The Forgotten Power of the Dinner Table

On my last day of lecturing at the seminary in Malaysia, a younger faculty member invited me into his home for dinner. He had three young children, so we ate early together with his wife, listening to the kids chatter away, explaining a favourite TV show. We ate chicken wraps with yoghurt and chilli sauce. When the kids went off for their bath, we had tea.

It's not an accident that this should be such a precious experience. A new global study, examining the relationship between shared meals and wellbeing across 142 countries, has found that people who regularly eat with others report significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and positive emotions. The connection is comparable to other major factors like income and employment.

Isn't this something we already know is true, instinctively? Eating together is such an ordinary human activity. It requires no fancy tech. It is simply the ancient practice of gathering around a table. Meals together create belonging and connection. They enable us to practice conversation and build memories. The dinner table is one of humanity's oldest social technologies.

And yet, increasingly, we eat alone. The new research found that, in the 2003-2023 period, Americans were 53% more likely to dine solo at every meal in a given day. That's 1 in 4 people not having anyone to eat with.

Eating together is only one symptom of a loss of the practices of social connection overall. Robert Putnam noted this in his 2000 classic *Bowling Alone:* but has recently reasserted the same thesis. More Americans – and presumably Australians, too – spend time alone at home with every passing year. Not only is the more formal invite to share a meal on the wane, we are less likely to drop by for a chat than ever before.

Why did this become so difficult? There is a great deal of performance anxiety around hospitality. Do I have the right food, and have I catered to all the quirks of my guests' palettes and dietary requirements? Is my house good enough? Do I have the time to clean and prepare my house?

Many of us would think nothing of inviting a friend to meet at a café or restaurant, yet hesitate before saying, "Why don't you come over?" Allowing someone into your home is a deeper welcome into your life – and perhaps that is where we baulk.

This is another example of the loneliness paradox. Modern society has enormous communication capacity but declining connection. Our contemporary experience of sociality is one of infinite possibilities ("I could connect with almost anyone in the world!") but of a growing failure to have the real connections with people that we need to thrive. Friendship has become more efficient, but less intimate.

Christianity emerged from Judaism, which remains a faith marked out by its practice of shared meals. Jesus' ministry was full of meals – something that we can see particularly in Luke's gospel. Jesus not only celebrated the usual festival meals, but he was known for eating with tax collectors and people of ill repute, for feeding crowds picnic-style, and for his banter over the table. He ate with his disciples the night before he died, turning the meal of bread and wine into a commemoration of his suffering. He ate with his disciples after he had risen from the dead. It is no mistake that one of the first descriptions of the early church involves them breaking bread together in their homes (Acts 2:46).

The new thing that Jesus makes a feature of his movement is eating together with people regardless of race, nationality, or social class. If they share in him, then eating together enacts that reality. The New Testament describes the practicalities of getting Jewish and Gentile Christians together with their different dietary habits. It wasn't easy to do!

There is a simplicity to this that we perhaps have lost. There were no gourmet chefs; it was just simple food. In fact, the meals that matter most are often the simplest: soup and bread, takeaway pizza, sausages on the barbecue. Chicken wraps with the kids.

What is precious is the invitation. There’s a way in which welcoming someone into your home is saying ‘I’ve got space and time for you in my life’. It’s a gesture of trust in a society that doesn’t trust easily – and of generosity in a culture of consumption. A home-cooked meal tastes of that openness, even if it is the most basic of recipes.

We spend a great deal of time searching for solutions to the loneliness epidemic. We know now the terrible impact of our isolation. But one of the most effective responses has been sitting in our homes all along: the dinner table.

I don't remember every meal I've eaten on my travels. I barely remember what I had for lunch last Tuesday. But I suspect I'll remember those chicken wraps in Seramban, Malaysia for years. That evening, a family welcomed me into their ordinary life.