

## Listening Is an Act of Love

At our dinner table at home, there is a tarnished metal wreath in the center that holds four candles, one for each of us. My mom makes dinner for our family each night and asks me to light the candles as we set the table. Every night as we leave the table, we each say something that we are grateful for, and my little sister uses a cone-shaped snuffer to put out the candles in the wreath one at a time.

This is where our days intersect: in bowls of thick yellow soup with rice on the bottom, in grilled cheese sandwiches, in kale salads with pomegranate seeds. When the sun falls below the trees, we crane to watch the sky become a kaleidoscope through our kitchen window. As dark settles in, we are insulated within the narrow, candlelit walls of our dining room, trading stories and laughter and music with those around us. My childhood has been marked by these moments of refuge from an impatient, fast-paced world. I am grateful for this table where I have grown up feeling loved, warmth emanating from each dish my mom labors over. Our moments here are an attempt to recenter, pausing between work days and night walks to reflect on what we are grateful for.

I have always loved to stay at the table after dinner and listen. Listening to my parents and their siblings at the table has felt like a guilty pleasure since I was younger, hoarding stories and news as I sit towards the edge of the table. I have learned about my cousin Susannah's three years working in education in Bhutan and amassed dizzy dreams of a career in foreign service. I have felt transported to the lives of countless anonymous people as my mom brings the stories of her physical therapy patients home with her. I have quietly listened as one of my best friends Neve divulges details of her family structure that I didn't know before. It is growing up at this table, when I was too young and hesitant to chime in but eager to listen, that has given me the gift of hearing other perspectives. It has taught me how much you can learn by just listening.

Our table is a place to welcome people home to. It is here that I bring my friend Emery home to dinner and we tell my parents that we are dating. When I am nervous like this, I feel with my feet for the shape of my dog Milly lying under the table. After this night, my mom puts a fifth candle at the table to light when Emery comes for dinner. This fifth candle serves as an open invitation, a reminder that a crowded table is a good thing. We light it again when my friend Izzy comes over for poached eggs and strawberries on her birthday.

Every night when we put out the candles, I watch the smoke curl towards the ceiling as my dad waves his hand trying to stop it. He doesn't want the ceiling to stain. I would almost like

it if the ceiling was stained: it would be a testament to years of gratitude, enveloping us in its familiarity as we sit down to eat each night.

Our tables have been planted in different settings: a faded walnut table, tucked into the quiet cove of our backyard in bustling Northern Virginia, a plastic camping table, assembled at the top of Mrazek Trail, a cherry-wood table with an extra leaf, ready to be deployed in our sunny Bend dining room. But regardless of its setting, dinner has always been rooted in listening, understanding, and reflecting. I have come away from this time in my life as a more empathetic, balanced, and reflective person. From reminders that listening is an act of love, and from the practice of this moral at our table, I learned to be a compassionate listener. Listening is a sort of empathy that emerges from understanding the significance of each voice present.

I want to carry this empathy forward as I pursue a career in international relations and diplomacy. There is value in welcoming our neighbors to join us in discussion, listening to—and hearing— their stories, and creating a common ground. Throughout my life, I hope to return to dinner tables as a way to cultivate connection, gratitude, and understanding. I want to actively foster compassion and unity, as I have learned it at our table.