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Opinion Life & Arts

## What is it that we really hunger for?

Answering this question can help us make important changes to our lives

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I was recently helping to cook dinner for a large group of people when, while in the kitchen, chopping and chatting with the other volunteers, I suddenly thought of the Danish movie *Babette's Feast*. I watched this film, a 1987 adaptation of the short story by Isak Dinesen, years ago but every now and then my mind goes back to it.

The story is about a woman named Babette Hersant who, having escaped the violence of the Paris Commune of 1871, finds herself in a small coastal town in Denmark, where she is taken on as a housekeeper by two ageing spinster sisters, Martine and Filippa. The sisters live as part of an ascetic Lutheran community that is growing older and increasingly discordant. After 12 years, Babette comes into a small, unexpected fortune and she decides to use the money to cook and host a lavish feast for the community with ingredients sent from Paris.

Concerned by how luxurious it all seems, the townspeople make a pact between themselves that they will eat the food, but they will not show any pleasure or make any comment about it. Yet during the meal they are overwhelmed by Babette's cooking and by her gracious offering. They can't stop themselves from expressing their joy and slowly, as the meal progresses, they begin to settle their quarrels and make peace with one another. They had come for food but found what they really needed: reconciliation and renewed joy.

Between my own recent cooking experience and my memories of this film I started to wonder how often we recognise what it is we really hunger for — and how a greater awareness of this might lead to shifts in our own lives.

The Scottish painter Caroline Walker (whose current exhibition, *Caroline Walker: Mothering*, is showing at Newlyn Art Gallery & The Exchange, in Cornwall) makes work that explores the experiences of women, considering interiority, domestic life and working environments. Her 2021 painting, *Newborn Check*, depicts two female medical professionals checking the vitals of a newborn baby. The woman in dark blue scrubs holds the infant gently under its back while listening to its heartbeat. The

other woman in the grey scrubs observes ready and attendant. I love this close-up depiction of these women at work and for whom part of their job is literally to monitor the health of beating hearts that have just entered the world.

There is something about this image that makes me wonder if the labours of our lives might reveal something about the things we have hungered for over the years. The path to becoming a doctor is long, intense and at times, I suspect, quite gruelling. Yet I can imagine there are many times, when a patient is successfully cared for, healed or has had their life improved, when being a doctor must feel deeply satisfying.

Whatever the reason we follow the path of paid or unpaid work, there is a need that drives us. Sometimes that need is primal, like the need to simply be able to sustain our own lives and those of our family. Sometimes it is a need to contribute to the wellbeing of others. Sometimes the need is less altruistic, and is about meeting the expectations of others, so as to feel validated, to feel purposeful or to achieve a certain level of success as defined by society.

When reflecting on the life choices we have made, do we feel driven by the same hungers as before? And, if not, what deep need are we still trying to satiate?



Detail | Caroline Walker | *Newborn Check*, 2021 | Photo: Peter Mallet Photography  
Courtesy of the Artist and GRIMM, Amsterdam | New York | London