The Bread of Gratitude

Gratitude can sometimes be so intense that it demands physical expression, so that we have to jump for joy, or dance or shout or enjoy a long, tight embrace with someone we love. It wells up in those moments when we realize how incredibly lucky we are to be here, and how easily the abundance we casually take for granted can be snatched away and turn to heartache. And then a simple thing like bread may seem a gift beyond reckoning. Susan Schnur, a writer living in New York, recalls seeing an instance of this she would always remember:

“Once, many years ago, sleeping on the sofa bed in the living room of my boyfriend’s parents’ house in Teaneck, New Jersey, I witnessed a performance of gratitude the likes of which I have never seen elsewhere.

It was in the middle of the night -- I was up with my own back pain --when the light flashed on in the upstairs hall and Jon’s father came padding down into the room. Oblivious of me, he went into the kitchen, cut himself a slab or rye bread with a butcher knife, then stood with it in the dining room under the street shadows.

Chleb, he said finally, thrusting the bread into the air. Broit--he held the bread against his pajama pocket. Pane--he shook it. Lechem--kissed it. Bread--took a bite.

This he did over and over, saying the word in more languages than I could imagine existed--thrusting, hugging, shaking, kissing, biting, exclaiming--until he stood in the room empty-fisted. Then he burped roomily and went back up the stairs to bed.

I think of that night a lot, especially when I am up myself at 3 a.m. I think: What did I know about this man?

That he loved his wife, yes. His children. That he checked on his kids too often in their rooms, changed the oil in his car every thousand miles; kept unnecessary dry goods in the basement. His family used to laugh at him.

He seemed sometimes, on an ordinary morning, almost stunned by the fierceness of his happiness. He was, it now seems clear to me, exhausted by his blessings; in a sense, afraid of them.

He was a Holocaust survivor, Jonny’s dad. The contrast woke him in the night.”

It’s a powerful image. I like to think of this man rousing in his sleep, troubled by memories of hunger and cold and flea-infested nights spent on crowded wooden planks, cold with no blanket, realizing suddenly that he is safe in a warm bed, surrounded by people who love him, and then rather than slipping back into drowsiness and lethargy forcing himself to complete consciousness so that he might fully taste and savor the miracle of his survival. I imagine him in Treblinka, or Auschwitz, or in Dachau, vowing solemnly that if he lived, he would never again take even a slice of bread for granted, but would remember to offer thanks for each moment and morsel of existence. And as I think of him tearing the loaf with his teeth and relishing the yeasty goodness of the grain, I wonder if bread will ever taste so wonderful to me? Will this man’s children, who have never known deprivation, be able to live with the same gut-felt gladness as their father, who suffered so greatly? And I see how closely this man’s pain and joy have been intertwined.

To a man or woman who is hungry, Mohandas Gandhi once said, god can only appear in the form of bread. And perhaps this is why Jesus, when he taught his disciples to pray, included the request for daily bread among the essentials, because he was of that class of people for whom the next meal is always a foremost concern. My parents never stood in a breadline, but some of yours did, I suppose. And I recall my mother’s stories of growing up in the Depression, when beans and cornbread were on the table every night. Our family never went hungry. But the pot liquor (as they called it), the juices left in the bottom of the pan where the beans and greens were boiled, formed a delectable last course for every meal when all the food was gone. My grandfather called it “larapin” which is southern or southwestern slang for “exceptionally yummy and delicious.” Because appetite gave that broth an extra tang, especially when sopped onto the last piece of pone. My family were Okies. And maybe your parents or grandparents subsisted on tortillas, or fry bread, or on pita, or pasta. But few of us are far from removed from lean times, and are closer than we think if we remember not just our forebears but our neighbors for whom food and shelter and clothing can still be a daily struggle.

We remember those in extremity, not just for their sake but for our own. Because closing our hearts to suffering means closing them to joy also. Hardship and happiness are often sewn from a single strand, and the thread that binds them together is love. This seems to be the lesson of a short story titled simply “The Bread” by Wolfgang Bouchert. There a woman who is disturbed by a noise in the night rises from her bed and discovers her husband in the kitchen. He says that he heard someone prowling outside and came to investigate. Yes, she replies, she heard the prowler too, but she realizes why her husband is really there, for she sees the knife and crumbs on the table, and knows that he has been eating, furtively, in secret. Wordlessly, the two return to the bed that they have shared for so many years. Then, at their meager dinner the next night, the woman places four slices of bread on her partner’s plate, and only two upon her own. He protests that she must eat more, that she cannot survive on so little, but she tells him she finds the bread difficult to digest. He hangs his head shamefully, knowing she lies, but eats the bread he’s been given as they share their scanty meal.

The desperate hungers of this world seem to demand an equally desperate love. And to celebrate our Thanksgiving this month without being mindful of those in need would make our feast a poor one. True wealth is measured, not by what we own, but by what we share, and the ultimate poverty is to be without compassion, devoid of feeling for the deprivation in our world. And so this holiday we invite into our minds and hearts the refugees, the thousands uprooted by war in Syria, the undocumented and homeless and hungry here within our own borders, the working families stretching a meager paycheck to put food on the table, for only they can remind us how to see the holy in an ordinary loaf of bread.

CHLEB! (Thrust a loaf of bread into the air)

BROIT! (Hold it against the chest)

PANE! (Shake it)

LECHEM! (Kiss it)

Let us give thanks and share abundantly the blessed bread of life. May the basket never be empty.