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The Magic of Sobremesa

You are enjoying a delicious meal, maybe home cooked or in a special restaurant, surrounded by your favorite people – who are they? Family, chosen family, friends, colleagues? You adore these people – or at the very least enjoy them. The meal was delightful, and a good time was had by everyone. Here in the U.S., more times than not, that is the end of the occasion, maybe a few goodbyes, a kiss on the cheek, a “let’s get together soon” or “see you tomorrow”. You leave the table, stomach full, content, time well spent with your community, and now you rush on to whatever is needing to be done. What if there was more? What if, instead of hurriedly paying your bill, saying your goodbye, rushing on -- you stayed? What if you let yourself relax, talk with your people about anything: the issues of the day, your last vacation, the needs of your community, maybe the color yellow. What if the conversation didn’t end with the food, but grew deeper by stopping and sitting and talking and relaxing and sharing? Think of it, having a glass of wine, a digestif or a coffee and allowing time for real connection to your relationships, communities and ideas – to take a load off and allow your body to mellow out and digest your meal. Wouldn’t that be magic? Enter the Spanish custom of Sobremesa – the magical time of gathering and talking after a meal has been shared: a time to nourish community, relationships and ideas; to relax and digest.

Though the literal translation of Sobremesa is “over the table” it’s meaning is all about nourishment. Not just food, and sustenance, but feeding relationships, ideas and relaxation. Relationships are integral to being human, they give us a greater sense of purpose, lower anxiety, strengthen our immune systems and increase our empathy – we are happier when we have meaningful relationships and community. They create a sense of belonging; remind us we are part of something greater than ourselves and are a place for social connection. They have helped us survive throughout the history of humankind. In the U.S, my culture, it takes work to create and maintain relationships, it oftentimes feels too structured and forced. I long for unstructured time to sit and talk without outside stimulus, entertainment or agenda. Where there are many ways to nourish, grow and care for our relationships and communities – doing “nothing” is not part of the U.S. culture and we are missing this form of connection with each other. Think of the joy felt by simply “being” with a loved one, an interesting colleague, a new friend, or a family member. Think of how it feels to let conversation flow, sharing ideas and slowing down. Magic.

Human beings have been sharing ideas and storytelling for millions of years, it is core to our being Human. It increases our understanding of each other and our world. The ability to connect in this way gives us insight into new perspectives, helps balance the load of life and creates solutions. Having a space to freely and authentically share with our people is sacred. Having a safe, unstructured place to wonder and talk about what is on our minds in the moment is sacred. It can be light and joyful or deep and pensive – if it is not rude or disrespectful it has a place during Sobremesa. How would it look for you knowing there were opportunities to experience life in this way, warm and welcoming – no need show up with pre-determined talking points, agendas or expectations of performance – simply what’s on your mind right now? Magic.

I can't help connecting the social attributes of Sobremesa to our emotional and physical well-being. I think about this often, how much more relaxed would I be? Relaxation does wonders for human beings; decreases anxiety, stress and inflammation are only a few on the long list of positives. When we relax after eating a meal it eases digestion and increases the amount of energy and nutrition we receive from food. Sometimes it can feel stressful to fit relaxation into our daily lives. We have meditation, mindfulness, vacation, spending time with loved ones – the marketplace is full of wellbeing you can purchase – all of which can take a lot of energy to accomplish, leaving us feeling drained. Yet slowing down, being in the moment and not “doing” something is rare. Our culture in the U.S. does not make room for unstructured relaxation – there is no place for it to live without working hard to make it happen. What if it was part of our everyday life? What if we let go of rigid schedules and strict ideas of “wasting time”? How wonderful would it be to know and trust that those moments will happen, they are just part of life? Magic. I know my mental health would improve, connecting with my people, working out my thoughts and ideas, hearing other's ideas, opinions, stories – jokes! This would fulfil an emotional and physical need that in the U.S culture feels fought for.

Food, for humans, is intrinsically linked to friends, family and community. We need both food and social connection to flourish. Sobremesa is a custom that satiates this need, not only in Spain and other Latin countries, a lot of cultures around the world have this custom woven into their lives. So, the next time you find yourself filled with wonderful food and surrounded by your people – ask them to stay awhile, see what magic happens for you.