

*"If thou tastest a crumb of bread, thou tastest
all the stars and all the heavens."*

— Robert Browning

An Homage to Bread is the 15th in a series of Labor Day essays inviting a moment of reflection on living a more meaningful, more mindful life

About the cover painting:

Boy with Basket of Bread, by Evaristo Baschenis, ca. 1655-1665. Baschenis was an Italian Baroque artist in the late seventeenth century, best known for his still life paintings. Almost without exception, he restricted himself to two themes: kitchen scenes with foods and utensils, and musical instruments. His work was a change from the then more familiar themes of religious or mythological events. Born in Bergamo in 1617 to a family of several generations of artists, Baschenis previously lived the provincial life of a priest. This painting, in the public domain, is in the permanent collection of the Currier Museum in Concord, New Hampshire.



About Robert Browning:

Browning is almost universally acknowledged as the source of the above quote. Browning was an English poet and playwright in the Victorian era, who began writing poetry at the age of 12. While most of his poems are quite lengthy, he is most remembered for some of his famous brief aphorisms:

"Grow old along with me!" "A man's reach should exceed his grasp."
"Less is more." "God's in His heaven—All's right with the world." One modern critic, Harold Bloom, has said that Browning is the most significant English poet since the major Romantics, surpassing his great rival Tennyson and even major twentieth-century poets, including even Yeats, Hardy.

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An Homage to Bread

Metaphor for Life

By: Lois Sekerak Hogan, Ph.D.



Currier Museum, Concord NH Baschenis 1600s

*My hands plunge into the soft lump of dough as
I begin to push and knead... push and knead...*

coaxing the heap of dusty flour, egg, oil and salt into a pliable pillow.



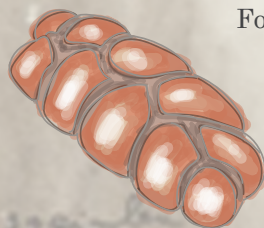
This is no task for a Mixmaster or KitchenAid.

My hands alone can feel when the flour has been absorbed to the right degree -- the time recommended in a bread recipe is often inaccurate, affected as it is by temperature, humidity, and type of flour.

For years I made bread weekly: whole wheat and sourdough were family favorites. Today I'm making challah, a traditional Jewish bread from my friend

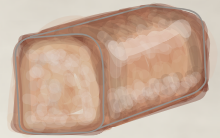
Stacey's recipe. It's an all-day process. After punching down the dough and letting it rise again multiple times, I begin to twist and weave three strands into a braid, as I once braided my daughter's hair. I feel at one with men and women who for eons have worked flour into myriad forms to feed their families.

A seemingly simple task, I am struck by many lessons making bread has gifted me, of which perhaps the biggest is patience. Bread-making is the antithesis of instant gratification. It demands that I slow down and wait. Wait for this miracle of flour and yeast to work its alchemy. While much of my life is a blur of endless activities and to-do lists, I savor the meditative moments of stillness in making bread.



For me bread carries a deep emotional connection & brings back memories. Squishing Wonder Bread into little doughy balls in grade school.

Drooling at the first whiff of freshly baked cinnamon buns from mom's oven on Sunday mornings. The in Paris when I first tasted a real croissant



It's the one food acknowledged in my family's prayer before meals:

"Thank you for our daily bread."

Stacey's recipe goes back centuries and was carried to America by immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe. But bread is embedded in every culture of the world, expressed in an alphabet book of shapes and textures. Anadama, Bagel, Brioche, Baguette, Bannock. . . Ciabatta, Challah, Chapati . . . Focaccia, Johnnycake, Lavash, Muffin, Naan . . . Pita, Pretzel, Pumpernickel, Scone, Tortilla, Waffle, Zwieback.

Bread is more than food: there's a reason it is called the "staff of life." As a metaphor and symbol, it feeds us in many ways. Bread is so integral to our lives that the word became synonymous with money. To earn one's living is to earn "bread." We speak of how much "dough" we have in the bank. A "breadwinner" brings home the paycheck. We build community and friendships by "breaking bread" together.



And then there's romance, as Omar Khayyam rhapsodized:

"A loaf of bread, a jug of wine, and thou."

Bread is so beautiful that we even hang paintings of it in museums!



Hours later, as I take the golden loaves of challah out of the oven, the mouth-watering aroma fills my kitchen, and I imagine French toast, grilled cheese sandwiches, bread pudding -- and then cut a thick slice, slather it with butter and melt in a prayer of gratitude.

Thankful for *the simple things in life*
that feed my body and my soul.