

Letters to Reinhold: Eating dill pickles in paradise

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Breakfast was your favorite meal; you often said so. Sometimes you would remember that the Dutch were known to have cheese with their breakfast. You liked that custom, so why did it never occur to me to give you cheese for breakfast? Of course, we frequently had cheese for lunch, and my housekeeping mind may have reasoned, "Well, we can't have cheese at two meals, can we?" Perhaps you would have liked cheese for breakfast and then we might have had eggs for lunch? But often you weren't home for lunch and had to eat elsewhere, whether on your travels, at some committee luncheon (where the food probably was ghastly) or with students in the cafeteria at Union Seminary (where you swallowed your food whole because you were talking at the same time).

Anyhow, my sense of guilt remains, for I should have been imaginative—a word you often used where I might have used the word "sensitive"—and made available not just cheese, but *all sorts* of cheeses for breakfast. I am haunted by this recollection when I am abroad—not only in Holland but also in Israel, where people have a variety of lovely things for breakfast, including cheese. And I can hear you saying, "In Holland, they often have cheese for breakfast."

I suppose that such memories are part of the invested capital left by a very happy marriage. But I find myself amused that minor details—if food be a minor detail—remind me of so many areas in which I lacked imagination, or was too engrossed in habits of behavior and routine to respond to things you might have liked to have or to have done. Perhaps life isn't long enough. We were married for nearly 40 years—40 years except for six months—and still that was not long enough. A favorite line of verse you used to quote was from a little poem by Ralph Hodgson: "Time, you old gypsy man, will you not stay, put up your caravan for just one day?" And I might add to that a line from a pious hymn about "eternity being far too short"—too short for praising God, I believe the hymn's context has it, but I would also want to say, far too short for showing love in little ways as well as big. And so,

because food is always with us, because we have to eat several times a day, and because we go to the grocery store perhaps more frequently than to church, it is often food that reminds me of my shortcomings.

Yet in a sense all this is rather silly, because you were the most ungreedy of people and in fact not too discriminating about food. Our friend the poet Wystan (W. H.) Auden used to say in his teasing, brotherly way, "Of course, Ursula doesn't have to be a good cook, because Reinhold would eat almost anything." He said this just to get a laugh and to poke a bit of fun at us, of course. It was all part of the game-playing that he and our family enjoyed together. He would generally put me into the role of the sister he teased, and I would respond by making him the naughty but nice brother.

I remember one of the other occasions on which we played this little game. One day at the Academy of Arts and Letters some good person came up and asked if Mr. Auden and I were related. We were speaking British English rather than American, although both Wystan and I loved to use Americanisms and sprinkled our conversation with OK's and other such expressions to show how broadminded and Americanized we were. In any event, when this person asked if we were related, the devil entered into me and I said, "Oh, yes, he is my naughty younger brother." This reply rather baffled the inquirer. When we were alone Wystan and I giggled like a couple of schoolchildren, and he said, "I do hope that gets abroad. It will be such fun for the biographers."

But to get back to food. I remember a time in the '60s when my daughter, Elisabeth, and I drove from Stockbridge over to Hudson, New York, to meet a friend who was coming up on the train from New York City. We wandered about that interesting town, which, despite its depressed and neglected state, had all sorts of attractions—historic and, for us, also architectural—as well as its scenic setting on the Hudson. Getting somewhat hungry in the course of our peregrinations, we looked for a place to pick up sandwiches and coffee. We found a delicatessen which provided what we wanted, and, as we bade the owners farewell, we bought a few extra items, including a jar of dill pickles.

When we got back home to you, you began to talk about dill pickles. And what you related was quite a saga indeed. When you were a small boy in Lincoln, Illinois, you used to deliver groceries for the saintly owner of a grocery store in the town. I don't suppose that anyone had heard of child-labor laws in those days, because you seem

to have been incredibly young for that job. Anyhow, you put together and delivered grocery orders, and you and the other delivery boys were allowed to help yourselves to a dill pickle from a barrel as a little bonus when you left for the day. You told me that the owner's daughter, who was the cashier for the store and sat in a kind of iron cage, noticed but said nothing when you and the other boys sometimes took more than one pickle each.

Your telling me this tale prompted the two of us to write to Florence Denger, the lady who had sat in the iron cage— and thus began a delightful correspondence. We were in touch with her at the time of your increasing weakness and illness, and she wrote to us about what life was like in Lincoln, Illinois, when your family was there and your father was the local parson. She mentioned a number of things which you had never told me, and was also informative about your father. But it wasn't until after you died that I was able to visit her. She was a marvelous old lady, and I love to think of her when I think of your boyhood in Lincoln.

A dill pickle was not only something that you enjoyed eating; it was bound up with your life and the community in which you grew up and to which your father ministered. Your biographers will not bother to think about dill pickles when they write about you. But *I* like to think about them. At the same time, I am bothered by the thought that for all those years I failed to pander to your love of them. Of course, you could have bought the pickles and brought them home. But I don't think you ever did buy things at grocery stores or delicatessens to bring home. It's odd to recollect that, but I don't think you did. I suppose that when you were a parson, much food was showered on you by your parishioners.

And that reminds me of the stories you did tell me about your father's parish in Lincoln—for example, about how farmers' wives would bring you geese, vegetables and so on from the farm because to give these to the parson (the "holy man") was a way of keeping the evil eye off the crops. But also, since your mother was such a fantastic cook and provider, you probably did not develop the acquisitive instinct to shop for yourself.

So there we are. Sometimes very pious admirers of yours tell me how sure they are that you are in heaven—and if not sitting at the right hand of God, at least comfortably ensconced. I find it quite difficult to suppress my impulse to say, "Yes, I am sure he is eating cheese and dill pickles." But why not? I am reminded of Jesus' words foreshadowing the messianic banquet: "I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine

until the Kingdom of God comes." And although presumably there is no eating or drinking or giving in marriage in heaven, yet we do like to think of bountifulness and satisfaction for the souls of the righteous.

Oh dear, how symbolic it all is. You and I were—and are—skeptical about many aspects of so-called Christian belief, including the doctrine of the resurrection. Yet, I suppose, the instinct to project and prolong the meaning and value of life stays with us. Our marriage was celebrated before the host of heaven, and for all eternity. So I like to think of you as, if not seated on a cloud and playing a harp, at least as eating cheese and dill pickles.