Food as a Symbol

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Abstract

In this study the author explores her personal experience of understanding food as a symbol. In an illuminating discussion that draws on her own Korean life and heritage, the author argues for the symbolic importance of food as an expression of identity and maternal instinct. Indeed, the symbolism of food preparation is shown to have therapeutic implications, especially in filial contexts. A compelling case is made for the potential of food to be a means of reconciliation or closure between people and this is discussed with reference to examples from cinema and life history, notably the author’s relationship with her late father, which sandplay has helped her to come to terms with.

Key words: Food as Symbol, Maternal Instinct, Identity, Reconciliation, Transcendent Function

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A Personal Experience of Meeting Food as a Symbol

I like to make and create things. When I create something, I like to share and enjoy it with someone else. It is through preparing food that I gain that kind of satisfaction. To me, making and sharing food is a happy pastime which gives me much joy in life.

Last winter, a special guest came over to my house. The visitor had lived away from Korea for twenty-eight years and experienced foreign cultures and food. Therefore I had to think very carefully about my dinner plans for him. It was a bit worrisome since my guest was over sixty years old. I was not satisfied with the thought of taking him to a restaurant, even an expensive one, where it would be easy to just pay money for a meal. My mind was set on the belief that food prepared with earnest devotion would be the best form of hospitality, and so I decided to prepare the food myself. What I made was pollack stew with intestines mixed with radish and salted fried mackerel. I also prepared various dried vegetables mixed with sesame oil and perilla seed sauce, as well as makgeolri, which is Korean rice wine. This menu offered a selection of food that Koreans have enjoyed eating for centuries.

As soon as I laid the food on the table in front of him, my guest said with a sparkle in his eyes that it had been such a long time since he had last eaten this kind of food that he could not recall ever having tried it previously, and he indicated that he would take a long time to enjoy his meal. The reason why I chose this kind of meal was that it was in season, light and easy for the stomach, and good for his high blood pressure, as well as suited to a comfortable home setting. He was so impressed with his meal that he kept saying, “Oh, what joy! Wonderful!” As I gazed into the face of the man eating his inexpensive dinner so happily, I felt a pang of life’s hunger that moved my heart. The reason I started concentrating on food is that intuitively I knew that people have always recognized the importance of food as a means of treatment.

What kind of power was it that the food I made would bring such happiness to the person eating it and also to the observer? This paper is concerned with how preparing food with various ingredients and setting the table for the guests can transcend into meeting each other at an unconscious level. This transcendence could function as a symbol.

What is Food to Humans?

Ancient philosophers defined death as the separation of body and soul. This concept implied that