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It's Mush and Not Oatmeal

Breakfast is a big deal at my family's house. We have always been early risers and that implies that we need to eat breakfast. Ever since I can remember, my dad made oatmeal or what we called "mush" for my sister and I for breakfast, and this is the tradition I interviewed my sister, Miranda, about. I can remember times when I was excited for mush, and then I can also remember times when I just wanted to eat fun cereal like normal kids. I questioned why we had the same thing to eat everyday for breakfast, and I also questioned why my dad was so persistent in having us finish it. In my experience, the tradition of mush is something that was very prominent in our childhood. We had birthday mush, first day of school mush, and even chocolate mush if we used my dad's protein powder. I wanted to talk to my sister about this ritual because it holds a special place in my childhood as it was a constant in our lives that we could always count on.

To begin, I can explain the background of this ritual that predates both the lives of my sister and I. My dad is the youngest of ten siblings, so his mom, my Grandma Therese, had to find inventive ways to feed all her children easily. Her solution was oatmeal. It was cheap and you could buy a large quantity of it at one time which was perfect for her big family. Another reason why she bought it was because oatmeal is filling, and she was already struggling to make enough food to not only satisfy my dad's growing appetite but also all of his siblings. My dad has told us stories of his experience with "mush," which is the term he coined because he used to think it was disgusting and mushy. Some of his stories include him describing how he would sit at the kitchen table all morning and all afternoon because my Grandma Therese told him that he

couldn't leave the table unless he finished his mush. So he sat there and sat there until finally he begrudgingly ate the cold oatmeal. Despite the numerous complaints he gave when he was younger, my dad is a very structured person and when he got older he began making mush for himself because he liked the ease and routine of it. This behavior was carried throughout his college years, his married years, and then finally when Miranda and I were born.

The person I selected to be interviewed was my sister, Miranda. She is my only sibling and two years older than I am. Throughout our younger and older years, we have continued to stay very close to each other which I am extremely grateful for. Right now, she is doing her Master's Program and first-year student teaching at the same time with Boston University. Even with the distance, our relationship has always stayed consistent with keeping in touch with each other. For this assignment, I Facetimed her and conducted the interview to hear about her experience with mush.

Miranda gave a similar history of our ritual of mush. She agreed that our dad's background was the initiating factor of why we have eaten the same thing every single day of our childhood. It was fun to reminisce about different memories that she shared about this ritual. Miranda talked about the time that we sat by the breakfast table in our swimsuits because it was the first day of swimming lessons, and my mom took our picture with our mush on the table. Miranda also shared that eating mush was a personal experience. Each of my family members have their own mush recipe of what they like. Miranda likes to add chocolate protein powder and lots of peanut butter. My mom likes to have her mush with more milk, so it is more runny. Then she adds walnuts, raisins, and blueberries. My dad likes to add chocolate protein powder, milk, walnuts, raisins, and cheerios. I like my mush to have peanut butter, vanilla protein powder, walnuts, and then cheerios or some other cereal for crunch. These oatmeal concoctions have also

developed over the years. Miranda shared that both her and I used to only put brown sugar in our mush when we were really young. It is also fair to mention that the way we make mush is in a four cup, Pyrex measuring cup. Then we pour out three bowls for my mom, Miranda, and me and my dad eats his out of the Pyrex. It's definitely a little rustic process, but it's what we have been doing for twenty-one plus years (and my dad even longer)! Maybe it's just because my dad loves the Pyrex container, but he definitely uses it everytime. Again, another example of how he is a creature of habit. Another memory that Miranda shared that I forgot about was what my dad would eat in addition to his mush. My dad would toast four pieces of bread and then would spread peanut butter in between. With these peanut butter sandwiches, he would dunk them into his mush. We called these sandwiches, "dunk toast." Looking back, it's kind of weird, and I don't think explaining somewhat soggy, oatmeal-soaked peanut butter toast would be appealing to everyone. However, my sister and I would love to eat it, and the best part would be when the peanut butter would melt out and then mix into your own mush. Miranda explained how our kitchen table would always get messy with the oatmeal, and my dad would attempt to clean it with one singular napkin everytime. We both laughed at that memory because it's kind of hilarious to reflect on how my dad would never truly clean it and then frustrate my mom with his futile attempt.

One of the big takeaways I gathered from my interview with Miranda, and also my own reflections, was that eating mush brought my family together. It was something we did every morning because we all were awake super early, which might not be common for all families. My dad would leave at 6:30am for work, but we would still sit at our kitchen table and eat together before the day started. Miranda shared that those memories were special because even if we didn't really talk or have a lot of conversation, the action of getting ready and the busyness in

our house was something comforting. It was chaotic at times, especially when we only have one bathroom and all my family members are trying to use it at the same time. The family ritual of eating mush is something I think all my family members miss doing. Now that Miranda and I are away at college, my family isn't able to come together every morning. Additionally, eating mush is still a big part of our lives. For example, I interviewed my sister in the morning and was eating cereal, and it was funny because the first thing that she asked me was if I was eating mush.

Another big takeaway from this ritual was the comfort in routine. Making mush was something that my family could depend on to be consistent in the midst of our busy schedules. Now, my dad still continues a similar tradition by making a big Saturday breakfast when Miranda and I are home. Family bonding during mealtimes is very important to my parents. However, Miranda did make sure to remind me that I used to get mad in the morning when the mush would not turn out. In High School, I would make the mush because I was the first one to get ready, and I definitely would get upset if it turned out too runny because I didn't add enough instant oatmeal. It is the little things about this ritual that make it the most meaningful.

I also asked my sister about how she thinks this ritual is perceived to others and if outsiders have been introduced to the ritual. Both of us agreed that explaining this ritual to other people has had mixed reactions. I have explained this ritual to my friends and they were disgusted hearing about the dunk toast. However, Miranda ate oatmeal everyday in her undergraduate college days so when she shared the history of the ritual with her friends they weren't that surprised. In terms of introducing people to eating mush, I don't think my family will be doing that anytime soon. For Thanksgiving this year, both my sister's boyfriend and my boyfriend will be coming over to our house, but I think my dad will most likely be making his big Saturday breakfast instead of making mush (it's a little more appetizing to most people).

Overall, mush has been a big part of my life growing up and still continues today. It is a ritual that my family holds close because of its comforting routine and dependability. It shows my family's values of consistency and structure, and it also showcases our closeness as a family. We acknowledge the importance of eating together as a family, even if that means it is at 6am. The ritual of eating mush is not currently in my daily life at college, but I do eat the same thing everyday for breakfast. So yes, I am my father's daughter, and I still can't break away from the values of consistency in my breakfast routine. As much as I try to get away from the hold mush has on my life, there's a very high chance that my kids will be eating mush for a majority of their lives as well. But don't worry, I'll let them choose their toppings.

Interview Questions

1. What is mush?
2. How would you describe the tradition of eating mush?
3. What is the history of mush? How do you remember it coming into your life?
4. What influence does our dad have in this ritual?
5. What memories do you have with mush? What is your favorite memory?
6. What is your mush concoction?
7. What meanings do you think this tradition has?
8. Growing up, how did this ritual fit into your life?
9. What does this ritual convey about our family?
10. If an outsider perceives this ritual how would they respond/act?
11. Are new family members socialized into learning about this ritual?
12. How do you think this ritual will continue in your own life?