

The Better World *John & Lynne Diamond-Nigh*

## It's All in Good Taste

Suppose for a minute that this is true—that before our birth our spirits wander in a dark acre of woods. Call it an Easter egg hunt, not for colored eggs but for small, gem-husked capsules. You open one up and find a pill inside, a gift, a little endowment that will brighten and guide your life—prosperity, perhaps, or luck, or tolerance. Or passion. You're a lucky dog if you discover that one.

But how about good taste? Would you fit that pill back into its capsule, kick it under the leaves, and look for something better?

We went to a country picnic recently. Toward the end of the meal, a young woman with a startling sheaf of plum-blue hair took a violin from its case. While the rest of us were finishing our chicken and lemonade, she played a piece of music that swept across our humdrum gossip and all the discouraging news of the week—parts of a plane being fished from the ocean, an America without Pontiacs. The melody swelled in the air like a generous spell and then drifted away across the fields like some dying incense of sound.

Even the horses liked Sibelius. If *they* have good taste, what's wrong with it? There wasn't a person at that party that didn't clap or shout or whistle when the young woman dropped her bow to her side. We all remembered once more that life is hallowed, it is good—it is fantastically good.

Yet many of us would throw that little Fabergé egg engraved with the words good taste away and look for another—wealth, perhaps, or celebrity. The word highbrow—as in highbrow music—is a little out of use now. Once it simply described a high forehead that phrenologists believed contained a large brain. But is a big brain really an asset in a culture where we're all trying our best to fit in, to be acutely, dazzlingly Facebook-average?

An ad for Miller beer plays straight into this prejudice. A loud-talking, get-outta-my-way delivery man retrieves cases of Miller beer from the cooler because the folks there are just too uppity for good proletarian Miller beer.

Taste, the thinking goes, narrows your palette of thrills. You can't enjoy the Shirelles, raspberry wine, or Uncle Dieter's cheese n mac n loganberry muffins. It has to be yellow fin tuna and the Kronos Quartet. Taste skins away the common touch.

Does it? We recently had coffee with a pal who was mourning the loss of a singular employee. What made her so good, so irreplaceable? We were curious. His answer surprised us—*good taste*. Not proficiency with computer programs, not good organization. No, it was good taste. It gave her manner a quiet grace, it put her at ease with any client, it sharpened her judgment. Our friend could always count on her for an astute second opinion. "If Annie said it was good, I knew it was good."

What if good taste *is* that good? What if it makes for better judgment, a wider circle of thrills—the Shirelles *and* the Kronos Quartet. What if it does what that Sibelius melody did—deepens our enjoyment of life?

Or makes for a better world? For reasons we all know well by now, our collective appetites are being reshaped as we write this. They must be. Can you think of a better axiom for your own prolonged satisfaction and the health of our earth than this: buy less, buy better. Buy sparingly what is beautiful, artful, durable, and suited to our needs. And if we do buy on impulse, make that impulse accurate.

We urge our art students to look at as much art as they can, all their life long. Ask a wine connoisseur how she acquired that mysterious skill of telling good wine from bad. She'll likely say just taste, taste, taste as much wine in as many places as you possibly can. A professor of mine put it this way: read a thousand books, write one. Sit on a thousand chairs, buy one. Taste a thousand wines, feel confident about the one in front of you.

A small boy with more ice cream on his face than in his cone spoke for us all—"Please, play that again."

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