

Pie Eating Contest

Thanks! No one could have guessed from the appearance of such an energetic crowd of aggressive eaters that you would eschew your competitive impulses sufficiently to allow a leisurely old dessert eater like me to devour two pies ahead of you. I keep trying to tell people that it was **not** rigged, but unless somebody really saw the energy that you poured into that contest I don't think they would believe me.

I couldn't help but appreciate the fine manners and careful eating habits that you all have developed through the cultivated atmosphere of our dining hall.

By contrast, I seem to have slobbered all over my plate, and my face, and the table, to say nothing of the T-shirts of the people sitting next to me. Actually, I have wondered if my grubbing instincts to get my nose right into the bottom of things have not been furthered by my experience in administration. Certainly I have to "contend with the whole pie" at once. And I need to have a consummate appetite for things that might otherwise end up in a mess.

To tell you the truth, my biggest learning from this contest had to do with the psychological and moral responses to our honor code. I honestly stuck to most of the rules and certainly kept my hands tied behind my back the entire time.

But I did have to confess that I spilled some on the table and even a bit on the ground, though I tried to eat most of it up. How could I accept the prize, though, when I not only knew I had not eaten every last apple slice but also heard people telling me that they had seen some infraction of the honor code?

I couldn't. In spite of the judges' declaration that my plates were the cleanest, I forfeited the prize tennis racket to Susan, a very deserving, hard-eating person, and competitive second place finisher.

Seriously, the experience led me to reflect on some of the unusual qualities and dilemmas that we face with our honor code. I think that it is both unusual and highly significant that we have a community of people here at Guilford that is so conscious of our ethical responsibilities to one another that we take matters of personal and intellectual integrity to heart.

In a culture where the predominant (pseudo) ethical code seems to be primarily: "How could I get the most for number one?", or "What's in it for me?", or "How can I get around the system without anybody catching me?" -- it is refreshing to be in a place where people really think about issues of fairness and responsibility to the rights of others. We know that it is sometimes, perhaps many times, hard to live up to that concern. But I believe it is a concern that we all share in the deeper layers of our conscience.

What really seems tough (and here I stray away even further from the subject of pies) is the matter of acknowledging having witnessed someone else's violation. Even if we can be critical of the "What's in it for me?" ethic on the grounds that it's narcissistic and selfish, it is harder to acknowledge the limitations of an ethical which says in effect, "I should not rat on my buddy."

I think we have a fairly deeply ingrained American conviction that we should "live and let live" or, to use the old Biblical metaphor of doubt: "Am I my brother's keeper?" The ethical dilemma here is one in which we want to preserve the freedom of integrity of other people to live their life as they choose, even if that means violating forms of social contract, while at the same time wanting to preserve a viable society in which people have sufficient respect for one another that they can be trusted at their word and believed in cooperative efforts for mutual good.

The events of the twentieth century, particularly the atrocities of the German holocaust, (to say nothing of violent and bigoted forms of destruction of life closer to home) have taught us the serious limitations of that "live and let live" philosophy. Carried very far, it serves to legitimize brutal and dehumanizing forms of behavior on the grounds that "it's none of my business."

No, in some sense I **am** my brother's keeper. And I am my sister's keeper. At least I think that is true in the sense that each of us has some responsibility for the quality of the community that we create around us. And central to that community needs to be a form of compassion which goes beyond a sentimental willingness to let "everybody do their own thing," to a willingness to "speak the truth with love" in confronting forms of injustice and personal violation with courage and sensitivity. The truth is hard. But ultimately both love and justice depend on it.

Wow! It seems like I have come a long way from pies. I guess this is an example of reflection on experience -- a quality I hope we all are developing with some refinement. It's also a way of saying thank you for challenging me last night. It's great to have a lot of fun and learn something at the same time.

With best wishes for a spirited community (which means both fun-loving and moral).

William B. Rogers
President



Photo by Jack Mohr

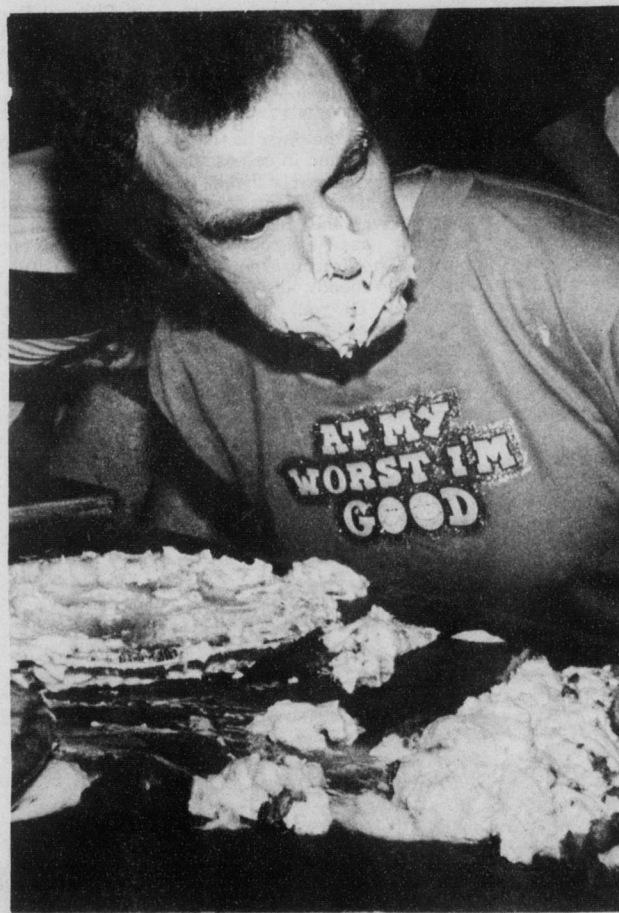


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