

The Spoon

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Abstract

A spoon is an ordinary and easily recognizable thing. As a utensil for eating and feeding, a tool for cooking and serving, or perhaps a collection of memories, this article reflects on a spoons' place in our lives. The shape of a spoon and other significances are considered.

Keywords: *spoon, utensil, roundness, collectibles*

As a thing, a spoon is immediately recognizable. Its rounded edges and small, shallow, concave bowl on the end of a handle mimic a cupped hand and outstretched arm. It is an everyday utensil, a piece of cutlery, and, along with fork and knife, it is part of a place setting in many cultures. The spoon may appear to us as just an ordinary thing, yet it is one of those things that seem almost essential to our lives. Its value and significance may not occur to us until we are left without one.

I am sitting in class about to eat my yogurt. I reach into my bag to grab my little silver spoon, but instead of pulling out a spoon, I pull out a fork. In my frantic rush to get to school on time, I had mistakenly taken a fork out of the cutlery drawer rather than a spoon. "It'll work." I think to myself. I gently plunge into the yogurt. The fork scoops up some yogurt but most of the yogurt slips through the prongs of the fork. I raise the spoon towards my mouth with my other hand cupped beneath and hope that I don't spill. This would be so much easier with a spoon.

It is true that a spoon is a tool among several possible tools that we may use to feed ourselves. If anything, one could argue that feeding is a spoon's primary purpose. The spoon scoops, holds and carries food, whether it is yogurt, soup, cereal, or ice cream, from a bowl into our mouths: one spoonful at a time. And yet a fork can do the task as well by skewering or sometimes scooping, then carrying and transferring food from one place to another. However, using a fork to eat when you really need a spoon may become a messy endeavor. Attempting to eat yogurt, or

liquid or semi-liquid foods with an implement other than a spoon may be cumbersome or near impossible. A normally simple and unobtrusive act can become a nuisance or a spectacle.

There are big spoons and little spoons, tablespoons and teaspoons, slotted spoons and soup ladles. But the spoon usually found at the dinner table is of a particular size: mouth size. Its smooth rounded surface let my lips, tongue and teeth comfortably embrace or support some part of it while I gently tip its contents by its handle into my mouth. The spoon's blunt edge and smooth surface means we need not to worry as we put it to our mouth: unlike the pointed prongs of a fork, the pointy tips of chopsticks, or the dangerous edge of a knife. As the spoon retreats, I am free to savour the tastes and textures of the yogurt, soup, or ice cream.

"Here comes some pear...!" The spoon is often the first utensil used to feed an infant ready for nourishment beyond breast milk or formula. The parent scoops up a small amount of milky cereal, or pureed vegetables or fruit, then gently and perhaps with some ceremony brings the spoon to little one's lips and mouth. It is not unusual for the parent's mouth to open as an accompaniment to this gesture, mimetically encouraging baby to do the same. The mouth of the infant is tender and round, and so is the baby spoon! Today's infant spoons are manufactured using gentle, pliable materials like silicon. By its smoothness and roundness, the infant takes in a mouthful of food between her lips, hugging the spoon, probing it with her tongue, lips squirting out, playfully, idly, eagerly, or unwillingly. The parent may use the spoon to scoop again some of the puree or pabulum that has gathered around the outside of baby's mouth, then try again. In our early lives as human beings, the spoon may introduce us a friendly and sometimes playful engagement with the surrounding world with its gentle gestures of nurturing and nourishment. The roundness of the spoon may constitute "the origin of confidence in the world" (Bachelard, 1969, p. 103). We may be not only fed with nutrients but also with security and trust as given by the unassuming roundness of the spoon. In the last days of our lives or by the sickbed, the spoon may again deliver simple foods and medicine. To feed another with a spoon is a gesture of nurturing, but also of intimacy, healing, and care.

As growing children, we may be taught how to hold our spoon and other cutlery in a particular way, and in a particular hand. Learning to hold a spoon properly by its handle—not by the tip, nor at the bottom, but somewhere around the upper middle—is about developing "good manners." There may be other such rules of etiquette. One should not slurp from ones spoon. One should not take a big spoonful of soup then swallow it all at once. Rather, one must take small sips, patiently maintaining a slow rhythm of scooping and eating, then scooping again.

While spoons are primarily recognized for their instrumental uses in the kitchen and at the table, spoons may sometimes take on other significances. In Western culture, an antique silver serving spoon may be a family heirloom, passed down from generation to generation to be brought out of its velvet-lined box only on special occasions. As it is used to serve out mashed potatoes or a warm casserole over a big holiday dinner, the silver spoon is once more quietly interwoven with fond memories of conversation and laughter among loved ones. Even with strangers, after sharing serving spoons and a meal together, we may no longer consider one another as mere strangers. Such are the convivial possibilities that may be generated by a spoon.

For some, a set of spoons is not simply a collection of eating instruments; rather it is a collection of memories.

I stand in my Nan's front hall, eyes gazing up at a wooden frame full of spoons. There are probably over 30 of them; silver, shiny, and to my Nan, I'm guessing quite special. It is an opulent looking collection. The dainty spoons are elegant

and refined, delicately detailed in their own unique way. I like the one that says Scotland, with a twizzle-like stem and a royal crown at the top. As Nan walks towards me to give a hug, I ask her why she has spoons hanging on the wall. "My dear," she begins, "let's sit..."

Decorative teaspoons hang neatly in rows, collected over many years of traveling the world. They wait patiently for a grandchild or other visitor to ask about them so adventures can be retold and memories can be shared. Collecting souvenir spoons is a Western tradition dating back to the turn of the twentieth century when it became possible and fashionable to travel for leisure. The shadow-box display is a visual reminder of one's travels, each spoon marking a place or perhaps an event. Yet once a spoon becomes a *souvenir*, a thing remembered, a bit of memory, it will rarely be used, if at all, for a utilitarian purpose. When we collect a thing, our interest may move beyond its ordinary usage. Yet, there may be something about the spoon itself, the thingness that initiates and encourages people to grow their collection over time. Its meaningfulness as a collectible may be still built on its meaningfulness as an everyday thing. We may wonder, why collect spoons? Why not a fork or other utensil? Perhaps a spoon's collectability lies in its utter commonness, its portability, its harmless roundness, its gesture of holding, and its entanglement with most every food culture. It may be the humble spoon-ness of the spoon that suggested this ordinary thing as a collectible—an extra-ordinary item that crystallizes the essential aspects of our shared human being across places and cultures.

The truth is, a spoon is not just a spoon. It holds meaning, value and sometimes memories to those who hold it in their hand, or hang it in their home. Such a simple thing is often so much more than meets the eye, especially when we reflect on its place in our lives. Can you imagine if Mary Poppins did not have a spoon? A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. Like many other things in our lives, we may not fully appreciate or understand a thing's significance until we don't have it when we need it. As service for the table, as a handy tool for the kitchen, or as a collection of memories, a spoon is something special.

References

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