

Can we have our cake and eat it, too?

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—On Tuesday, two lawyers were arguing an arbitration case in front of me when one said to the other: “You can’t have your cake and eat it, too.”

Why not? I thought. What’s wrong with having cake and also eating it? Cake cannot be eaten if you don’t have it. If eating doesn’t follow having, what does? Who would want to have cake and just stare at it?

Situations arise, of course, that prevent cake from being eaten. Self-enforced weight-reducing diets are one. The cake itself might be off—too much fluff or too little chocolate.

It’s not uncommon, however, to judge the cost of eating cake as being too high for the benefits received—so we don’t. Calculations of risk and cost, of whether to do something today or defer it, of when not to do something even though it’s available—these are calculations we try to learn how to make as we get older.

We learn to leave some cake on the counter—for tomorrow, for others and for our own self-interest in the next morning’s weigh in. Having is not the issue; the consequences of consuming what we have are.

For reasons of reportorial integrity, I will point out that a world of difference exists between spurning cake on the counter and leaving cookies in the jar.

When I’m seriously upset or feeling underappreciated, I will take down my grandmother’s earthenware cookie jar from the top shelf and rotate its lid in a slow, ear-grating circle against its seat. This hollow sound is my not-very-subtle signal to my wedlocked acquaintance, who continues to insist on anonymity in these writings, that I need some attention. Grandma Dora’s chocolate-chip cookies have stalled psychoanalysis for years.

Some political scientists believe that revolutions occur when cake is in front of people but they’re only permitted a taste. Rising expectations, this theory goes, fuels revolutionary anger more often than total repression and hopelessness.

A countervailing idea, however, argues that the first bites of anything good -- like cake -- are the only ones that satisfy. Cleaning a plate is mainly a matter of cultural habit or satisfying a self-perceived need for feeling full.

Perhaps this is why the first days of every revolution feel so much better than the uncertainty, chaos and reestablishment of authority that follow.

Any discussion of cake inevitably leads to Queen Marie Antoinette, the Austrian wife of France's Louis XVI who, when told of peasants being unable to afford bread, their staple food, reportedly said: "[So] let them eat cake [brioche]."

While Marie was a monarchist of the old school, she never uttered this heartless gaffe. Her taste for expensive gambling and shopping were the grain of Paris gossip mills, but her spending habits were exaggerated and sometimes fabricated. She was also accused of incest, lesbianism and sleeping around. Most of the numerous accusations against her seem based on something other than truth.

On the other hand, it is true that her husband expressed no interest in consummating his marriage with her during its first seven years. (He was more taken with fiddling with locks.) Louis finally got around to doing his royal duty, and Marie bore several children.

For all his peculiarity, Louis was the sovereign who made the American Revolution succeed. A statue of him stands in Louisville, Ky.

The cake libel that follows Marie seems to have first appeared in a writing of Rousseau. He hung the statement on an unnamed queen who was *not* Marie. Later writers found it convenient to stick it on her.

It does, however, appear that Marie did say to Henri Sanson, her executioner, after climbing the scaffold to the guillotine: "Pardon me sir. I meant not to do it [step on his foot]." That's a pretty classy line to drop a moment before you're about to lose your head to the man on whose foot you've just inadvertently trod.

So why do so many things not work out as we hope? Why did Louis and Marie produce such a crisis? Why did the French Revolution end so badly? Why does divorce stalk marriage? Why do we fail so often or get something not done quite right? Why can't we have cake and eat it, too?

Well, for one thing, it's a lot easier to screw up things than to make them work out.

If getting things right were as easy as getting things wrong, we'd put a lot less value on right. We'd live in a world where screw up was acceptable. We'd adapt to living with bridges that fall down and government that always performed badly. (Some governments are like this, but ours is not one of them.)

Screw up is not our individual and collective norm despite certain kernels of evidence that disfigure our universal cob. But screw up is always a factor.

A second reason is that we don't know what we don't know about most decisions. We try to anticipate problems and manage uncertainty. And with enough experience, we can guess at what we don't know. But without relevant experience, it's tricky to know which guesses make sense and which don't. Big mistakes can befall anyone doing something for the first time without a mentor.

For a third, our measure of control over most things is small. Usually, we have some control over how what we do turns out. But we often overestimate the actual degree of control that we do have.

When an individual decides to take an action that affects others, he can anticipate opposition. Even those on the same side often can't work together very well. And there is always the wild-card factor—unexpected bad stuff happens.

For a fourth, we have flaws that can undermine our best efforts. As a writer, I've written words that turned out to be not so true. My flaw: too much confidence in my own judgment.

Finally, each of us is just one actor in a cast of several billion. We can amplify our selves through money, position or wisdom, but we are, in the end, each alone and only one.

Since screw up dogs our lives, why is success so often unfulfilling? Why is it hard to eat with pleasure the cake we do have?

If cake comes easy and is always around, it's not special and doesn't reward.

If cake comes after hard struggle, it tastes good for a bite or two and then loses its pizzazz. Many of us taste the crumbs of failure more intensely and lastingly than the sweet icing of success.

If your cake is freighted with a sense that it's not for the likes of you, the first couple of times might satisfy. But self-doubt discredits success. A nice cake turns into just another stale breadstick.

The answer, by the way, that the one lawyer offered the other who said that he couldn't have his cake and eat it, too amounted to this: Of course, I can.

It's my job to decide whether he can or can't.

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