

The Good Woman Syndrome Or, When Is Enough, Enough?

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When a third big kettle of beets boiled over, I stared at the bloody mess and asked myself if this were mere happenstance. Perhaps here was a Freudian slip trying to tell me something. Perhaps I had better sort out a few feelings, the one uppermost being: When is enough, enough? I also wondered if I am a solitary case, or whether other women find themselves in a similar bind.

It goes back, of course, to childhood. I learned early that grandmothers differ. The culinary skill of my paternal grandmother never rose much beyond a cooked glob of flour and milk known as Mother's Mush. On the other hand, my maternal grandmother had a flair for everything from herbed dumplings to delicate Swiss pastry. Since my mother proved to be a dutiful daughter, I also strove to follow the tradition. So it was understandable that when I first read *Silas Marner*, I took note that in the Lammeter household they "never suffered a pinch of salt to be wasted, yet everybody had of the best, according to his place." Food in our home, too, was regarded thankfully, expertly, and above all, providently.

Since I was the eldest of nine children, with no sisters until after four brothers, I naturally fell into the role of Mama's little helper. In addition, Mama had a legitimate escape hatch—she liked to work in the garden. So I manned, or rather, womanned the kitchen. Third-generation girls in my day were well-indoctrinated into the virtues of waste not, want not. Potato water and a little sugar zinged the yeast start in a two-quart jar. Our "drippers" filled the oven with cheek-by-jowl loaves. There was the separator to wash, the cream to churn, the astrachan apples to strain through a jelly bag, and always, supper to serve when the men came in from the evening chores, famished and tired, and usually after dark.

Perhaps it was this last round of dishes that sowed a small rebellious seed. To the long day, was there no end except bed? Something in me cried for some time of my own. Especially at dusk. In an adolescent burst of self-pity, I scribbled, "The canyon breeze comes floating down, / A perfume-laden stream. / The tired housewife only knows / It's time to skim the cream." Needless to say, someone quickly pointed out how lucky I was to have cream to skim.

So we fed thrashers, tried out fat for soap, made headcheese, dried corn, processed in a three-quart old pressure cooker croakers from Utah Lake (the bones softened admirably), and dunked the old hen into boiling water, the better to de-feather it. I pondered with awe the unlaidd eggs in its viscera.

Pending the subsequent arrival of the clan from the ranch back to Provo, in the fall, I was sent ahead to "take care of the fruit." Five bushels of peaches, eight bushels of tomatoes, three bushels of pears. A copper boiler with a wooden rack in the bottom yielded up dozens of quarts toward the goal of an ultimate 800. One autumn, I flunked the wood-chopping test, almost severing a finger. But one learns to make do with splint and bandage when the kitchen floor is strewn with bushel baskets.

And I did collect brownie points. When she checked the laden shelves, Mama always said I had done well. She died young, and we tried to carry on as we had been taught. We couldn't have done otherwise.

Eventually, belatedly, and gratefully, I married, and went East to live. I was determined to be the best wife known to man. During the honeymoon, simply heating up a can of beans was unthinkable. I had to do intricate and tedious things to it. This zealous kitchen activity was taken in stride by my husband, reared in the same pioneer tradition.

Consequently, our first joint project in a rented apartment was to find a spot for a tomato plant. From then on, things developed fast in the food department — a house accompanied by a ready-made orchard and yards and yards of garden space. When our first child turned out to be two, my mother-in-law came back to lend a hand by salvaging culls from the apple trees and filling bowls and kettles with applesauce. There was never a free moment nor an empty stove.

Soon we were growing more produce than even we could use, so we picked, bagged, and gave it away. Our large place was the natural center for our struggling and still homeless branch. From our stove flowed great pots of spaghetti; MIA groups roasted corn and wienies inside or out, depending on the weather. As their building fund contribution, a military couple from a base forty miles away offered to host a Chinese dinner. On a frostthreatening fall day the food arrived late, packed in boxes and frozen solid. We blew the fuses with rigged-up hot plates, electric roasters, and the like. But we managed.

In the struggle of our small LDS group to earn money for a chapel, our family raised and sold corn, raspberries, apples, and squash. I operated a bread route. With a laden basket, once a week one of the children delivered loaves to the neighbors. I also made and peddled jam and jelly.

But my specialty lay in salvaging borderline produce. Seventeen split cantaloupes in the morning became seventeen jars of cantaloupe butter by night. The celery that could not freeze but did become quarts of puree for soup. A blender and assorted ingredients turned overripe corn into pudding. Salt water routed the bugs in broccoli. And the cat found no comfort in our turkey bones, long simmered for every calorie.

And again, all this was not without recognition. The grand tour of the house ended in the basement where our astonished Eastern friends were expected to make appropriate cluckings over the marvel of row on row of filled jars. Guests at dinner were regaled with how much of it we had grown ourselves. And always, at the end of a hard day's canning, the output was counted and approval bestowed. If someone in the community fell heir to a lug of kumquats, I was the expert to call. I wore the good woman halo so well polished that why should I think about writing poems? Hence, the summer that I had my fancy heart operation, I dared not admit my secret relief that a drought had curtailed production, and there could be a respite while I got my second wind.

So year after year, plied with goodies, my men remained svelte, but not the purveyor thereof. There came a time when my doctor, on call at the slightest emergency, wondered sadly what more she could do for me if my weight continued to climb. I was suddenly ashamed. I had expected medical science to keep me alive, although I was not willing to do my self-disciplining part. Now I faced two equally gruesome alternatives: On the one hand, I could die; on the other hand, I would become a nobody, a non-person, a cipher. My entire image as a good woman was tied up with food. Without a canning lid in my hand, would anyone even like me any more?

Guilt-ridden, I remembered an article in the *Ensign*, in which the author said virtuously that there had been a benighted time, when, for their travels, "I used to stow in anything easy, ready-made and grabbable." However, she repented, and now has learned to spend "as much time and imagination on our portable meals as I would at home." This concept prompts her to deep-fried chicken wings, to be served with a whipped-cream dip ("if you don't mind a bit of a mess"). With a can of salmon, there is no mere opening to toss together with a little celery, mayonnaise and pickle. She begins by rolling a crust of defrosted patty shells, to surround a complex filling using a dozen ingredients.

Or consider the advice in the *Era* on "How to be a mother ten feet tall." You bake cookies every day; even, presumably, on Sunday, for seven recipes follow. "Mothers and grandmothers," admonishes the

author, "have cookies for their medals of honor. So for Mother's Day, and for the other 365 days of the year, fill up the cookie jar and receive acclaim."

To stay alive, I must abandon this highly esteemed cultural pattern?

Men do not deliberately keep women over a hot stove, although this adds to their image as good providers. In their defense, I do not think they consciously plan that women be so busy with food that they have no time for bridge, shopping, politics or other forms of mischief. In fact, I don't think they object if a woman has assorted strings to her bow, so long as she can keep her priorities straight and can rev up to fulfill the exacting requirements of Superwoman. What they basically want is a continuity of mothering. No break in the comfort of chewing at the breast. When one of my more sophisticated students brought his bride to call, he said, "I want you to meet the woman who bakes the best bread in the state." Thud! Here I had thought he valued me for our deep literary discussions and that he found me wise and witty. Instead, I was just another earth-mother.

I am pushing this too far, I know, but as a third-generation pioneer woman is there a legitimate way out? We moved back to Utah in the fall and found everyone "in the fruit." The pressure was strong to buy bottles and begin again. When I thought I had canned enough, someone said, "But you're surely going to do some for the girls." So I did. Perhaps I did it sullenly, and that tarnished the gift, but one recipient said, "The way our family eats fruit, this is just a drop in the bucket." And another is reported to have said, "No, we haven't eaten it yet. My family doesn't really care for it. But I take it because it makes her feel so good."

I realize there is possibility of famine. I know that waste not, want not is practically a divine principle. "Better belly burst than good food waste." And I know, too, that for all my carping, I am deeply committed to the scripture, "She looketh well to the ways of her household and eateth not the bread of idleness." An untried recipe is still often preferred reading.

But I want to pull a little in the other direction. I am also Chloe, Cora, or maybe even Carmen, each wanting some small place in the sun. Unburdened by inner guilt or by outside imperative, I should like whatever I do to be a free-will offering, arising from some deep instinctive source. And so, I wonder if there might be a few other sisters out there who would join me in trying to:

1. *Simplify*. The overladen table may be against my particular Word of Wisdom. After teaching a Relief Society lesson on Thoreau, I brought

to the pot-luck luncheon a bowl of apples bearing the sign, Simplify, simplify, simplify! I don't think anyone got the point, since no one ate the apples, surrounded as they were by elaborate dishes.

2. *Diversify*. Buy store crackers and take a child for a nature walk. Perhaps the laden cookie jar is not the only answer to delinquency, as pie may not be the only way to comfort the bereaved.

3. *Risk shattering the good woman image*. "I don't like it. What's in it?" complains a picky grandchild. So I don't play the game of finding what will please. I have other irons in the fire.

4. *Solve problems more deeply*. Is a chocolate cake the best way to handle a crisis, as I have so well taught my daughters, who must now fight the battle of the bulge?

5. *Accept responsibility*. I cannot shove this problem entirely onto the culture. In the long run, I must make the decisions. So far I have gone along with the "lakes of soup, the hills of meat, I'll have to eat before I'm dead." As I ponder choices, I must accept the consequences for writing this article instead of stirring up a batch of salt-rising bread. Maybe some women can do both. For me, it is either-or.

Ultimately, it is my option whether I shall rise obese on Judgment Day, so addicted to squirrelling away food that I can be at home only in the terrestrial sphere. According to my cultural lights, I have tried to be a good woman. But only I live inside my too-tight skin. I must decide when enough is enough.