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The healing power of good food

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KEEPING THE FEAST: ONE COUPLE?S STORY OF LOVE, FOOD, AND HEALING IN ITALY
By Paula Butturini
Published by Riverhead Books, $25.95

One of the things I have grown to appreciate about Christianity is that of the three Abrahamic faiths it is the one with no dietary restrictions.

I like that Jesus? first recorded miracle occurred at a celebration and that the result was the best wine the steward had tasted that day.

I like that Peter dreamed his way, as told in that wonderful passage in Acts, to an understanding, through food, that took hold in the early community, a new understanding that God is inclusive. When the equivalent of the first orthodoxy police tried to nab Peter for eating the wrong stuff with the wrong people, his visions told him it was all good -- all the animals of earth, sea and air, and, by extension, all the people, without exception.

All of that is, begging pardon, a somewhat windy way of saying that Paula Butturini?s *Keeping the Feast: One Couple?s Story of Love, Food, and Healing in Italy* is in the best sense about things sacramental and holy.

Butturini and her husband, John Tagliabue, are wounded journalists who needed time -- and table -- to heal. As correspondents covering revolutions, they?d experienced front line savagery of a type most of us cannot contemplate.

It began shortly after they were married, at the start of the 1989 ?Velvet Revolution? in Prague, Czechoslovakia. There, police thugs beat up the *Chicago Tribune*?s Butturini. Weeks later, in Romania, a sniper?s bullet ripped through *The New York Times*? Tagliabue.

The long road to physical recovery from the bullet wounds was complicated when Tagliabue contracted Hepatitis B, caused by a tainted blood transfusion during his earlier treatment. His condition worsened to the point where doctors were considering a liver transplant. He recovered without a transplant and began to regain health, but Butturini simultaneously realized that he was beginning to slip into depression, a condition she

understood at some level because of echoes from her childhood and a mother who suffered debilitating bouts of depression.

Tagliabue recovered enough physically to be reassigned by the *Times* to Berlin and soon after was sent to cover the war in Yugoslavia where, amid scenes of violence reminiscent of those in Romania that surrounded his shooting, he began to tailspin into full-blown depression.

Just before the move to Berlin, Butturini lost her reporting job and as Tagliabue was experiencing flashbacks in Yugoslavia, she received a call telling her that her mother?s depression had returned after 30 years -- her mother?s final bout with the malady.

Butturini was already ?preternaturally impatient to get back to our real lives, not these fake lives we had been living, with him playing patient and me playing nurse.? But she had yet to figure out what her role would be in her husband?s long and arduous path back to mental health, and she praises the Times for accommodating Tagliabue?s needs through ensuing years of therapy, during which he was unable to work.

At this point, they returned to Rome, the city where they had wed.

Her caring for Tagliabue would take on many shades and move through layers of friendship and encouragement, despair and confusion. A catharsis of sorts came in a rousing, shouting public scene where she was suddenly ?the madman [who] found myself howling at him at the top of my lungs in the middle of the piazza.? It was, she said, the moment ?the logjam was broken; the moment when I stopped waiting for him to get better and simply started trying to live again, as normally as one could during the unearthly, erratic abnormality that passes for everyday life during a family?s imprisonment in depression.?

The meals and the ritual of table she so beautifully sketches -- as joyful at times and also as perfunctory and duty-bound as love itself -- become an essential part of the healing.

Butturini finds wonder in a piece of plain baked bread dough, in ?the clean, sacramental smell of baking wheat.? She discovers healing in a beautifully compassionate letter from Mercy Sr. Mary Ann Walsh (spokesperson for the U.S. bishops). She finds grace in the comfort of friends during times of deepest dissonance. Comfort comes to her in the little church of Santa Brigida in the Piazza Farnese, where she alternately prayed, cried and angrily banged the back of the pew in front of her.

Her experience of grace was one, she realized, that her mother failed to recognize, ?the grace that was waiting to catch her, the same grace that happened to catch me in time.?

That sense of grace extended to the table -- the constant through it all -- to the pastas and risottos, the fruit and the fresh bread from an Italian market, the polenta that took both her and her husband back to childhood.

?Like a potter centering clay on a spinning potter?s wheel, the mere action of cooking centered me,? she writes. It kept her focused on a task at hand so she wouldn?t panic about the future, a future that held promise not only of recovery but of new life.

In an age where so many grasp self-consciously for religious symbol, where the talk is of a ?thick Catholicism? draped with the costume and ritual that supposedly gives it identity, Butturini?s story for me was a gentle if powerful reminder that the life of faith is mostly lived outside the sanctuary walls. It is lived in circumstances that test the limits of love; it is lived among families, whole and fractured; it is lived with the help of friends; it is lived in the marketplace and around the table.

This is not a religious self-help book or one that offers easy-to-use formulas about overcoming life?s

difficulties. It is far deeper than that. It is about the tough slog that love sometimes becomes, and it is about the power of a table and good food to connect us with the history and the lives that have brought us to the present as well as with each other. It is about healing.

Of course the matter of table and food and connections can only be enhanced if the setting is Italy, which, she writes, ?still celebrates one of the most primordial rituals of the human community, the daily sharing of food and fellowship around a family table; what better place to take ourselves to heal??

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