available. Amanda absorbed cheese, bread, and vegetables. Laura looked at Amanda sitting at the kitchen table in the sun shining in the big south window, happily causing food to disappear in small but serious bites. Laura said, "I should have seen that earlier. Those rules must have been made for problem eaters, and we don't have problem eaters. That was an interesting but short experiment."

We pass traditions from generation to generation. If we are alert, sometimes we can add something creative, based in gentle love, to those traditions. If my daughters have children, I think they will not have rigid mealtime rules. Their children will eat the food they need and like when they are hungry. None of my descendants will eat corned beef hash under duress.