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Fall 2018 Public Affairs Essay Contest

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Biographical Statement: I am a Senior Dietetics student with special interests in nutrition counseling, research, and international nutrition and cooking. My hometown is Huntsville, MO.

Non-Profit Organization: Springfield Dream Center

Essay Theme: This essay discusses how seclusion in the experience of food impacts the community and how food can instead be used as a tool to unify the greater community and promote healthy societies.

Word Count: 1040 words

The Power of Food in Social Unification

Sharing a meal is a simple but intimate experience. Preparing food requires a great deal of thoughtfulness, caring, and consideration for the needs of those being fed. In food cultures across the world, the first step of friendship is an invitation to have dinner in one's home. Across the table, a sense of oneness is created. It is how people begin to form trust, where strangers become friends, and how differences can be understood and reconciled. Today's America is effectively fed by several fast-paced food giants providing access to cheap, convenient, and tasty products for people of all socioeconomic classes. Emphasizing inexpensive, efficient eating has altered when, where, and how we socially connect. Could the simple act of eating be a significant piece of connecting as a family, a culture, and a community?

Every culture uses food as a method of self-expression, to celebrate important events, to establish camaraderie between strangers, and to experience the pleasure of eating and satisfying the needs of the body. In East Asian countries, a few dishes are shared between three or four friends, each person placing a few pieces of food at a time in their own rice bowl. This requires that extra attention be given to how much each person eats, so no one goes hungry. Food is eaten at a steady pace so slower eaters do not feel rushed, and friends continually offer food to others.

In American food culture, where it is often considered cheaper and more time-efficient to eat outside the home, it is more practical and acceptable to eat alone. Many have accepted the concept that food should be shared mostly for special occasions, because sit-down restaurants or home-cooked meals require more time and expense. An estimated 20% of meals in the U.S. will be consumed in a person's car, and few families share even two or three meals per week (Stanford University). Though Americans lead in production and consumption of fast and processed foods, allowing us to allocate more time and energy to succeed in work and play, perhaps what we have unknowingly sacrificed has more impact on our culture than we can guess.

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Teens who do not regularly share meals with parents are more likely to skip school, have overweight status, and have lower performance in academics (The Atlantic). With the disturbing, persistently increasing rates of youth obesity in the U.S., this correlation should not go unnoticed. We all understand that *what* we eat matters, but it is time we also consider the importance of the *how*.

Shared meals are an opportune time to grow parent-child relationships, instill values and feelings of love, and share difficulties and successes. They create space for honest emotional conversation among family, friends, and even strangers. Samuel Chamberlain was quoted as saying, “The gentle art of gastronomy is a friendly one. It hurdles the language barrier, makes friends among civilized people, and warms the heart.” Research agrees—experts suggest eating with others lowers perception of difference in sex, race, and social status (The Atlantic). Consider how one’s view of foreign policy could change upon having lunch with an immigrant.

Sharing the food experience not only positively boosts our social connection but our physical health as well. Cooking in the home allows for more control over what goes into food and how much food is given. Decreasing processed foods tends to decrease excess calories and refined sugars. Having parents oversee the food experience also promotes in children a healthier body concept and relationship with food (Neumark-Sztainer 2008). Imagine how much healthier a young girl’s understanding of her body would be if, rather than gathering information from model magazines and reality TV shows, she spent an hour listening to her mother’s teenage experiences as the two made a hearty and healthy dinner together.

The question to be addressed by the individual is, how will I choose to use food? Food was never meant to be an isolated experience. Every person must eat, and sharing the eating experience subtly reminds us of the similarities we share. It is arguably one of our greatest tools

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to connect, unify, and care for fellow humans. But in a fast-paced world with competition and expectations pushing at us from every side, how do we make time to prioritize real food? How do we go back to the dinner table, in whatever form that may take in modern society? How do we use it to not only satiate our bodies but unify our perspectives? Of course there is no solitary answer; there are countless ways to engage in unity through food. Perhaps we must first change the perspective of food that has dominated American culture since the industrial age. Perhaps we should give food its due power as an art, an experience, and a connector.

To prioritize unity will always mean to prioritize people. Because people are deeply intertwined in our daily lives, we must prioritize people in the nuances of everyday life. Whenever possible we must regard the health of ourselves and others above convenience. Spend an extra thirty minutes preparing breakfast for the house. Shop at a farmer's market and learn from the vendors where their produce comes from. Take a homemade lunch to work more often than you run through the drive-thru, and eat with coworkers instead of at your desk. Finally, we can look for ways to connect with others through food. Organize weekly dinners with neighbors. Bring an international student into your home and serve a traditional homemade American meal, or cook a dish from his country together. Volunteer at a food pantry. Attend a seminar about food sustainability and the state of hunger and poverty in the local community. Participate in a Hunger Banquet to gain a new perspective on food wealth.

If food is a necessity, its space in our lives and daily activities should be significant. If food impacts the unity of a group, then how we think about it and how we treat it says much about the health of our community and society as a whole. Maybe what this country needs is not a thousand more changes in policy, protests, or new leaders in office, but a fresh engagement with social connection, food, and what it means to be human.