

“The Bread of Life” (Gary)

Gratitude can sometimes be so intense you can almost taste it. It demands physical expression, so that we have to jump for joy, or dance or pray, or enjoy a long, tight embrace with someone we love. It wells up in those moments when we realize how incredibly lucky we are to be here, and how easily the abundance we taken for granted can be turned to ashes. Then a simple thing like bread may seem a gift beyond reckoning. Susan Schnur, a writer living in New York, tells of such an experience. She recalls:

Once, many years ago, sleeping on the sofa bed in the living room of my boyfriend’s parents’ house in Teaneck, New Jersey, I witnessed a performance of gratitude the likes of which I have never seen elsewhere.

It was the middle of the night—I was up with my own back pain—when the light flashed on in the upstairs hall and Jon’s father came padding down into the room. Oblivious of me, he went into the kitchen and cut himself a slab of rye bread with a butcher knife, then stood with it in the dining room under the street shadows.

“Chleb,” he said finally, thrusting the bread into the air. “Broit”—he held the bread against his pajama pocket. “Pane”—he shook it. “Lechem”—kissed it. “Bread”—took a bite.

This he did over and over, saying the word in more languages than I could imagine existed—thrusting, hugging, shaking, kissing, biting, exclaiming—until he stood in the room empty-fisted. Then he burped roomily and went back upstairs to bed.

I think of that night a lot, especially when I am up myself at 3 a.m. I think: What did I know about this man?

That he loved his wife, yes. His children. That he checked on his kids too often in their rooms, changed the oil in his car every thousand miles; kept unnecessary dry goods in the basement. His family used to laugh at him.

He seemed sometimes, on an ordinary morning, almost stunned by the fierceness of his happiness. He was, it now seems clear to me, exhausted by his blessings; in a sense, afraid of them.

He was a Holocaust survivor, Jonny’s dad. The contrast woke him up in the night.

It’s a powerful image. I like to think of this man rousing in his sleep, troubled by

memories of hunger and flea-infested nights spent on crowded wooden planks, realizing suddenly that he is safe in a warm bed, surrounded by people who love him, and then, rather than slipping back into drowsiness and lethargy, forcing himself to complete consciousness so that he might fully savor and smack his lips at the miracle of his survival. I imagine him in one of the camps, vowing solemnly that if he lived, he would never again take even a slice of bread for granted, but would remember to offer thanks for each moment and morsel of existence. And as I think of him tearing the loaf with his teeth and relishing the yeasty goodness of the grain, I wonder if bread will ever taste so wonderful to me? Will this man's children, who have never known deprivation, be able to live with the same gut-felt gratitude and gladness as their father, who suffered so greatly? And I see how closely the man's joy and pain have been intertwined.

To a man or woman who is hungry, Mohandas Gandhi once said, god can only appear in the form of bread. And perhaps we have to know what it means to be hungry in order to see the sacred in the simple gifts of good and clothing and shelter. Hardship and happiness are sewn from a single strand, and the thread that binds them together is love. This seems to me to be the lesson of a short story by Wolfgang Bouchert, titled simply "The Bread."

There a woman who is disturbed by a noise in the night rises from her bed and discovers her husband in the kitchen. He says that he heard someone prowling outside and came to investigate. Yes, she replies, she heard the prowler, too, but she realizes why her husband is really there, for she sees the knife and crumbs on the table and knows that he has been eating. Wordlessly, the two return to the bed that they've shared so many years. At their meager dinner the next night, the woman places four slices of bread on her partner's plate, and only two upon her own. He protests that she must eat more, that he cannot survive on so little, but she tells him the bread is difficult to digest. He hangs his head shamefully, knowing she lies, but eats the bread he's been given as they share their scanty meal.

The desperate hungers of this world seem to demand an equally desperate love. And to celebrate this holiday without being mindful of those in need would make our feast a poor one. True wealth can best be measured, not by what we have, but by what we can afford to share, and the ultimate poverty is to be without compassion, devoid of feeling for the suffering of others. This Thanksgiving, let us invite into our minds and hearts the refugees, the prisoners, the outcasts and the derelicts, for only they can remind us how to see the holy in an ordinary loaf of bread.

CHLEB! (Thrust a loaf of bread into the air.)

BROIT! (Hold it against the chest.)

PANE! (Shake it.)

LECHEM! (Kiss it.)

Let us give thanks and share abundantly the bread of life. May the basket never be empty!

