What Makes a Renaissance Woman?

ESSAYS ON ASPIRING TO BE A FEMALE LEONARDO DA VINCI



by Alexandra Pratt

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This work is the result of many years of reading and curiosity. It is also a work of opinion.

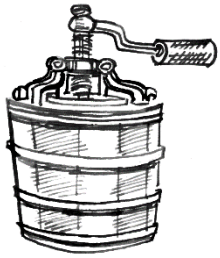
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CHAPTER 1

ICE CREAM : A SOURCE OF TRUTH

It all goes back to childhood…

Turning ice cream with your left arm sucks. Homemade ice cream, that is. Fundamentally, peach, though peppermint and later, chocolate, became popular. To churn ice cream as a left hander, you have to pull the lever toward you over the apex of the arc rather than – for right handers – pushing it over that most difficult length of the circle's circumference.



I don't believe Leonardo churned ice cream. I wish I could have him draw beautifully detailed, accurate sketches of ice cream maker parts to illustrate them for you. The parts include an outer bucket, a cylinder to hold the custard, a dasher to churn it, and a lid that fits into, finally, the all-important crank apparatus. That apparatus has a big lever on it or, if you go the unapproved easy automation route, it's got a cord to plug in instead.

My dad loved ice cream. Most specifically, hand cranked, made from cooked custard of milk, eggs, and cream. Was that because of the sumptuous taste and feel of rich semi-frozen, somewhat soupy luscious melty lumps, perhaps a comfort food? Or because of homemade ice cream's connection to his disrupted childhood? His banker father was diagnosed and died of leukemia within two weeks

when my father was eight. My grandmother became a single parent and wage earner for herself and her son. They weren't destitute, but she started working full time. They moved from rural Texas to the growing city of Dallas. My father and his aunt, who had no children of her own and whose husband was a traveling salesman of pharmaceuticals, spent a lot of time together. My father and Aunt Ruth would, so the story goes, cook up some custard and take turns cranking the ice cream on hot summer days. And then of course eat it all. And repeat… since the story is that they'd go through more than one batch.

How often this really happened is in question, given the fact that the custard needs to be refrigerated overnight before churning, as well as ice makers not being readily available in the early decades of the 20th century. And Aunt Ruth didn't drive. How did she get the groceries? Perhaps my great aunt was always planning these events, ordering a block of ice and prepping custard, as entertainment for her lonely nephew.

In my childhood homemade ice cream was a sacred rite. My sisters and I were the labor. Usually, the goal was to make peach ice cream using a special recipe from my dad's childhood friend /sometime girlfriend, known as the BEST PEACH ICE CREAM. EVER. The appropriate heavy pan to make custard without burning and without the eggs and milk separating was a fundamental requirement. The ice cream mixer was a feature as well. Way back, it was a wooden tub, then superseded by plastic, with a galvanized cylinder to hold the to-be-ice cream. And the hand crank attachment which locked into the top was critical to

production. Dad's values were expressed in scorn for our cousins, who had an electric one. Though it had a rustic wooden tub, the electric mixer head made it faux old-timey – displaying apparent professional cooperage but eliminating elbow grease. Of course it couldn't be as good if it wasn't hand cranked![1]

Our ice cream maker was rimy from the rock salt used with the ice to make slurry. The wood sleeve over the metal grip rotated as you cranked. As the only leftie in the family, I had to adjust to our assigned toil. Mostly by learning to turn the crank with my right arm, because it just didn't work to use my left. Perhaps this practice is what made me ambidextrous.

As the custard metamorphosed into ice cream, and the cranking got more difficult, more and more convolutions were required to keep pulling that crank up and pushing it over the impossible mountain of the peak rotation. At that point, we were leaning over the porcelain kitchen sink – this was before the tyranny of stainless sinks – falling off the high stool my father had made in shop class in order to apply leverage. The penultimate cranking always needed to be completed by Dad. My mother, an Ohioan, had not been properly indoctrinated into ice cream rituals as a child. Even though she always claimed their summers were hotter and steamier than those in Texas. I don't remember her participating in the cranking.

Back to the peach! Peaches were a linchpin of Texas summers, and a trip to the farmer's market to secure giant, hairy peaches, was a summer rite as well. Luscious Texas peaches, deep yellow and juicy – before the innovations of

nectarines and artisan peach shapes like donuts came along – were peeled, with the hairy skin making your fingers prickle, sliced up - no chopping - pits removed, and covered in sugar. We were told to be wary of the pits, which contain cyanide!

When the custard was most of the way transformed to ice cream – as far as homemade ice cream gets – we would stop the cranking, hold the cylinder down, take off the crank apparatus, and carefully remove the cylinder cover to reveal the foamy goodness inside – which might now be three-quarters full, having grown and expanded during the cranking. The goal was now to pour in the peach mixture, which otherwise would be populated with rock solid, frozen peach chunks. This operation required a firm hand, so that the cylinder wouldn't buoy up out of the ice slurry, a caring hand to avoid splashing salty ice water into the ice cream, and delicate holding with fingernails both to hold down the open cylinder and have room to pour the peaches. The dasher, that bladed thing that pushes the air into the custard, takes up vital real estate that adds more challenge to pouring in the goodies. If calculations had not been made correctly, there might not be enough room in the cylinder for all the peaches. We were always of the more-is-better persuasion when it came to flavor.

If successfully navigated, the top went back on the cylinder, the crank went back on the top, and we had to summon the power to crank more, to mix the peaches into that glistening, loamy ecru mass of coalesced goodness. If the can popped up, the ice in the bottom prevented a reassembly and further cranking. Then we'd have a fail for that batch because there was never enough ice to pour it

out and start over. If we'd cranked long enough that Dad deemed it complete, the real torture began. It needed to harden. He would cover the top of the mixer with a stack of newspaper, weigh it down with whatever would help hold the uneven surfaces of crank, tub, and mixer, and tell us we had to wait. Oh, that was the worst!

The homemade ice cream practice wasn't just about eating, as you might have already realized. It was a family value as well in respect to what's "real" and what is valued. Store-bought ice cream was not at all equivalent. (Though my dad sure as heck loved Blue Bell later on – his freezer always stuffed with multiple gallons when he got older.) When we were little, we would make excursions to Polar Bear Ashburn's after dinner. It was on the way to my grandmother's house. If we were in Ft. Worth going to museums, we would definitely make a stop at the one there. The silver background of the logo, with the polar bear outlined on it, represented summer and cool, just like the silvery refrigerator bags that grocery stores used at the time to sack ice cream and those small boxes of frozen peas or spinach that Bird's Eye or Jolly Green Giant used. No plastic bags or microwaveable packages back then!

Dad had hung out at the soda fountain that used to be down the street from the Dallas Polar Bear Ashburn's in high school, so you can sense a theme in family food outings – absolutely no McDonald's, that was for sure. And my understanding of the word "carrageenan" was informed by his lecture on the difference between "real" ice cream and that of Dairy Queen, which had seaweed in it. Definitely lower on the ice cream value spectrum – and remember this was before all the "super premium" vs.

"premium" vs. ice milk distinctions. Ice cream was either "real" or not. Sherbet was the less ice cream-y alternative.

Where did we go with Ice Cream as Source of Truth? Ice cream continued as a guiding principle and presence as we aged. When we were old enough to work, the grease-laden realms of fast food were not for us. We moved on from homemade ice cream to the commercial stuff.

My sister got a job at a nearby Swensen's in high school. It was a franchise expanding out of San Francisco at the time. I quickly followed her. The layout included freezers of ice cream to the right for cones to go and ten booths and tables on the left for sit-down sundaes and confections. Dead ahead as you entered, in the back of the store behind glass was the all-white ice-cream-making room, featuring a giant horizontal metal ice cream maker. Other than the black-and-white tiled floor and the ice cream making room, the theme was brown and more brown, with mirrors on the brown walls.

The ice cream was good! Since it was made fresh on the premises, it met the standards of our dad's value system. The competition's ice cream was all made elsewhere and shipped in. The store was owned by a couple who were (as I remember) interested in running a business, not specifically a franchise. So though we had training on scoop size, there were no uniforms or focus on productivity. We didn't sell bubble gum ice cream because they thought it was a choking hazard for kids. And they employed college students – a bunch of art students, dancers, someone who later got a job doing illustrations for Hallmark. Maybe we didn't always work to the highest of

customer service standards, and I'm not at all sure the store made money, but the freewheeling culture was fun and the product good.

The college students were models of semi-adult humans who were able to do what they wanted in running this store – I remember the owners being around, but I think students were managing it. It was work making the ice cream in the store, too. My sister did it. Maybe I was scared to. It was a giant freezer, making 10 or 20 gallons at a time. Galvanized five-gallon tins were used, not the later plastic or paper. It had to be aged in a hard box at minus twenty degrees to prevent ice crystals forming, then at zero, "regular" freezer temperature.

The virtuous aspects keep coming: like the hand cranking, scooping ice cream required conditioning and hard labor! The model of appropriate tools was reflected in our 1930s designed ice cream scoops – still recommended by those who review household items – and much easier to use than the rounder soda jerk ones with the curved bar to extract the ice cream. Those made it difficult to create a good scoop, and the unscoop was never a clean detachment! Don't get me started on cake cones versus sugar cones… much more value judgment involved in that choice as well. Please note this was also before the era of calorie-added cones dipped in chocolate, nuts, or other folderol.

Beyond the cultural value systems, the store experience included life lessons. I learned how to make change in my head in order to count it out from the adding-but-non-change-calculating register, how to serve customers, how to clean up and how to deal with unhappy folks. I learned

how to communicate with the young man, older than me, who had cerebral palsy. He was a regular, and with trial and error at understanding his speech, I had his order down. I think he might have had a crush on me. I took my earnings and shopped for clothes, books, records (yes, vinyl), and it was fun to explore and develop my own taste. It helped me assemble a sense of style. Book shopping gave me a big collection of Edward Gorey works, which I discovered in browsing a bookstore.

I remember being sticky a lot on the job, but I really enjoyed making myself a custom sundae, taking it home to put it in the freezer. My favorite coffee ice cream. Caramel. Nuts and whipped cream. And having it for breakfast the next morning. It was almost better all frozen together than freshly made in the store. My sister would bring home run-off – the weird "ends" of ice cream flavor batches, combos that might contain a random color and taste assortment of the tail ends of her production.

But change happened. The couple sold the store to a franchise group out of Florida. Different mindset. Different culture. The nice older couple moved on, and new, out-of-state suited guys showed up. They had a sort of mob vibe, with sharp black suits, button down shirts, polished loafers and slicked down hair. Very alien to us Texas kids - or at least teenage me. It was immediately apparent that they were out to make money, and that a franchise was a franchise was a franchise. Their shock when they walked in the front door, seeing the front plate glass windows completely covered with fantastical figures in shades of green was palpable. (The ice cream freezers couldn't keep up with the hot Texas sun in the summer,

and this cheap screening, the work of one of our college students, helped.)

Notice we are developing a theme about child labor, imposed by parents. In the workplace that shifts to business owners and managers.

It had always been the practice to write notes on the wall of big freezers in the back of the store. The six- or eight-foot-tall freezers had metal doors, all white – no glass – and so were perfect for writing inventory, orders, notes in multiple colors of grease pencil as an easy way to communicate. As changes were dictated, the rainbow of color changed. Picture the drawing of a three-year-old who doesn't know yet that the sun is always yellow in drawings. Maybe they make the sun purple because it's sometimes behind clouds, and the grass brown because it's winter. The blue frenetic grease pencil might now be a disbelieving screed about the new instructions for using the dishwasher. And the red, clear letters an angry rant about the directions for clocking in and out on the new time clock. Or the green slanting words a polemic on doing away with pooled tips, and the material result that no one would want to work behind the ice cream counter and the new practice was reducing our pay.

Perhaps they locked up the grease pencils. I don't remember. The college students went away, new teens were hired who knew from the start they had to don the peculiar brown stripy, flouncy, turn-of-the-20th-century pastiche uniforms. I became an assistant manager, so I got to wear standard clothes in appropriate brown-ish colors. Instead of a vibe based on the fundamental appeal of good

homemade ice cream, the rules of a corporate business took over. The ice cream itself didn't matter much, except as a vehicle for earning money. I don't remember the mob-looking guys ever scooping a scoop – or eating one!

What that meant was teaching us about "productivity," which really means nothing of the sort in serving scoops of ice cream. "Productivity" in business parlance is a label for getting-as-much-as-we-can out of workers while paying them as little as possible.

If you're Lucy and Ethel on the chocolate manufacturing line, where they're expected to manage the volume of chocolates coming down the conveyor belt, then it's a simple calculation of how many chocolates they could handle in a standard time frame. Lucy and Ethel found out the downside of productivity, since they could not keep up with the flow. Instead they stuffed chocolates everywhere in a fruitless and hilarious pursuit to serve the needs of a conveyor belt.

In case it's not obvious, when you produce more product in shorter time frames, you can make more money because you have more to sell.

Lucy and Ethel are the factory example, which, in our current world, has plenty of experts looking at human capacity and ergonomics and assembly lines to calculate the maximum output and/or analyze for replacement of humans by robots, which don't complain or get carpal tunnel syndrome in their extremities. The difference in my ice cream store example is those mob-looking guys had no control over who decides to come in and buy stuff on any one day. It could be warm and nice and a good day to go

out, or it could be thundering, raining and miserable and not a day for ice cream.

The productivity calculation, however, is based on how many customers come in and buy. As well as the number of workers on the shift. To calculate it, we took the dollars we sold in the past hour and divided by the number of workers on shift… and if that number was not what they wanted, we were supposed to ask an employee to hang out and not be paid. Specifically, to clock out for 15 minutes. Or 30 minutes. The employee was forced to hang out and earn nothing while technically at work so that the store would generate higher productivity numbers. Note that the salaried ranks of businesspeople cannot be asked to clock out, should their productivity not be up to par. As a child, I wasn't yet wise to the value of earning money, so the free ice cream after the labor of turning that crank kept me happy. The work of being in an ice cream store was different. It was a job. But me in my teenage naivete went along with this productivity scam and asked folks to clock out and calculated those ratios that made productivity look better.

I am honestly not sure how long I went along with that practice. At that point I think I was only there in the summer, home from college. But I do remember the young black teen working there whom I asked to clock out. One day when I gave her a ride home, we talked. Her house was in an area by downtown Dallas that was later mown down for an art district celebrating the monied folks of Dallas. I remember during the ride, Cynthia told me they kept their money in cash under a mattress. Maybe she had her paycheck in cash with her that day. Her family didn't trust

banks. I had no idea back then of the many ways blacks had been excluded from banking systems, whether through redlining, predatory lending, or no convenient banking institution. Without knowing any further information, it was clear to me that, while my mother might have cried about having little money in the mid-1970s malaise, Cynthia was much less advantaged than I was. I was using my pay to buy clothes, books, whatever. She was helping support her family. Participating in this transition from locally owned, single focus operation to a distant cog in a larger business became a first lesson in the "capitalism" taunted by Chambers of Commerce, politicians and "known" entrepreneurs.

Clearly our local owners cared, showed up, and made it easy to work there. They had made a decision to hire college students, based on that being the pool of workers. I don't know whether the business was profitable, but I remember Mr. Aberg talking about sizes of scoops, costs of operations, which amounted to early education in being entrepreneurial. He was already successful as a businessperson. The big business owners expressed more interest in the transactional, the profits.

Some adult must have been in charge, but none left an impression. Before and after scenarios included part-time workers; none of these workers were, I believe, likely to make a career out of an ice cream business. What changed for me was how the workers were valued. They became a replaceable set of folks who needed some cash handling, table waiting and customer service skills. And an image-conforming uniform. As a part-time worker there were no benefits. I as an assistant manager was in the highest

possible role. There was no assumption of earning raises and promotions, though I believe they valued me enough to want me back the two summers in college I worked there.

Later, moving on to work in the professional, white-collar world, I found my experience in fast food to be a double-edged sword. It was discounted and dismissed by "professionals" who valued a college education, not the practical aspects of showing up, managing money, managing people, perhaps managing orders and supplies and merchandising product. I saw it with a manager who refused to tout a new hire's experience in fast food. Why not? It is as if it is demeaning to have worked in a fast food restaurant – unless you are planning a career in fast food.

Two thoughts here: business ruined my beautiful ice cream experience! And I learned that businesses maintain a system built on making it difficult to improve conditions and pay for franchise (often fast food) workers. While these same business professionals look down on the experience and expect only the novices, the unskilled, and the unmotivated to participate in this system. The experience of working for a franchise was certainly as fundamental to my feelings about the American capitalist system – further informed by later work experiences – as the ritual of homemade ice cream was to an understanding of culture and values. I learned about other types of people and culture - from the transactional Florida franchise guys to the aspiring college students to the teens trying to earn money to support their families.

In my childhood, the practice of making homemade ice cream was what helped me learn how to get hard things done. To be willing to go through the steps to achieve a reward. The ice cream, when eaten, always paid off. It might be soupier than fully frozen or the add-ins unexpectedly dissolved, but the taste and the texture pretty much never disappoint. Admittedly, it is possible to be too full on other feast goodies to enjoy it properly.

Perhaps all the steps of making the ice cream are as much the reward as the ingestion of it. Seeing all the tiny bubbles form in the formerly white, now ivory heavy liquid, and the wooden spoon coated with the results of that marvelous physical reaction… well, that was just the first part! Suspending gratification by waiting overnight for the custard to fully cool and refrigerate before you could move on to the churning required discipline.

So yes, all those lessons of patience, persistence, following a process step-by-step, and making the investment in order to secure the reward were seminal in my childhood. And they've paid off as I've moved through life. Perhaps not the least – going back to my friend Leonardo – because it contributed to me becoming ambidextrous!

But when your first real paid work experience induces cynicism, what happens next?

NOTE

[1] Perhaps the culture of homemade ice cream in Texas summers had a higher social status component than my child self understood. One set of friends bought commercial ice cream but provided it in an ice cream churn on the 4th of July, in an apparent effort to present it as homemade.