

Our Dinner Table University

By Leo Buscaglia

And what did you learn today?

When Papa was growing up, at the turn of the century in a village in northern Italy, education was for the rich. Papa was the son of a dirt-poor farmer. He used to tell us that he couldn't recall a single day when he wasn't working. The concept of doing nothing was never a part of his life. In fact, he couldn't fathom it. How could one do nothing?

He was taken from school in standard three despite the protestations of his teacher and the village priest, who saw in him great potential for formal learning.

Papa went to work in a factory, and the world became his school. He was interested in everything. He read all the books, magazines and newspapers he could lay his hands on. He loved to listen to the town elders and learn about the world beyond this tiny, insular region that was home to generations of Buscaglias before him. Papa's great respect for learning and his sense of wonder about the outside world were carried across the sea with him to America and later passed on to his family. He was determined that none of his children would be denied an education.

Papa believed that the greatest sin was to go to bed at night as ignorant as when we woke up. "There is so much to learn," he'd say. "Though we're born stupid, only the stupid remain that way."

To ensure that none of his children ever fell into the trap of complacency, Papa insisted that we learn at least one new thing each day. And dinner time seemed the perfect forum for sharing what we had learnt that day. Naturally, as children, we thought this was crazy. There was no doubt, when we compared such paternal concerns with those of other fathers, Papa was weird.

It would never have occurred to us to deny Papa a request. So when my brother and sisters and I congregated in the bathroom to clean up for dinner the inevitable question was: "What did *you* learn today?" If the answer was "nothing", we did not dare sit at the table without first finding a fact in our much-used encyclopedia. "The population of Nepal is..."

Dinner was a noisy time of clattering dishes and animated conversations, conducted in Piedmontese dialect since Mama didn't speak English. The news we recounted, no matter how significant, was never taken lightly. Mama and Papa listened carefully and were ready with some comment, often profound and analytical, always to the point.

"That was the smart thing to do." "*Stupido*, how could you be so dumb?"

"*Cosi sia*, you deserved it." "*E allora*, no-one is perfect." "*Testa dura* (hardhead), didn't we teach you anything?" "Oh, that's nice."

Then came the grand finale, the moment we dreaded most – the time to share the day’s new learning.

Papa, at the head of the table, would push back his chair, pour a glass of red wine, light up a potent Italian cigar, inhale deeply, exhale and take stock of his family.

This always had a slightly unsettling effect on us as we stared back at Papa, waiting for him to say something. He would tell us that if he didn’t take time to look, we would soon be grown and he would have missed us. So he’d stare at his children, one after the other.

Finally his attention would settle on one of us. “Felice,” he’s day, calling me by my baptismal name, “tell me what you learnt today.”

“I learnt that the population of Nepal is....”

Silence.

It always amazed me – and reinforced my belief that Papa was a little crazy – that nothing I ever said was too trivial for him. First, he’d think about what was said as if the salvation of the world depended upon it. “The population of Nepal. Hmmm. Well.”

He would then look down the table at Mama, who would be ritualistically fixing her favourite fruit in a bit of leftover wine. “Mama, did you know that?”

Mama’s responses always lightened the otherwise reverential atmosphere. “Nepal?” she’d say. “Not only don’t I know the population of Nepal, I don’t know where in God’s world it is!” Of course, this only played in Papa’s hands.

“Felice,” he’d say, “get the atlas so we can show Mama where Nepal is.” And the whole family went on a search of Nepal.

This same experience was repeated until each family member had a turn. No dinner ended without our having been enlightened by at least half a dozen such facts.

As children, we thought very little about these educational wonders. We were too impatient to join our less educated friends in a rip-roaring game of kick-the-can.

In retrospect, I realize what a dynamic educational technique Papa was offering us. Without becoming aware of it, our family was growing together, sharing experiences and participating in one another’s education. And by looking at us, listening to us, respecting our input, affirming our value, giving us a sense of dignity, Papa was unquestionably our most influential teacher.

Early in my university years I decided upon a career in teaching. During my training, I studied with some of the most renowned educators in the country. When I finally emerged from academia, generously endowed with theory and jargon and technique, I discovered, to my great

amusement, that my professors were imparting what Papa had known all along – the value of continual learning.

He knew there is no greater wonder than the human capacity to learn, that the tiniest particle of knowledge has the power to better us. “How long we live is limited,” he said, “but how much we learn is not. What we learn is what we are.”

Papa’s technique has served me well all my life. Now before my head hits the pillow each night, I hear Papa’s voice: “Felice, what did you learn today?”

Sometimes I can’t recall even one thing I have learnt. Though exhausted after long hours at work, I get myself out of bed and scan the bookshelves to find something new. With that accomplished, Papa and I can rest soundly, assured that a day has not been wasted. After all, one never can tell when knowing the population of Nepal may prove useful.

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