



*I'm going to sit at the welcome table, hallelujah!
I'll sit at the welcome table one of these days.
I'm going to feast on milk and honey, hallelujah!
I'll feast on milk and honey one of these days.
All God's children gonna sit together, hallelujah!
All God's children gonna sit together one of these days.*

— "River Jordan," traditional spiritual. —

I DON'T THINK IT IS OVERSTATING the case to say that a lot of us are feeling powerless right now. Most of what's going on in the world is not something we can control. Most of us rightly try not to let that stop us — we try to claim what power we can as often as we can. So even though we know it might not help, we talk to our representatives, we give money, we demonstrate. But at some level, most of us are living a history that is sweeping us along with it. This is not always fun.

All of us need to devote some energy to fighting battles that will probably be lost, simply because we have an obligation to fight the good fight. But most of us can't live on a steady diet of tilting at windmills. We also need to do work where we know we can accomplish something, and where we know we matter. That's why I think food preservation and storage matter so much. Ultimately, we are talking not only about the fairly manageable question of what to have for

dinner, but also about transforming our society, our use of energy, our culture.

One battle we can win is the recreation of the welcome table and the full pantry. One of the things we can do to tie ourselves to others is to share food with them, with those in need of food and with those in need of companionship, conversation and friendship — that is, all of us.

What does the welcome table have to do with the full pantry? A reserve of food means that our pantry is never so empty that we cannot share a little. Our table is not bare because we have preserved and stored a season's overflowing abundance and captured the richness of summer in our kitchens. A little of that warmth can be passed on, neighbor to neighbor, as we sit down together, or as we bring a pot or a jar of something to someone in need. We think of the pantry as a measure of personal security — and it is — but it is also a measure of our capacity for generosity.

One of the reasons we so rarely sit down with others is that we are so terribly intimidated by the idea of “entertaining” or “cooking” in the fancy sense shown to us by countless TV shows and magazines. All you have to do is read the magazines in the supermarket check-out line to realize that “entertaining” is one heck of a project. You have to have little bits of smoked salmon in cream puff shells with lemon-thyme crème fraîche. You are supposed to have fancy dishes and multiple courses and serve meals that cost enough that you have to take out another mortgage on your house.

Now there is a real place for the occasional lavish feast. The idea that you might save up the best foods for a celebratory display has a long history. But so too does something other than “entertaining.” Sitting down together at a meal with others to whom you are tied — just a plain, ordinary meal — is celebratory not because of what's in it, but because of who is at it. And the more we watch famous people show off their homes, cleaned by underpaid minions, and their elaborate buche de buttercreams, the harder it becomes for a lot of people to imagine eating a simple meal together from their pantries. And yet, the lentil soup, the loaf of bread, the baked potato, the jar of jam . . . these are the

comforts that we need most, the things we most need to offer one another, and that we most need for the daily, but never wholly ordinary work of feeding ourselves, both body and soul.

We live in a world of need. In 2008, more than one hundred million more people went hungry due to rising food prices, while one out of every nine US families now requires food stamps. The world is full of hunger — hunger for food, security, hope, companionship, community and joy. And that rising tide of unfed hungers makes us see the world in terms of scarcity, of what we don't have and what we aren't sure of. The welcome table and the welcoming pantry run contrary to this. They remind us that summer comes round again, and that we have on hand sufficient to share, even if our sharing is plain.

The welcome table can be as simple as inviting an elderly neighbor to dinner, or making sure that you really sit down with your sister-in-law once in a while and drink tea and eat something. It can be welcoming an army of neighborhood children in for milk and cookies, or setting the church table for an army of people in need. It can be dropping that extra casserole or pie over at the family that just had a baby or lost their job. It can be taking the risk and asking someone to come eat with you — that step in a casual friendship that opens you up, perhaps frighteningly, for more.

The welcome pantry feeds the welcome table. It ensures that there's enough when the children come, when the guests arrive and there are two more. A little more rice in the pot, a little more broth in the soup, a jar of pickles to stretch it all, and there is enough for everyone. When the pantry is full you need not run to the store in order to give a little, share a little, or simply feed your family.

We've lost the habit of the welcome table and the welcome pantry. I once taught a Hebrew School class of fifth graders about Passover, and I asked how many of them, when the Haggadah commands them to cast open their doors and call out "Let all who are hungry come and eat," actually do so? What, I asked them, would they do if someone actually tried to come in and sit down? Overwhelmingly, these children in a comfortable suburb told me that they would never really open their doors, and that if a stranger tried to enter and eat, they would

be afraid. There are, perhaps, some legitimate reasons for fear—but some even greater reasons for overcoming it. We are people who have learned to fear the idea of casting open our doors to others.

There are things we can only understand about one another by sitting together for a meal, or by cooking and preserving together. Seated together, we learn about each other's food culture. In fact, we create a food culture. Standing at the chopping block or the stove, we learn about the traditions that bind us, the history of how we have filled our pantries and secured our future. Until we eat together, there are intimacies we cannot share. Cooking and eating together are powerful ways of tying our lives together. Building community depends upon them. Because so many of us are too busy, or too afraid or intimidated or simply not in the habit, we lose community and intimacy in precisely the measure that we do not share food. Food is a starting point for most human connections.

Every faith that I know of has elaborate laws of hospitality and generosity. It is worth remembering that these faiths—and secular movements that share these ideals—grew up not in worlds of wealth and privilege but in times of vulnerability and uncertainty, when we were far poorer than we are now. These moral systems do not emphasize hospitality because they are concerned with minutiae, but because these are not minutiae. The welcome table is the basis of strong communities and a humane society. The welcome pantry makes the welcome table possible, and creates the food culture that we live within. Both together give us a hand on the reins of our future.