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We celebrate a post-birthday

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—It's not widely known that I turned down multiple invitations to appear on Oprah to discuss male-female relationships. Without me, she had to close her show last year.

Oprah told me that “Dr. Corky” would have been “an unforgettable gust of hot air.”

I can't explain how I became so blessed with the ability to dive the murky waters of relationships without getting the bends. Perhaps it's because I appreciate the complexity of women—their nuances, their layers, their mystery. Men are simple creatures in comparison. Men hammer nails; women paint them.

I offer in support of my own expertise an episode from last week that I've totally made up and does not involve anyone with whom I am still on speaking terms and who still occupies a common residential living area.

He: Your birthday is Saturday. Would you like to know what I got you?

She: No.

He: Wanna guess?

She: No.

He: Is it vegetable?

She: What?

He: I see your point. Do you want a cake?

She: No.

He: I can get a cake from the Botkins [local caterer who makes wonderful cakes].

She: No. Cakes are fattening.

He: Do you want me to make you a cake?

She: No.

He: Do you want a cake for your birthday, last chance?

She: No.

Now men of my acquaintance -- principally, me -- would take a four-no dialogue to mean that the woman who repeatedly said no did not want a cake for her birthday. That shows how dense men of my acquaintance are, principally, me.

Women reading this account will understand that, of course, a birthday cake was expected, preferably one with non-numeric candles.

The birthday came and went. A day after...

She: Where's my cake?

He: What cake?

She: My birthday cake.

He: You said that you didn't want a cake.

She: So?

He: Did you want me to bake you a cake?

She: Of course.

He: Oh. I must have misheard what you said...four times in a row.

She: Your hearing is getting worse. You should clean your ears and get them examined.

He: What kind of cake would you like?

She: A good one.

He: Do you want me to pick a recipe?

She: Are you kidding?

I hold the opinion that any birthday cake I make should be at least three layers of double chocolate cemented together with a mortar of fudge icing. This opinion is widely known but not widely shared in our nuclear family.

I should add that I do not fear cooking. I learned my way around kitchens at college where I washed pots and cracked 150 breakfast eggs for budding theologians, though not in the same sink.

I excel at assembling clean-out-the-refrigerator casseroles. These start with a hideously expensive enameled-steel pot that lends a high-falutin' aura to all pre-served contents.

I bind leftovers -- meats, fowls, slightly furry potatoes, the odd berry or two, an orphan olive, grapes -- to each other with marinara sauce and then asphyxiate surviving bacteria with a smothering coat of cheese four or five layers thick. I jazz up these creations with back-bencher stuff from the spice rack—mace, cream of tartar and tins whose labels have disappeared after three decades. Then bake at 350 degrees for a day or two.

I apply some of the same basic cooking techniques to cakes, but I understand that they are a different kettle of fish.

For one thing cakes require mixing ingredients that are known to explode, like baking soda and buttermilk. I won't even mention a favored anarchist method for ridding the world of capitalist cakes—dry ice.

Cakes always raise the question of whether I can substitute baking power for baking soda, since both begin with “baking,” and I'm usually out of one or the other. I have always answered in the affirmative, to keep things simple.

Baking soda is sodium bicarbonate, a base. When it's mixed with an acid like lemon juice, carbon dioxide is created, the planet warms and the cake rises. Baking powder is part baking soda, along with an acid and a filler. My general rule is one part baking powder equals 20 parts soda.

I always try to enhance the flavor of mainstream cakes. In the past, I've added whole garlic cloves and Vietnamese red-fire liquid.

It's been my experience that cake recipes are excursions into wonderlands of linguistic uncertainty.

Take the pumpkin cake with white frosting the post-birthday person picked for me to make.

She left me a note: “I like extra cinnamon and a little nutmeg, too!”

I had no idea how much cinnamon she considered “extra.” A “little nutmeg” might mean a pinch or a cup. How was I supposed to decide?

This recipe was tricky right out of the box, from which it did not come.

It called for four eggs, but said nothing about their point of origin or size, which range from those of the quail to those of the ostrich. I was not about to infer that the recipe meant chicken eggs, because it didn't say chicken eggs when it certainly could have said chicken eggs.

So I used the eggs that were in the refrigerator even though their container did not reveal their biological source. For all I knew, they might have been vulture eggs or those of a venomous platypus.

The recipe specified two cups of pumpkin. A can of pumpkin was left on the recipe book. Unfortunately, the can contained only 15 ounces of pumpkin, one short of the 16 that would make two regulation cups.

So I had to fill in the pumpkin shortfall with something else.

Like nutmeg.

Nutmeg is a nut that comes in a plastic jar. When a recipe says grated nutmeg, I grate. Since I received no grating guidance from her, I popped in four whole nuts to make up the pumpkin shortage.

This left the question of how much cinnamon I was supposed to add over the two teaspoons called for. I was not going to be guilty of being a cinnamon cheap. So I added half a cup.

Then came the question of what to bake this in. The recipe said: "Turn into 13 x 9 x 2 pan or tube pan." Our kitchen lacks a pan that is 13 inches high by nine inches long by two inches wide.

And what exactly was a "tube pan" of unspecified dimensions? I could find no pan shaped like a tube, which in my mind is a hollow cylinder. I gave up and went with a glass baking dish.

The recipe said "combine all ingredients in large bowl."

Did combine mean sift? If so, was I supposed to sift the dry ingredients individually or sift them together? It makes a difference.

I knew that I shouldn't run the eggs through the sifter, but was I supposed to beat the eggs a little to blend them or just toss them in straight from the shell? Cakes have risen or not on such decisions.

And when, I asked, was I supposed to pour in the "salad oil," which I assumed was the olive oil we use on our salads.

And once every ingredient was in the bowl, did "combine" mean to use an electric mixer or stir the mess lackadaisically with a wood spoon?

The frosting instructions were just as bad.

The recipe called for "1 box powdered sugar." The only box I found at the grocery was a two-pound box of granulated sugar. It was next to a two-pound plastic bag of "confectioner's sugar."

Using the theorem -- things equal to the same thing are equal to each other -- I dropped in two pounds of confectioner's sugar on top of one semi-frozen stick of butter, eight ounces of refrigerated cream cheese and two teaspoons of vanilla.

I fortified the mixture with pestle-ground multi-vitamin pills and a handful of capers that were losing ground in the refrigerator.

The "frosting" recipe said to "blend all ingredients in mixer."

I will point out that controversy rages as to whether frosting and icing are the same or different. Some believe frosting is thicker and creamier inasmuch as it usually contains more fat than icing does. Critics of icing dismiss it as just another donut glaze.

I have no opinion on frosting versus icing, but don't get me started on Welsh rarebit versus Welsh rabbit. If you do, the hare will fly.

How much blending was meant by "blend"? Was it whipping up to egg-white stiff or just schmushing around until the capers drowned? I took a hard line and blended until the frosting turned to gravel.

I spread the cold frosting on the cake hot from the oven.

This left a semi-liquid glop that acted more like starving quicksand than a birthday cake.

That night, the birthday beneficiary yummed it up as she dipped a spoon into her bowl of pumpkin cake.

It's the thought that counts, she said, as she poured the rest down the groundhog hole out back.

I put my portion in the refrigerator for future use in a casserole.

I hear the phone. It's Martha Stewart.

She tells me that a Dr. Corky show on cooking relationships would change daytime-television forever.

Who could disagree?

Message from an unnamed, uninterested party:

Anyone who reads this column should know that the author is a big fat liar who will be getting asbestos blue jeans for his next birthday!

Do not believe anything he writes about me, particularly when he's quoting specific before-breakfast conversations that he claims he has on tape.

I've confiscated all such tapes—both real and imagined. They will be evidence in an upcoming legal proceeding where I will prove beyond a doubt that his pants have been on fire for decades.

I wish he'd stop telling lies and fabricating truth.

Curtis Seltzer is a land consultant, columnist and author of **How To Be a DIRT-SMART Buyer of Country Property**, available at www.curtis-seltzer.com where his columns are posted. His latest books -- **Snowy Mountain Breakdown, Land Matters** and **Blue Grass Notes** -- are available through his website.

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