

Most of us eat to live.

Ruth Reichl, on other hand, lives to eat. After owning a widely popular restaurant in California in the late 1980s, she went on to become the restaurant critic for the *Los Angeles Times*. Her witty reviews and simultaneous appreciation for Michelin-starred restaurants and hole-in-the-wall joints made her industry and fan favorite. To her dismay, after she became the critic for the *New York Times* her popularity went from her asset to her Achilles’ heel. It was impossible to experience a restaurant as the average dinner would because no matter where she went people recognized her and treated with the kind of attention befitting royalty.<sup>1</sup> She needed to be anyone but the world-famous critic of the nation’s most-read newspaper. That’s when she asked her friends in the costume industry to craft a series of identities, each with their own name, fashion sensibility, makeup, wig, family-of-origin story, and professional histories.<sup>2</sup>

One of the first personas Ms. Reichl adopted was that of Molly Hollis, an unassuming girl from the Midwest who married a real estate mogul with bonafide blue-blood history. Despite her new-found wealth and Manhattan address, Molly retained a dowdy, plain wardrobe and “awh-shucks” personality. Molly’s first foray onto New York’s dining scene was at the now-defunct Le Cirque, a French restaurant in Midtown known for its attentive service, extensive wine list, and precisely plated dishes. As Ruth would later write in a scathing and now-famous review, the staff took one look at Molly, surmised she didn’t belong, and treated her accordingly. As a result, she endured an extraordinarily long wait and a poorly-lit sit in the rear corner of the restaurant. When she requested a more expensive and exclusive wine than what the sommelier recommended, he told her with an air of disdain: “You won’t like it,” and brought her a cheaper wine (and only after serving others who had arrived after her *but* who fit the traditional profile of a Le Cirque diner). The staff’s indifference toward Molly was a far cry from the endless doting she had received when she had dined there as Ruth Reichl.

When Ruth wasn’t being Molly from the Midwest, she was sometimes Emily or Chloe. Chloe was a Marilyn-Monroe looking blonde who flirted with everyone who passed her way. With every wink of her eyes, every flash of her diamond jewelry, and every sexy reveal of her

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth Reichl, *Garlic and Sapphires: The Secret Life of a Critic in Disguise* (New York: Penguin, 2006). All examples in this sermon are sourced from Reichl’s memoir and David Kamp’s review of it.

<sup>2</sup> David Kamp, “‘Garlic and Sapphires,’: Food Critic in a Funny Hat, *The New York Times*, April 20, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/10/books/review/garlic-and-sapphires-food-critic-in-funny-hat.html>, accessed September 28, 2018.

smooth, lean legs, restaurant staff swooned. Chloe could do no wrong. Servers went out of their way to please Chloe. She was their queen; they were her court jesters.

On still other occasions Ruth walked in as Betty, an older woman with tattered clothes, unkempt hair, and an overstuffed duffle bag. Betty's arrival always prompted resistance from restaurant managers and maitre d's. If and when they chose to seat Betty, she always had to endure her server's obvious disdain and refusal to look her in the eyes.

Some chefs found Ruth Reichl's closet of personas an exercise in deceit, especially when she recounted visiting the same restaurant in 5 different personas left her with 5 different classes of service. Ms. Reichl not only detailed a restaurant's ambiance and cuisine, she captured the underbelly of humanity and the sneaky way sin shows up in our lives—our arrogance, pride, self-righteousness, and disregard for others. What happened in those Manhattan restaurants though is no different than what happens to us every time we decide the parameters by which someone has a "right" to be in our company, our community, our church, our pew, or our nation. We alter our behavior, our support, and even our prayers. In doing so we craft a self-made universe with ourselves in the center and everyone else the supporting cast in our quest for control and peace of mind. No one seems to know the challenge of that this morning better than our friend John.

See it in your mind's eye: John and Peter are knee-deep in conversation when they see a man on his knees and arms outstretched onto a desperate young man. John rushes over and asks in befuddlement: *"What do you think you're doing? You're not one of us. What gives you the right to do our work? Back off, dude."* John, of course, thinks he's protecting Jesus' good name and ensuring the makeup Jesus' inner circle doesn't change. To be fair, John and the other disciples still don't yet grasp that the city of God that Jesus is building has plenty of space for everyone—that it's neither a competition nor a race. It's a community. John, it seems, believes that there's only way to follow and serve Jesus. Sometimes we do, too. However, different is not bad. It's just different. **There is no one way to bear the image of God when bared in love and justice and mercy.**

Few things are as dangerous as deciding the end of someone's story before it even begins. Imagine, for example, what might have happened if Jesus' disciple John had *not* tried to thwart the work of the unnamed man at the beginning of our Gospel story who tried to cast out a demon? Could he have gone on to become a great leader in the Jesus Movement? Could he have found the purpose and direction he might have been longing for?

This is the reason why we ought to fall on our knees in repentance when the first word to come to mind when we see the beautiful sari and hijab head wrap on a woman's is "terrorist." For there is more to any faith than its most extreme kind, and yes, God's imprint is all over her, too.

Today's Gospel implores us to carry out our lives with the humble yet fierce conviction of Jesus Christ when we fail to imagine anything else but maintaining the status quo like John. It's never been about us alone. There is a larger force of redemption taking place. There are voices among us crying to be heard. There are people wondering when their story will matter, when their pain will become our pain, when their abuse will no longer be silenced, when we will help write another story.

Maybe though you are wondering the same thing about yourself. Just because you may have failed to conform to how you imagined and hoped your life would be, or just because you don't fit the so-called norm of what you think someone of your age or pedigree should have, that doesn't mean that God's Spirit does not reside in you, enabling you to be the light and joy of God to others. By virtue of your baptism, you have been called and so has everyone else and grace is renewing all of us each day.

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After six years at the *The Times*, Ruth Reichl moved on to *Gourmet* magazine. Although her tenure at *The Times* was relatively short, she had become intimate with the shame and silence of being reduced only to the images and expectations others had defined as "the" way to be. Most of all, she missed being herself. She missed meals with her family at home where no phony persona was needed.

The same is true at this table [the altar on which we celebrate Holy Communion], a table where there is room for more. Why not be the one to let someone who has not heard or experienced its riches know that there's a seat with their name on it? Why not be the one who refuses to let what others say and think stop them from saying yes to God? Why...not join in the new creation?

Dinner's ready, y'all.  
Don't let it go to waste.

Bon appétit.

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