

Radical Middle-Aged Cake Acceptance

by Roz Warren

I'm processing books in the circulation office of the library where I work when I hear a sudden outcry.

"Oh no!"

"This is dreadful."

"This is just terrible!"

What catastrophe are my co-workers, all middle-aged women, reacting to? Have the library's computers crashed again? Has a letter from an irate patron just been posted on the bulletin board? Is there another new book by Joyce Carol Oates?

Nope. They're talking about cake.

One of our patrons has baked us a scrumptious-looking chocolate cake, which sits invitingly on the counter in the circulation office. After taking a piece ("I really shouldn't, but...") I return to my work station and continue to eavesdrop as my co-workers respond to this thoughtful gift.

"Oh my God!"

"Uh-oh."

"This is just evil."

You'd think that eating chocolate cake was the worst possible kind of calamity.

"This is treacherous."

"I'm in trouble now."

"Oh dear. Oh dear. Oh dear."

I begin to wonder -- isn't anybody going to say anything positive?

Like: "Chocolate cake? How cool is that?" Or "I love cake. I'm having a nice big slice."

Not a chance. By afternoon's end, not a single librarian has had anything nice to say about this unexpected treat. We've gobbled it down. But have we enjoyed it?

You sure wouldn't think so, listening to us.

Last week, I helped celebrate my pal Lucy's 40th birthday. As we all sang Happy Birthday, Lucy's husband brought out a beautiful layer cake he'd made from scratch, lavishly decorated by Olivia, their 7-year-old daughter.

I try to avoid sweets, but I always make an exception for birthday cake. To turn down birthday cake, it seems to me, isn't merely rude. It's bad karma.

So I had some. And I enjoyed it, too. But my pleasure was undercut by the guilt I felt about consuming all those empty calories.

Lucy's other friends also said yes to cake, invariably adding "Just a small slice for me, thanks." or "Just a tiny taste."

But the kids at the party, a gaggle of little girls Olivia's age, had a totally different response. Drawn to that cake like moths to a flame, each child claimed as large a piece as she could get her hands on, then happily made short work of it.

Seeing cake, they weren't alarmed. They were thrilled.

They were quite a sight, these little girls, beaming, with huge chunks of cake on their plates.

And yet, sometime between now and adulthood, they, too, will stop being delighted by cake and learn to fear it. Rather than taking a big piece and loving it, they'll ask for a tiny slice and beat themselves up about eating it.

Is there a scientific name for this crazy cake phobia? The terror that strikes the hearts of otherwise sane and mature women when offered a delicious dessert? Yes, cake has zero nutritional value.

Still, shouldn't a grown woman be able to simply enjoy a piece from time to time?

Listening to my co-workers kvetch about our cake, and remembering how much those little girls loved eating theirs, I resolved that I would try to shed my own fear of delicious pastry and get back in touch with my inner 7-year-old.

Call it Radical Middle-aged Cake Acceptance.

When comes to cake, I'm going to give myself just two options. Either smile and say "No, thanks." Or have a piece and enjoy it, without ambivalence or guilt, the way I did when I was a kid.

"Cake is not the enemy" is my brand new mantra. (You can try it too. Just repeat after me: "Cake is not dreadful. Cake is delicious.")

Is this an impossible dream?

Invite me to your next party and let's find out.

