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Doing Dinner: Confessions Of A Radical Mother

By Maya Talisman Frost

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by: **Maya Talisman Frost**

I love slow living. It's peaceful, meaningful and downright radical in a go-go world.

According to a recent article in (appropriately enough)Time magazine, groups of harried parents across the USA are joining a wave of slow living advocates by doing something really revolutionary—having one sit-down dinner at home with their kids each week.

I don't know whether to applaud or cry.

The idea that parents are willing to undertake the Herculean task of rearranging their schedules to fit in a single dinner at home is laudable. The fact that it requires superhuman effort is terribly sad.

How did we get here?

The article states that back in the 1980s, sociologists decided that providing structured activities for kids would prevent juvenile delinquency. In addition, education experts suggested that American children needed to study harder to compete academically in the global market.

At the same time, American business leaders looked around and discovered they were losing their edge. They bumped up hours and production rates in an effort to keep ahead of burgeoning Asian countries. This new competitiveness spilled over into the home, where mothers fresh from the work force took the corporate ideal of high productivity to the playgrounds.

Yikes.

I spent most of the eighties living and working in Asia. I taught English in Japan for five years, so I'm all too familiar with the "education mama" syndrome. What's interesting is that the American mamas have taken that same emphasis on competition and achievement and focused on sports or other activities.

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Although we don't have to suffer the unfortunate consequences of despondent students going through the examination hell of the Japanese system, we have burned out 15-year-olds having knee surgery for ten years' worth of soccer injuries, and families who can't remember their last no-TV, no-phone, real food meal at home.

I think that somewhere between a manic preoccupation with education and a rabid adherence to frenzied activity schedules is a happy medium.

It's called dinner.

People in Europe or Latin America are horrified to hear of families in the U.S. gulping dinner in their cars on a daily basis. It's appalling that there are actually campaigns to re-introduce the concept of sitting down to eat. In cultures where families gather for meals every afternoon and again late in the evening, they view this obsession with achievement as baffling, alarming and pitiful.

And they're right.

The truth is that it's pretty hard to lose control of your family's activities if you make dinner a priority most nights. It's simply not possible to attend multiple practices each night if you're expected at the dinner table from 6:30–7:30.

When I tell people that I have four teenage daughters (ages 13, 14, 16 and 17), they look at me with a mixture of horror and pity. Life must be tough at your house, they say. You must live in your car, they tell me.

Um--no.

My idea of multi-tasking is breathing, talking, and hiking in the woods--all at the same time. My family eats a relaxing dinner together at home--by candlelight!--at least five nights a week. It's the best part of the day.

Don't get me wrong. Sports are great for kids. So is drama. And music. And debate.

But dinner matters, too. I figure that my kids aren't going to be living with us forever, and while they're here, it's a lot more important to have dinner together than it is to have the girls sign up for every sport and activity on earth.

What they lack in basket-shooting ability, they've gained in conversation skills, thoughtfulness, and an appreciation for family and shared meals.

They don't eat yogurt from a tube while riding in a van, then race home to study. Here's a typical scene at our house: four girls sprawled on the floor in front of the fireplace, doing homework or reading. This is after we've had an enjoyable dinner and they've cleaned up the kitchen.

It makes me feel terribly guilty. Shouldn't I be exhausted and irritable, battered by constant demands

for rides and juice packs?

It's not that my kids don't do anything. They're into all kinds of activities—drama, music, dance, volunteer work, and even jobs. Two are gearing up for lacrosse, one is in the midst of interviews for a year-long exchange program, while the oldest is in her senior year and doing the college application dance. It's a busy time.

And yet, they still eat a real dinner at home most nights.

All of us—singles, married couples, young families and empty nesters—can benefit from the dinner ritual. By adopting and continuing the tradition of shared meals and conversation, we are emphasizing the importance of thinking and sharing ideas. If we want our culture to value thinking, we've got to start by offering a tribute to it on a daily basis.

Okay, so my kids may never get athletic scholarships. They may never meet a single university athletic director before choosing which college to attend. They won't be the next Olympic gymnast or ice skater, and they're not likely to be conducting symphonies by the time they're 25.

They'll have to settle for being happy, smart, kind, aware, motivated, and full of enthusiasm for the

world and their place in it. Their father and I will just have to be satisfied with lasting memories of slow life with our cherished children, and our daughters will strive only to duplicate this same lifestyle for their own families someday.

Radical, isn't it?

Maya Talisman Frost is a mind masseuse. Her work has inspired thinkers in over 70 countries around the world. This article appeared in the Friday Mind Massage, a free weekly ezine serving up a satisfying blend of clarity, comfort and comic relief. To subscribe, visit

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To Thine Own Self

By Wayne and Tamara

Direct Answers – Column for the week of December 6, 2004

Someone gave me a bit of advice, and I'm doing my best to get my head wrapped around it, trying to understand and comprehend and translate it into my own life. What does it mean to "follow your own heart"?

Lisa

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Lisa, Dante's "Divine Comedy" opens with the author saying, "Midway in the journey of our life, I found myself in a dark wood, for the straightforward path had been lost." That is how many people feel. It is as if they are searching for an answer when they don't know the question.

In your quiet moments, with no concern for anyone but yourself, what are your dreams? Your desires? What are your hobbies? Your interests? What did you like to do when you were young? If someone gave you a lot of money, what would you do? Often what you would do doesn't take money, but if you had money, you would feel the freedom—the unburdening—to do it.

Most of us have a talent for complicating the obvious. The amoeba, a one cell organism, has a lesson for us all. It moves toward and embraces what it authentically needs, and it moves away from the uncongenial. That is all we need to do in life, and it applies to everything—people, jobs, leisure activities, and studies.

This method is extremely simple. It is so simple people don't realize how powerful it is. In the course of time, it can create the kind of life we want. Is it sometimes wasteful? Yes, sometimes we follow false trails. Will we sometimes feel our life is stalled? Yes, but at a deeper level we are moving forward.

People who follow this simple technique, in time, feel as if their lives were guided by an unseen hand. They gain a sense of destiny. What once seemed like random events, they know occurred for a purpose. They end up living a life which fulfills them.

Wayne & Tamara

I Love Lucy

My mother is making dinner for the holidays, and she invited my mother-in-law who is undergoing chemotherapy. My mother-in-law is very upbeat about her condition, but she constantly talks about the details of her illness.

The problem is this. My dad died from cancer 10 years ago. He and mother were very private about his illness and never brought it up with company unless someone asked. Mother was devastated by his death and has a hard time listening to other people's cancer stories.

My mother told me she is going to call my mother-in-law and tell her a guest, who will be at the dinner, had cancer before and does not want to talk about cancer or have it discussed. That isn't true, but mom said the guest will play along.

I feel uncomfortable with this. I told my mother, but she said it's her dinner and she is going to do it. I always treat my mother-in-law as a second mother, but my mother and my mother-in-law have a standoffish relationship. Since my mother is making an issue of this, it seems to be my problem, or is it?

Jennifer

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Jennifer, a sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay contains the lines, "There are a hundred places where I fear to go,—so with his memory they brim." That is where your mother is. But your mother-in-law is, as another poet said, raging against the dying of the light.

Your mother's scheme reminds us of the sitcom "I Love Lucy." Each episode involved a ruse, and when the ruse was discovered, all was forgiven. In real life subterfuges blow up and cause bad feelings. The guest's "cancer" may be all your mother-in-law needs to helpfully suggest support groups, books, and treatments.

The real problem is two mothers who don't get along. Go to the dinner, but don't be a party to this ruse.

Wayne & Tamara

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