
Time to Eat: School Lunch and the Loss of Leisure in Education

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It is the time you have wasted with your rose that makes your rose so important.

—*The Little Prince*

[The school cafeteria] reminded me of pictures of prison dining rooms that I have seen on television, but without the enforced silence of the penal setting.

—Janet Poppendieck (2010)

In her *School Lunch Politics* Susan Levine (2010) reminds us that lunch “has become the daily institutional meal, and more than half of the nation’s population now eats the noon meal- at work, at school, in a hospital, prison, or in the Army” (p. 165). Common sense should tell us that such an institutionalization carries meanings well beyond the food being consumed. Nowhere are these meanings more apparent than in the school cafeteria during lunch. Recent school lunch reforms center upon the nutritional components of the food students are served in our schools, particularly in the midst of our current child obesity epidemic. First Lady Michelle Obama has spearheaded action in this regard. School lunches, too, have been marked by questions of racial and economic equality since their inception in the early decades of the 20th century. As a result, Levine contends that “School cafeterias became racially and economically segregated zones” (p. 156). Questions of who qualifies for free and reduced lunch, along with the stigmas attached to such labels, abound as well. Such concerns are, of course, vital to the physical, emotional, and social well-being of our students at the begin-

ning of the 21st-century. School lunch can, perhaps, serve as a means for alleviating these far-reaching problems.

But how we eat our school lunch tells us much about ourselves too. The manner in which we consume a school lunch serves as a mirror for our most fundamental beliefs and assumptions about our educational system: how, what, and why we teach students in the first place. The way the school cafeteria operates stems from how the classroom operates, from how the marketplace operates, and from how our lives are ordered. In other words, the values on display in the school cafeteria during lunch are inter-connected with realms well beyond the lunch tray. What we find lacking in the school cafeteria at lunch is also disappearing from these larger realms: leisure. While the loss of leisure in the school cafeteria sounds harmless and frivolous enough (after all, how leisurely and idle do we really want the school day to be), its disappearance presents a deeper philosophical dilemma. The loss of leisure in the school cafeteria mirrors its loss in the classroom, the marketplace, and our lives. The school cafeteria should serve as the last bastion of the classical notion of leisure in schools, and its loss reflects a deeper philosophical loss in our quest for educating students. Fortunately, though, the school cafeteria at lunch provides the simplest and most appropriate venue for leisure to enter the classroom and beyond, but such a change requires a shift in our 21st century perspectives.

Leisurely Lunch

Leisure's entry into schools actually turns out to be a re-entry, as schooling is inextricably linked with leisure. Josef Pieper (1954) reminds us that our word "school" is ultimately derived from the Greek and Latin words (*skole* and *scola*) meaning "leisure." "The word used to designate the place where we educate and teach," Pieper explains, "is derived from a word which means 'leisure.' 'School' does not, properly speaking, mean school, but leisure" (p. 2). Pieper makes such a declaration in his *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, published in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Within this context, Pieper apologizes for exploring such a seemingly lighthearted topic as the world is busily rebuilding. But Pieper contends that such a rebuilding requires a philosophical choice: what will be the philosophical foundation of our culture? If the West is going to rebuild following classical precepts, then leisure must occupy a fundamental place. Leisure's meaning goes well beyond the sense of free time; in fact, for Pieper, leisure serves as a mindset or a way of life. Leisure is an approach to how we interpret the world.

Leisure ultimately influences how we go about knowing. Pieper ex-

plains that the ancients divided knowledge into two categories: *ratio* and *intellectus*. *Ratio* was the type of knowledge we are most accustomed to (and comfortable with) today: “the power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and of examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions” (p. 9). Because it is the most tangible, and thus the most measurable, *ratio* is the type of knowledge we most value in our schools. In fact, in our era of high-stakes testing, *ratio* often stands alone. But the ancients believed that another path to knowing was both necessary and complementary, that of *intellectus*. *Intellectus* is closely related to “contemplation,” “that simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye” (p. 9). The mind is completely receptive in this mode. Before we begin measuring, searching, and examining (as in *ratio*), the mind is able to visualize an object in its entirety. As Pieper explains, we are able to “participate” in this “non-discursive vision, which is the capacity to apprehend the spiritual in the same manner that our eye apprehends light or our ear sound” (p. 10). We can consider the object in its entirety, all before we start dissecting it into parts. When we look at a rose, for example, before we begin “to count, to measure and to weigh it up,” we first “open [our] eyes receptively” to the rose. The rose’s image is then able to “enter into us, so to speak, without calling for any effort or strain on our part to possess” it (p. 7). Both ways of knowing, though, were needed: “The mode of discursive thought is accompanied and impregnated by an effortless awareness, the contemplative vision of *intellectus*, which is not active but passive, or rather receptive, the activity of the soul in which it conceives that which it sees” (p. 9). Of course, as Pieper points out, we tend not to trust any gifts that come without effort and strain. Only through work can we properly achieve rewards. This is one reason why *ratio* serves as our primary mode of learning in school.

Perhaps more importantly, this is why we have severed school’s roots in leisure. *Intellectus* is synonymous with contemplation, time and space in which to consider ideas. Often this takes on a playful form. Because contemplation serves as its own end, ideas can be entertained, compared, forgotten, rejected, and reconsidered. Whereas we have to be active in *ratio* while seeking a tangible, measurable answer, *intellectus* allows us to be receptive, as in receiving a gift. The mind is active in play. Leisure allows for time and space for this contemplation. We are then allowed to “pierce the dome” of everyday existence (p. 71). Pieper uses this term to signify those moments in life when leisure and contemplation are best able to thrive. We have time and space in which to break away, at least mentally, from the workaday world and enter into contemplation. Because we are often much too busy to stop on our own,

many times leisure is “imposed” on us. Encountering death stops us and allows for reflection. The same goes for birth; as we hold a newborn, we find ourselves asking what our own lives are all about. Pieper mentions that something as simple as a poem or seeing a striking face allows for these moments (p. 71). The experience brings us away from the hustle and bustle of the world, and we can contemplate on the higher meanings and deeper questions of life. These moments are fleeting of course, as we eventually have to get back to work. But those moments provide some of the most poignant insights that inform our lives. Pieper explains that we also “pierce the dome” on two other distinct occasions: in school and at the feast. This is why school lunch serves as such an integral conduit to our classical roots of leisure.

One reason school has lost its leisurely roots is that the liberal notion of education has been slowly eroded. A liberal education purports no utilitarian ends. In a sense, it is not useful. We do not seek a liberal education to do something else; it is good in and of itself. This idea informs the classical notions of leisure and contemplation. Poets, for example, do not serve a purpose beyond the poetry itself; poets are not functionary. They do not fit into a five-year plan (p. 19). The ends of a liberal education and vocational training, of course, have been in tension since at least Plato’s time (Rice & Smilie, forthcoming). At the beginning of the 21st century, the pendulum has swung heavily in favor of vocational and career training, as liberal arts colleges and degree programs fight for their own survival. Pieper ultimately asks “whether the world, defined as the world of work, is exhaustively defined; can man develop to the full as a functionary and a ‘worker’ and nothing else; can a full human existence be contained within an exclusively workaday existence?” (p. 20). The decline of liberal education seems to answer in the positive. Because leisure and contemplation can only survive with time and space outside of the workaday world, our focus on career ends drives leisure out of the school. This is particularly apparent in the cafeteria during lunch.

Pieper contends:

There is no such thing as a feast ‘without Gods’—whether it be a carnival or a marriage. There is no such thing as a feast that does not ultimately derive its life from divine worship, and that does not draw its vitality as feast from divine worship. (p. 45)

He asserts that all feasts have divine roots. Feast days and other holidays have their foundations in worship. People come together at the feast to satisfy their physical drive for survival, but the communal feast also serves other, higher purposes. The school cafeteria is, of course, not a place for divine worship, but the coming together of students provides for a

similar purpose. Pieper sees the feast, in line with leisure, as containing three elements: “effortlessness, calm and relaxation, and its superiority to all and every function” (p. 44). The conversations, the opportunity for reflection, the momentary pause from their functionary roles in the classroom, all allow for students to break into the realm of leisure, “to pierce the dome” of everyday existence. The cafeteria activities, beyond consuming the food itself, are all done with only their own end in mind. Spending time with friends in the lunchroom is done for its own sake, not for any utilitarian ends that are required and measured. Such activity of the cafeteria at lunch captures “school” and “leisure” at their core. But to recapture these classical notions will require work.

Lunch Time

In his prolific *Of Time, Work, and Leisure*, Sebastian de Grazia (1962) reminds us that “lunch” comes from “lump,” as in “a lump of bread” (p. 108). The rapidity of lunch is seen in its etymology, as time allows for only a light meal and quick repast. “Ranging from twenty minutes to one hour, the interval is supposed to be not for rest but for the ingestion of food,” especially for Americans (p. 108). Often work is done while eating lunch, either while at the desk or out with others conducting business. School lunch follows suit: the speed and efficiency of the marketplace finds a home in the classroom and then moves to the cafeteria. Time for lunch in the cafeteria has seemingly disappeared. One study has put “the national mean” at “just over half an hour,” with this time decreasing in recent years (Poppendieck, 2010, p. 28, p. 150). Such a trend is not taking place only in the United States. English scholars lament the

slow death of what used to be called the ‘lunch hour.’ More and more schools in the UK are trying to condense lunch into as little as 30 minutes, from a current average of 45 minutes, rendering it impossible for children to enjoy their food in a pleasant eating environment. (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008, p. 96)

The apparent loss of time in the school cafeteria means a loss of leisure.

But examining the amount of time allotted to school lunch through the 20th century presents a murkier picture, especially as lunches first entered the schools in the early decades of the century (Levine, 2010, p. 32, p. 37). For example, in her 1920 *The School Lunch: Its Organization and Management in Philadelphia*, Emma Smedley details a 30-minute lunch period for students in smaller senior and junior high schools, while students in bigger schools enjoyed a mere 25-minute lunch (p. 33, p. 34). In the 1915 survey of the Salt Lake City public school system, one

hour of the school day was devoted to lunch (“Salt Lake City,” p. 211). Raymond Callahan notes that the Gary Plan allowed for an hour and fifteen minute lunch in the early decades of the 20th century (1962, p. 135). The “usual period” for lunch in Boston schools in 1905 was a scant 20 minutes (Barrows, 1905, p. 218), while lunch at Chicago’s Englewood High School that same year was allotted 25 minutes (Miller, 1905, p. 202). No standard amount of time devoted to lunch seemed to exist in the early part of the 20th century when lunches first came into the schools. No standard amount of time exists now either.

But what is most telling about the school reports and reports devoted to school lunch in the beginning of the 20th century is the curious absence of such references to time spent for lunch. In her 1913 *School Feeding: Its History and Practice at Home and Abroad*, Louise Stevens Bryant uses over 300 pages to provide a comprehensive guide to school lunch. She examines different proteins in ingredients, compares recipes, and even spells out the decorations for tablecloths. But she devotes a mere paragraph to the “Economy of Time,” where she pleads that “care must be taken not to encroach on the lesson hours.” She then provides an example from Maine, where a handful of students help prepare the meal each morning to ensure efficiency once the lunch meal is served (p. 179). In the introduction to Bryant’s book, P. P. Claxton, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, remarks that many students who do go home for lunch “can do so only by running home, bolting their food and hastening back to school” (p. 11). The aforementioned Salt Lake City report of 1915 only indirectly indicates the one hour lunch period through a schedule of the entire school day. The Portland, Oregon, school report of 1913 devotes an entire section to the malnutrition of students, including reports on breakfast, lunch, and “habits of mastication,” but makes no mention of the time duration (“Portland Public Schools,” p. 269). The same appears from the efficiency experts of the era, those who would seem most concerned with units of time. John Franklin Bobbitt, in his 1912 “Elimination of Waste in Education,” does not refer to lunch at all. Callahan’s classic, *The Cult of Efficiency*, examines no figures or reports concerning lunch in this period. This seems to be the general trend of the era: any coverage devoted to school lunch is entirely concerned with nutrition and using school lunch as a learning opportunity. Time does not warrant mention. The same trend exists today.

But what do these trends mean? The lack of references to time allocated to school lunch at the turn of the 20th century seems to indicate a certain lack of concern. The amount of time set aside for lunch was, apparently, of minor consideration. More pressing needs existed, such as improving the nutrition of students and using the lunch room as another

classroom. This mentality, too, prevails today. Time is an integral feature of leisure; such a disregard of time, or perhaps such an unquestioning acceptance of it, indicates the disconnection from school's roots in leisure. If time is not a consideration, its lack and/or disappearance go unnoticed. For example, U.S. Commissioner of Education P. P. Claxton, as previously quoted, acknowledges in 1913 that students who go home for lunch do so by "bolting their food and hastening back to school." In her 1924 *The Rural School Lunch*, Louise Howell Snell points out that "breakfast is hurriedly eaten and the lunch, often consisting of fried meat, biscuit, and preserves, quickly assembled without forethought" (p. 4). Both lament the hurried pace of school meals, but like many of their contemporaries they make no mention of procuring more time for lunch. The current duration seems above reproach and questioning. This mentality suggests acceptance of the rushed American lunch, especially in schools. Of course, one purpose of American schools in the early decades of the 20th century was to integrate immigrant students into American values and mores. Students were to be "Americanized." One such method, presumably, was to change the habits and mindsets of these students concerning lunch. The European lunch has traditionally been the "family meal" of the day, where more time is set aside for eating. This longer, more important meal contrasts with the American lunch, where we are most concerned about speed and efficiency. As part of the acculturation process, the rushed American lunch in schools fit perfectly, but this does not explain why the time duration of lunch was so seldom commented upon in school reports and other relevant documents. If anything, the acculturation aspect of lunch would seem to have focused attention on the time given over to this important activity.

In fact, school lunch experts at the turn of the 20th century sounded very much like our current experts and policy advisors. They devoted their time and attention to two major areas: nutrition and using the cafeteria for explicitly educative experiences. Nutrition at that time focused solely on remediating the lack of calories, vitamins, minerals, and protein, as many students were either not receiving enough nutrients from food or not receiving enough food. Lack of food is still a major problem for millions of children in our schools, but the concern is now more on the nutritional content of food that is available. What has not changed, though, is the idea of using the school cafeteria as a type of classroom. If the lack of concern for time devoted to school lunch threatens opportunities for leisure in the cafeteria, then the demand to utilize the cafeteria for educative experiences makes such opportunities even rarer. Pieper celebrates the feast for its "effortlessness, calm and relaxation, and its superiority to all and every function" (p. 44). If

the feast is a place and time set aside for leisure and contemplation, for “piercing the dome,” then its use as another classroom further removes students from school’s fundamental roots in leisure.

Force Fed

During the lunch hour the tactful teacher will be able to train the children to be considerate of others and to observe the usual form of good table manners. (Snell, 1924, p. 7)

The use of the cafeteria during lunch for educative purposes started alongside school lunches themselves in the early decades of the 20th century. The 1913 Portland, Oregon, school report affirms that the “school meal contributes not only to the child’s health, but to his education as well. Cleanliness, order, politeness, habits of mastication, principles of dietics, cooking, etc., can nowhere be so effectively taught as in connection with the school meal” (“Portland Public Schools,” p. 269). In her 1922 article “Malnutrition, the School’s Problem,” Lydia Roberts argues that

‘Book learning’ as the sole aim of education was long ago discarded, and the broader aim of teaching children ‘how to live completely’ has, theoretically at least, taken its place. Surely, the first step in a program of complete living should be education to produce a sound body. (p. 458)

The school cafeteria can supplement the already well-established idea that “the children need education in health habits and in the choice of food” (p. 458). But the ends of such an education were not always involved with nutrition. Smedley, in her 1920 *School Lunch: Its Organization and Management in Philadelphia*, explained that “health” was one aim of the school lunch, but that the cafeteria was also “to serve as an educational factor, instilling wise food habits, offering an opportunity for lessons in courtesy and consideration, and providing a laboratory for the practical demonstration of allied subjects of study such as cooking, hygiene, buying” (p. 6). Smedley takes lunch time instruction even a step further:

The lunch room is a business venture in which pupils have the important role of principal patrons, and since, within the limits set, they have freedom of choice, they gain valuable lessons in how to buy for values, self-restraint in buying, and responsibility of selection, as well as getting an understanding of the factors that enter into the selling price of the food purchased. (p. 7)

It should come as no surprise to us that school reformers sought to utilize the cafeteria for instruction during lunch in the beginning of the 20th century. Our current focus on “time on task” makes the lunchroom valuable as well today. Poppendieck (2010) illustrates this mindset:

'It's this wasted half hour,' the education professor Karen Evans Stout says of the typical American school lunch. 'We don't use that time to teach a thing.' [...] She is talking not just about the time students spend waiting in line, but the failure of American public education to harness this central human experience as an opportunity for teaching and learning. (p. 275)

Such use of the lunchroom for educational activities, though, raises fundamental questions about leisure's place in school. If students are on task in the cafeteria as well as the classroom, where is contemplation welcome? Where can students converse? Where can activity be its own end, if not in the cafeteria?

If we are going to allow leisure in school, then the cafeteria is the most obvious place to begin. In examining leisure, Pieper notes contemplation exists for its own sake. The use of the lunchroom as another classroom begins to blur the distinction between means and ends, between utility and liberality. If the cafeteria becomes another location in which the activities performed by students are means, such as learning about business practices, then the possibility of providing a liberal education to students, of any sort, is slim. The cafeteria could serve as a bastion of liberality in schools, one location where students are able to simply be, to perform their human-ness without filling out a worksheet or completing a quiz. Students could be most human, in the sense of doing something for its own sake, in the cafeteria. But if we make this time and space instrumental, to serve particular educational objectives like our classrooms, then we sever school's relationship with leisure irreparably.

Kass (1994) illustrates this distinction in describing the act of eating itself:

Living form, to preserve life and form, threatens life and form. Eating is at once form preserving and form deforming. What was distinct and whole gets broken down and homogenized, in order to preserve the distinctness and wholeness of the feeder. (p. 54)

In other words, to maintain and rebuild ourselves, we must break down and destroy something else. We have to re-create ourselves from other matter. This recreation is at the heart of the meal and at the heart of leisure. Not only do we re-create ourselves physically while eating, but we also re-create our sense of humanity at the same time, in conversation and contemplation with companions (the root of which is "bread," as in "breaking bread" with someone). The "chaos" of the lunchroom ultimately breaks down the order and rigidity of the classroom. *Intellectus* supplants *ratio*, at least for a time. Such a breaking down frees and sustains students in their humanity. The meal (and its conviviality)

serves as an end, not as an instrumental or deterministic means like classroom activities. But our tendency to blur these distinctions has become more rampant. In looking at the background and development of the National School Lunch Program, Gordon W. Gunderson (2003) argues that

Properly coordinated with classroom work, the lunchroom can be a laboratory for actual experience in the principles of nutrition, sanitation, safety, personal hygiene, food service management, courtesies and social graces, budgeting, accounting, food storage and handling, food preservation, delivery systems, and many other subjects of importance to society. (p. 54)

Such an approach to school lunch diminishes opportunities for organic and spontaneous re-creation.

Appetite for Learning?

Pieper's precept that the foundation of the feast is "its superiority to all and every function" speaks to the integral nature of the leisure of the lunchroom. If Pieper is correct, if the feast allows for time and space that is superior to all other functions, then we would do well to slow its disappearance. Pieper's claim deserves further consideration. If we consider school lunch in the same manner as Pieper does the feast, then we are confronted with a time and space outside of "the world of work, the utilitarian world, the world of the useful, subject to ends, open to achievement and sub-divided according to functions" (p. 64). We enter a time and space in which we have the opportunity of "piercing the dome of everyday life" (pp. 69-70); Pieper claims that the "philosophical act" can only occur under these conditions. We can only contemplate and philosophize outside of the "world of work," where only utility is valued. Pieper, in fact, argues that "the philosophical act is incommensurable with the world of supply and demand," and that "the more 'total' the demands of the world of work, the more sharply and clearly do we see that philosophy is incommensurable with it" (p. 65). In other words, because the philosophical act is done for its own sake, outside of the utilitarian world, it is allowed to take us beyond the everyday world. It is this "theoretical character" of the philosophical act that remains "untouched in any way whatsoever by practical considerations, by the desire to change it; and it is in this sense that philosophy is said to be above any and every 'purpose'" (p. 77). This theoretical and philosophical manner of knowing was valued by the ancients over utilitarian and vocational education. It was a higher knowledge, unencumbered by any "purpose."

If we consider American schools at the beginning of the 21st century, it takes no stretch to see how much influence utilitarian ends hold over our instruction. We only need to look at the lists within today's Common Core State Standards, to see multiple references to "college and career readiness," to accept that contemplation and philosophizing hold very little sway. And this is why the lunch period, under the influence of no educational objectives or outcomes, is so vital to our original and classical foundations of school. If our classrooms are not providing this time and space for leisure and its elements of contemplation and philosophy, then the lunch room can perhaps fill this void. After all, the feast was fundamental in creating these moments of piercing the dome. Our public school lunchrooms cannot (and should not) be beholden to the gods, as Pieper defines the feast, but at the very least they should provide students a chance to interact not as students achieving outcomes and objectives, but as humans celebrating what uniquely makes us human. Students should be able to converse about subjects entirely for their own sake: the game last night, that shirt he is wearing, what she posted online earlier. Visser (1991), in her historical and prescriptive *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities, and Meaning of Table Manners*, reminds us of this "unserious," leisurely sense: "People who converse in the context of dinner have always been warned not to talk about anything too important—not religion, not politics, or anything controversial" (p. 267). "The art of dinner-table conversation," she continues, "as it has evolved from the seventeenth century onward, was that of interaction, almost for its own sake" (p. 267). If, after all, we are educating students for their eventual lives outside of the classroom, then to deny this time and space outside of the classroom, even for a mere 30-minute lunch period, seems almost counterproductive.

Liberal Lunch

If the lunchroom serves as a likely site for leisure's re-entry into the school, then what could that re-entry look like? First, any additional time given to lunch would improve the overall experience for students on many levels. Poppendieck, for example, points to "time troubles" in the lunchroom as factors both in nonparticipation in the school lunch program and in students' choice of unhealthy items, because they are easier and quicker to grab and eat. Quick eating, she also points out, harms the digestive process for students (pp. 148-9). But we have to be careful when jumping to the assumption that more time necessarily means more leisure. De Grazia reminds us that Aristotle does not mention time at all when he defines leisure (p. 11). Aristotle is ultimately concerned

with “freedom from the necessity of labor,” which as de Grazia points out sounds very much like our modern conception of free time (p. 11). But de Grazia gives us another warning here: when we mark leisure in terms of time, leisure is then thought to only exist in time outside of a job or an occupation. This is the distinction that concerns us with school lunch. A 25-minute school lunch could be just as leisurely, or even more so, than an hour-long lunch. Time itself does not determine leisure, though it certainly helps by providing more opportunity for leisure. Aristotle was most concerned that this time be set aside from occupations, from activities that ultimately serve a purpose (p. 12). Leisure had to be free from *ascholia*, the Greek term for being occupied. Note the roots: our word “school” serves as “leisure,” while the “a” means “without.” But de Grazia again implores us to proceed with caution. All of our lives are lived being occupied by something. Even when we are not physically occupied, our mind and thoughts are still active. These do not cease even when we are sleeping. The entire distinction is whether or not this being occupied is for an ulterior purpose. De Grazia contends that for Aristotle, “Leisure is a state of being in which activity is performed for its own sake or as its own end” (p. 13). Having time away from necessity helps to foster leisure, but it does not guarantee it. For the school lunch period, this means what is more important is what we “do” with this time, or, more appropriately for leisure, what we “do not do” with it.

As Aristotle insists, leisure must be marked by time and space away from necessity. Leisure allows for doing things for the sole sake of doing them. This is precisely where our current school lunch is at a crossroads concerning leisure. Since its inception in the schools a century ago, the lunch period was considered as a potential class period. But such a use takes lunch from the realm of leisure and places it in the realm of necessity. In a lunchroom that also serves as a classroom, students do not act for their own sakes; everything is done for an instrumental purpose. Under this guise, students in the lunchroom serve the same role as they do in the classroom: producers of artifacts in meeting outcomes and objectives. All of this production is done, of course, in the state of occupation and obligation. Poppendieck reports that many schools feel the crunch of time regarding lunch: with No Child Left Behind and the Common Core State Standards, more time is needed in instruction. Schools can regain this time teaching during lunch (p. 150). Through this encroachment, though, students are not allowed to transcend to a leisurely level; they stay in the world of work. But how would a lunchroom look that was devoted entirely to leisure? We have to disabuse our own notions of marking “leisure” with notions of chaos and decadence, of a sense that anything goes. Pieper is quick to remind us of Aristotle’s ultimate ques-

tion in his *Politics*: “That is the principle point: with what kind of activity is man to occupy his leisure?” (p. 44). For Aristotle and the Greeks, this activity required effort, mental effort. Pieper speaks of how the Greeks used the term *skolen* again, how a person needed to “work his leisure” (p. 44). This “by no means ‘leisurely’ character of leisure” shows that the mind has to be active in contemplation, in conversation, in playing with ideas (p. 44). In true leisure we do not shut our minds off; the image of someone collapsed in a chair, absorbed in the television screen, mindlessly entranced, does not “work,” so to speak. The activity of the lunchroom, the conversations, the laughter, the drama, the interactions, all “play” into leisure.

The March 2013 edition of *Language Arts*, a journal published by the National Council of Teachers of English, allows us to examine more closely this distinction in the lunchroom between leisure and occupation. This special issue, entitled “Literate Lunch,” explores

educators across the country [who] are taking a critical stance toward the quality of food children eat. No longer is the topic of food relegated solely to school district nutritionists and those working in school kitchens; food has become central in school curricula. (Albers, et. al, p. 239)

The subsequent articles, for the most part, examine how the language arts classroom can make students aware of nutritional issues in the lunchroom. Through use of critical literacy, the authors chronicled how students both became aware of nutritional problems in school lunch and how they went about promoting changes to the menu. From planting and cultivating their own school gardens to creating and releasing a documentary on the unhealthy and unappealing offerings in the cafeteria (entitled “Lunch is Gross”), students used critical approaches to enact changes in their lunchrooms. Most of these activities took place within the language arts classroom and not during the actual lunch period itself. The fight for better food, theoretically, would show its fruits in better fare in the lunchroom. The actual work, the critical literacy being taught and enacted in the language arts classroom, would not necessarily be undertaken in the cafeteria itself. So we can imagine a leisurely lunch still able to take place, albeit a much healthier one. This is a micro-example of how a leisurely lunch can thrive in our current school cafeterias: our students can engage in the curriculum throughout the school day, even to improve the quality of their lunches, but this work is all for the purpose of creating leisure. As Pieper summarizes Greek thought best articulated by Aristotle, we work in order to secure leisure, not the reverse as we often believe (or at least act like we believe) today (p. 2). We can imagine this lunchroom, made better by healthier

food, but still informed by leisure. Students have toiled; their fruits can be enjoyed, at least for 25 minutes or so. This distinction, though, must remain clear; in fact, these particular classroom examples can serve as a type of ideal.

We would do well to remember, too, the leisurely element found in conversation. One reason we often share meals with others is for this conversation, to catch up with each other. Conversations are standard fare at meals. Kass laments that “without conversation the belly rules the mouth, and the table becomes no different than a trough” (p. 146). But conversation, like leisure itself, is disappearing from schools. Bomer (2011) reminds us that “Walking down hallways in many schools, one is more likely to hear ‘stop talking’ than ‘talk more’” (p. 136). The talk in classrooms, and more and more in lunchrooms serving ostensibly as classrooms, comes through discussion. A quick look at the etymology of “discussion” reveals the “cuss” root, the same root found in “percussion” and “concussion.” All indicate a hitting together, whether of ideas, drums, or skulls.¹ Discussion requires an almost confrontational readiness; all participants anticipate their chance to enter the fray. Outward activity defines discussion: one person’s idea is to hit against another’s. Conversation, on the other hand, denotes a more leisurely approach. Its etymology involves “con,” meaning “with,” while “vertare” means “to turn about” (such as in “versus”). In conversation we take an object and consider it by turning it around together. This communal act takes on no sense of active readiness, no sense of hitting ideas together. It is more of a sense of journeying together. We assume an art to conversation but not to discussion. Conversation is much more leisurely; we can meander this way or that (together) as we consider the object and turn it around in our minds. The conversation is allowed to wander this way and that, unhurriedly. There is no sense of arriving at the “right” answer or solving a problem, as is often found in a discussion. It is in this sense that Kass reflects that “It is shared speech, even more than shared food, that makes a community of diners” (p. 146). And it is in this sense that leisure can be welcomed into the school cafeteria.

Conversation is fundamentally for its own sake, as are leisure, liberal education, and the feast. All are inter-connected, and all are vanishing from our schools and our lives. But the school cafeteria at lunch can serve as the best chance to recapture and reintroduce these aspects to generations of future students. More time for lunch would help in this regard, but more important is placing the lunchroom outside the world of work, outside of utilitarian ends and purposes. Students need space in which to partake in activities for their own ends, to “pierce the dome of everyday life” in order to partake in and celebrate their humanity as

such. While the nutritional content of what our students eat should be at the forefront of our concerns, we also must be cognizant of what else is happening (or not happening) beyond the food on the tray. We are well aware that the food our students are consuming may not be the most healthy and beneficial selections for their physical well-being, but are we providing a lunchroom informed by leisure that allows for the health of their humanity?

Note

¹ I became aware of this relationship from John Senior's (1983) *The Death of Christian Culture*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, pp. 195-196.

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