

“Of Love and Chocolate”
February 10, 2008

The Reading

The reading is a recipe for a chocolate cake purported to be “better than sex.” The source is from a website, best-chocolate-recipes.com and the author is unknown.

Here begins the reading.

My friend served a Better than Sex Chocolate Cake recipe at Christmas dinner one year. It was the first time I'd heard of this yummy dessert. I have to say, it lives up to its name. Almost.

Crust

1 cup unsalted butter
2 tbsp sugar
2 cups flour

Vanilla Pudding Layer

3 egg yolks
1/2 cup sugar
1/4 cup flour
2 cups milk
2 tsp vanilla extract
2 tbsp unsalted butter

Cream Cheese Layer

8 oz cream cheese, very soft
1/2 cup sugar
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 tsp lemon juice
1 cup cream

Whipped Cream Layer

1 1/2 cups Cream
3 tbsp powdered sugar

Pineapple Caramel Layer

8 oz can crushed pineapple, drained
1 jar caramel or chocolate sauce

Chocolate Glaze

2 oz semi-sweet chocolate
2 tbsp unsalted butter
1 1/2 tsp vanilla extract

Butter a 9 by 13-Inch cake pan. Set oven rack in center of oven and preheat to 350°F.

Beat butter and sugar until fluffy. Add flour, at low speed in mixer, blend until mixture is pebbly and can be pressed together. Press mixture on bottom of buttered pan and bake for 20 minutes or until golden. Cool completely. (If using a Food Processor, process until ingredients are a coarse mixture.)

For pudding, beat egg yolks and set aside near stove. Whisk the sugar, flour and milk in a saucepan until free of lumps. Set over medium heat and cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spatula, just to a boil. Remove from heat and whisk a little bit of the hot, thick pudding into the beaten egg yolks then pour the yolk mixture back into the pudding, whisking really well. Continue to cook 1-2 minutes, stirring constantly, until thick.

Pour pudding into bowl and add vanilla and butter, stirring until butter melts. If pudding has lumps, pour through a large, fine-mesh strainer. Chill, with plastic wrap pressed directly on surface of pudding, until ready to use.

Beat cream cheese, sugar, vanilla and lemon juice just to blend. In separate bowl, whip 1 cup cream to medium-stiff peaks. Fold a scoop of whipped cream into beaten cheese then fold remaining cream into cheese. Set your Better than Sex Chocolate Cake recipe aside.

Whip 1 1/2 cups cream, sugar and vanilla to stiff peaks.

Spread crust with cream cheese mixture, top with pineapple, then caramel or chocolate sauce. Spread pudding over pineapple; spread whipped cream evenly over pudding. Chill well.

To make glaze for your Better than Sex Chocolate Cake recipe, melt chocolate and butter over low heat, stirring until smooth and completely melted. Remove from heat, stir in vanilla. Drizzle in zig-zags across cake's surface.

Here ends the reading.

“Of Love and Chocolate”
by
The Reverend William Haney

February 10, 2008
The Unitarian Universalist Church
Columbia, Missouri

It’s been awhile since we had a service auction as a fundraiser for our operating budget. I don’t recall when the last one occurred – at least a few years ago. In the past I’ve put up for auction three times a sermon, the title being up to the successful bidder. I don’t know how much each sermon gained in revenue, but I’m certain it wasn’t in the thousands. So much for my self-esteem! Eric Bader was the successful bidder this last time around. I’d hoped he forgot I owed him a sermon, but he didn’t. To my surprise, he wants me to preach on the film titled *Chocolat*. I recall seeing that film years ago and was intrigued with it. That’s not so much because I’m a devotee of chocolate – to be frank, a chocoholic. No, my interest was piqued because it is something of a fantasy; a mythical expression that I felt held a deeper meaning. So, when Eric announced his devious plan, I rented the film twice so I could get a better feel for its explicit and perhaps its implicit content. So, first, what was the story line of the film?

We are brought into the lives of French villagers at the beginning of Lent in 1959. From time to time we hear a woman’s voice over, so this is a narrative reflecting upon a past time. There is a pall of earnestness, if not fear, embodied in the persona of the Mayor of the village. He is the Comte de Reynaud. He tells himself and others his wife is on vacation in Venice when in reality she left him. His observance of Lent is over-zealous to the extreme. His protection of the village dates back to his ancestors’ annihilation of the Protestant Huguenots. His position of importance – if not power – is embodied by him standing guard at the entrance doors to the little church every Sunday morning. He also keeps a tight rein on the newly arrived young Priest, Pere Henri, editing, even writing the Priest’s homilies. This self-appointed moralistic vigilante guards the imposed tranquility of the village in which everyone knew what was expected. But, on the morning of the first day of Lent, in the sacred space of the village church he so prizes, a sly north wind blows open the doors and spreads itself over the congregation. He rises from his front pew, and passing up the aisle, firmly closes the doors. Can this wind be merely an unexpected weather event, or is there something more to it?

Well, there is more to it. It announces the arrival of the wandering Vianne and her young daughter, Anouk, cloaked in red capes. Vianne rents a shop space with an apartment over it across the church square, owned by a cranky old woman, Amande. Vianne sets about establishing a chocolate shop. The Mayor is outraged that anyone would open such a shop at the beginning of Lent. But her goods have a strange effect upon anyone who tastes it. As we learn later when she tells Anouk, her father was an apothecary who traveled to Central America for adventure. There he discovered the ancient Mayan formula for a spellbinding chocolate that reveals one’s desires and hidden yearnings. He also falls in love with a native woman whom the tribal leaders warn she will be a wanderer. He marries her, and sure enough, with a young Vianne in hand, she wanders with the north wind. Later in her own wanderings, Vianne carries with her in a clay pot the ashes of her mother. With her magic formulas Vianne’s chocolate shop changes the lives of all who enter through the door.

The other characters we encounter are the daughter of the old woman Amande, Carolina and her young son, Luc. Her husband recently died. Carolina is the devoted secretary to the Mayor. She is overly protective of Luc since he is apparently a hemophiliac. She prevents Luc from seeing his grandmother, Amande. This is because Amande wants to live her life without concern for her own health, seen by Carolina as undermining her attempts to protect Luc's health. Luc has a talent for drawing, but his images are very dark, twisted and are monstrosly threatening. Another character is Josephine, a battered and abused wife of the tavern owner, Serge. Amande and Josephine form the core supporters of Vianne's shop and her magic. And magic it is, since she can tell beforehand what chocolate goodie is the favorite of the person to whom she is offering it. There are secondary characters, such as the elderly man and his little dog. He is attracted to a widow who lost her husband in the First World War and with the aid of two women escorts, remains in mourning.

The story line unfolds as a struggle between the Mayor and Vianne. Even though the tale takes place for a period of over a year, it seems the village is in a perpetual state of overzealous Lent, of extreme depravation and sacrifice. The conflict across the square is one of the church passing out piety: the store, potions. The Mayor plots various strategies to close the chocolate shop. He uses the naïve, browbeaten and fearful Priest to his ends. He also uses the abusive husband Serge, after Josephine leaves him to stay with Vianne and Anouk. But, alas, the Mayor's attempts at rumor and boycott are thwarted by the arrival of boat people at the village's river dock. Here enters another kind of wanderer, the river rat named Roux. Like Vianne, he moves from place to place. Unlike Vianne, he seems not to have any desire to change the social environment. He denies that Vianne can foretell his favorite chocolate goodie. He remains aloof. However, a bond begins between them. He attempts to get rid of a squeak in the shop's front door. When his boats are burned by the demented and abandoned Serge, and Vianne offers sympathy for his loss of place, he responds with a shrug that the boat was merely a way of moving from one place to another. He remains non-committed.

The burning of the boats is the denouement of the story. Vianne holds a private birthday party for Amande, with the grandson Luc in attendance, all of the shop's supporters and Roux. Everyone revels in the delicious morsels. The party re-gathers at the boats to the despair of the Mayor, who tells Serge something had to be done to stop this abandon. Luc accompanies his grandmother home, where she dies. He returns to his house when his mother is repairing his father's bicycle for him. Serge takes the Mayor's comment as permission to spread gasoline on the boats and set them afire. With the near loss of Anouk, who was asleep with Josephine on one of the boats, Vianne gives up. The sly north wind rises and she packs to leave. But Anouk does not want to wander anymore, something Vianne knew but would not admit. A struggle between them as they descend the stairway causes the pottery urn to crash to pieces at the bottom of the stairs. The ashes are scattered and are no longer contained. Anouk tearfully agrees to go with her mother, but Vianne sees this as an omen. She hears a commotion in the kitchen to find Josephine teaching the store supporters, including Carolina and Luc, how to prepare the confections for the day. Vianne decides to stay. In the meantime, Serge visits the Mayor and when he tells him what he did, the Mayor comes unglued. Later the Mayor is attempting to coach the Priest for the following morning's Easter service. In frustration, the Mayor seizes the homily draft and dismisses the Priest, telling him he will have the corrections by morning. But he cannot focus. To his dismay he sees Carolina and Luc enter the shop from his window. All is lost for him. He is distraught and feels hopeless. Later that night he breaks into the shop through a window to destroy the chocolate goodies in the display window, only to accidentally taste some and falls into an uncontrollable reverie of chocolate consumption. He is found early Easter morning asleep in the shop window by the Priest and Vianne,

who promises not to tell anyone. He apologizes to the Priest that he did not finish the homily. The Priest enters the pulpit and speaks from the heart for the first time. He speaks to the humanity of Jesus, asking all to abandon resistance to the joys of life and against the exclusion of others and for the inclusiveness of love. The village is transformed. The story ends with a warm south wind bringing Roux back to the village to fix the unfixable squeak in the shop door.

As with most good stories, this one exists on a number of levels. The superficial one is that of good versus evil, although that is an overstatement. The story line has Vianne as an agent of change. The story line has the Mayor holding on to the status quo. The story line is a conflict between that of pleasure in its simplest form – chocolate – and piety in its orthodox form – Lent. Through the course of the year from one Lenten to the next, Vianne shows a number of villagers that pleasure is not a sin. Vianne gives hope to Luc when he begins sketching a portrait of his grandmother in the shop without the knowledge of Carolina. He leaves his dark sketches behind. Josephine is given an authentic new life working and living in the shop. From being a haggard looking kleptomaniac in the beginning she becomes a beauty. The Mayor, through his forced piety, attempts the same transformation by reforming Serge, but to no avail. He is the one who set fire to the boats, undoing all that the Mayor attempted. Even Carolina, his secretary, knows his wife will not return, and she assures him the villagers would understand. The Mayor's world is collapsing with his wife leaving him, his hold on the piety of the village disintegrating and his attempt to counter the transformation by the chocolate shop with his pious approach for Serge's reformation. Although he did not set fire to the boats, his intolerance and rigidity gave permission for the act. So, is this simply a contest between good and evil, between pleasure and piety? Is it also a socio-political commentary on religious rigidity overtaking the lives of unthinking people? Well, yes and no. Yes in that the story line reveals those elements. No because there is a deeper meaning, an underlining story.

Since in my mind film is a visual art form with a supplemental dialog, there are several images that transmit meaning. At the opening of the film, some boys are rolling a bicycle tire with a stick. It goes out of control, hitting Carolina and Luc. She scolds the boys with considerable vigor. It is later when Luc is wiping away the remains of a nosebleed that a clue is given to the concern of Carolina. Her repairing her dead husband's bicycle for Luc is an image of her relaxing her anxiety about his health, just at the time of her mother's death and the boat fire.

Another image is that of the doors. At the beginning of the film, the Mayor sees to it all are in attendance at the church service and closes the doors. When the doors are unexpectedly flung open by the clever north wind, he is the one who closes them. With all behind the doors, he believes his extreme piety is safe. His world is safely embodied in the obedience of the congregation. He sits, constantly monitoring the congregation. The church is a sterile, loveless space, filled with fear and apprehension. Opposite the church square is the chocolate shop. This door is left open for all who wishes to enter. Once inside, Vianne and Anouk are warm and welcoming. There is an exotic feel to the space, what grouchy Amade initially named the décor as "early Mexican bordello." When Roux arrives, he attempts to fix the door's squeak, which is not successful. When he returns at the end of the film, it is again the door, the opening to a new way of life for him, that is the image of his transformation. This time Vianne offers him his favorite chocolate. Also in the course of the story the shop door is violated by Serge, an image of the hostility toward what the shop represents. He breaks into the shop attempting to take Josephine home with him. Once upstairs, he breaks through that door to seize her.

The more subtle images are in the imaginary kangaroo that Anouk needs to take care of because of an injured leg, and the urn with Vianne's mother's ashes held as sacred by her. Each is a symbol that keeps a hold on the two. Each one, the needy kangaroo and the urn of ashes, is the underlying force that keeps the two moving from place to place. When Vianne and Anouk were moving with the north wind, they each wore red capes with hoods. The color red is full of symbolic meaning. In ancient Jewish tradition, red signified love, sacrifice, sin and salvation in various contexts. In the early Christian tradition, red was the symbol of the Holy Spirit, of charity and martyrdom for faith. All of these meanings and symbols of the color red express some aspect of Vianne's wanderings. She brings love and charity to the places she inhabits. She and Anouk's lives are in a sense a sacrifice to that journey, a form of martyrdom. For those whose lives she transforms, many see her efforts of salvation and redemption to be in reality a sin because it is unorthodox. And coupling the red cloaks with the sly north wind, she and Anouk embody the Holy Spirit as it removes the obstacles preventing love and charity to prevail. That the sly north wind should appear during the time of Lent is the breath of fresh air needed by a fearful and oppressed village. And it came at no one's request. The final image is the church square. Through the story, the church square is virtually empty. At the end, it is filled with jubilant and fun-loving villagers, including the now-relaxed Mayor, who seems to begin a promising relationship with Carolina.

Yet, even with the freeing of the sly and clever north wind for others – perhaps the Holy Spirit – Vianne and Anouk remained trapped. The Easter resurrection of the spirit had little meaning for them. The kangaroo and ash-carrying urn held each one back from remaining in the transformed place. Much like the wanderer Roux, they remained uncommitted. The smashing of the urn was the omen, a message from her mother that it was alright to stay. After Vianne decided to stay, the sly north wind rose again. This time, she opened her window and flung the salvaged ashes to the wind. Then, the warm south wind brought Roux back to the village. Finally, with the return of Roux, Anouk's little kangaroo hops off, now well and no longer needed by her and disappears from her fantasies.

That this story is a fantasy is quite true. It is something of a fairy tale. Where Vianne gets her money to furnish and decorate the shop and to obtain the necessary chocolate supplies is not essential to the story. What is essential is the power of chocolate to do miraculous things to people: to change their lives, to change their attitudes toward one another. The Priest, once unshackled by the oppressive piety of the Mayor, is the messenger of grace and forgiveness. The medium of that grace is in the joy of being open to the possibilities that something as simple as chocolate can offer. In a sense, in this fairy tale, chocolate is the Eucharist, since we see the Priest officiate that rite only to Serge. All we see is his role in the confessional, usually forced by the Mayor.

Each character in the story finds their respective self-hood, including Vianne, Anouk and Roux. That this story is placed in the context of Lent is no accident. Lent is the forty days (excluding Sundays) before Easter. Too often Lent is seen as a period of deprivation, which was the Mayor's understanding. Yet, there is an alternative aspect to this season: that of grace, that practiced by Vianne. One of my colleagues when in college heard a minister preach a Lenten sermon that did not suggest denial, but rather acceptance. In this way, one can take on something that would help to change, to turn around. In taking on rather than denying, the chance for grace without warning, like the sly north wind, just might enter one's life. Was Vianne the agent of change for the village? She was to the extent she liberally opened the door when the orthodox door was closed. In reality, by the acceptance of joy as a part of one's life, even during the caution of Lent, each villager was an agent of change. The sly north wind opened the doors of the hearts and minds to allow chocolate to grace the starving palates of those most in need. So,

even as I would not recommend the over-abundant Better than Sex Chocolate Cake, or the daily visit to my favorite chocolate pusher, I would recommend answering the sly north wind when it blows our doors open to new possibilities in our lives. In this season of Lent, let us answer the call of our own sly north wind.

Amen.