

*I Love to Cook Without a Book: Recipe Cards, Remembrance, and Emancipation*



My grandmother was a self-trained artist. At the beginning of the day, she would dispatch her children to school and her husband to the office, wearing a dressing gown, her hair in curlers. Thus, she would remain for most of the day, not fulfilling the role of “housewife,” but making art. She would paint and sculpt, work that set her heart and mind free from domestic drudgery. Only at the end of the day, as her children came home from school, would she dress, quickly straighten the house and prepare the evening meal. She would greet my grandfather at the door, appearing to have spent the day in typical domestic tasks that she accomplished, literally in the final moments of her day. Her art mattered more than her housework; it was emancipatory work for her. Cooking was a part of her art.

My grandmother was a splendid cook. She could bake, fry, stew, roast, preserve, pickle, can and jar just about anything. She cooked almost every day of her life; at least until the cancer, that eventually caused her death in 1987, debilitated her. The great sadness at the end of her life was that food lost its taste. She could no longer enjoy the taste of fried catfish or carrot cake, of chicken and dumplings or buttermilk pie. When she died, her estate was divided among her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. On her kitchen wall, hung a cross-stitch panel that defined her food making style: “I Love to Cook Without a Book.” Although my sister received this family artifact in the division of my grandmother’s estate, I received something of equal value: her collection of recipe cards and the storage box, which she painted, to hold them.

The recipes are handwritten on scraps of paper: old envelopes, grocery store receipts, and the like. Hardly any of the instructions are complete; they are notes to an accomplished artist, each one requiring improvisation as well as memory. Each one invites newness and creativity. Womanist and Feminist scholars teach us that domestic, cultural objects are valuable for transmitting history. Such objects create a memory of

creative action, liberation, and beauty. For women of my grandmother's generation, this truth is essential. Her generation had less access to the instruments of history and memory. So the objects that my grandmother and her generation of women created are crucial in transmitting their stories.

My grandmother was the matriarch of my family. She inspired children and grandchildren by her words as well as her work. When I was a young person I would visit her home in the country and spend countless hours in a process of creative exploration, painting, making and puttering in her studio, which she called "The Art House." This was emancipatory time for me: moments in which my heart and mind were set free. It was not only the freedom of sharing wisdom with a creative soul, not only the eating of delicious food; it was an experience of love. Real love is the birthplace of emancipation.

From time to time I still cook with my grandmother's recipe cards. When I use them, I am participating not just in an exercise in food making; I am a part of my grandmother's life and in a very real sense extending her love to those whom I love. I share the wisdom of my grandmother's experience and get to participate in her understanding of beauty and creativity. The recipe cards are splattered and smeared by use. At times, the smear is the mark of my grandmother's finger, seeming to try and wipe the card clean. Like a relic, this patina speaks to the physical presence of my grandmother across time and space.

Sharing food works to "re-member" the community. It binds people across time as well as across tables. When I use my grandmother's recipes, remembrance continues. I dine with loved ones on the foods enjoyed by previous generations. We share our own memories of those who are no longer physically present as they were in the past. This is the very definition of anamnesis. The word comes from the Greek *anamnesis*, "remembrance." The idea of anamnesis was first used in relation to the Eucharist by Saint Paul, writing in his First Letter to the Corinthians: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, he took the cup also, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" (I Cor. 11:23-25)

Paul is writing to a community in a pastoral crisis concerning food. During the ritual meal, we would call the Eucharist, rich people are coming early and eating everything, leaving the poor with nothing. Paul encourages the community to look beyond their personal needs and to remember the weaker members of the group. He conflates this remembering of the poor with the memory of Jesus' own gift of life and freedom, given to humanity in his passion, death and resurrection. In remembering the

poor and Jesus' life, Paul says that the community becomes the Body of Christ. As the Body of Christ, the community lives out their identity as the real presence of Jesus in the world. As they act for the sake of freedom in the world, Jesus is alive and active with and in them.

The sense of remembrance that Paul has in mind is active. It is much more than a cognitive exercise of pulling together facts about a past event; it is an embodied experience that brings the thing being remembered into the present. It is about the way that God has emancipated people from their slavery, setting them free in a world of love, peace, justice and beauty. Paul's teaching is continuous with the annual celebration of the Passover. In the Passover meal, people are instructed to claim, through remembrance, God's liberation of their ancestors from slavery to freedom. Again, this is not only a cognitive exercise; it is standing with the ancestors in their deliverance from slavery into freedom. It remembers emancipation. When we gather for the Eucharist today it is as a people who are beginning to learn what it means to be free. By hearing the stories of redemption in the Hebrew Scriptures, the signs and wonders of the Kingdom wrought by Jesus in the Gospels, the non-compliance of the early church in the narrative of empire in the Epistles, we receive a counter-narrative to make history on eschatological and emancipatory terms. The repetition of sacred story as part of the Eucharist reinforces a new narrative in the imagination of worshippers.

Anamnesis is not only memory of the past; it projects the community into the future with a sense of hope and trust. The future, which anamnesis also remembers, is about the life of God, where all people join in celebrating their emancipation. The remembrance of the promise binds us to those not yet born who will share our hope of deliverance from slavery to freedom, God's desire for all beings. The prophet Isaiah set this promise in the context of a dinner party:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.  
And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death for ever.  
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.  
It will be said on that day,  
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.  
For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain. (Isaiah 25:6-11)

In this world, the past becomes the present and the future too. All time is the current moment. In this world, memory is called not simply from the mind, but from the body. In terms of the Eucharist, it is the action of eating, not the idea of eating that describes anamnesis. Likewise, it is real emancipation, not just the idea of freedom that is the goal of Eucharistic life. According to anamnesis, our remembering is not just an idea, not just words written on a recipe card, but something that we must do. We take those words, that recipe, and we create something out of it: the Eucharist. We remember the event that calls us to act for the sake of emancipation in the world. It is the difference between reading a recipe and enjoying a meal cooked from a recipe. This active remembrance is transformative, acting on us when we may least expect it to do so.

At the end of every day, my grandmother would prepare and knead dough, leave it in the refrigerator overnight to slowly rise, and bake it in the morning for breakfast. Miraculously I would awaken in my grandmother's house to the smell of bread baking every morning. It was completely effortless for her, and it was repeated day after day, year after year. It was infused with her love and her life. So even now, a quarter century since her death, I can still smell the bread baking and savor its yeasty memory in my imagination. It is a memory that changes me; my mouth waters and my eyes fill with tears, each of which honors my grandmother. The recipe card transmits the instruction across time and space, such that one need only follow the direction and be returned to childhood.

Bread is at the center of the Christian Eucharist, of course. Along with wine it is still shared among those who gather at Jesus' table. The story we tell, the story first passed on to us by Saint Paul, says that it is in the eating and remembering that we remember the future into which we press day by day, year after year. In that future, all beings will be emancipated from their slavery to death and live eternally to feast at the banquet prepared by God from the beginning of creation.