



Remember the family dinner?
A daily hour of warmth,
sharing, and emotional nourishment?
Neither do we.

THE FIRST TIME MY HUSBAND AND I MET, he told me about his dinner routine, or his lack of one. His refrigerator had been dead for months, and he had slipped into the custom of eating big breakfasts and late lunches and skipping the day's last meal. Eating dinner, for him, meant scarfing down a box of Fig Newtons sometime after sundown. • I, on the other hand, starved myself during the day and gorged at night. I looked forward to dinner, viewed it as the reward for my daily labor. • He'll change, I thought. We'll have evening meals, nothing elaborate, but plates full of something warm and filling, food to elicit closeness and talk. • I was wrong. • There were sit-down dinners now and then, usually at restaurants with friends—so I knew that he could lift forkfuls of linguine with clam sauce to his lips after dark. But our after-work rendezvous involved either movies or walks or just talking over a bag of pretzels. Even after we married, dinner was

What Ever Happened to Dinner?

By Sue Hertz

often defined as a pan of tortellini on the stove. If one of us was hungry, we'd simply spear a morsel.

And I got used to it. In fact, I grew to like not worrying about the what-to-cook-for-dinner-tonight panic. Eliminating the process of preparing, eating, and cleaning up meant time to read the evening paper, not just skim headlines. It meant time to do laundry, pay bills, and answer mail before my brain got as fuzzy as our TV reception without cable. Chores done, we could go to bed at 9 o'clock if we wanted. Or watch Marlon Brando on video. Or snuggle. If we ate a balanced breakfast and lunch, we didn't have to combine grains and protein and vegetables to complete the FDA food pyramid. Yogurt and an apple sufficed.

Then, last April, Luke arrived. Now, a newborn doesn't need a sit-down dinner. In fact, newborns routinely do their best to destroy sit-down dinners. Ask any parent. But having a child made us a family; Bill and I were responsible for someone beyond ourselves, and we began to wonder whether we were depriving that someone of a critical ingredient of family life.

What ever happened to dinner as we once knew it, we wondered, or at least as we think we once knew it? Forever etched in our minds is the image of the Nelson family—Ozzie, Harriet, and the two boys sitting at the dining room table tearing rolls and chewing steak.

On the same TV channel just 30 minutes away was the Cleaver family, June with her apron at one end of the table, Ward with his cardigan sweater at the other, Wally and Beaver on either side. Dinner was the time these families talked about their days and their problems. There were no angry words, no tossed peas, no TV yammering in the background. Dessert was homemade pie served with plenty of milk.

Real families liked what they saw on the screen and tried to emulate it. If you're old enough to remember Eddie Haskell, you probably remember your entire family sitting down at the same time every night, somewhere between 5 and 7 p.m., maybe not with the same harmony as the Nelsons, but always together, and always to something hot—tuna surprise, or maybe Mrs. Paul's Fish Sticks. Skipping the evening meal was like skipping Communion. You didn't do it. The dinner hour was sacred.

BUT SOMETIME IN THE YEARS BETWEEN *Leave It to Beaver* and *Beavis and Butt-head*, that sanctity dissolved. While Bill and I are admittedly looser about the evening meal than most of our friends, no one in our circle claims to have a family dinner every night. Not even six nights a week. And that's typical.

Our friends' habits are echoed in a July 1991 Gallup telephone survey that found that 46 percent of children aged 9 to 15 do not eat with their families every day. Another study, a Roper poll, showed that between 1976 and 1986 the number of families who ate dinner together declined by 10 percent.

How did we come to this? My friend Lucy would say—logistics. Most evenings, Lucy and her two sons walk in the door of their Hingham home about 6 p.m. Lucy comes from her job in Boston at John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, 2-year-old Will comes from child care, and 10-year-old Charlie comes from his after-school program. After checking the mail and the phone messages and settling her two sons into homework or LEGO play, Lucy will try to whip together a meatloaf or spaghetti for them to eat when her husband gets home, sometime after 7 p.m. The family gathering is important, she believes, but some evenings the kids can't wait to eat until Dad

returns, and neither can she.

When they do wait for Dad, Lucy's perpetual motion negates the "sit-down" of a sit-down dinner. The phone rings, she answers it; the washing machine goes off, she stuffs the clothes in the dryer; the dryer buzzer buzzes, she hops up to fold the clothes before they wrinkle. With only a few hours to do all the household chores, she feels she can't waste a minute.

Despite the chaos, Charlie feels pretty good about his family's routine. When he asked his fourth-grade classmates about their dinner-eating habits, he learned that no one had a family dinner every night. Roughly half of the 25 students ate with their families 4 or 5 times a week, 6 said they ate a family dinner fewer than 3 times a week, and 6 said they never ate with their parents. Fourteen of the children said they dined on take-out food at least twice a week.

No one was unhappy.

Lucy's hectic schedule seems to be the norm. Labor statistics show that nearly two-thirds of adult women in the United States work. Many of those women have families. In 1993, of the 52 million married couples in the United States, almost half told the Bureau of Labor Statistics that both partners worked either part- or full-time. But blaming dinner's disappearance on women working is blaming women's right to choose options other than homemaking. Men are busy, too. According to Juliet Schor, author of *The Overworked American*, 30 percent of men with children under 14 work 50 or more hours a week—and seem to be no more eager to spend their evening hours slicing mushrooms than are their wives.

But even if Mom or Dad does cook dinner, many of the children aren't around to ingest it. Teenagers are often either wiping windshields or stocking supermarket shelves or shooting hoop. (In 1992, 51 percent of 16 to 19-year-olds in the United States worked.) Since gym space is tight and student athletic teams often practice on rotating schedules, the dinner hour is spent on the court.

THERE ARE, THE EXPERTS SAY, several practical benefits from eating dinner together. Herbert Benson—chief of the division of behavioral medicine at New England Deaconess Hospital and president of the Mind/Body Medical Institute says that eating with others involves three out of the four keys to a healthy body and mind. First, says Benson, eating evokes "the relaxation response"—by causing the diner to focus on a word or sound (prayer or talk) and muscular activity (chewing). Dinner also provides nutrition, which leads to a healthy body. And, says Benson, if dinner talk is positive, then our cognitive senses are satisfied. Only exercise is missing.

Need another incentive? A University of Nebraska study showed that people who eat together as a family, or even as a couple, eat more nutritionally; children who don't share meals with their siblings or parents eat fewer servings from the basic food groups than other children. Without a structured family meal, many children now cook for themselves, which can translate into dinners of peanut butter cookies.

And here's an even better reason for dining together. Dinner can—according to Stephen Maurer, a marriage and family therapist in Brookline—improve a couple's sex life. Dinner creates conversation which creates intimacy. And intimacy leads to sex. At least for women. Men, Maurer reminds us, don't need a sense of warmth to get in the mood.

Those are just the practical considerations. Beyond them, there's a bigger issue at work here. In the American psyche, dinner is far more than a meal. It's a metaphor for a family's togetherness, or a couple's togetherness, and it's a measure of our family values. Family-value gurus, like pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, loudly decry the passing of the family dinner.

"I think it is tragic not to save all of these rituals—breakfast, dinner, Thanksgiving, Christmas," says Brazelton. "They become much more important, the busier we get. Children need to know there is structure in the family, and if parents don't preserve structure, they're leaving the kids up in the air."

But what does "up in the air" really mean? Does it mean that our children will turn to drugs or guns or gangs? That they'll hope to find family attachment by creating their own family—at age 14? If dinner means connection—feeling like an integral part of a whole—are we creating a generation of loners? Where will that lead?

Some comfort can be found in a close look at the history of the family dinner: the myth versus the reality. Anthropologists report that thousands of years ago, even before electric popcorn poppers, the gathering of food was the most important event of the day in ancient tribes. They tell us that cooking and sharing of food mark the difference between humans and animals. (Humans do it; animals don't.) But they also advise us that the daily fete—at least as we believe we remember it—existed for just a very short time.

Until the twentieth century, dinner, the day's main meal, was not served at

unimaginable to most homemakers a decade earlier. There were refrigerators with freezers. Washing machines. Dishwashers. Lawn mowers. And of course, television.

TV shows like *The Donna Reed Show*, *Father Knows Best*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, and *Leave It to Beaver* reinforced the notion of family togetherness. Dinner was always ready by 6 o'clock, or so the networks wanted us to believe.



WE BABY BOOMERS LIKE TO REMINISCe about family dinners, but did we really eat dinner with both parents more often than not? I remember sitting around the dinner table, my mother on one end, my brother on the other, my father and I on the same side. Not a traditional seating plan, but one that I realize in hindsight evolved from the many weeknights my parents munched alone, after my brother and I polished off our chicken potpies in front of the TV.

We children couldn't ignore our hunger pangs until my father got home from work, my mother reminds me now. Monday through Friday, she fed us at 5:30 p.m. and she ate later with my dad. The table was long; it was silly for one parent to sit on one end and the other parent on the opposite end. So they sat next to each other. When my

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the end of the day, but in the middle of the day, or—in early tribal days—whenever the food got there. In agrarian communities the midday feast was a break from, and reinforcement for, planting crops and wrestling oxen. Mom and the kids may have joined Dad, but very often so did the other six men working with him in the fields.

The Industrial Revolution didn't improve matters. Factories controlled employees' lives, and in urban areas, father, mother, and often the children worked from sunup till long after sundown. The historical fact is: dinner in nineteenth-century America was similar to dinner in nineteenth-century Europe—a meal for the elite.

The onset of World War I disrupted mealtime even for white-collar families. Fathers, husbands, and older sons were gone. World War II muddled family life again, sending the men off to war and women to factories to replace them. When the war ended, the men returned to their jobs and the women to the kitchen. Women at home was a symbol that the war was over and families were together again.

At the same time, postwar technology made life at home much easier, turning out home products that would have been

brother and I joined them on Sundays, they kept their seats, probably so my dad could monitor how much food I fed the dog under the table. The funny thing is, I don't remember those chicken potpies in front of the TV. I do remember trying not to squirm as my father, sitting next to me, demanded that I eat one more pea.

Yet I don't feel slighted that my family didn't feast together every night of the week. My parents needed time alone to talk, and so do couples three decades later. Clare O'Callaghan—a child, adult, and family therapist in Brookline and Boston—thinks my husband's and my ritual of foraging through the refrigerator at day's end is just fine—as long as we forage together. "It's your routine," she says. "Whatever works for you."

Whatever works. Family therapist Stephen Maurer says that the point of eating together is not to masticate and swallow, but to have shared time and conversation—to provide nourishment and warmth to those you love—but he admits that his own family doesn't enjoy that reconnection more than twice a week. His wife arrives home from her job just as he is off to see evening clients, and his teenage son may not be home at all. Dinner is usually (Continued on page 87)

Dinner

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one parent, sometimes two, eating with their five-year-old daughter. When Maurer feels he needs some time with his son, the two of them will go out to brunch on Sunday. For other families, Maurer says, the solution may be a shopping outing followed by a family lunch in a restaurant, or an apple-picking excursion in the country.

Phyllis S. Swersky, president of Work/Family Directions—a business dedicated to blending home and office demands—uses bedtime and car rides to catch up with her three children each week. No radio, she says, just talk.

Such regimens fail to satisfy pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton. Apple-picking and car rides, any communication time, is welcome, he says, in addition to dinner. Brazelton says children need consistent

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family time every day. Frantic schedules are no excuse.

As our friends Barb and Chris say, eating together as a family teaches their three boys—ages two, five, and seven—patience and thoughtfulness. They must wait for everyone to sit down, for the beans to arrive, for dessert until after they clear the table. They learn how to talk with adults and how to listen to one another. And they learn manners: how to hold a fork, how to sit in a seat, how not to put their knees on the table. It's a wonderful idea, and maybe it will be a wonderful reality for Bill, Luke, and me.

We all want daily family time, and although that means one more thing to squeeze into the day, we recognize it's definitely worth the effort, especially for Luke.

If we make dinner fun—saving until later the lecture on weak grades and leaving toys outside in the rain—he will, we hope, look forward to family dinners and feel comfortable enough to confide in us, share his highs and lows of the day. In turn, he will hear about ours, and maybe learn something about the adult world. Best of all, someday he'll be old enough to help us clean up. ■

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