Show Transcript
Deconstructing Dinner
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Jon Steinman: And welcome to Deconstructing Dinner produced in the studios of Kootenay Co-op Radio (CJLY), Nelson, British Columbia, I'm your host Jon Steinman. On today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner, we are going to be doing something that has not been done here on the program before; and that is re-master, so to speak, one of the first broadcasts ever aired here on the program. On January 26, 2006, we aired the fourth episode of Deconstructing Dinner titled "Paying the Costs of Not Paying Attention to Eating" featuring UK-based Carl Honoré, author of the book "In Praise of Slow", Victoria Stanton was on the program, a multi-disciplinary artist operating in Montreal, and Paul Rozin – a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.

And so again, on today's broadcast, we will be re-mastering our January 26, 2006 episode titled Paying the Costs of Not Paying Attention to Eating. In other words we will be looking at how the attention we pay to the specific moment of eating affects the attention we pay to purchasing food and our awareness of food in general. If there was a question that could be posed here at the beginning of this show, maybe it could ask whether reconnecting ourselves to the act of eating, can help reconnect ourselves to food itself.

And with the goal behind Deconstructing Dinner being to better understand the implications of our food choices, it is of course equally important to look closer at what our individual connection is to that actual point of eating. It could be said that the more aware we are of picking up a piece of food with a fork; the more aware we are of the steam rising above a bowl of soup, or the various smells being emitted from an oven, the more attention we will then give to the food we choose to buy, and the more aware we will then be of the impact our food choices have.

In discussing this connection we have to eating and to food, we will be hearing from Paul Rozin – a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. Paul will provide an introduction to the show's topic, but the first and most important step in reconnecting ourselves to food, is to first determine whether we are satisfied with our present connection to food. If this satisfaction is questionable, then the second step could then be to determine how we can better connect ourselves to that act of eating and in doing so, better connect ourselves to food.

To provide some options on how to better connect ourselves to eating, we will hear from Carl Honoré – the bestselling author of the title "In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed." Also joining me will be Victoria Stanton – a Montreal-based artist who created a participant-driven project entitled ESSEN. The ESSEN project consists of participants sitting down to a meal together and instead of following the daily routine of feeding oneself, participants instead, feed one another. And we will hear from Victoria later on in the show.

soundbite

In speaking of the relationship that North Americans have to food, it's common to compare the French relationship to eating, to that relationship we as North Americans have. Paul Rozin – a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, has conducted extensive research on the North American relationship to our sustenance. Paul's research focuses on cultural psychology and the acquisition of likes and dislikes towards food. In introducing how our connection to eating can then better connect ourselves to where our food is coming from, Paul compares the North American relationship to food with that of the French.

Paul Rozin: Well I think there's a lot of pleasure in all of these places, but the tempering of the pleasure with concern about health effects seems particularly prominent in the United States. So, for example, if we ask Americans and French what comes to mind when you think of heavy cream, and we give them the choice of whipped or fattening, the French are more inclined to think of whipped, that is, they're thinking of what you're doing with the cream to eat it, and the Americans tend to think of fattening, which is of course what one of the consequences of a high calorie food is. Similarly, when we ask them what they think about when they think of chocolate, the word fat comes up much more among Americans than it would among French. The French tend to think generally of food as what they're experiencing and eating, and Americans are more likely to think of what the food will do to them. So we have an ambivalent relation to food, and they have a more strictly pleasure relation.

JS: Later on in the show we will be hearing the word ESSEN used quite frequently. Essen is a German word that means eating. Its counterpart is FRESSEN – which is the word for feeding. As food is becoming more and more a function of our daily routine as opposed to a focused and distinct pleasure, I asked Paul if he thinks that the North American connection to food is resorting back to the Neolithic times of FRESSEN – of feeding as opposed to eating.

PR: The German has a distinction between essen, which is humans eating, and fressen, which is animals eating, and the basic effect of civilization has been to make eating a very elaborate, very civilized act, and not something like biting into a piece of flesh, you know, and chewing it and…but rather we have forks and knives and napkins and we have dinner conversation.

I don't think that we are moving toward fressen. Eating is a very civilized act for us. We eat food that is very far from its raw form, usually. Now, there's one aspect of fressen that we might be showing more than other places, and that is that we wolf food down. That is to say…and we often eat it in a non-…like while you're driving or something, so that the civilized essen kind of way of eating is sitting around a table, conversing, focusing on the food, and then the little bit of the fast food culture is sort of getting it down as fast as you can, which is one sort of more animal way of eating, so in that respect, yes.

But when we go out and eat at restaurants, or at a typical family meal in the United States, I think we're definitely essen, not fressen.

JS: And we're listening to segments from an interview with Paul Rozin – a professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. In further helping introduce today's topic, Paul explains how the way we connect to the food that's placed in front of us, can better connect ourselves to the impacts our food choices have.

PR: Food has economic and political significance. When you're eating a food, you could be focusing on the food, and the experience of the food – that's more the French way. You could be thinking about your health, but you could also be thinking about the relation of the food to the world – was it made with child labour? You could be worrying about was it made with pesticides – that is, artificial pesticides, many pesticides are natural, but…

You could be thinking about the way that it was grown, the way the animal was harvested, and when you do that, of course, you're bringing into the experience of eating and food choice, many considerations about the world. So if you think that it is immoral to kill animals for food, then the act of eating meat involves your thinking about how did this meat get there? The average person, when they're eating a piece of meat, is not visualizing a cow going to slaughter, or the carving up of the cow. They're thinking of what's on their plate and maybe whether there's too much fat in it. But they're not thinking about the history, but of course, you can be alerted to do that, by visiting a stockyard, by reading, by hearing that there is a history to these foods and that may be of a serious concern to you.

JS: And that was Paul Rozin of the University of Pennsylvania. And you can find out more about Paul's research by looking up the Department of Psychology at www.upenn.edu.

soundbite

JS: There are a few common threads that hold my guests' responses together on today's broadcast. One of those threads, which has also been mentioned on previous shows, is that food is an inescapable component of our lives, and if there is a starting point to the effort in better connecting ourselves to our actions, well then food is that point at which

we can maybe begin deconstructing our daily routine, and in doing so, maybe we can hopefully better connect ourselves to that routine.

Another common thread throughout my guests' responses is the comparison of routine and ritual. Routine is referred to as those actions which we undertake daily or perhaps weekly, and by doing so in such a repetitive nature these actions begin to not require much thought in order to complete them.

Ritual, on the other hand, is referred to those actions which we undertake that are done so when there is a mindful connection between ourselves and our actions – and you could liken it to almost a spiritual connection. Expanding on these common threads that hold together the show for today, it is safe to say that food for the vast majority of North Americans has simply become a routine that exists as one component of our fast-paced lives.

Fuelling these routines are the convenient ways by which companies have made attempts to make our days as simple and effortless as possible. But as is also the fuel for Deconstructing Dinner, these conveniences can only exist at a cost, and the more we plug ourselves into these routines, the more we incur these very costs while also placing these costs on others, on our communities, and on our planet. So as Deconstructing Dinner aims to deconstruct the routines facing our food supply, today's show will provide some ideas as to how we ourselves can better deconstruct our routines, and our fast-paced lives.

But this culture of speed that we now very much are a part of and is of course much more evident in larger cities, has been targeted as the enemy by a worldwide movement that takes many shapes and many forms and in the case of food, has been coined the Slow Food Movement. But this battle, so to speak, is not being waged just against food, this is a battle that takes many fronts, and to better explain this war that is receiving far less attention than others, is Carl Honoré – the bestselling author of "In Praise of Slow" – a book that exposes not just the Slow Food Movement but the Slow Movement as a whole. Carl grew up in Edmonton, Alberta and after moving to Scotland became a journalist, he later made his way to London, England where he has presently resided for 10 years. I spoke with Carl from his home in London, England, and he explains this Slow Movement or as he refers to it - a cultural revolution….

Carl Honoré: Well the Slow Movement is a catch-all term that describes the cultural shift that's going on right now around the world. For the last hundred and fifty years, at least, everything has been accelerating, the pace of daily life, we've been always seeking to do everything more quickly. But I think in the last eight, nine, ten years, the whole speed culture is moving into its endgame, it's kind of reaching a stage of diminishing returns in the sense that speed is now doing us a lot more harm than good. This constant rush for every moment of the day is a race against the clock, is beginning to erode the quality of life – the quality of everything we do. It's taking a toll on our diet, our health, our relationships, our work, the environment. Everywhere you look, there's too much speed, there's too much hurry in the system, and we're paying a price for it. So I guess the Slow Movement is one way that people are now describing this counter-quake, if you like, this

backlash against the notion that faster is always better, and that busier is always best. So if you look around the world, there are people choosing to do all sorts of different things more slowly and finding that, contrary to what conventional wisdom tells us, which is that if you slow down, you're a loser, you're lazy or you're roadkill, they find that by slowing down, they do whatever it is they're doing a bit better. So they're eating better, they're exercising better, they're working better, they're making love better. So I think we're talking really, here, in essence, about a kind of cultural revolution – a re-think about our approach to time and speed and pace and slowness. It touches every corner of our lives.

JS: As was mentioned earlier, one way to illustrate the opposing sides of the Slow Movement, is by comparing Routine vs. Ritual. Carl suggests that the more we just try getting through things as opposed to doing them, the more we lose ritual and allow our actions to merely become routine…

CH: I think when you talk about routine, there's a sense of things that have to be got through, and almost maybe...when I hear the word routine, there's a hint of superficiality about it in the sense that you go about doing something without even thinking about it, without engaging with it thoroughly. It's just routine, it's reflex, it's automatic. And I think that that's often what happens with a lot of things we do now and especially when we live in this road runner mode where we're doing everything more quickly. We don't have the time or the patience or the tranquility to connect thoroughly with whatever it is we're doing, so everything becomes just a box on our to-do list that we tick. You get up in the morning, you brush your teeth, you gobble down breakfast, you jump in the car, you drive to work, you do your work…You know, everything becomes just a blur. And I think that's…sort of…when people talk about routine, that's the way I see it, that we aren't really doing things thoroughly, we're just getting through them. You used the word ritual, and I think that's a very helpful way of approaching how to improve that state of affairs. Because I think that some of the things that are built into everyday should be more rituals than routines. And by ritual I mean that they have more depth, more texture, more meaning. And that you slow down, you're in the moment, and you're actually connecting with what you're doing. So…that doesn't necessarily have to be when you're brushing your teeth, I'm quite happy for that to be a swift piece of routine…but I think when you sit down to a meal, if you're just routinely gobbling that down without really concentrating on it, then I think you're missing out.

So I think that one of the things that we lose, culturally, in daily life when we're in a hurry, is we lose ritual. And you see that right across the field of human experience, but you see it, I think, particularly at the dinner table. I think food is one of the great, one of the most wonderful and one of the most basic human rituals, and it's been sacrificed in this headlong dash to the finish line.

JS: If you are just tuning in, this is Deconstructing Dinner, and on today's show we are re-mastering the January 26, 2006 broadcast titled Paying the Costs of Not Paying Attention to Eating. The show is examining how our relationship to eating affects not

only our food, but the world around us. We are hearing right now from Carl Honoré – author of the book In Praise of Slow.
As was mentioned just previously, our culture has turned into one where we are increasingly trying to simply get through our daily actions as opposed to actually doing them. Carl shares some possibilities as to how our culture could have got to such a state – this state of speed…..

CH: I think whenever you talk about how we got so fast, the usual suspects rear their heads. So, for instance, you think about technology, which allows us to do things more quickly, but then conditions us to expect everything to be fast, to be on demand. Or, if you go back further, urbanisation, with the creation of cities. Cities seem to speed people up. They act almost like giant particle accelerators. The city is always faster than the countryside. Or the workplace, with every-tightening deadlines, and heavier workloads, pushing us along to get things done more swiftly. But I think if you cut through some of those external factors, you get to what is probably the nub of the question, which is our relationship to time itself. In the West, we have a very neurotic and unhealthy view of time. We see time as the enemy, it's a slave driver, you want to take it by the scruff of the neck and shake it for all it's worth. We see an empty space of time in our diary or our schedule and we don't rejoice, we panic, and we rush to fill it up with more activities. So I think we have this very strange and unhealthy relationship with time, which drives us on. The Germans have coined a term recently, which is *freitzeitstress* – free time stress – and it describes this phenomenon that even when we're away from the workplace, even when the boss is not hovering by our elbow and we're not on a deadline, even in those moments of leisure and supposed slowness, we're running around like a headless chicken, trying to fill up our schedules with more and more activity, and do more and more. And I think there's a kind of cultural compulsion nowadays to squeeze more and more into less and less time. And, of course, that whole have-it-all approach is just a recipe for hurrying it all.

JS: Carl indicates that our culture of speed is very much a result of our relationship to time itself. With Western consumer culture being famous for filling up our time to the point where it seems there just isn't enough, I asked Carl if he thinks we are still in control of time itself?

CH: No, I think that part of the problem that underlies this whole speed culture is that we've lost control of time. We've lost all sense of how to deal with time. We feel that we're constantly racing just to keep up, there's never enough time, people talk about time poverty, there's even an expression time sickness, which describes this whole phenomenon of feeling constantly that time is draining away from you and you have to go faster and faster just to keep up.

And I'm not against clocks, I'm not anti-time or anti-schedules, I think that schedules have a place. But you have to have a fluid and open relationship, I think, with the clock. You can't allow the clock to determine every second of your day. You can't have one eye on the digital clock in every moment of every day. That's folly. That means that you're

just rushing constant…you're always in that hyped-up, hyper stimulated, go-go-go state, and you end up racing through your life instead of actually living it.
So I think that definitely, one of the root causes, if not the root cause, of this over-accelerated culture of ours is the fact that we have forgotten how to interact with time.

JS: In my conversation with Carl I likened the Slow Movement to one that attempts to increase the peripheral vision of our daily routine. And Carl responds…

CH: Well I certainly think that tunnel vision is one consequence of a speed culture, because the faster you go, the less you see, the less you engage, the less colour, the less texture your life has. You just become a blur. And I think that certainly, the first step towards combating that whole hurry-up creed and ethos is to pull yourself out of the tunnel vision and realize all of the things that you're missing by hurtling down the railway line and never looking to the side, definitely.

JS: The Slow Movement that provides the basis for Carl's book In Praise of Slow describes efforts being made to pull our culture of speed out of the tunnel vision it fosters, and Carl explains some of the many efforts being made to slow our lives down…

CH: Well, I think, whatever walk of life you look at, there are people who are saying it's time to put on the brakes. Let's look first at the workplace. The number of hours worked in continental Europe has been falling steadily, and what people are discovering is that working less not only means a better quality of life, because you've got more time off, but it actually means that you're more effective at work, you work better. So the most productive workers on the Earth at the moment per hour are the French, you know, with their 35-hour workweek. You look at the Nordic countries…they work very short hours compared to North Americans, for example, and yet their four economies rank among the most competitive on Earth. So I think the message in the workplace is that less is often more, but so too the message that slower is often better. So you're finding that more and more companies are waking up to the fact that people in the workplace during the workday need to shift gears. They need to have time to take their foot off the accelerator pedal, put their feet up, go for a walk, get away from their desk and have lunch, because it's in those laid-back, relaxed moments that the brain slides into that more creative, that more nuanced mode of thinking.

And so people come back with better ideas, they're refreshed, they're thinking more clearly, and so you're seeing huge companies, VERITAS, for instance, big software company in California, recently introduced e-mail-free days. You're finding companies on both sides of the Atlantic encouraging staff to take naps at work. They're building napping rooms, or rooms where people can go and meditate so that they can get in touch with their inner tortoise, if you like.

And these companies are not doing that because it gives them a warm, fuzzy feeling, let's be honest. They're doing it because it's good for the bottom line. It helps people to work better. And another example of how even fast industries are suggesting that we need now to put speed limits on the information superhighway. A senior executive at IBM recently

launched what he called the slow e-mail movement. And you think well what on earth is that? How can e-mail be slow? But he's just saying a very simple thing, which is that these tools, e-mail, cell phones, BlackBerry's are fabulous, but they all come with an off button, and if you don't switch them off, if you don't slow down from time to time, they'll overwhelm you.

And so he's suggesting people check e-mail twice a day. I personally find that a little bit extreme. I don't think I can get by without a few e-mail checks in a day. But the principle, I think, holds true for everyone.

So that's the workplace…if you look at…in medicine, people are getting away from this idea that the quick fix is always the best approach, and so blue chip medical schools all over the world are starting to teach listening – basic listening to a patient as a tool for diagnosis. You'd have thought that would be an obvious weapon in every doctor's arsenal. But in the race that you find in hospitals all around the world, doctors are just in too much of a hurry to engage with the person, to listen to them.

And so they're putting that back on the curriculum. And another example of that in the medical world is the boom in alternative and complementary medicine. A lot of these old healing traditions are based on very slow, gentle, holistic approaches to the body. You think of acupuncture, massage, yoga, meditation. And the big universities are starting to find that these things, however flakey they make look on the outside, actually do work. And I think that one of the benefits that they bring to the table is their slowness. They don't take a sledgehammer approach to the body, they work in harmony with nature, they work in harmony with the body, and they often manage to cure illnesses that conventional medicine fails to get at.

If you look at food, for instance, people are turning away, I think, more and more from this fast approach to eating. And that's both on the farm, with the rise of organic farming, free-range poultry…people want to have food, I think. They want to know that their food hasn't been raised on an industrial timetable. They want to know that it's in harmony with nature and the rhythms of the great outdoors. And I think another manifestation of that is the renaissance of the farmer's market, which you see all over Canada. People want to get back in touch with food and the producer, and know that that food is real food; it's not something that's been whipped up in a laboratory somewhere.

Of course, beyond some of those changes is the Slow Food movement, which began in Italy as a backlash against the fast-food movement in the late eighties and early nineties. And has now spread right across the world and has a hundred thousand members in over fifty countries, including Canada. And their whole campaign is based on a very simple but sensible idea, which is that we eat better – we get more pleasure – but we also get more health from our food when our food is cultivated, cooked and consumed at a reasonable pace. And these days, increasingly, reasonable pace means a slower pace.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner. On today's broadcast we are examining that daily routine we either love or hate – and that's the routine of eating. Right now we've been

listening to segments from my interview with Carl Honoré – author of the bestseller "In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed." Carl has been referred to as the "godfather of Slow." A noble title to say the least.

As I mentioned earlier – this Slow Movement that forms the basis for Carl's book, is more commonly understood when speaking of the Slow Food Movement – but as is the case, food is only the subject of one chapter in the book. This movement of slowing down has now extended to the routines of work, schooling, medicine and even thinking itself…. But keeping on the food side of things, Carl explains why increasing the attention we pay to food can then allow us to pay more attention to other parts of our lives.

CH: I think that because food is such a basic part of everyday, it's necessarily there as part of the routine, it can and should be a daily ritual - we sit down and eat three times a day. And I think that when you sit down and start talking to people about how slowing down can benefit them, how they will feel a payoff from it, how they'll gain more pleasure, often the best place to make that case is at the table. I think people notice right away when they sit down to a meal that's made of proper ingredients and that is consumed with the TV switched off and people sitting 'round the table breaking bread together, chatting…they understand right away. I think most people, however jaded their palate might be, most people will understand pretty instantly how much joy there is to be had from that slower approach to food. So I think food can be a good starting point for people when they're trying to get away from that fast-forward approach to life. And to convince themselves that yes, slow and slower might actually be good for them, I think that food is a good place to start.

JS: Now one of the fears that can justifiably exist when listening to a program such as this one – such as Deconstructing Dinner – is that the more we deconstruct our food and deconstruct the methods by which food makes its way to our table, the more complex the whole world of food becomes. And complexity for some acts as an attractive lure into wanting to learn more – and for others complexity can be a deterrent to having any involvement whatsoever. And Carl Honoré explains that there is good and bad complexity.

CH: Well I think that complexity is not something to be abhorred and run away from. I think that complexity is often another way of saying richness and pleasure and stimulation, which are all things that I think we would aspire to. I think that there is bad complexity and there is good complexity. I think bad complexity is an overscheduled life where you're constantly running around with one eye on the clock and never properly concentrating on what you're doing because you're either trying to do two or three things at once or you're worried about what's next on your to-do list. I think that's bad complexity.

I think good complexity is slowing down a bit, doing a bit less in general, but freeing up time so that the things that you do, you do well, and you give enough time to. And the complexity that comes from that is the pleasure that would come from sitting down to a meal that involved maybe going and buying some produce at farmer's market, talking to

the producer, coming home, cooking it up, sitting 'round the table and having a conversation.

That's a lot more complex than going to 7-11, buying a microwaveable meal, tossing it in the microwave, and gobbling it down while you're watching 'Desperate Housewives', but I would argue, and I think most people would agree, that that's a good kind of complexity.

You know, that's what the human experience should be about. That's what it is to be a person, is to connect with other people and to connect with the senses. And if you're denying yourself that kind of complexity, then I think you're in real trouble.

JS: Since the release of "In Praise of Slow", Carl has been receiving many letters saying how his book has changed their life, but one of the barriers that could potentially exist in trying to slow our lives down and pay more attention to our surroundings is that trying to do so in a city like Vancouver or Toronto can pose a difficulty when the pace of those around you doesn't change at all. And I asked Carl whether he thinks slowing down individually, requires the same to be done on a collective level.

CH: I think that it's both, actually. I think that there is an onus on each person to try and find a way to re-learn that lost art of shifting gears to find their inner tortoise. But it is difficult in a world which is racing around you at a hundred miles an hour, and the pressure's on, and if nobody else understands that, then you're going to come under a lot of pressure to go faster than is good for you.

So I think that the Slow movement, or the Slow revolution, like any cultural revolution, needs to move forward on two flanks. The first is the individual and the second is the collective. But I think for the most part the starting point needs to be the personal. And then from there you flow into the collective. And I think that as more and more people wake up to the fact that they can do everything better by slowing down a bit, then the message ripples out and it becomes more permissible, becomes less embarrassing to slow down, and people feel they have permission to do it, and I think that you get a multiplier effect. And I think we're starting to see that. I mean, my book came out a year and a half ago, and I'm just amazed by all the new groups that have sprung up, and all of the new debate and conversation that's going on in the media all around the world on this subject. And it's every age group, and demographic group, it's not just new age gurus or burned-out executives after their first heart attack. It's everybody – it's everybody from pensioners to teenagers to schoolteachers to dual-income couples, it's…everyone understands this now, and I think more and more people are now willing to take the leap. And that then makes it easier for other people to follow suit.

JS: And that was Carl Honoré – bestselling author of the book "In Praise of Slow: How a Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed." One of the most interesting turn of events that Carl now faces, is after the release of his book, Carl has been living a life of speed as he travels around the world fielding interviews for newspapers,

magazines, television and radio. An even greater stroke of irony is that while Carl was travelling through Italy researching his book, he was slapped with a speeding ticket! Carl's web site is www.inpraiseofslow.com

soundbite

JS: On today's broadcast of Deconstructing Dinner, we are essentially re-mastering the 4th ever episode of the program that aired back on January 26, 2006. Titled "Paying the Costs of Not Paying Attention to Eating", this show looks critically at the attention we pay to eating and suggests some ways with which we can better connect ourselves to not only the act of eating, but to food in general.

This show will be archived on our web site at cjly.net/deconstructingdinner.

We were just listening to segments from my interview with Carl Honoré – author of the book "In Praise of Slow." While Carl's book provides a great introduction into how we can slow our lives down, Montreal-based artist Victoria Stanton has created one option for disrupting our daily routine of eating, and introduces her idea through a project she calls ESSEN – a German word for eating. Victoria first launched her idea in an article published in the winter 2005 issue of Ascent Magazine, entitled "Don't Talk with *My* Mouth Full." Here's Victoria explaining her ESSEN project. And this is Deconstructing Dinner.

Victoria Stanton: The ESSEN project is a public performance in which I invite a group of people to gather at a restaurant. Now this is what the performance has been up until now; I invite a group of people to gather at a restaurant – so a public place. The people who come are sitting in pairs – either at separate tables or at a table together – and feeding each other over the duration of a meal. Each person orders their food and the person who they sit across from is the person who they're feeding. So they exchange plates, one person feeds the other, the other feeds the other and they negotiate that for the course of a meal. That is, in essence, what goes on during the performance. It's one of a series of performances that I started doing almost three years ago here in Montreal, where I invited groups of people to get together in public places, whether it was inside somewhere, like the restaurant, where ESSEN takes place, or outside, like a park or a sidewalk, and engage in an action as a group, usually lasting somewhere between an hour, an hour and a half. And ESSEN too, the restaurant performance lasts about the same time. So it is, in fact, part of a larger series of performances, these public performances.

JS: It is certainly an innovative and unique idea to sit down in a high-end restaurant whereby you and your group feed one another. Victoria provides some background into how she came across the idea of ESSEN…

VS: I've been working in performance for about thirteen years and I work in different media to do performance work. And this…the restaurant performance as it is now, culminated as a result of three different other performance incidents. So in one regard, I was working on a video that was related to a series of spoken word performances I was

doing, I was trying to make a visual document of these performances that I was doing live on stage – but create a performance video from these. And I had a group of people with me walking without any clothes on in front of a restaurant that…I had been wanting to experiment with this as an action, because it's a restaurant here in Montreal that's particularly upscale, where it's just as important to be seen in this restaurant as it is to actually be there eating, and there's a strange relationship between the people inside the restaurant and the people outside that are looking at each other while people are there. So I was thinking a lot about, you know, people are going there to eat, but they're as much going there to people-watch and to be looked at and to be seen in that particular restaurant in this part of town. I wanted to mess with that somewhat, getting this group of people walking out in front of the restaurant…let's give them something to look at. I guess I was being sort of facetious in a way, but this took place, and we taped the performance and a year or so later, I started thinking about what would it be like if I was inside that restaurant? So I guess it was two years later or so that I found myself thinking about setting it up so that now we're inside the restaurant, what are we going to do once we're in there? I'm going to invite a group of people to come and eat with me in this place that we did this action in front of some years before, and of course, my first thought was I'd really like to go in there, we'll all take our clothes off, and we'll eat dinner at this restaurant. I thought, well, no, I don't have the courage to do that, I don't really feel like being removed from the premises, is there something else we can do as a group in an action together in this piece?

Now, this is where my concerns with food really played in. I was thinking not just about disrupting, disturbing other peoples' experience, but then it became more about, well, you know what, I am really interested in exploring food. So it wasn't just about doing this gesture that would shock people, it was also about being in the restaurant. Here we are, in this upscale restaurant, how can we engage in this experience in a way that we don't normally engage in our eating experiences?

JS: And we're listening to segments from my interview with Montreal-based performance artist Victoria Stanton here on Deconstructing Dinner. As was mentioned earlier by my guest Carl Honoré, there is a clear distinction between routine and ritual. When exploring ways to better connect ourselves to any of our actions, one way to do so, is to look at our routines, and find ways to become more mindful of them. Upon doing so, these actions, or these routines, can then become more of a ritual. And Victoria Stanton uses the experience with the ESSEN project, to respond to this idea of ritual first presented by Carl Honoré.

VS: There we were, feeding each other, as a way of, in part, disrupting the daily routine. So, I see this serving all of these different purposes, I guess, and giving myself an opportunity to really think about being there and eating, as opposed to doing something so automatically. I'm not just thinking about being in this incredibly upscale restaurant, where I don't usually find myself, thinking about how it is I could really exploit that moment, for myself, for anyone else who is around who happens to see us and perhaps provide that pause for someone else who might be there who witnesses it.

JS: As Victoria continued her thoughts on exploiting the moment, she continues with the notion that her ESSEN project – this concept of feeding someone else and being fed, is also a push towards slowing down time…

VS: It's a very subtle way, an attempt at trying to slow down time, really. I can't stop time, but I find it does slow down time, because it opens up a window into another experience that is somewhat unlike what usually happens. And when we become mechanized in our routine, when we're on autopilot, we're not really conscious of time, as such. So I see these performances as really similar…a variation or interpretation of what it is to be in a meditative place.

So that if I'm paying more attention to what it is that I'm doing and in turn doing something that might cause someone else to pay attention to this thing going on, because it's out in the world, and they see us doing something that they don't usually see, it's somehow…it's like a little glitch in time, as it were. And I know I'm being really ideal (sic) when I talk about it like this, but I do think that there is something to it. It kind of reminds me of the way I feel when I go away, when I leave for a place that I've never been to before, travelling, whether it's vacation or for work, but I find myself somewhere that I haven't been, and because I'm seeing everything for the first time, my senses are really alert and awake to everything.

So time moves quite differently in that kind of situation. And that's what I suppose I'm trying to re-create somewhat through these pieces also. Here I am in my daily life, but I'm going to insert something a little different and see if I can mess around a bit with my perception of time and see if that can have an impact on anyone else around me.

JS: With an increased alertness that occurs during Victoria Stanton's public performances, she also explains how our normal routine of eating gets disrupted when being fed, and when feeding someone else.

VS: I'm paying so much attention to being there in the meal, because you need to think more when you're feeding somebody, and when someone's feeding you, it's not automatic. It's actually harder to focus on what's going on around the table. It's even difficult to have a conversation with someone sitting right next to you, which is something that we do really automatically too, because you can eat, you're not really thinking about it, you're talking, you're eating. So that is a bit tricky to really pay attention to anything else, besides paying attention to being there and eating.

What I've come to realize with this particular performance – and it could be different in other circumstances – but the last couple of times that it's happened, it really has become about being an experience for the people who are directly participating.

And at this moment, I'm not quite as concerned with whether or not it does impact the larger environment around us. This particular performance, right, because I was talking about…there's other ones that we also go out in the world and do something where you can't miss us, we're here, we're like right in the middle of the sidewalk kind of thing.

This one, it's somehow…because when you're at a table, you know how, in a restaurant, people are less likely to check out other tables, it's considered rude to kind of look over. Even when someone gets their plate and you're wondering what they're eating, you kind of surreptitiously look over to see their plate, because you don't want to be too obvious about it.

So this performance has become about the people who are involved in the experience that we have together.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner. In disrupting the routine of eating or any routine for that matter, unforeseen difficulties may arise. And Victoria explains one of the difficulties participants discover upon having to rely on someone else to feed them.

VS: Impatience comes up again and again; people getting really impatient. And it's not a difficulty that can't be overcome, but it seems to be a common response; that you're used to your own way of putting food into your own mouth, and now you're suddenly having to figure out with someone else how to do this.

At first it seems subtle; again, most of it does exist at the level of subtlety. But certain circumstances…I've had a couple of people talk about how…wow, I really had to work hard at calling in patience because I was getting really frustrated, it was bringing up all kinds of stuff for me. This is what's been said to me. The same thing has happened with myself.

JS: Along with impatience exhibited by ESSEN participants, there was also one participant who experienced a rather enlightening experience by being fed by someone else, and Victoria explains.

VS: Well one person was talking about how she could feel a difference in how she would digest…how the food would go down. She just said it just felt different eating like this than when I just sit and eat by myself. Like I said, it's hard for me to quite imagine what that…because I haven't had that experience, but she was really quite certain that she could tell a difference with how she was…well this is what she said to me…I feel like I'm digesting it differently. And I thought, oh, that feels like a bit of a stretch, but…I wasn't soliciting response, she just said to me after we finished eating "it just went down differently, I could just feel it going down differently."

And I thought well, that's quite something, what do you account that for? And she says well I was eating more slowly, the person was talking to me about the food when it was coming towards me - it's a funny thing.

JS: And this is Deconstructing Dinner and a re-mastering of the January 26, 2006 broadcast titled Paying the Costs of not Paying Attention to Eating. We have been listening to segments from my interview with Victoria Stanton – a Montreal-based performance artist who hosts meals in restaurants where participants actually feed each other as opposed to themselves.

This activity does not of course need to be restricted to just restaurants, but is one that can be done in any place at any time. And I will certainly suggest to any of you listening in on today's broadcast, to try it yourself with a friend, a family member, a partner, or if you're really brave, maybe a stranger in a restaurant. But in the end, when taking apart Victoria Stanton's ESSEN performances, food really does prove itself as a necessary item of our day to focus more attention on. Victoria explains how an increased attention paid to eating, can also help focus our attention on other routines in our lives.

VS: Why is this a more necessary item in my day to focus on than anything else that I do in my day? Because it is ultimately what sustains us. It seems like it's a shame to be just as preoccupied during that…what we do each day; eat, and each time that we do. If I'm not paying attention to that, there's a whole lot I'm also not paying attention to. I'm just generally preoccupied. I mean, it stands as a really quintessential example for me of how I think I spend a good deal of my time always being preoccupied, never really paying attention to any one thing that I do because I'm doing one thing and I'm always thinking about the next thing I need to do.

So if we're going to…and I don't think I'm so different from so many other people out there in that regard…which is something I would like to transform in my own life, which I, hopefully, I think I slowly am. I don't necessarily derive as much satisfaction from so much in my life because I don't give myself an opportunity to really live in the present with whatever it is that I'm doing.

So if that's the case, if we're looking at ways of trying to alter that in the way that we live, and we're looking at our day to day lives, we can say if I have a meditation practice here, and I do that, and it's very much a part of my life, and it does help me to centre myself and to come back to being in the present and focusing, that's all good. But then if we try and look at ways in which we transpose that to the rest of our lives, and we're looking at a point of departure, why not look at this process of eating. Because we do do this, say we have our three meals a day, and among every other thing that we do, we're just as preoccupied doing that as anything else, it's a shame.

JS: As I neared the end of my conversation with Victoria Stanton, I posed to her a very important question, one that addresses the nature of this program Deconstructing Dinner. As this program attempts to better understand where our food is coming from, what impacts our food choices have, there is of course the risk that the more we understand our food system, the more our food choices will become an obsession – an obsession where we are constantly trying to determine how far our food has travelled, how it was produced, health impacts, and all of this may lead to an eventual fear of food – similar to what my guest Paul Rozin suggested at the beginning of the broadcast. In addressing this question, Victoria explains – that the key in avoiding this potential obsession is being able to find balance.

VS: One could become obsessed with anything. And I don't necessarily that as a good thing. I think I ultimately would like to see myself and everyone else who's interested in food…because then you end up going to the store, and you're constantly reading the

packages on everything and so, so uptight around what can I eat, what can I not eat…I mean, I now have all of these food sensitivities that I didn't have before…and not since doing the performance (laughs)…that would make it sound like this just cropped up last year.

But over the years, initially it was dieting, because I thought I needed to lose weight, which wasn't the case, again, it's body image issues. And then it became, oh, now I need to make sure I eat well, because now I can't eat all of these things, and…I feel like I traded off one obsession for another in a way. And so if I see that happen, then yeah, I can definitely see people become just generally way, way too preoccupied with that, with the concerns around what they're eating to the point of becoming obsessed with it.
I think that ultimately, we want to try and have a balance here somehow. That I want to pay attention, but I don't want to pay attention at the expense of everything else that's going on around me. It doesn't mean that we can't single-mindedly have these very important plights like…I'm going to lobby government to ensure that we don't have GMO's in our foods, that we do have greater access to organic produce or at least produce that's not being attacked by pesticides…these are all really important ways in which you need to have the focus and be slightly…not obsessed, I don't know if there's another word that we could use that…I mean, focused, and believe in, and persist in to make sure that we're eating…we have a choice here to eat things that are good for us and not potentially devastating to us and to our environment.

JS: Just prior to interviewing Victoria Stanton, I came across a quote by the late Luciano Pavarotti, and it reads this: "One of the very nicest things about life is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is we are doing and devote our attention to eating." In wrapping up my conversation with Victoria Stanton, I asked her to respond to this quote.

VS: I laughed when I read it: "One of the very nicest things about life is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is we are doing and devote our attention to eating." This is spoken by somebody who obviously truly loves food. That's great that someone feels that way. Because not everyone does feel that way, a lot of people feel like eating is just something I have to do like going to the bathroom and sleeping, because if I don't, I'll fall down. Like people who are really obsessed with work or whatever just shoving food in my mouth while I work because otherwise I can't sustain this.

JS: And that was Victoria Stanton – a Montreal-based performance artist. And you can read more about her ESSEN project in the 2005 Winter issue of Ascent Magazine.
Today's broadcast has been a re-mastering of the January 26, 2006 broadcast titled Paying the Costs of Not Paying Attention to Eating.

And as was done then, I will wrap up today's show with another quote that relates nicely to today's theme. And it says this: "I mind my belly very studiously, and very carefully; for I look upon it, that he who does not mind his belly will hardly mind anything else."

And that was Samuel Johnson.

And here's one more clip to leave you with from one of my interviews.

PR: Pleasure drives eating, there's no question about that. And basically, that's going to continue and maybe even overwhelm these other forces.

Ending Theme

END OF TRANSCRIPT