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The Morning News

I grew up in a family where mealtime was talking time. We were numerous enough and busy enough that breakfast and dinner offered the best opportunities to find out what everyone was up to. Then, I married a man who had lived alone, away from his family, for long enough that he had developed his own way of doing things. He had a demanding job which didn't allow a great deal of personal time. For breakfast, especially, he was accustomed to reading the morning paper. Who wouldn't if he ate alone most of the time and was interested in world and sports events?

Immediately following our wedding, we boarded a train to travel from Dallas to Portland, Oregon. The several meals we had on the crowded, wartime train were invariably at a table shared with another couple. We of course were on our very best behavior, determined to act like a well-settled married couple having just a routine meal and getting acquainted with our sometime companions, all very interesting people. Incidentally, we didn't fool any of them about the length of time we'd been married, for it was obvious that we were getting acquainted with each other's daily habits.

Soon after we settled into the routine of our new lives in Portland, Paul reverted to his custom of reading the morning paper. I realized that it was really the only time he had to do so, but I was nevertheless unhappy with his raising a paper wall between us at our tiny dining table. He didn't ignore me; we conversed about this and that, but he mainly read through the paper. I didn't verbally object to his reading, but I did decide that I should show him, as subtly as possible, that looking at each other without a barrier would be better.

I considered several Machiavellian plans before I decided on one that involved tinting his breakfast food a delicate shade of green. Arming myself with a small bottle of green vegetable dye, I spent some time on Saturday while he was at work tinting a small bowl of sugar a lovely green; I gave a similar pastel shade to a small pitcher of cream (those were the days!), as well as to a glass of milk.

Sunday morning, while Paul brought in the morning paper, I set the breakfast table with a regular glass of milk, an ordinary pitcher of cream, and a regular bowl of sugar. We exchanged a few cordial comments before Paul erected his usual paper obstacle. Our dining area, the kitchen, was minute, making it possible for either of us to serve the table from the counter, the range, or the refrigerator, without leaving our seats. I carefully, quietly, switched the normal milk and sugar to the doctored milk and sugar. Paul said a few words with the paper down while he sugared and creamed his coffee, returning quickly to whatever he was reading. In a moment he lowered the paper with a strange, pained look on his face and said plaintively, "I think I'm going to be sick!" In that brief glimpse he had registered a difference in the table setting without actually identifying the change.

Of course, I was instantly contrite although I couldn't keep a straight face. I confessed what I'd done. He examined the green food and decided that, after all, he hadn't suddenly become sick. He laughed, too, but after all these years he can't really believe that his sweet bride would do such a

thing to her new husband. At the same time, he occasionally admires her imagination and ingenuity in doing such a thing.

For a time, he did not read the paper at breakfast, but he clearly missed it. In time, I discovered that we had plenty of time to talk at dinner in the evening. I also discovered that there's something highly satisfying about reading the morning paper and sharing views on what we found there. After all these years, it seems to me the most natural way to have breakfast -- when we're alone, that is. When our family is at home or when we have breakfast guests, we abandon our every day habit and ignore the morning newspaper.