



Kitchen Table Cultures: What's Missing From Smart People's Problem-Solving Methodology?

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By Renault Catalani

Our family's from a kitchen table culture. Many Old Worlders are. Eire and Indo, Persian and Paisano, Lao and Luo, all the same, gather to eat and laugh and sorrow. We always have. Sundays are best.

My most vivid early memories are of generous Chinese merchants,

gentlemanly German sea captains, jocking Pilipino steamer crew, all packed between our martial Madura grandpa, our war-wounded Uncle Attie and his scary shaman Auntie Kris. Everyone's passing plates for Momma's steaming Thai jasmine rice, her soothing sayur lodeh soup and her world-famous crispy chicken ayam. Fragrant as heaven. Poppa let me sit nearest him, because I missed him so. Always missed him so.

Many important things are learned around our robust kitchen tables. Naturally, we acquire good table manners, the primary paradigm for civil social interaction. For behaving well, we kids got praise from new and familiar faces. For properly paying attention to the social expectations of important others like our grandpa who gave us life; like our mom who made this meal with the love of her hands; like our pop who worked hard to bring home the bacon; and of course his Sunday guests by whom he made a living - for behaving well before these Big People: We got desert. For behaving badly, we got exile.

Kids and adults got a lot more, from the ritual and the practice of several generations from several social streams gathering for food and conversation. Every Sunday. Sure we did back then, and sure we do right now.

Indeed, I'm pretty sure that most of the essential life skills I own today were earned early around our mom's kitchen table. No overstatement.

Take problem solving. Fixing broken stuff is central to living well. Healthy and happy communities require solving well, day after day, problems from a child's tears to a teenager's drama to adult troubles at a global scale. You could say that our species are basically serial problem-solvers. And I want to say: Our fundamental paradigm for successfully settling every kind of beef, is our Sunday dinner table.

Complexity and problem solving

We talk a lot about East Portland's ethno-cultural complexity. About why our neglected far east-end neighborhoods are so civil, instead of mayhem. About how David Douglas High's teachers manage to educate so well, kids speaking 70 languages. All that with so little money.

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I'll bet it's because of complexity. Complexity managed well by broad-shouldered problem solvers. Take our family's homeland, Indonesia. We do 700 living languages daily, as if 360 degree problem solving is normal. Indeed, it's precisely because we're bursting with crazy complexity, that we learn from blessed childhood through graced grandparenthood, how to eat and talk together. And jah'illaah, we eat really well and we speak super pretty too.

My point is, on this side of our deep blue Pacific, when you and I are troubled by hard American societal issues, it might be wise to simply take a seat and sit back into that surest of human repast platforms: Old World Sunday suppertime.

Take for example, the awful disparities dogging Portland's ethnic minority communities. This big bad problem persists despite decade after decade of Oregon's best social engineers applying our most earnest legislators' and our highest courts' sternest mandates.

Now, I'm not suggesting that all of us sitting down to our mom's fragrant nasi goreng and crispy chicken will finally settle us on what we need to do. Tidak-tidak. It's not that. Gathering across her sturdy kitchen table, across generations, across social classes and cultural communities, answers only the question of how. How we get to solutions. How.

I'm not saying that our crazy Indo cuz' Freddie (he lays concrete driveways and patios) or that our Hmong grandpa Shoua Lee (he deals with this grand continent's native spirits) scored at the tip-top of PSU Urban Studies Professor Nohad Toulan's class. Not them. No way. And it's not that either Thai rajini Nim Xuto (she can calm my nastiest enemies) or that guitarman Gauri Raj (he can make chicas cry in Nepali, Hindi, and Spanish) can pull blue cops or raven-robed judges into our side of any eastside shoving match. Tidak-tidak. Not at all.

All of us sitting and eating and talking together, is the how. It's how we get to tomorrow. It's the rub that rounds all sharp stones.

How we get solutions

Neurologists say that when you're happy, endorphins flush your brain. Like opiates, endorphins produce feelings of well-being. Our cousin Freddie gets that kind of rush from a perfectly slanted cul-de-sac driveway. It's how he is. His oldest son's wife's younger brother gets joy from reviving my asthmatic old Toyota. From fixing broken parts. Our pop got great joy from fixing broken hearts.

Scholars get joy by thinking through hypotheses. Priests get and give joy by talking to God. Across ages, across cultures and classes, one brain's endorphin buzz may not be the same as another.

Our mom gets a lot done when we take our seats in her kitchen. Along with making us healthy and happy, and expecting mindfulness to the gentle restraints of Old World civility - she readies us to see problems then solve problems from our many-many points of view. Compare this readiness to that of a local, state, or national policy huddle around their downtown conference room table. No doubt there's enormous intellectual pleasure in discussing what dense data's behind which policy proposition. Surely there's lively debate over what sound metrics best calculate which cool outcome. It's all good. By them.

But it begs the Big Q: Would their conclusions move an old Hmong shaman, were he at their table? Would they light up our middle-aged blue collar Indo? Would my cousin's Mexican wife feel included in their conception of our city's, our state's, or our nation's shared future? Would their Spasian (Spanish-speaking Asian) kids see themselves there?

About 50 years ago, a tight group of well-dressed, well-educated New Englanders got America into ugly warring over Cuba and Viet Nam. They didn't mean to. It was all working out wonderfully well around their mahogany table and inside their great minds. Shared endorphins. But their lack of social complexity created enormous gaps in their collective capacity to properly assess and competently solve presenting problems. As result, these really good guys brought bitterness across the Caribbean and all over Southeast Asia. Generations of misery. Ask anyone living there, or here.

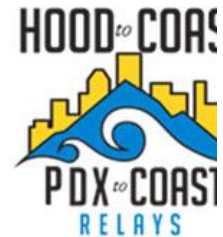
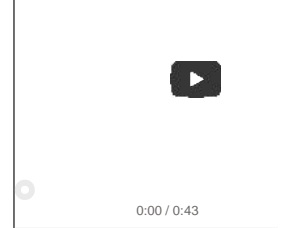
And of course these man produced what we now commonly call Group Think. Truckloads of science on this phenomena have been produced in the decades between then and now. No doubt bringing enormous brainy pleasure to those discussing it, evidently only among themselves.

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Turn the pages

Many-many important lessons we've all learned -- we Eire and Indo, Persian and Paisano, Lao and Luo -- around our mothers' robust kitchen tables. We learned to pay proper attention to the emotional and social expectations of others -- or we got brow-beat. Or banished.


Across millenia, across our energetic Sunday supper tables we've also practiced and practiced solving problems, across generations and across social streams.

If your familia's out of practice, next Sunday is a good day to recreate this very core societal ritual. It neither takes too much time or that much money for all of us problem-solvers -- big and little; old and young; west-siders, outer east and north enders; Portlanders of all abilities and disabilities, of all faiths and ethnicities -- to pull off a big dinner together.

Imagine what we can't imagine, waiting our turns for Momma's steaming jasmine rice, her soothing sayur soup, and her world-famous crispy chicken ayam. Fragrant as heaven. Then imagine taking that to work, early Monday morning.





 **Ronault LS Catalani** · Board Member, Board Counsel, Civic Engagement program at Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization
 Terima kasih (I offer our love -- what our folk say when English-speakers say thanks) to Mr. Foster and Skanner News for giving voice to a bigger Us, and better Portland. And thank you to KGW for recognizing this essential part of participatory democracy when honoring Bernie and Bobbie Fosters as OREGON HISTORY MAKERS on Christmas Day 2013.
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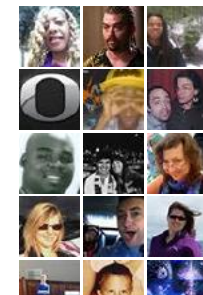
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