



© 2010 BY
PETER BERRYMAN
PETER@LOUANDPETER.COM

ARCHIVED AT: LOUANDPETER.COM/WZ.HTML

Imaginary Diet

Songwriter Stuart Stotts and I were talking recently about how sometimes a song comes out of nowhere, you suddenly become aware you've been singing it, and find that it pertains very precisely to your situation or state of mind. Just today, thinking back on some mildly unpleasant interchange (by now I forget which one), I realized I was singing to myself that great old Girl Scout song, "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I'm gonna eat some worms." I have always marveled at that line and how well it represents the way a bad self-image translates into self-destructive (eventually even suicidal) behavior. That little song is a great send-up of this phenomenon, speaking as one who in the past has turned to gin, cigarettes, and nowadays, Maple Nut Goodies when I suffer the common paranoia that nobody likes me everybody hates me.

But I doubt the appearance of this song is just an aesthetic observation being made by the brain to show off how smart it is and how quickly it can draw pointless analogies. My feeling is that there is a restorative reason the Eat Worms song selects itself on the personal jukebox. And my hunch is, in my expert opinion, that the logic of the song is such a hilariously blatant example of a wrongheaded impulse, the analogy helps you see the stupidity of your real situation. Like when you are so mad at the world you decide you're not going to click the damn seat belt. Certain beneficial-metaphor songs must huddle in the folds of gray matter, ready to leap into your consciousness when needed.

In the cranial toolbox there are other handy coping gizmos too, of course: little bits of prose, a few bumper stickers, some Groucho quotes, a phrase you saw needlepointed into Aunt Trudy's toaster cozy twenty ago, a single frame of a Dagwood comic, all mixed in with contrivances of your own imagination.

Given my recent musing about all this, it's not surprising that an article by Eryn Brown from the Los Angeles Times

caught my eye a few days ago. The headline was "Study finds imaginary eating can cut intake." And sure enough, the article described a recent experiment in which it was shown that volunteers who methodically pictured themselves eating their way through 30 M&Ms, when presented afterwards with a real bowl of the little bastards, actually ate half as many as volunteers who had NOT been asked to picture themselves eating M&Ms beforehand.

This study was lead by Carey Morewedge, an assistant professor of "Social and Decision Sciences" (!) at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. Soon after reading this article, I heard Ira Flatow, host of National Public Radio's Science Friday, interviewing Mr. Morewedge himself about the study, going into a little more chocolaty detail.

Basically, from my understanding, and to make a long story short, as with most studies like this, the volunteers were purposely misled about the theme of the study. Various groups were asked to imagine eating 3 or 30 M&M's, or 3 or 30 little cheese cubes, or not eating anything but MOVING 30 M&M's, etc. The findings indicated that people who imagined eating 30 M&M's, when later unexpectedly presented with an actual bowl of M&M's, ate far fewer of them than the group who imagined only eating 3 M&M's.

In the group that imagined eating 30 cheese cubes, there was NO difference of consumption from the group that imagined eating 3 cheese cubes, when these groups were presented with bowls of M&M's. The group asked to imagine just moving the M&M's was not influenced at all.

In other words, one apparently has to imagine eating the exact food in question for this anti-indulging effect to work. If you wanted to eat less at thanksgiving, you'd have to imagine gorging on every single food that was to be served. (I can hear it now: "YAMS! I didn't know we were having yams! PASS THE YAMS!!!!")

The study brings many questions to mind (if you imagine only RED M&M's, does it work for yellow ones?), and in the NPR interview, there are more questions answered and in more detail than

in this Whither Zither of course.

But it made me think back to one late afternoon in the early 1980s, very soon after I had managed to kick a pretty tenacious gin habit. I see myself lying on the couch on a particularly difficult day and very deliberately going through the whole process of opening a bottle of Tanqueray and preparing a drink, complete with imagined juniper aroma and the popping sounds of ice cubes as I pictured the gin flowing over them. When I was done with this air-cocktail, my urge to actually booze it up had diminished considerably. Of course, the next morning I had to go through the ordeal of imagining a hangover...

But all this makes me wonder, being a musician, about how often songs are used as this kind of tool? Are there songs that describe the concretion of some desire so well and so specifically that the urge is diminished after listening to it, singing it, or more to the point, having it on rotation in your head?

You have to wonder if folk songs like Pans of Biscuits ("pans of biscuits, bowls of gravy we shall have") actually have the effect of reducing cravings, at least for those particular foods, and if drinking songs which describe the details of boozing actually diminish the urge to an extent. You also have to wonder if violent video games, for example, actually diminish certain violent tendencies through the same process. Strange to consider. As I've mentioned in earlier Whither Zithers, other studies have found, and it feels right, that when you're sad, it helps more to listen to sad songs than happy ones.

So maybe, just maybe, the M&M's trick works with analogies. Maybe a song that goes round and round in your head 30 times is like eating 30 M&Ms, and if the song is an analogy for self-pity, for example, your urge to wallow in that destructive sludge is reduced. Hold the worms! But more studies, please, and by the way, are there any M&M's left?

SOURCES:

National Public Radio:

www.npr.org/2010/12/10/131967496/Thinking-About-Eating-May-Mean-Eating-Less

Los Angeles Times:

articles.latimes.com/2010/dec/09/health/la-he-imaginary-eating-20101210

WZ, Jan '11