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Tamales

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Tamales

I was invited to dine in the home of a family who had come from Mexico. The first tamale I ate was so spicy-hot that my eyes watered, my face was covered with perspiration, and I had to constantly use a handkerchief for my nose. The family members all found my reaction quite amusing, though I was embarrassed. When they later offered me a tamale for dessert, I thought it was almost cruel, after they had seen what happened to me earlier. But I tasted it; the tamale was sweet, not spicy at all. We all laughed, as I learned through experience, that not all tamales are the same.

Someone could have told me about varieties of tamales ahead of time. However, by having experienced the difference in a family meal context, I not only learned about a specific kind of food, but also about cultural diversity, and, most importantly, about how human bonds of friendship often arise more quickly and spontaneously when we cannot maintain our ordinary patterns of behavior. When we engage a new experience with the gifts of heart and mind we have at the time, we are liable to gain more than mere knowledge of facts.

Most of us might prefer to learn about matters of importance in life – far more important than varieties of tamales – by reading or being told, rather than through painful experience. We have all come to understand many helpful ways of thinking and acting from family members, our educational formation, friends, and advisors. But we have also found that only by reflecting on our own experiences – some of them painful – do we learn who we are and how we fit into the world.

Sometimes we suffer as we grow in self-understanding, at other times all seems delightful. Pain or pleasure is not the measure for growth. Many plants deepen their roots and grow stronger after being cut back or having received less, rather than more, water. We discover what is important to us partly by attraction, but also by encountering opposition. We might recall, for example, an occasion when we surprised ourselves by how strongly we defended a person whom we had not previously recognized as particularly dear to us, when his or her reputation came under attack by another person.

Much of the wisdom we acquire in life cannot be taught to us. But, through reflecting on our experiences, we become increasingly aware of how better to manage our relationships with persons and events as well as our physical, social, and spiritual environment. We can learn and improve the ways we deliberate about the choices we make in any and all circumstances. God and goodness, meaning and purpose: all can be found at any time, and in any place, when it is our determination to seek for them through the

process of reflection, when we note for ourselves all that resonates with our spirits.

Hot tamales or sweet, challenging occasions and those that we can handle with habitual ease: all are capable of bearing elements of wisdom for us when we choose to reflect upon the events, thoughts, and feelings that we experience.