

25 CAKES

The Tao gives birth to one

One gives birth to two

Two gives birth to three

Three gives birth to all things

I was standing in the middle of the drop-in and talking about the 25th Anniversary celebration. For as long as I have worked here, and that is long time, there has always been a big community party to celebrate the first day PARC opened its doors. It is lucky for everyone this is March 17th because this also happens to be St. Patrick's Day. That means two parties mixed into one. I wonder whether our PARC founders knew how an Irish birth would affect its evolution and history. Did they anticipate the influence of the Irish spirit on the songs and stories that would be found in this place?

I looked out across the room and called out. "Should we have a cake?"

There was a loud, shouted "Yes."

Without thinking, I called again "How many cakes?"

Someone shouted again, "Twenty Five." Then one voice turned into a chorus of voices, all calling for Twenty-Five Cakes. It rolled through the room like a wave. Now there was a jolly mood in the room. People were laughing because of the way this spontaneous question had been answered.

I said, "Good thinking."

But secretly I thought, "Good god, be careful what you ask for." Can we really do this? "

Inside a heartbeat I was torn between wondering how many people really thought this cake novelty extravaganza was a foolish thing to do and the conviction it would be a wonderful community event: outlandish and fun. There

were so many other important things demanding our attention, so why do this? The lighting and presentation of twenty –five cakes needed some consideration too. It could be a damn fire hazard in a crowded room.

Maybe it was the idea of beauty married to the flames or the laughter flowing from shared community inspiration, but the making of twenty-five cakes now seemed like something we had to try and do. As I walked away I heard myself muttering under my breath, “A circle of light calls us.”

I didn’t know then that the story of this circle of light would be the legacy of Twenty-Five Cakes or that it would be anchored in the heart of one man and one moment.

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Over the years PARC has learned a lot about preparing food and feeding people. When we were young it was a big challenge just to make a Thanksgiving dinner with our small kitchen’s second hand and breaking down stoves. At the end of those first dinner celebrations everyone would collapse with fatigue and relief; happy we were able to make such a good meal for so many people. Now, many years later, we prepare about 90,000 meals every year. This is exhausting, determined work, driven by necessity. It’s a constant thorn in our side but also a powerful way for people to come together and actively resist the destructive impact of hunger in our very poor community. It’s a responsibility carried by many hands

Making twenty-five cakes was a small puddle in this sea of food. It was done in a flash. The real challenge of the event was in the cake decorating. This turned out to be a tougher problem to solve. There was more laughter than volunteers. People were shy. People were amused. Many said we had better find someone else because they would only make a mess of things. We had 25 cakes ready for decorating but only a few people willing to take on this odd project.

Nevertheless, on the night before the party, we gathered together in a quiet and empty drop-in room: 2 staff, 2 members, 25 cakes and sleeping on a couch in the back corner, an exhausted and irritable Newfoundlander named Wayne MacLeod.

Wayne was homeless and back at PARC again after a series of housing failures. He had lived for a time at the large rooming house next door, until someone set the fire which burned it down. Wayne was one of the few tenants who had refused the housing relief support offered after the fire. He argued and insisted he had the right to look after himself. Then he disappeared.

When he finally resurfaced in the drop-in six years had slipped by. The other fire victims had been living in their replacement housing for years while over that same time Wayne's personal problems had become more intense. He had drifted into crack cocaine use and his body was beginning to break down under the strain of his drug taking patterns and an unstable, uprooted life. By the time he came back to PARC he was in trouble. He needed nursing and medical care to cope with serious health problems. He needed personal support. Wayne felt alone in the world and he was sick and depressed and moody. He was angry with himself one day, angry with the world on the next day. But he kept on struggling, hoping he would eventually pull things together so he could get a home and keep it.

We helped him find a place but it wasn't very good housing and he soon lost it. It's hard to break free of the street, live alone and change your life without the comfort of old companions, especially when all of your friends are continuing to use drugs or alcohol. Wayne had a very difficult time facing this, so it didn't take long for the street to take him back again. After that, he steadfastly refused other housing help offers. He said he was not ready. He continued living on the street or on other people's couches. For a time he even broke into the abandoned fire ruins of his long lost rooming house and lived there secretly and dangerously.

In this state of mind he arrived at the drop-in early every morning, well before the doors opened. We invited him in and with some ups and downs allowed him to stay on long after we had closed up for the day. He was absent when he was using. But most of his time was spent resting at PARC. We helped him take meals when he could eat and recover some of the sleep he was missing. Mostly we gave him as much comfort as we could, so he could use the place as life line and consider whether it was still possible to go on living.

Everyone has their own unique reasons for joining the PARC community. Poverty and personal hardship certainly drive people through its doors, but once inside

the reasons for continuing to visit or work there gets more complex. Understanding why people build such intense long term relationships with PARC is like trying to untangle the knots of memory and experience we carry around within us? It has something to do with the questions this makes us ask. Are these knots making us strong or making us prisoners? What knots should we try and make tighter? Which ones should we try to shake loose?

Wayne was a man with a lot of knots. It made other people crazy at times. This was especially true because his rough edges sparkled with charm. He talked in a strong Newfoundlander's brogue and he had the kind of rough humor people from the rock bring with them to the mainland. Most often he was a quiet man. His personal privacy had great dignity and it drew people to him. He was someone you wanted to like and had to like, even when he was doing things to piss you off.

One of Wayne's special traits was his determination to never do anything *if he was asked to do it*. I used to think that this was a little like his last stand; a personal protest against a world which had handed him so little. His trust and belief in fairness had been betrayed. Give and take had for a long time been a one-sided deal, so it was better to refuse anything which might set up or give in to another person's expectations. He was careful. It was safer for him to keep his distance. Better to watch from the outside than be trapped inside.

He did not take kindly to invitations and he also didn't like the arbitrary nature of rules. He made up his own mind about what was right and what was wrong. If this got him into conflict his quiet side disappeared. He wasn't shy about letting people know about his grievances. Things got loud at times. He made his own choices and whether they were good or bad they all had to fit in with his Mr. Grouch public image.

But there were other moments as well. These revealed a good heart beneath his survival armor. He was vulnerable and thoughtful. And he could not hide that he was a long way from home. He made little kind gestures then acted as if he wanted no one to notice. But of course PARC did notice and thanked him when they happened. We did it carefully and privately, knowing that Wayne would

brush appreciation aside and pretend not to care, even as his blushing face told a different story about what was going on inside his heart.

As we set up our cake decorating stations Wayne woke up. As usual he was grouchy. I got him a sandwich and something to drink. As he ate I noticed him looking at the long line of cakes waiting for their dressing. I knew better than to invite him to help out but I walked over to Wayne's couch and sat down beside him. I told him that all of these cakes were bringing up memories of my grandfather, on my mother's side, in Lunenburg Nova Scotia. Sammy Herman lived in a big old house by the sea and he made the best cakes and pies I have ever tasted. I began to talk about his lemon pie and growing up in Nova Scotia.

Then Wayne told me about his love of blueberry pie. His long grey hair hung down around his weathered face; a face which had spent so much time outside that it was worn like old wood. He could have been one of the fishermen I would watch when I was a little boy lurking in the back of the local Lunenburg dry goods store, eating my handful of homemade sauerkraut and listening without understanding to the banter of the old men around me.

So I asked him if he had ever eaten molasses and dumplings for dessert. He laughed, because that is a real poor person and fisherman's cheap treat. The only place I have heard tell of it was in Newfoundland. I know this because my grandmother on my father's side lived in Hearts Delight and she made this for me when she came over to the mainland for her over winter visits.

I laughed too. Then I asked him if he would keep me company because I had a lot of cakes to deal with. It would help pass the time to swap stories about Newfoundland and Nova Scotia. So over he came and flopped down in the chair beside me. I grabbed one of the butter knives we were using and began to lay on blue frosting. When I added some white tips I said this is going to be the sea. As I worked, our stories started to roll back and forth. I kept up my decorating, but I was careful not to say anything which could be misunderstood as an invitation for Wayne to join me.

I was starting on my third cake when Wayne picked up a knife and grabbed a cake. We kept on talking. By the time Wayne had finished his second cake something had changed. His interest in this project had shifted. There was less

talk. His effort became stronger and faster. He was the picture of concentration. It was as if he was discovering his inner artist. I was tiring and slowing while the cakes were leaping out of Wayne's hands. His first cake was shy and subdued, the second a fiery red. After this, he was in hot pursuit of a cake decorating masterpiece. The colors flew together and the cakes rolled out.

The other decorators stopped what they were doing and came over to watch. They proclaimed their approval but Wayne paid no attention to what he was hearing. After they went away he said he had never had a birthday cake and a lot of time to make up for.

By the end of that night we were done. The completed cakes were a wild mix of colored imagination and Wayne had decorated twelve of them. We finished up; working together to place everything on trolley cart storage shelves, then covering the carts to hide and protect the work until it was ready for our presentation the next evening. Wayne was cheerful. He was smiling in a way that I had never seen before.

The following day was a buzz of activity. In all ways it was a typical March 17th party. The place was packed. There was lots of good food. People danced and watched old PARC videos, to see themselves in these movies and remember old friends who had passed away. Later, in the early evening, the musicians took the stage and the songs began. In between their sets we played Irish reels.

But there was also something new coming. The news had travelled through the crowd that Twenty-Five Cakes were waiting in the back hallways. At around 7:30 the call for cake walkers went out. Since then, this label has stuck. Now whenever we do this it is always called the cake walk event because everyone knows that being a member of the PARC community is about as far from a cake walk as you can ever get.

The back halls were crowded and loud with excitement. 25 Cakes, 25 walkers, a candle lighting team and then more people helping to make sure this procession would be able to make its way safely through a crowded drop-in, to encircle it with its candle light and sweetness. Then we turned off the lights and the cakes began coming out into the room.

It was a long procession of people. They walked slowly and deliberately, taking care to keep their candles burning. The procession kept coming, moving to make its way around the edge of the drop-in floor. As it got bigger and bigger a collective gasp began to rise from the room. Finally the last of this line of cakes came out and took its position next to the first one. The drop-in was surrounded. The circle was complete.

In the glowing candlelight everyone was smiling and looking at each other in amazement. I stood there, transfixed by the beautiful faces of the people holding the cakes and the beauty of the people cheering them on.

Then I looked out across the room, searching for Wayne. My heart made a sudden dip. Wayne was nowhere in sight. Then I found him. He was standing at the back of the drop-in behind the coffee bar, staring out at the circle of cakes and light. I put up my arm and began waving at him. He saw me but he didn't move.

I felt something was terribly wrong. I remember thinking ..."How could you forget about Wayne?" I had been so busy with the finishing of this event that I had completely forgotten about him and the remarkable time we had spent together. I rushed over to the coffee bar. When I got closer I saw his face more clearly. He looked haunted.

I called out to him. "Wayne, Wayne.....it looks so beautiful. Look what you have done." Why aren't you holding one of your cakes?"

He did not reply but only turned to stare at me. His face seemed to be struggling to find a way to come to rest. I thought I saw tears rise and then dissolve. His mouth was fixed as if it was trying to decide whether to smile or scream with rage. He looked pale with uncertainty. His hands were limp at his sides as if he was exhausted.

I spoke to him again. "Wayne, are you OK?" He kept his silence but our eyes were locked together. I am not exactly sure what happened next. It felt like being in a traffic accident, at the moment when the car is suddenly turning in a totally unexpected direction and you know that you are about to crash. Everything starts to swirl beyond your comprehension. I heard myself talking with

words that were not of my making. They came from some place beyond my mind.

“Oh Wayne, I see how it is. You are the artist looking at your creation and standing back to see it all.

Wayne looked harder at me. The candles were illuminating the room but it was enough to see that he had heard what I said. I felt the tension between us rise. It felt like he was sharing something very important with me. As I watched, a light seemed to come from within him. It brought the color back into his face and his mouth relaxed. He smiled. Like he had suddenly loosened a very strong knot entangling him and now he was falling free. Then he burst into laughter.

And being a man of few words he said, “Yeah..... I think it’s time to eat some cake.”