

Lesson 4 What's for Lunch?

Mindfulness

How can I encourage my students to be mindful of eating?

I have such respect and appreciation for the food that's given to me—and for you who have cooked it with such love and devotion. I felt that if for some reason in my carelessness I would drop even one grain of rice onto the table, I wanted to be able to pick it up with the needle and wash it in the water, so I could eat and not waste it.

—Excerpt from a Hindu traditional story

In my history of teaching at several schools, I rarely have had a relaxing meal. Teachers and students rush off to the cafeteria to inhale food. It is a short lunch period, tucked into the school day almost as an afterthought. I find myself trying to eat slowly and savor my food, but my eyes are roving, forever on duty, as a new group of students are herded in for the next shift. I recall at one of these moments a relevant bit of education-school trivia: that these time-honored traditions of desks in rows, bells between classes, and rushed lunches were intentional features of the American public school system. Such an organizational structure was created for molding good workers for the American assembly line. It's an interesting thought, but I have no time to discuss it with a colleague because I need to remind a student to pick up that morsel of food on the floor and wipe down the table. I push the rest of the food in my mouth and stand up to rush to my next class. Ugh, I've eaten way too much, but when I move this fast, I tend to grab at everything I see like a starving animal. I swallow as I scrape plates and walk.

Cultural Philosophies

The noise and pace of the lunchroom rarely offers an opportunity to pause and connect with the experience of eating, which nourishes our mind and body. Today food is often seen as simply fuel. Yet the consumption of food has historically been a mindful and sacred act in many cultures, where one's "daily bread" is a powerful metaphor for communion or union with the divine. For many, the act of taking food is a ritual for taking God into oneself, feeding the soul as well as the physical self. Christians partake of the Lord's Supper (eating a small piece of bread and drinking wine or grape juice) in a memorial service of Christ's death and resurrection. In the Catholic Church, participating in the sacrament of Eucharist during the Mass indicates the belief that a person is, by the work of the Holy Spirit, consuming Christ in a *Paschal banquet*—that is, consuming his body and blood. Christians meditate on this mystery while consuming the ritual feast slowly and silently. Certain Native Americans eat meals slowly, deliberately giving mental and emotional space to the experience. Speaking may occur during the meal, but it is not essential. During harvest rituals, food is celebrated with prayers of thankfulness, acknowledging that the spirit forces of nature—the Great Spirit, and elements such as the sun, wind, and thunder—are the origins of food. These prayers also provide a ritual that emphasizes nature's abundant gifts and reduces the strength of forces such as scarcity and drought. Deborah Kesten shares these Native American rituals in *The Healing Secrets of Food* (2001), adding that "When you penetrate the essence of appreciation, what emerges

is caring about food. To care in such a way is inherently other-oriented because instead of focusing on your own food-related concerns, you are paying attention to the food before you, regarding the mystery of life it contains and provides. In other words, to have gratefulness for food and its origins calls for eating from the heart rather than choosing food solely because they're good for your heart" (Kesten 2001, 50).

Lesson Ideas

1. Consider making time in your classroom to eat mindfully. This activity can precede or follow content involving cultural studies, biological or chemical properties of certain foods, or certain literature. For example, while teaching Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, I wanted to offer a counterpoint to the typical way my students and I consumed food. I also wanted students to better understand the lives of prisoners in a Russian gulag during Stalin's regime. So instead of bringing in donuts as promised the day before, I brought in a baguette, the exact 16-ounce ration that each prisoner was given each day. I established a simulation scenario, telling my students that I was no longer allowed to bring in junk food, because faculty had just yesterday adopted a policy to ban all non-nutritious food items from campus. My students' voices rose in complaint. "I can't believe it!" some yelled. "I'm starving by 10 o'clock," wailed another. "They expect us to go without our snacks?!" Most were infuriated. But suddenly, a few students' voices rose up, changing the direction of the conversation entirely. "I can't believe you're whining," said one. "Most of the world makes less than two dollars a day, and you're complaining about us not having a few vending machines!" A fascinating dialogue ensued.
2. Ask students to bring in simple food—bread, fruit, nuts, and so forth—or provide the food yourself. Tell students that you are taking moments to experience mindful eating. The goal is not to eat the food as quickly as possible but to savor the process of eating. Explain how eating mindfully allows a quiet that draws awareness to our senses of sight, smell, and touch. Sometimes the smell or taste of a certain dish carries to a distant land once visited or conjures a memory. As we eat slowly, we contemplate the flavors, the texture, and the ingredients. We can sense our connection to the plants and animals that feed us.
3. Ask students to be quiet during this process. Ask that they refrain from eating until you direct them to do so and that they eat slowly and carefully while listening to your words. You can lead them through an eating meditation or read them a passage from *One Life in the Day of Ivan Denisovich*, both available in the appendix (on page 156).
4. After an eating meditation, inquire what the experience was like and whether it was any different than students' daily experience of lunch. My students felt the difference. "I really slowed down and tasted the bread," said one. "It made me think how the prisoners savored every little bit," said another. "Sixteen ounces," someone commented thoughtfully, "that's not very much for the work they were doing each day." You can follow up with a journal entry. See the Appendix for this prompt and some student responses. When you are finished, encourage

students to carry this experience with them to other meals. Try yourself to make time to each slowly and with awareness.

As an eater, I acknowledge the domain of the sacred. I recognize that the act of eating may be ritualized and inspired. It may be given symbolic meanings that are religious or spiritual in nature. It may even be joyous.

—Marc David

Reflection

How mindful am I of the food I am eating?