



**JOHN 15**  
CHALLENGE

# DINING TABLES AS BATTERING RAMS

---

*By Luma Simms*

PHILOS  
PRIMER



# FOREWORD

---

by Robert Nicholson

*Philos Primers* are brief studies on critical topics that go to the heart of our mission to promote positive Christian engagement in the Near East. This special edition, part of our 2021 **John 15 Challenge**, examines the unique culture of hospitality in the Near East through the autobiographical account of Luma Simms.

In the following pages, Simms, a Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, recounts her childhood in Iraq and rhapsodizes over its hospitable culture as lived out among Iraq's indigenous Christians. Simms also details the challenges she faced integrating her Eastern culture of generosity and community into her life in the United States.

Through Simms' moving story, we aim to show the importance of hospitality in the lives of Christians everywhere. This primer challenges those of us living in the West to embody the words of John 15 and love one another by adopting Peter and Paul's admonition to offer hospitality. By cultivating a culture of openness and prioritizing the needs of others, Western Christians can experience the same healing effects that Simms identifies in her own Arab culture.

# DINING TABLES AS BATTERING RAMS

---

The tiny kitchen is crowded with women deftly chopping, frying, and plating a variety of authentic Moslawi dishes to be served to mourners gathered in other parts of the house. Small at three years old, and constantly in the way, I squeeze and dart through the mass of black skirts and dresses that fill my nana's kitchen. The light dim, and darkened further by the smoke of frying pans, women clad in grief. Aroma of potatoes, meats, dolma, kibbee, rice, stews, onions, and spices brighten the thick noisy room, perfuming hot sweat given off by the oven, stove, and bustling women. My paternal great-grandmother, Nana Salma Daoud, a widow for 42 years, died; and my Nana Rahael's house is full of relatives and friends invited to the after-burial luncheon. This is our custom—no mourning without eating and weeping. We mourn with those who mourn, we sit silent, sometimes we whisper about the dead. The children are admonished if so much as a giggle escapes their lips. We do not leave those who lost the dead alone; we descend upon them. We press into the lonely void and fill it with our exhaled breath. Our lives, like breath, evaporate, but our place remembers us still. We drink coffee with no sugar. We embrace the bitter black that swishes in our mouths and in our hearts. The bitterness reminds us of the death and departure of our loved one. The mourning men and women, old and young, sit with the family of the dead. The children are shooed to another room, the garden, wherever, to prevent their levity from violating the sorrow. The sisters and aunts never sit, they are busy serving tray after tray of coffee; other relatives bustle in

the kitchen preparing the food—offering it up, to those gathered.

With no counter space to spare, a pan of hot frying oil is placed on the ground in some corner of my nana's kitchen. I decide to move out of everyone's way, but in doing so I back into the pan of hot oil and plop into it—my butt sizzles and I shriek, piercing the silence throughout the house. The entire kitchen and house is thrown in a tumult as women holler, howl, and wail—just as they did at the funeral. Luckily, my maternal grandmother—Nana Victoria—is a nurse. In her pocket was a vial of penicillin powder. She broke it open, combined it with Vaseline to create a paste, and coated my bottom with it; she saved me from a permanently scarred butt.

Life in Iraq was never without people, and certainly never without eating and drinking. Following an afternoon siesta, people went out, socializing in outdoor spaces, meeting each other at a club (*nadi*), or visiting each other in houses. If they worked late, they still found time in their week for others. On rest days or holidays they picnicked—one way or another, they gathered. People sought people. Feeding one another meant loving one another. This was the custom of the land: poor, rich, and everyone in between. Of course, there were big events with invitations: baptisms, engagements, weddings, first communions, funerals, and other special occasions and gatherings. But everyday life was lived with others, almost constantly, and odd was the loner family who kept to themselves. No one was too poor to offer hospitality; if one had tea, bread, and cheese then that's what was offered. The best we had was what we gave, even if

the family had to do with leftovers and bread and tea for the rest of the week—because the best was given away, not kept for oneself. This was true for the Muslim population as well as for the Christian community; it was the ethos of the entire society. Life was communal, and food was eaten with others. “Arab hospitality, it’s not a cliché, those are not empty words,” said Anthony Bourdain while visiting the Middle East.

The food varies between countries and regions within them; they vary even further, depending on the occasion and means. There are commonalities across the Middle East, but every country has distinct dishes; to a great extent this is owed to the geography and history of the area. In that region of the world, hospitality is a mark of honor; poor and rich alike exhibit it. Middle Eastern food and drink is the blood that circulates throughout the body providing nutrients and energy to the entire organism—life couldn’t be lived without it. The hard work of planning, cooking, and baking is nothing compared to the joy of pleasing and feeding our guests. The polite thing to do is always to set guests and their needs and desires above our own. It is not only loving our neighbor as ourselves but *above* ourselves. Hospitality, the reception of others with food, is the lifeblood of society; without it, man is isolated and lonely. Hospitality feeds bodies and souls.

The habit of association *is* learned primarily within the family. What is this habit of association? Association is the *action* of one life interacting with another, creating a human bond —association is the essence of human community: from the foundational community of the family to larger communal spheres. The *action* of eating

and drinking with others energizes this bond and brings it to life, such that *in the very act* of eating and drinking with another person a shared reality comes into existence. Practicing the action of interacting with others *is* the habit of association; it is existing within an institution greater than oneself and acting within it for the good of the whole. When children within a family watch those around them do this over and over again, they are catechized in the habit; they learn how to interact, why it's important, and also internalize how to be a person who interacts *within* his or her own family. Thereby, the child learns the necessity of family as an institution. In *Centesimus Annus*, Pope John Paul II wrote that “the first and fundamental structure for 'human ecology' *is the family*, in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person.”

This is the bosom from which children are habituated into a hospitable heartbeat. Personality matters, of course; some people are naturally more gregarious and generous than others. But within this framework, association is not a choice and the responsibility cannot be shirked with the excuse of temperament. It may be lived out in a more discreet manner in the introvert, but it will nonetheless be lived out. And yes, sometimes it is due purely to obligation, or habit, rather than desire or choice.

I don't remember my parents ever going out on dates, *per se*, when I was growing up. I do remember they spent a lot of time together, with me and my sister, and with family and friends. Our marriage and family culture

is different from that of the Americans. So much so that my family went through a dramatic culture shock when we came to America in the late 1970s. I was convinced that to be a well-assimilated and integrated American woman, I not only needed to distance myself from my parents and their Iraqi friends but also to reject everything about my Iraqi-Christian culture. In some sense, I had to “revolt” against who I was before, in order to enter into a new social order. It took me many years to understand and to practice the art of bringing two cultures together within myself—and eventually into my family life.

For a long time, I tried to decipher the key differences between American family culture and my Iraqi-Christian subculture or the broader Middle Eastern immigrant culture. The whole of the Middle Eastern culture tends to downplay the individual for the sake of the entire family, household, and clan. One of the first lessons I learned growing up in my family is “life isn't just about you,” but, “you are connected to others and what you do affects many around you.” This rule applied to significant life decisions, such as which career path to choose, or who to marry, all the way down to seemingly trivial practices like not eating the last apple in the refrigerator until everyone in the house has been asked if they want it first. This was the area that caused me the greatest agitation and difficulty after I came to America, where I was surrounded by a different message: “think of yourself and your desires first.” That's when I started thinking that maybe hospitality was just a personal choice, and maybe I didn't have to participate in the heart of my culture.

This constant consideration of others was most evident

in the very generous and hospitable Arabic-speaking culture. From the beginning of our time in America our weekends were full of gatherings—someone was always coming to our home or we would go visit other families—even though we lived 30 miles or more from most Arab people. I still remember those drives from Orange County to Los Angeles. On our return late at night after a sumptuous gathering, my dad drove while my mom and sister slept. In that quiet with only the hum of the car driving down the highway, I looked up into the night sky, gazing at the moon and the few visible stars within the Southern California atmosphere and wondered if things only existed because my mind apprehended them. If this was true, if reality *is* only because my mind tells me it *is* and not because something was objectively *there*, then maybe if my mind apprehended something else, then that would become my reality. But no matter how hard I attempted to envision a different reality—one in which I was back in Iraq among all our family—I could not bring it into existence.

And the reality I did apprehend continued without pause, as did our socializing. This Arabic cultural quality I'm describing was manifested in multi-family picnics and camping trips, day trips to local lakes, formal Arabic parties with Middle Eastern entertainers, a variety of feast days and celebrations. Eventually, a critical mass of Middle Easterners formed closer to our home. Once the distance gap closed, the frequency of these hospitable practices increased: weekday gatherings over *meze* (Middle Eastern small plates like tabouli, hummus, baba ghanouj, yogurt with mint, minced garlic and cucumbers, and the like) with a drink (usually *arak* or whisky), or evening tea-time which is a daily occurrence. We lived in

community to the fullest extent possible, so much so, that I used to quarrel with my mother over it. I was becoming more individualistic, fiercely jealous of my "me-time." I still am. My mother on the other hand—so given to hospitality—was forever saying "yes" to people dropping by for *chi* or *qahwi* (tea and Arabic coffee).

The act of cooking a meal for someone other than yourself and your immediate family, of cleaning the house, of setting the table, the dusting, vacuuming, mopping, vegetable chopping—all acts great and small are acts of service-oriented toward the other. Many times in response to my question: "Why are you making that dish?" my mom would reply with, "that's so-and-so's favorite dish." Or to my constant complaint of there not being enough salt in the *tabouli*, she would snap with, "so-and-so has high blood pressure and has to watch his/her salt," and then came the usual refrain from my parents: "Stop thinking of yourself!" Times without number I remember my mom instructing me, "When you have people over, Luma, you make what pleases them, not what will please you." Similarly, my paternal grandfather, Ghaib, used to instruct my father, my aunt, and all my uncles saying, "When you feed someone, you feed them better than you feed yourself; when you give a gift, give more than you would give to yourself." That's simply how they were taught, and that's how my father taught me and my sister, too.

One of our other customs is to prepare food that can be stored in the freezer so as to alleviate anxiety, and make a spontaneous tea-time, or an unplanned dinner quick to pull together—we are always ready to serve something, even if it's just coffee and a piece of chocolate. The

presupposition here is an open door and a generous heart. More fundamentally, this is receptivity—a society where people are always open to receive one another. No one we knew had an understanding of hospitality being restricted to formal or semi-formal dinner parties with no children within earshot, or inviting a few people over once in a blue moon and serving them one meager dish. In my adult life, I have met many Americans who operate this way. And yet any Middle Eastern woman will tell you that if there aren't at least three types of dishes on the table and more than anyone can possibly eat, then you're not really thinking of your guests, but rather, putting your own comfort above love and service to the people who have entered your home. This is almost unthinkable to the average American who thinks of people as autonomous selves and who serve them as individuals—whether that be in how many people they invite over, or the portion sizes of the meal. There's a reason that most restaurants in America serve in single portions not “family style.”

Hospitality flows from the receptivity of people; the outward actions of those who value receptivity are the offering of food and drink. As with all things that flow from a value or closely-held belief of what's important, the outward acts can be done willingly or grudgingly, but they are done at all times. Whether one “feels like it” or not. Having a home closed to other people means having a heart closed to other people, and to be thus would be a shame and a failure in Middle Eastern culture. A friend of ours once told my husband that I had “used [my] dining table as a battering ram to open the doors” of the small church we were attending at the time. And I remember thinking, if one can barely persuade Christ-

ians to take Peter and Paul's admonition to offer hospitality, to be open-handed—then how can one possibly persuade the culture at large?

The hospitable quality of our culture plays an important role in the mental and physical health of individuals and families. It's not that Arab people don't have hardships such as depression, marital problems, rebellious children, and so on. They do, but their response to these difficulties is attenuated by their near-constant association with each other, especially through acts of hospitality. The *action* of interacting with others creates human bonds; add to this the *action* of eating and drinking with others, and those bonds spring to life, and a *shared* reality comes into existence. These energized human bonds and shared reality powerfully cut against the isolation and loneliness of the individual human person, pulling them instead into a social group—a community. Especially when in distress, this community—where two or more are gathered—opens the individual person to receive love, comfort, and advice from another. It acts as a buffer to the harshness of life in this world. One can observe this energy of the social gatherings in our subculture, whether these gatherings be small or large: The men will interact with one another, discussing and arguing, while the women will gather, giving each other advice and support. These acts help tremendously to distract from the temptation of constant introversion. Hospitality heals.

Many times, when we experience marital or family problems in this contemporary culture, our first response is to turn in on ourselves and focus on our own needs and unfulfilled desires. In contrast, hospitality exercises the

habit of coming out of ourselves; it forces us to turn toward others, to serve, to prefer others above ourselves, and to avoid that temptation to turn inward. I witnessed the healing effects of hospitality in my parents' marriage. It was more than just having a temporary distraction from marital problems. Many times, when a hospitable act by one or the other came in the midst of a marital rift, my parents came toward each other later with a fresh perspective, a calmness, renewed openness, and a more controlled self-will. I've even seen couples come to a party in evident discord with one another, only to be nudged by friends and family into reconciliation.

The tangible healing effects of hospitality in my Arabic culture are imprinted upon my soul. I want to share them with the whole world. Often, as I work in the kitchen cooking, baking, and preparing for whoever is coming over, I am seized with this intense and fiery desire to invite the whole world to my table and to feed everyone. Years ago, when I first told this to my husband I received a "you are weird" look, but as time has passed in our marriage, my American husband—whom I've had to habituate to hospitality—just smiles understandingly at the notion.

Chris Arnade in his book *Dignity: Seeking Respect in Back Row America*, expounds on the commitment of the back row (the poor, the uneducated, those on the margins) to their communities and hometowns. In the book, Arnade has a chapter titled, "If You Want to Understand the Country, Visit McDonald's." One can even say the restaurant serves as the backbone of the book, just as it often serves as the place that holds together the communities he visited. Why is McDonald's so important

to the back row no matter where you go in the country? Arnade gave this answer: “McDonald's was a space they could be themselves on their own terms. It was a place to momentarily escape the drama and chaos of the streets, a place that allowed them to rejoin society on the same terms as everyone else.”

To understand the back row, Arnade went to the McDonald's in every community he visited. Why? “Because the people I wanted to learn from spent their time there.” What stood out to me most in one McDonald's story after another is that McDonald's was a hospitable place, in at least two senses: The restaurant chain itself is receptive to all types of people from all walks of life, providing a space where they can linger for hours on end; secondly, the restaurant provides a space where people can be receptive *to each other*. There they meet to socialize, to pray, study the Bible, play bingo, and to eat and drink together. I've defined hospitality as a valuing of one's receptivity to other people. Chris Arnade's *Dignity* is saturated with hospitality, because back row America is saturated with people who recognize its importance, and are filled with a deep desire and willingness to receive others and *to be received*. McDonald's is the quintessential place where back row America can act on that desire.

To test some of Arnade's observations I decided to read his book at a McDonald's. I sat in the same booth for six hours, and as I read I observed those around me: There was the older couple who sat together for two to three hours, the moms and grandparents chatting and watching their children play in the indoor playground, the construction workers who dropped in, who had nothing but nods, smiles, and “hellos” for me, and the Romanian

immigrants who brought their own food through the back door and sat in the booth next to me, eating and talking for a long time. They all wanted to be with each other and they wanted to do so while eating and drinking—and McDonald's allowed them to practice that kind of hospitality.

Not long ago I read a book written by a Middle Eastern immigrant who described *aaraq* (or “*arak*,” a unique Middle Eastern anise spirit, similar to the Greek ouzo) as “moonshine vodka.” This is a seemingly small but telling example of how some Middle Easterners describe their past with derision, in order to gain esteem from their Western audience. The distillation of wine into stronger spirits originated in Mesopotamia, and *arak* has been a part of Middle Eastern cultural gatherings longer than brandy or whiskey have been enjoyed on Western tables. Dismissing it as “moonshine vodka” is a form of cultural arrogance and an unnecessary, petty insult to Middle Eastern people. Middle Eastern people don't need any more derision, rather it is Americans—steeped in their individualistic, lonely, and isolated culture—who can learn from these exiles, migrants, refugees, and immigrants in their midst. *Il yinker asloo, yinker naphsoo*—He who renounces his origins renounces himself—my parents tirelessly said. They are right. I share these words because I believe that Americans would benefit from them, and from taking their own roots seriously. This country has no natives except the American Indians; everyone here has ancestors who came from elsewhere. Nonetheless, habits, history, and regions, built some traditions. Search for those traditions. Ask your grandmother for her recipes. Read about the history of your region within this vast country, understand it, learn its way of life and live it.

Do not disdain it. Try your best not to leave it. Put down roots. Stay. Cherish it.

I can't take a crowbar to the hearts of all Americans, to open them up and make them receptive. Yet I am convinced of the healing power of hospitality. The fear, loneliness, isolation, selfishness, and obsession with material gain that drives people away from each other and into themselves, wounds our society; hospitable actions are the salve. May we all use our dining tables as battering rams to break open the doors to each others' hearts.



**JOHN 15**  
CHALLENGE