



Meditations in the Kitchen

PRACTICES IN THE ART OF CONTEMPLATIVE COOKING

Join me in the kitchen.

One of the great joys of cooking is that it can be as simple or complex as the cook and the setting.

In the practices that follow, however, you're invited to begin where you are and embrace simplicity as a way to free the mind to attend to other things — the contemplative aspects of chopping, dicing and stirring.

The practice of paying attention

INHABITING YOUR BODY

Sometimes when we cook, it's quick and easy. There are hungry mouths to feed and we're tired. This practice asks for a different focus by cooking something you're interested in eating and then paying attention to your embodied experience.

Begin this practice by choosing something to cook that is fairly simple, but with a lot of chopping or kneading. Set aside enough time so that you can notice sensations in your body.

You may consider doing it on a weekend or a night when you'll have a bit more time to experiment. You may even ask family members to join you, if you think it would be enjoyable.

As you chop veggies or knead dough, pay attention to the way you feel in your body. Notice any tension, and any feelings of anxiety or, in the other direction, restfulness. You may find yourself racing through the steps or distracted by recipe notes. Do you stand straight, lean or slouch? Are you dancing!?

If your mind begins to criticize or wander, gently bring it back to your body and your actions.

There is no perfect way to do this practice. We simply bring our gentle awareness to each moment.



Questions for reflection

What sensations or feelings did you sense in your body?

Where did you feel them and did you have feelings in one area more than another?

What criticism or judgment, if any, was present while you were cooking?

Was it difficult to bring attention to your body?

Was this experience positive, negative or neutral?

The practice of remembering

A FAVORITE MEAL

This practice is for re-creating and tracing memories. So often, our cooking and eating are informed by childhood and family memories, but we aren't fully aware of how or why.

Cook one of your favorite meals and practice mindfully recalling familiar aromas and tastes. You might reflect on the setting, the time of year and those you shared them with. This may fill you with warmth and gratitude.

For many of us, however, remembering is painful. Perhaps you don't have any fond memories and so the idea of this practice is filled with longing and grief. If this is the case, please be gentle with your emotions. You may decide to skip this practice. Or, if you're feeling inclined, you might decide to begin today to create new food memories and cook for yourself with love and warmth.

Regardless of whether you cook an "old favorite" or something new, bring your attention to all of your senses.

Notice flavors, textures and aromas, and see if you can place whether it meets your recollection. If you are no longer able to eat a dish as it was originally prepared (whether due to health changes, allergies, etc.), notice what that experience is like, as well. Frustrating? Sad? Filled with compassionate acceptance?

Simply stay present.



Questions for reflection

What about this meal is special?

Who ate it and when? Describe the setting.

Where did you get the recipe?

How does this meal, its familiar aromas and tastes, make you feel—emotionally and physically?

If you chose to create a new food memory, what was the experience like?

Was this experience positive, negative or neutral?

The practice of pleasure

SEEKING BEAUTY

This practice asks you to explore food by pursuing beauty. Many of us have, at one point or another, experienced the joy of fresh produce from either our own gardens or local farmers markets. We relish these experiences that keep us close to the land, as well as the attractiveness of fresh-from-the-earth veggies.

As an exercise, find the most beautiful food you can afford at your local grocery store and buy it. It can be fresh, frozen, prepared, refrigerated – the only requirement is that it be attractive to you.

Pay attention to what catches your eye. Is it the color on a box of crackers? The vibrant green of a head of spinach or the deep amber of a perfectly golden sourdough loaf?

Notice how you're drawn to beauty and whether it impacts what you choose to buy.

Once home, decide how to prepare it in a way that preserves the beauty of the food. Use your imagination, a quick Google search or the index of your favorite cookbook for ideas.

Many of us may have a hard time with this practice and a lot of internal judgments ("Is it "good" or "bad" that I think this is beautiful?"). Please set aside your inner critic and simply explore why you find something beautiful and what it stirs within you.



Questions for reflection

What food did you select as the most beautiful? Was it difficult to find something?

How did it make you feel to prioritize beauty and pleasure when buying food?

How did you choose to cook/prepare the food?

What factors influenced your decision? Where did you find a recipe and was it easy or difficult?

Was this experience positive, negative or neutral?

The practice of gratitude

CREATING COMMUNITY

This week, when shopping, whether at the grocery store or farmers market, offer thanks to a vendor or the cashier. Really pay attention to them, look them in the eyes. Notice how she or he responds.

Choose a specific, meaningful way to transition from preparing to serving your meal. It can be anything from lighting a candle, a moment of silence, a poem or a reading. Ask those in your household to join you in the practice.

At the end of a meal, give thanks to the person who prepared it. Be specific and note those qualities and flavors that truly stand out.

Think about a time when you were served a delicious, thoughtful meal. Note what about that memory stands out—who was present, who prepared it, what was served. Pay attention to whether any memories surface that link feeling cared for to gratitude.

“Cooking and shopping for food brings rhythm and meaning to our lives.” – Alice Waters



Questions for reflection

What quote, scripture or mantra feels good to repeat and helps you feel connected to gratitude?

Write a prayer of thanks or words of gratitude to offer before or after each meal. Explore whether you feel gratitude about the source of your food and to whom.

From the exercises, write about the meal you were served. Who was present, who prepared it, what was served?

Did any specific memories surface that sparked feelings of gratitude?

Was this experience positive, negative or neutral?



About Judith Alfano, LCSW

Judith Alfano, MSW, LCSW is a therapist in private practice, both online and in the coastal communities of New Jersey. Her research and professional interests are spiritual formation, the integration of psychology and religion, and women's health and well-being.

Judith's therapeutic approach is deeply relational, grounded in psychodynamic theory and integrating narrative and somatic therapies, parts work and the wisdom of spiritual care.

Earlier in her career, Judith held key roles in marketing, HR and communications at organizations ranging from an established energy company to higher ed and a tech start-up.

She later transitioned to clinical mental health, working in multiple counseling centers where she supported those experiencing anxiety, grief and those impacted by trauma and abuse. Along the way, Judith explored other paths to join her community in healing and recovery.

One of those paths is cooking. Judith is interested in the intersection of cooking, spirituality and mental health, and completed a professional culinary program as well as continuing education courses in functional nutrition and integrative care for cancer survivors and those with chronic illness.