

*Symbolic Foods:
Making the Everyday Special*

Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

As a group, with family members, or one-on-one, list favorite holiday foods, especially those that are decorated or arranged in special ways. Discuss the meanings behind these foods, after which the participants' food memories will be represented using imagery applied to hard-boiled eggs. On paper, draw out some traditional designs (for example, *pysanky* [Ukrainian wax-resist Easter eggs], *slamenky* [Czech straw-decorated Easter eggs], or paper cutting [Spirit Lake Indian Reservation]), generate simpler designs based on the traditional art forms, or create designs inspired by the local landscape (for example, sundogs or prairie flowers). Use these designs to decorate white-shelled eggs with crayons and/or onion-skin dye prepared by the group, traditional Easter egg artists, volunteers, or staff.

TIME:

Four to seven hours over four sessions.

MATERIALS:

- Paper or index cards
- Colored pencils or colored markers
- Pens
- Crayons
- Scissors (Consider using larger, pre-K-size crayons and pencils, as well as ADA-adapted scissors for those participants with visual or motor skills issues.)
- Multiple sheets of paper with three egg outlines drawn on them
- Onion skins from red or yellow onions
- White-shelled eggs
- Two or more 2-quart bowls
- Strainer
- Rags or paper towels
- Hot water
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

These activities are designed to increase social interaction between individuals within the care facility and the elder residents’ family or outside community through the sharing of decorative food and designs. Loneliness and boredom will both be addressed in this way. Egg designs, paper cutting, or other methods of food decorating with the use of adaptive supplies will help address the residents’ sense of helplessness. Those unable to physically reproduce designs can participate by recalling and retelling their own experiences with decorative foods and instructing others on how they were created.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

“Loneliness may predict impaired cognition among older people. The aim of this study was to determine the effects of socially stimulating group intervention on cognition among older individuals suffering from loneliness. . . . Two hundred thirty-five participants (≥ 75 years) in seven day care centers in Finland [were included in the study].

“Group intervention was based on the effects of closed-group dynamics and peer support. The three-month intervention was aimed to enhance interaction and friendships between participants and to socially stimulate them. Each group was facilitated by two specifically trained professionals. In addition to active discussions, the groups included three types of activities depending on the participants’ interests: 1) therapeutic writing; 2) group exercise; and 3) art experiences. . . .

“The intervention and control groups were similar at baseline with respect to their demographics, disease burden, depression, and cognition. The ADAS-Cog scale improved more in the intervention group than in the control group within the three-month period. . . . The dimension of mental function . . . showed significant improvement at 12 months in the intervention group . . . compared with the control group. . . . Psychosocial group intervention improved lonely older people’s cognition.” [Abstract]

*--Pitkälä, K.H., P. Routasalo, H. Kautiainen, H. Sintonen,
and R.S. Tilvis. “Effects of Socially Stimulating Group
Intervention on Lonely, Older People’s Cognition: A
Randomized, Controlled Trial.” American Journal of Geriatric
Psychiatry 19, no. 7 (July 2011): 654-663.*

Activity Plan

SESSION 1 (ABOUT 1 HOUR):

(Depending on the number of participants.)

1. The person directing the activity should read aloud from the following text:

We transform everyday food into food that is special for holidays, birthdays, and other celebrations by preparing it in specific ways, arranging it, and/or decorating it. For such occasions, these foods are not “just food,” but symbols of a particular belief system, a religious or family story, an ancient meaning (e.g., fertility), or of the local natural world. Creating such special foods, which are meant to be ephemeral and consumed for the occasion, usually involves a group effort to gather and prepare the ingredients, decorate the food, and arrange the plates and table. In so doing, socialization occurs and family and/or religious traditions are passed on, not only within the immediate family, but to a larger group, as well, when the food is admired and eaten. It is not an accident that religious rituals such as the Friday night Jewish Sabbath meal, Christian communion, or American Indian feasts are held not in isolation, but are instead shared with others. It is in eating together that we create community—that is, literally, communion. People, coming together in celebration, create more than the sum of their individual parts.

A great benefit of the arts activities supported by the *Art for Life Program* is that they often involve eating together, either before the sessions or after. This lesson plan, as well as others, encourages such associations. We all come together and share around food.

2. Ask a series of questions to initiate group interaction and the memory recollection process. This can be done either as a group or one-on-one with volunteers, staff, or with the participants’ family members. The questions should not be asked as if interviewing a person, but instead as an effort to engage in mutual, interactive dialogue.

- What decorated foods do you recall for family birthdays, holidays, or other celebrations? For examples from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*, read aloud or have participants read aloud the following:
 - folklore items “24. Jack-O-Lanterns,” and “25. The Night Before Halloween,” page 208, Chapter 8
 - folklore item “73. Lamb Cake,” page 281, Chapter 10
 - folklore item “Geranium Cake,” pages 286-287, Chapter 10
- What kinds of symbols or designs did you or your family use to decorate foods? What meaning do these symbols have to you or your family, to your faith or your culture?

- When such special foods were made, which family or community members did what part (e.g., making sausages, making dye, arranging plates or the table, serving the food)? Group leaders might spark memories by reading aloud from *Sundogs and Sunflowers* the following examples of foods made special because of when they were made or who prepared them:
 - folklore item “78. Norwegian Flat Bread,” page 283, Chapter 10
 - folklore item “80. How to Make *Lefse*,” page 284, Chapter 10
 - folklore item “41. Christmas Ice Cream,” page 215, Chapter 8
 - folklore item “43. Hot Dogs and *Lutefisk*,” page 218, Chapter 8
 - folklore item “44. Oyster Stew,” page 218, Chapter 8
 - folklore item “45. Fruit Soup,” page 218, Chapter 8
 - Sometimes foods or plants have special or symbolic uses, such as foretelling the future, ensuring good luck, predicting the weather, or curing illness. To trigger reminiscences, share the following examples from *Sundogs and Sunflowers*:
 - folklore item “1. The Goose Bone,” page 90, Chapter 4
 - folklore item “16. Wild Fruit on the Trees,” page 91, Chapter 4
 - folklore item “21. The Corn Husks,” page 93, Chapter 4
 - folklore item “24. Reading the Hog Spleen,” page 93, Chapter 4
 - folklore item “81. Potatoes and a Full Moon,” page 153, Chapter 6
 - folklore item “1. Predicting With Potatoes,” page 196, Chapter 8
 - folklore item “34. The Turkey Dance,” page 211, Chapter 8
 - folklore item “70. Remembering the Little People,” page 280, Chapter 10
3. Ask the participants to describe, as best they can, how one or more foods were made special and/or decorated. Allow time for the participants to share this information.
- What ingredients and/or materials were involved?
 - When was it usually made?
 - Who was in charge of making it?
 - How and from whom did you learn to make it?
 - Have you passed it on to your children, other family members, and/or community members?
4. Ask the participants to list a few of their favorite decorated foods, write them down, and write down as best they can the materials and ingredients used. They also should describe how the food was prepared and how it was decorated or made to look special. This list should be brought along to the next meeting. If individuals cannot write their lists themselves, perhaps a volunteer or family member can help to write it down for them. Exact measurements are not necessary; terms like “handful,” “bunch,” or “a pinch” are fine to

use. Some participants may have photos of such foods and should be encouraged to bring them along to the next meeting.

SESSION 2 (1 TO 2 HOURS):

(Depending on the number of participants.)

1. Ask each participant to tell the group about one of his or her favorite decorative foods. Hand out the sheets of paper with three egg outlines on each page and writing implements to the participants.
2. Explain that the participants will draw designs or symbols for their particular foods or make up ones that they find appealing. Some may be inspired by the *pysanky* (pages 75, 106-107, and 154), *slamenky* (page 119), or paper cutting (page 238) designs in *Sundogs and Sunflowers*. (These should be simple designs that easily can be drawn with crayons on hard-boiled eggs.)
3. Participants can incorporate images and designs inspired by the decorated foods of their childhoods, nature, or a current interest.
4. Below each egg design, participants should record the name of the person from whom they learned the design or what inspired it, the relationship of that person to the participant, the holiday or occasion for which it was made, and if there is a special name for the food or design. Again, if the participants cannot remember or think of something, ask them to make up or imagine a design that can represent that particular food. For example, if the food is a birthday cake, a simple candle can be drawn; if that food is a special meal that was only served on Sunday, a church could be drawn; if fish was

the favorite meal of a participant's father, a simple fish design could be drawn. Imagination and creation are wonderful substitutes for memory.

5. Make photocopies of the completed designs and share them with other residents in the care facility, as well as the participants' family members. Perhaps kitchen staff, volunteers, family and/or community members could prepare their versions of these decorative foods and bring them to share with participants for the final meeting. The participants could also help guide the care facility cooking staff in the making of a favorite dish to share with others.
6. Ask participants, volunteers, and family members to each bring a yellow or red onion to the next meeting, as well as one or more hard-boiled eggs for each participant. (In the weeks running up to this event, ask the care facility cooking staff to save all the dried onion skins they can to be used in the next session's activity. Separate the red onion skins from the yellow onion skins.)

SESSION 3 (1 TO 2 HOURS):

(Depending on the number of participants
and what is prepared beforehand.)

1. The activity leader and/or participants should bring copies of all finished design sheets to the meeting. See folklore item "15. Onion Skins" on page 200 of *Sundogs and Sunflowers* as a starting point. Read aloud from the book and show the pictures before starting this session.

2. Volunteers, staff, family members, and care facility participants should peel the colored skins from the onions, putting red in one bowl and yellow in another. Use the 2-quart-size bowls. (If the skins collected are not enough, augment what was peeled by what was collected by the care facility cooking staff.) Pour 4 cups of boiling water over the onion skins to cover and steep while participants decorate their eggs. Other natural dyeing agents, such as beet peelings or tea bags, may also be used to create egg dyes. (Make sure backup sources of natural dyes are available.)

3. Each participant should have at least one hard-boiled egg and crayons to share. (Have extra eggs on hand, in case some are broken during the activity.)

Participants should use crayons to decorate the eggs with whatever design they prefer from the finished design sheets or from designs pictured in *Sundogs and Sunflowers: pysanky* (pages 75, 106-107, and 154), *slamenky* (page 119), or paper cutting (page 238). Those who cannot decorate their own eggs can work with others to create the designs they would like to.

4. Once the eggs are decorated and the dye has set, use a strainer to remove the onion skins from the dye. Place the decorated eggs in the dye (the dye should cover the eggs) for 10-15 minutes. Participants can take turns turning over the eggs, so that the dye will adhere evenly to the undecorated part of the eggs. Movement is good for the residents physically and active participation bolsters self-esteem, so encourage them to do this simple activity of watching and moving the eggs so that they are colored completely.

5. Remove the eggs from the dye once the desired color has been achieved. Using soft rags dipped in hot water, participants should rub the eggs to take off the crayon wax. More than one dip in hot water may be necessary to rub off the wax. White designs will be left on the eggs where the wax was. To create a shine on the eggs, gently rub the egg with a small amount of butter using a soft cloth or napkin.

6. Participants should use index cards and crayons to create labels for each egg. Include the participant's name, as well as the name and/or inspiration for the egg's design. Keep the labels with the appropriate eggs and refrigerate the eggs for the next session.

SESSION 4 (1 TO 2 HOURS):

(Depending on the number of participants.)

1. The participants, staff, volunteers, and family members should take the eggs and labels and display all of them on a table for everyone to see and enjoy. Also displayed should be a copy of the completed designs and information (see Session 2, #5).
2. The participants should each introduce themselves, point out their eggs, and tell, if possible, what it was that inspired their designs.
3. Family members, staff, volunteers, and community members should be asked (see Session 2, #5) to prepare their versions of those decorative foods or others of their own choosing, such as cookies, cakes, or cupcakes, and bring them to share with participants for the final meeting.
4. Participants could gift their eggs to a friend or family member or eat and enjoy their eggs with other refreshments.

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Dr. Saltzman was previously the Folklife Coordinator for the Iowa Arts Council and is currently the Director of the Oregon Folklife Network at the University of Oregon in Eugene. She provides assistance with multicultural, accessibility, and diversity issues; project development; event planning and implementation; presentation of traditional arts and artists; grant writing; and curriculum content. She has created award-winning online folklife curricula, works with Iowa Public Radio to produce *Iowa Roots*, and was funded by the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University to research and develop the website Iowa Place-Based Food. Since 1982, she has worked in the field of public folklore at private nonprofit and state agencies. Saltzman has written numerous articles, served on national boards, and authored *A Lark for the Sake of Their Country: The 1926 General Strike Volunteers in Folklore and Memory* (Manchester University Press, 2012).