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Taste and See

“A person acquires taste not by accident, but by spending years training his or her eye and learning how to make good judgments.” —Letitia Baldrige

It all seemed so straightforward on the internet. I’d watched one of those time-lapse videos, the ones that record a process from start to finish, like a chick emerging from an egg or a flower opening. This particular video was three minutes long and showed how to decorate pies by cutting and shaping the top crust. Under a perfectly positioned camera, a pair of perfectly manicured hands manipulated a perfectly round ball of dough on a perfectly flourless, shabby chic butcher block countertop. A pinch here, a twist there, a few cuts, and you have a thing of beauty.

The first time I’d seen hands roll out a pie crust was over three decades earlier when I watched my grandmother’s experienced hands use a glass rolling pin to roll them out on her laminate kitchen table. The fifth of ten children, she’d been raised in the Appalachian Mountains, where pie was both necessity and art, the understood measure of a woman. When her siblings gathered for a reunion each summer, no one could predict which second cousins and great aunts would be there, but we never wondered whether

there would be pie. As sure as the nieces and nephews would play softball and the old men toss horseshoes, we'd eat pie—butter-scotch, blackberry, cherry, rhubarb, and chocolate custard.

About two hundred miles due south of where I live now, cake is more the order of the day. Raised in the mountains of this area, my husband, Nathan, shares the regional preference for cake, although he has not yet turned down a piece of pie when I offer it—nor has anyone else. Still, knowing that his heart (and tongue) have been trained to prefer cake, making pie has become something of a personal venture, a skill I curate for the sake of memory and good taste. When I saw a video promising “8 WOW-Worthy Pie Hacks,” I bookmarked it for a rainy day.

I like to make pie when the sky is gray and there's a chance of precipitation. A cold drizzle will do, but I prefer a coming storm, the ominous gathering of dark clouds, a perfect foil to the warmth and security of a well-stocked kitchen. A Saturday afternoon is especially good as it's that window of time when the work of the week is over, but the responsibilities of the coming week have not yet descended on our family. Somewhere around two o'clock, after lunch is over and before hunger calls them back, I shoo my children downstairs to where a fire roars in the wood stove and my husband lies dozing in front of a football game. Back in the kitchen, I turn on the radio, make a cup of tea, and give myself to making pie.

One such Saturday came just before Thanksgiving; I pulled up the video on the computer in my kitchen and set to work. Within a few minutes, the dough had come together, and after chilling it, I rolled out several bottom crusts, carefully transferring them to glass pie plates. Then I began the top crusts. For one pie, I cut even strips and wove them under, over, under, over to form a lattice. For another, I braided dough together to ring the outer edge. I cut out decorative shapes and formed small masterpieces, the whole time

relishing the sensory nostalgia of bits of dough wedged beneath my fingernails. Soon the pies were ready for the oven.

And that's when the trouble started.

In the video, the step of baking had been reduced to a single screenshot consisting of bold white letters B A K E superimposed over the image of a pie. Easy enough. Form your pie and then simply put it in the oven. But when I checked on them less than thirty minutes later, I discovered that my perfectly sculpted, perfectly pricked, perfectly Pinterest pies had already browned in all the wrong places. To add insult to injury, the bottom crusts remained the pale sickly white of raw dough. The filling that was supposed to simply peek through the whimsical cutouts had boiled up into a blistering flow of fruit lava. What I saw in my oven looked nothing like what I had seen on the video, and it was not good.

À La Mode

This wasn't the first time I'd been frustrated by something online. In fact, whenever I logged on, it increasingly felt like I was navigating a netherworld, uncertain of where the next click would take me or whether it would deliver on its promise. Links to heartwarming stories turn out to be ploys to garner page views. News articles are often nothing more than partisan commentary disguised as journalism. And when I search for treatment for common health problems, the results leave me with more questions than answers. *What if calamine lotion isn't enough to heal a bug bite? What if it's not even a bug bite? What if I wait too long to seek care—what if I've already waited too long? Maybe the answer really is to align my electromagnetic fields and balance my gut bacteria . . .*

When I was a young stay-at-home mom, the internet was a lifeline. From the comfort (and isolation) of my kitchen table, I'd

read the news headlines, keep in touch with friends, browse the latest fashion trends, and discover better ways of tackling my daily chores. When Nathan's work took us overseas to New Zealand, email helped us to close the gap between our parents and their year-old granddaughter. Eventually, the connectivity of the digital infrastructure opened doors for me to work from home.

But as technology has advanced and become incorporated into almost every moment of my life, a funny thing has happened. Instead of making life simpler, it often makes it more complicated. Instead of choosing to get online, I now have to go out

IN A SINGLE day, I can encounter more data, more opinions, and more ideas than my grandmother did in an entire lifetime.

of my way to unplug. I have to disable alarms on apps, unsubscribe from email lists, and take digital fasts. "Social" media has become decidedly antisocial, the joy of connecting with friends dampened by the inevitable political debates, clickbait headlines, and pop-up ads that dominate my feed. In a single day, I can encounter

more data, more opinions, and more ideas than my grandmother did in an entire lifetime.

Most of the time, my frustration with the digital world is as ethereal as the radio waves that bring it to me: a niggling irritation, a mental and emotional fatigue, a classic love-hate relationship. But sometimes, it has real-world consequences, as when I tried to make my WOW-worthy pies. Or the time I rearranged my week's schedule after a friend posted a weather report predicting eight to twelve inches of snow—a report that was a year old.

In the past, the possibility of changing my plans due to an outdated weather bulletin was relatively low. Forecasts came from a select number of sources: local television and radio stations, newspapers, and for those old enough to remember, telephoning Time and Weather. And while none of these sources could guarantee the outcome of their predictions, I didn't have to question the timeliness or integrity of them.

But over the last decade, smartphones and social media have dramatically changed how we access and share information. Today's digital experience relies heavily on average people like you and me to produce and distribute content. Every Facebook post, every Instagram photo, every Tweet, and every YouTube video adds to the information that's available to other users. Multiply that by an estimated three billion users worldwide, and what was once a welcome source of connectivity and information has become a muddy, torrential flood, sweeping us along with it. As a result, neuroscientist Daniel Levitin observes, "Our brains are busier than ever before. We're assaulted with facts, pseudo facts, jibber-jabber, and rumor, all posing as information. Trying to figure out what you need to know and what you can ignore is exhausting."¹

In other words, the conflict, confusion, and exhaustion you feel when you log on is the challenge of having to constantly make choices about who to listen to and who to mute, of figuring out which news outlets are reliable and which are driven by partisan agendas. It's the challenge of knowing which of our hundreds of "friends" are true and trustworthy. It's the challenge of needing to realize *before* you invest precious time and energy that a three-minute video probably won't be enough to prepare you to make WOW-worthy pies.

Becoming Wise

Although we experience this informational overload in the context of the digital age, the need to sort through data is not unique to it. New technologies have certainly complicated and altered how we receive and engage with information, but at root, we're facing the same questions that human beings have faced since the garden of Eden: *How can I know who and what to believe? How can I make choices that lead to a successful life? How can I avoid mistakes? How can I know what is good?*

And since the garden, philosophers from Socrates to Hypatia to Gandhi have been trying to answer these questions, to make sense of a world that is often chaotic, manipulative, and quite simply, overwhelming. One of the most famous of these “lovers of wisdom” was Solomon, a king who ruled over the nation of Israel during the tenth century BC. According to scriptural narrative, Solomon encountered his own crisis of knowledge shortly after inheriting the kingdom from his father David. Facing a tumult of political and social unrest, including defending his throne against internal family rivalries (and you thought your Facebook experience was rough), he also had to navigate relationships with neighboring countries and gain the trust of a nation composed of fiercely independent tribes.

SOLOMON asked for the ability to know the difference between good and evil. He asked for discernment.

Soon after Solomon became king, Jehovah appeared to him in a dream, telling him to ask for whatever he wanted. Foremost on Solomon's mind was his inability to make good decisions. “LORD my God,” he replies, “. . . give your servant a receptive heart

to judge your people and to discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of yours?"² Surprisingly Solomon does not ask for sustainable peace or for the challenges of leadership to go away. He did not ask for a long, prosperous reign. He asked for the ability to weigh the challenges he would face and make wise decisions. He asked for the ability to know between good and evil. He asked for discernment.

Broadly speaking, discernment is the ability to sort between a host of options and pick what is good. It carries the idea of judging the merits of something, being able to distinguish between good and bad and what is best. As Solomon writes later in the book of Proverbs, the goal is:

To know wisdom and instruction,
 to understand words of insight,
 to receive instruction in wise dealing,
 in righteousness, justice, and equity;
 to give prudence to the simple,
 knowledge and discretion to the youth.³

In other words, discernment does not change the challenges we face; it changes our ability to face them.

When I think of how quickly the world is shifting around me, I know that I am unable to keep up with it. And while I don't have the responsibility of governing a nation, I understand the weight Solomon felt. With him, I question, *Who is able to do this? Who among us can sort through all the noise? Who can*

DISCERNMENT does not change the challenges we face; it changes our ability to face them.

survive the waves of new information, new data, and new decisions crashing over us every moment of every day?

But like Solomon, I also know that I can't escape the context I've been placed in. Even if I were to unplug, move off grid, and somehow attempt to isolate myself from the modern world, the modern world would still find me. And when it did, I would be ill-equipped to deal with it. No, as much as we'd like to, there's no going back to a simpler time, no escaping the world we live in. So we must become people who can face it. We must become people who have insight, who can recognize justice and equity, and who can make good decisions. We must become people who can spot goodness when we see it.

Need to Know

But to do this, we first have to acknowledge how much we don't know. And this is where our modern context does present a unique hurdle to developing discernment. Of all of its benefits, one of the drawbacks of the digital age is how easily we mistake information for knowledge. Because we can find the answer to most of our questions, we can begin to believe that we are smarter than we actually are. Because we can find an instructional video to help us perform just about any task—everything from car maintenance to, yes, even making pie—we can begin to believe we can actually perform these tasks.

But tips and tricks are not skill and expertise. Information and data are not wisdom and knowledge. And knowing about something is not the same as knowing how to do it or whether you even should.

If I'm honest, I can't blame a three-minute time-lapse video for how my pies turned out. Sure, the video oversimplified the process of pastry making, presenting an edited version of reality,

but I can't escape the fact that *I should have known better*. I'd baked enough pies to know that you have to watch them carefully. I know that you have to rotate them while they're baking and shield the crust to prevent it from burning. I know that any slight change to a recipe—even a change to the shape and design of a crust—can alter the process entirely. No, I couldn't blame the video. The problem was that I wanted the process to be as easy as it appeared online. I wanted to believe that life could be so simple, that all I had to do was follow a few easy steps and everything would be beautiful. I wanted to hack my way to a perfect pie.

In this sense, my desire for a simple solution to a complicated process revealed more about my own simplicity than anything else.

Because here is the difficult truth: there are no shortcuts to skill and expertise. The ability to produce beautiful pies requires more than information—it requires practice and learned proficiency. A video may be able to show me how to do something, but it can't make me a person who can actually do it. Similarly, there are no hacks to discernment. No three easy steps to follow, no lists or tricks or tips to ensure that you'll be able to make good decisions when you need to. In order to make good decisions, you must become a discerning person, a person skilled in wisdom and goodness itself.

And to be these kinds of people, we must be humble enough to be willing to learn.

This is why Solomon continues in Proverbs 2 by calling us to listen “closely to wisdom . . . [to] call out to insight . . . [to] seek it like silver and search for it like hidden treasure” (vv. 2–4). Why he tells us that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; [but] fools despise wisdom and discipline” (1:7). People who do not think they have anything to learn, won't. People who are confident in their own ability to make good decisions shouldn't be.

And people who refuse to humble themselves before the One who is wisdom Himself will never become wise.

But to those who will, to those like Solomon who cry out for understanding, God makes this promise: If you acknowledge your need, if you recognize your inability, if you commit to the process,

you will be changed. You will become a person who can face the challenges of this world with clarity, purpose, and confidence.

THIS IS WHAT God does when people ask Him for discernment: He gives it.

Because this is what God does when people ask Him for discernment: He gives it.

Solomon describes God's promise of discernment, saying, "For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He stores up success for the upright; He is a shield for those who live with integrity" (Prov. 2:6–7). The New Testament writer James confirms this. "If any of you lacks wisdom," he writes, "he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

He will not chide you; He will not shame you for all you do not know. He will not laugh at your mistakes or mock your failed attempts. This God, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, this God will simply teach you what you need to know. Out of His generous heart, this God will show you the way of goodness.

Taste and See

We ended up eating my ugly pies because the truth is that no matter what it looks like, pie is still *pie*. My daughter even declared the blackberry one the best I'd ever made, and her compliment

was more than platitude. It *was* one of the best blackberry pies I'd ever made, and the reason had nothing to do with what the crust looked like. It was the filling.

To make blackberry pie, I use wild blackberries foraged months earlier. In July, when the sun is high and the days are long, I wander over to a friend's pasture where blackberries grow along the fence row and down to the creek bottom. Once I've picked a few gallons, I come home to make jam, a cobbler or two, and freeze the rest for a time deep in winter when we've nearly forgotten that sun-ripened blackberries exist.

The trick to a good blackberry pie is the texture. You want something firm but not dense, gooey but not runny. Because of their naturally high water content (which is further intensified by the freezing process), blackberries have the potential to produce a soupy mess. And when this happens, the anticipation of slicing through rich flaky crust quickly gives way to the disappointment of having to slurp your pie with a spoon.

But because wild blackberries can be tart, you also have to give attention to your sweetener. A cupful of sugar may be enough or it could be too much depending on the amount of berries, how ripe they are, and the seasonal rainfall. Like texture, getting just the right blend of bittersweetness can be challenging—you don't want a sour blackberry pie, but you also don't want a syrupy sweet concoction that obliterates the tang of the berries.

With both these things in my mind, I had gone to the freezer to discover a further complication: I had only one bag of blackberries left, barely enough for a pie and a thin one at that. So on my way upstairs, I grabbed a jar of blackberry jelly to stretch the berries. Back in the kitchen, I rolled out my crusts, mixed the berries and jelly, adjusted the sugar and thickener, and popped it in the oven. You already know how the crust turned out, but by some culinary miracle the filling was a perfectly firm, perfectly sweet, perfectly

THE GOAL OF discernment is not to simply avoid the evil in this life; it is to learn what is good so that we might embrace and enjoy it.

blackberry foretaste of heaven.

As we look at the chaos of the world around us, it would be easy to count it up as a loss, to see its burnt edges and soggy bottom and simply toss it in the trash, but to do so would be to miss the goodness of the world God has made; to do so would be to miss the best blackberry pie you've ever eaten. Because here is the crux of the matter:

the goal of discernment is not to simply avoid the evil in this life; it is to learn what is good so that we might embrace and enjoy it.

Listen to the words of Solomon again:

Then you will understand righteousness, justice,
and integrity—every good path.
For wisdom will enter your heart,
and knowledge will delight you.
Discretion will watch over you,
and understanding will guard you.

.....

So follow the way of the good,
and keep to the paths of the righteous.⁴

The promise of discernment is the promise of life, the promise that we might reach stability in a changing world. It is the promise that we might have insight in the midst of confusion, that we might find healing in the brokenness. It is the promise that we might taste and see that the LORD truly is good.