

'How do I love thee?'

With real butter, of course

Each of us must determine what gives our own life meaning. For me, family comes first, followed by my amazing and eclectic circle of friends. Next I need work that engages and challenges me. But right after that, far ahead of material possessions or financial success, is popcorn.

This magical exploding grain will always hold a place in my heart, my soul, and my imagination. Some of my earliest memories are of my brother Mike, the family's designated popcorn popper, popping it up in a huge pan on the stove, the rest of us banished from the kitchen until he had enough hot corn to go around. The smell was intoxicating; the ratio of butter to corn an exact science (one stick per gallon, if memory serves). Decades later, Mike is still the undisputed champion of perfect popcorn.

Once I grew up, I realized that we ate popcorn because it was cheap, and there were a lot of bowls to be filled. But even though I now have a job and can afford glamorous foods like chips and dip, I still consider popcorn to be the focal point around which to plan a family evening. What's a game of Monopoly without greasy fingers?

And could there be a more universal snack? I've only ever met one or two people who don't like popcorn — and I don't trust them.

It's not overstating to say that a good part of my life revolves around popcorn — I can, and often do, eat it daily. It elevates my nightly viewing of *Law & Order* to the sublime. I don't panic if I run out of toilet paper or clean clothes, but a popcorn shortage has caused me to make a midnight run to Wal-Mart.

Somewhere in the past 20 years or so, there came the miracle of microwave popcorn. When I count my blessings, I count microwave

popcorn twice. So aromatic, so comforting, and you don't even have to turn on the stove! When they look back on the 20th century and mark the inventions that made real contributions to the betterment of the human condition, what do you think they'll remember? Fabric softener? Hair gel? Try Pop Secret Homestyle, my friend, and get back to me.

The only drawback to microwave popcorn until now has been that it was made with hydrogenated vegetable oils, which clog up your coronary arteries like bacon grease clogs up your sink. However, just recently introduced is a brand that is free of these trans fats, and I weep for joy. I can have my popcorn and eat it too. Is there no end to my blessings?

I have sampled popcorn in nearly every form — popcorn balls, caramel corn and, of course, the classic Cracker Jacks. Tourist traps sell what they like to call "Ozark microwave popcorn," which is a whole ear of popping corn, still on the cob, and a paper bag. To some it's merely a novelty, but you can bet your extra-fine salt that this aficionado popped it up and enjoyed it thoroughly (even though most of it stays attached to the cob, so you end up with a sort of corn-sicle).

My admiration for those who strive to make popcorn better knows no bounds. If there is a Popcorn Hall of Fame, it must have a very large exhibit devoted to Orville Redenbacher, who experimented with hybrids to come up with larger, more energetic kernels. I love Orville for the same reason I love Bill Nye the Science Guy — genius is alluring.

You may think me obsessive, but I maintain that popcorn is such a perfect experience that few things in life can compare. For example, I enjoy having a boyfriend from time to time, but boyfriends are only human. Humans often disappoint, but popcorn is reliable. Popcorn loves you back.

I know what you're thinking, sitting there reading your Sunday paper: "This chick is a do-not-pass-go, do-not-collect-200-dollars nut job." Well, that just proves my point.

Popcorn would never judge me that way. *Marian Kelly lives in Seneca, is a standup comedian and writes a column for this newspaper.*



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