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The Bread of Life, with Chocolate Chips

Samuel Morris Brown

I learned to cook when my wife was recovering from cancer surgery. There's a hollowness, kindred to cancer, hungry to swallow you up when a beloved's life is threatened. I still remember, with a soul-deep ache, that time when her body was a battleground for scalpel surgeons and monstrously mutated cells. Those harrowing days and their fulminating awareness of her mortality still haunts me. I've seen a lot of death in my short life; nothing disoriented me like her cancer.

The wild upheaval of unexpected illness unearthed more than a surgical specimen for the pathologist's microscope. She and I discovered in the cancer's aftermath my longstanding failure as a husband to be her full partner. This spousal dereliction had insinuated itself into the infrastructure of our marriage. I realized that my soul needed a surgery of its own. A spiritual death had wrapped its malignant fingers around my internal organs, a nefarious mimic of the tumor that had lifted the retina off the back of her eye. The simultaneous, stark revelation of her mortality and my personal failure left me wanting to sit alone in a room and cry my way through the smothering chaos rather than accept the painful transformation that beckoned.

But there was no time to stare, heartbroken, at my pitiful soul, dithering about whether I could be remade, whether we could be made whole. I would have to man up. I would need to keep house.



The war between the forces of order and chaos is as ancient as any humanity we would recognize as our own. In the Bible's opening lines,

our Hebrew God tamed the waters of the primordial abyss. Their neighbors and occasional captors, the Babylonians, despised the waters of chaos too. In Babylon, the people celebrated the power of the god Marduk's sword to vanquish the sea monster Tiamat, who presided over the inundating waters. The god-king's slaughter of that watery demon made human existence possible in ancient Mesopotamia.

Those Babylonians are my kin. I know that chaos and detest it. I struggle against its asphyxiating wetness. In the weeks of our physical and psychic suffering, I felt the waters of despair swell to fill the miserable concavity in my soul. I wanted to gut Tiamat to put an end to the chaos. I needed Marduk's sword but did not know where to find it. In its place, I found a thick-bellied, well-balanced kitchen knife. It hefted well. I started chopping vegetables.



When she and I first met the summer after college, my kitchen consisted of an electric vegetable steamer made of thin plastic. In it I melted bags of Lipton pasta mixes into nodular slurries. Most nights, I half expected a two-headed brook trout with five eyes to peer up from the yellowish, lumpy mass. But I didn't care. Especially when mixed with a can of cold black beans, the molten pasta sustained me. I had other priorities than food.

She changed all that.

One of my first memories of our years together is of an outlet store hawking adventure clothing in southeastern Maine. A male friend, on a whim, rescued a bag of cookies that had been abandoned atop a clothing rack. Still troubled by urban legends about razor blades concealed in Halloween apples, I declined his offer to share in the spoils. Surely, I fretted, a sociopath had baked those sweet morsels with foxglove before depositing them as bait above the fleece sweaters. But, eyes singing with spontaneous pleasure, she partook. No razor blades, no poison herbs. Just butter, sugar, flour, and chocolate. She laughed at me, her mouth full of cookie. In the car afterward, I ran my fingers through her thick, black hair. I still feel that hair in the web spaces of my fingers, where it caught before I wiggled my hand free.



During the initial crisis, I cooked simple, even clumsy dishes. I flailed in a quicksand of risottos, week after week, gruels of sodden rice drowning in liquefied cheese. With time, though, she taught me the language of

the kitchen. As she initiated me into the sorority of the hearth, I opened my heart to the ancient rhythm of the village. I found myself drawn into the cycles that once organized the world. I saw harvest seasons as more than a Whole Foods marketing campaign. I considered what it might mean to be with a bundle of life—roasted carrots or a seared tenderloin, perhaps—as it fell to its death on our hearth.

Over the ensuing years, she guided my culinary restlessness into intermittently successful experiments. I learned how to attend to the moment when the cumin, coriander, and garlic splashed into sweetly diaphanous onions bathing in heated oil. That familiar, tiny explosion of odors still calls to my increasingly sentimental memory those early years as her pupil.



She did not, however, teach me to bake. I was afraid. Cooking let me be wild, even dissolute. The distracted nonchalance of stovework fit my personality. I could stab some specimen of allium or whittle a fennel bulb, smear the sacrifice in oil and salt, and start it on fire. Vivid flavor could spring from death, no matter the liberties I took with the recipe. I could add extra salt, or vinegar, or Aleppo chili pepper flakes at the end, as our tongues dictated.

Baking, on the other hand, channeled the stentorian gaze of endless generations of women whose culinary science was hard won and ironclad. Baking meant gardening in fastidious colonies of yeast. It demanded precision. In baking, the ways I touched and handled wet, leavened flour created the difference between glorious supper and execrable waste. The baker's tasks entailed reading recipes as if they were the code of Hammurabi. I preferred to see recipes as half-remembered oral traditions from an archetypal hearth.

I watched her, though, enthralled by her careful face and the tawny blubber of dough that she massaged with her hands before lowering it into a bread pan. I saw her pour cookies from the mixing bowl and into our lives. I witnessed her create cakes from cocoa, butter, and flour. Baking was perilous, yes, but also beautiful.



In the misery after her surgery, a box of fine chocolates arrived on our doorstep from San Francisco. They were a gift from a friend, a whimsical, quantitative man whose mind never sleeps. The exquisite flavors of that chocolate told us a story about the meaning of life. We will all die,

and most of us will suffer. And yet we will have known the tenderly bitter tang of chocolate, the sweet softness of homemade bread, the touch of oil-wet fingertips on our scalps. We will have lived.

After a few years of cooking, I happened upon Kristine Wright's essay about Latter-day Saint women baking bread for the sacrament. Not allowed to perform the formal priesthood ordinance, they brought the ritual to life in the loaves of bread they offered on the altar.¹ They baked the Lord into the world, recapitulating his work in Capernaum. There, Christ had performed his great miracle of loaves and fishes. Five hungry thousands listened to Jesus with one ear and to their grumbling stomachs with the other. He fed them from a basket of food barely adequate to the hunger of his disciples, let alone the multitude. The crowd was hungry again within a few hours. Jesus exploited that extended moment of knowing that the food would never be adequate but had to be enough. For that brief time, the bread and fish was sufficient to tell his disciples that Jesus was the bread of life. He in his eternal presence, in his life of divine regard mapped onto human transience, is our everlasting bread. He is the force that makes us whole in spirit and body.

The thought of baking sacramental bread as a ritual in its own right captivated me. If Christ was the bread of life, those Latter-day Saint women were his bakers. I realized then that women had also likely baked the bread of that Passover meal transformed by Jesus's broken body. When he gave thanks at that last supper, it was for their bread. (I find myself now ignoring the tired-eyed disciples in Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting, my gaze occupied instead by the fist-sized loaves of bread scattered across the table like wind-fallen peaches.) In my mind, the baker that night was the Mary, "covered in roses . . . covered in ashes . . . covered in rain," of the folksinger Patty Griffin's devastating eulogy. I knew in my soul's soul that when Jesus preached the bread of life he had in mind those women baking that bread. I could taste their bread in the same place of knowing. I could hear believers praying, as Jesus taught them, for *that* daily bread whenever they turned their eyes to the sky.

1. Kristine Wright, "'We Baked a Lot of Bread': Reconceptualizing Mormon Women and Ritual Objects," in *Women and Mormonism: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Kate Holbrook and Matt Bowman (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 82–100.

In the bread of the Lord's Supper, eternity and time conjoin. That crushed wheat mixes with water and yeast, is lit on fire, and enters our bodies, where we burn it again in our cellular furnaces. When my own baptism by fire will come, I do not know. I suspect it began with that cancer surgery and the wounds it exposed. But we all dance in that fire on the boundary between eternity and time whenever we bake. Christ's gift has always been in his grace-filled juxtaposition of the eternal and the temporary.

As I reflected on those sisters baking that sacramental bread, I remembered the chocolates that arrived in the midst of our sadness. Those two images—of baking bread and succoring chocolates—braided themselves together when I entered a new phase of my religious life.



Years into my apprenticeship in the kitchen, some overoptimistic Church leaders decided that I should serve in an elders quorum presidency. I couldn't imagine why anyone thought I belonged in a hierarchy. My speech is arcane and unsettling; my demeanor is at best disheveled. My belief, however fervent, is a clumsy mixture of the feral and the abstruse. I doubted that I could be of any use to the people we worshiped with. I realized, in the rare clarity of thought I associate with inspiration, that I'd better learn to bake. Any ministry meant to recall Jesus's would need to incarnate his bread of life, even if the leaven was inanimate, and sugar and chocolate joined hands with the flour. Cookies were small and lively; they were more manageable than bread, more easily shared with ward members. Plus, chocolate chip cookies are the first and most familiar of sweet baked things, a common pathway into the guild of those who know flour and water. An ever-gracious mentor, my wife taught me a basic recipe for salted chocolate chip cookies based on whole-wheat flour. I was a mediocre student of baking, as I had feared. But her attention and my belief that God wanted me to bake called me to persevere. Gradually, vivid flavors came through, especially when I began zesting citrus peels into the dough. The veil of fear and unfamiliarity over my eyes began to lift.



The veil. It's a story about being blind and yet feeling the warm breath of a greater realm on our cheeks. This veil of mortality drapes across the world to separate the living from the dead. On our mortal side of this

supernatural curtain stand the people whose stomachs rumble, whose food waste befouls the sewer system, who yawn and sweat and fight and want. On the other side of that boundary, it's all of us a century later, now docile and pure, like Montaigne's old men too weary to get into any trouble. As a young child, I imagined the veil as if it were a cheesecloth wrapped around a quorum of ghosts. I still sort of like that image of a gauzy barrier at which the living and dead strain to see and be seen. I'm glad to love and be loved by those who have slipped from the world that can be touched into the world beyond our fingertips.

Increasingly, though, I think of the veil as the barely visible interface between what is temporary and specific on the one hand and what is eternal and universal on the other. It's that shimmer just out of sight when we look over an alpine lake at dusk. It is, in the company of the beloved, the shiver of awareness that she is not just an electrified scaffold of gristle and bone. The veil contains the sacred yearning that comes as we eat the bread of life. The veil is the promise of life in the midst of physical and spiritual deaths.

When she and I stand together in the kitchen, the veil of eternity stretches under the pressure of our questing fingers. As the remnants of plants and animals speed their dissolution over the fire of our modern stove, they place us in a different kind of time. These living-things-becoming-food, these cookies and loaves of already broken bread, are real. So are we, both broken and real, in time and eternity.

We Christians eat in remembrance of a God beaten to death. We do it every Sunday as we take the sacrament. The Lord's Supper isn't just about that one Passover meal, though, however carefully we repeat it. We are always eating in the presence of these lives of ours as fragile as food. From the sacrifices of animal and vegetable spring our enfleshed souls. When we make ourselves vulnerable to the flavors born of these foods and the communities they may cohere, we push our fingers into the veil. Our spirits surge with a life greater than our bodies can contain.

I get, I think, what the ancients were doing with their animal sacrifices, so much more daring and wildly natural than our searing the flesh of dismembered industrial chickens over machined rows of propane-spewing candles. Our ancestors slaughtered, gutted, and divided a sheep into a wood fire to burn it into fragrant smoke that would feed the heavens. Theirs was an eternal meal. Not an endless meal. That's not the point, even though we may wish that a specific mouthful—or a particular person at a certain moment—would last into an endless

sequence of seconds. The point that we struggle to comprehend is to melt the veil of eternity into our lives. Our Hebrew predecessors did so at the temple altar; we do it at the sacrament table. And, sometimes, we can trouble that veil with a chocolate chip cookie.

These cookies my wife taught me to bake have become a spiritual discipline for me, like a nun worrying the beads of her rosary. I bake them almost every week now. Because my grandfather loved puns, I dubbed them the *Cookies* of the Priesthood, as they were intended to entice the elders to visit our spartan classroom above the staircase. But this pun hid the truth inside my clownish humor: the title was dead serious. I couldn't stop thinking about the sacramental bread when I baked them. That bread, these cookies, were the otherworldly priesthood of the Firstborn made actual among us. They were Jesus as the bread of life and the bread he broke with the disciples. They were the sacrificial offering Abraham and Sarah made to Melchizedek. They were the Savior hanging from a tree and calling out for his Father absent in heaven as his mother wept at his feet. They are the soul-healing promise of his broken body. They are the assurance that in opening ourselves to eternity we can see through the death of spirit and body, that Atonement is concerned with more than just a blessedly quiet afterlife wrapped in the veil's ghostly gauze.

Sometimes these cookies are a hope of solace in the face of personal tragedy.

A friend's father died unexpectedly. Sudden death hideously breaks the living and the dead. Survivors must bear that rupture in their souls. Before the body is hidden in the ground, the traditional story we tell about the veil is senseless and cruel. The beloved is still physically present, but that presence is a sacrilege of its former vitality. My friend's favorite cookies were pumpkin chocolate chip, so we baked fifty small orange-brown cakes studded with chocolate chips. I left the nutmeggy mound of sweet things on his back porch with a note of condolence. I realized as I walked back up the street that these priesthood cookies were my offering against death. I had little else. In such despair, sometimes we can only say "take, eat," as we hold hands in otherwise silence. Those chocolates, that sadness, are the bread of life in the mouths of mortals.

That calamitous death taught me that many events that call us to protest our infirmity also welcome a morsel of this bread of life. Funerals, cancers, heart attacks, drug overdoses, and advancing birthdays after

middle age all want the cookies of that priesthood of Christ, the priesthood that thins the veil between our fingers. This bread of life, bedecked with chocolate chips, is my testimony of hope against cataclysmic days.



We're going to die one day, she and I. So will everyone we have ever known and loved. That day will come long before we desire it. And yet, in the meanwhile, we will bake, we will give, and we will wonder as the veil wraps close about our skin.

This essay by Samuel Morris Brown won third place in the 2019 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest sponsored by BYU Studies.

Cookies of the Priesthood

Base recipe is an adaptation by Kate Holbrook of a Molly Wizenberg adaptation from Kim Boyce's recipe; the base supports the rainbow of variants listed below.

2 cups whole wheat flour
1 cup whole wheat pastry flour
1½ teaspoons kosher salt
1 teaspoon baking soda
1½ teaspoons baking powder
1 cup unsalted butter (2 sticks)
1 cup granulated sugar
1 cup brown sugar
2 large eggs
¾–1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1½ cups chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Mix flour, pastry flour, salt, baking soda, and baking powder in a medium bowl.

Cut butter into roughly 1-centimeter cubes.

Using a stand mixer with paddle attachment, beat butter and both sugars for about 2 minutes until creamy. (At first, set the mixer speed on the lowest setting to avoid a sugar bomb; then increase the speed to medium-low.)

Add eggs and vanilla extract to the butter mixture and mix on low speed until moist and well combined.

Add the combined dry ingredients and mix on low speed until integrated.

Add chocolate chips and fold them in by mixing the dough for a few seconds on low speed.

Spoon heaping balls of dough onto ungreased baking sheet.

Bake for 10 minutes or until golden brown. Let cookies cool for 5 minutes before transferring them to a wire rack to cool.

Successful Variants

Pistachio orange: Decrease chocolate chips slightly; add a heaping $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of pistachios (ground to moderate granularity) and the zest of 1 orange.

Blueberry lemon: Eliminate chocolate chips. Add zest of 1 lemon and 8 ounces of dried blueberries. (The dried blueberries from Trader Joe's are the best option discovered so far; the bulk dried blueberries at other stores are much drier and smaller.)

Cherry almond: Ditch the chocolate chips. Add heaping $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups dried sour cherries and heaping $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh whole almonds (ground to moderate granularity).

Strawberry: Add $\frac{1}{2}$ –1 cup diced dried strawberries.

Nutmeg orange: Add 2–3 pinches nutmeg to dry ingredients. Add zest of 1 orange.

Lemon hazelnut: Decrease chocolate chips slightly. Add a scant $\frac{1}{4}$ cup hazelnuts (ground to moderate granularity) and the zest of 2 lemons.

Grapefruit: Decrease chocolate chips slightly. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground cardamom, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup pecans (ground to moderate granularity), and the zest of 1 grapefruit.

Cranberry: Add $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon cinnamon to the dry ingredients. Eliminate chocolate chips and add zest of 1 orange and $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups dried cranberries.

Cranberry chocolate: Add $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon cinnamon to the dry ingredients. Reduce chocolate chips to 1 cup. Add 1 cup dried cranberries, zest of 1 orange, and scant $\frac{1}{4}$ cup pecans (ground to moderate granularity).

Orange cherry: Reduce chocolate chips to 1 cup. Add 1 cup dried cherries and zest of 1 orange.

Lime currant: Add $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons of powdered, dried lime (stocked at many Near Eastern stores; okay to substitute with fresh zest of 2 limes) to the dry ingredients. Replace chocolate chips with $1\frac{1}{2}$ cup dried currants.

Lime barberry: Add zest of 2 limes and replace chocolate chips with 1½ cup dried barberries.

Failed Variants

Pomegranate: Add 1 tablespoon pomegranate molasses in lieu of vanilla extract. Add ¾ cup pomegranate arils. Reduce chocolate chips to ¾ cup.

Note: *The arils just don't have a great texture.*

Quince: Grate a peeled quince and microwave on high for 6 minutes. Wring out quince in a dish towel (or mash through a strainer) to remove water. Add cardamom and ground hazelnuts. *Optional:* add a few pomegranate arils.

Note: *This variant is a huge amount of work for soggy cookies.*

Syrian splash: Add 1 teaspoon Aleppo pepper flakes to the pistachio-orange variant recipe.

Note: *The pepper created weird burnt notes.*