

Grace in a Coffee Pot

Regular? Decaf? Doesn't matter. Enjoying a pot of coffee with loved ones can be a holy moment.

BY CHARITY VOGEL



IT'S OCCURRED TO ME lately that maybe the single-serve coffee dispenser is what is wrong with us these days.

OK, maybe that's overstating matters a bit. Still, I'm starting to wonder: do those little single-serve coffee capsules signify something going awry in the American spirit, a push toward

individual wants and desires over the good of the larger community?

Think about it: the premise behind the single-serve coffeemakers—which use hot water and small plastic containers of ground beans to dispense hot coffee in one-cup increments—is beguiling at first blush.

Advertisements for these single-cup

coffeemakers admonish us with, “Don’t make a whole pot! Just make one cup at a time, fresh and steaming whenever you need it.”

This is attractive in its simplicity, nearly foolproof in its appeal. Indeed, this sort of consumption could even be interpreted as pious in a vague sort of way: *I am not going to use energy and a*

filter and a pile of grounds to make a large amount of beverage at one time, the user may think.

Perhaps this is why these machines can command as much as \$100 in stores. We seem to love paying a lot for the chance to be seen as socially conscious.

Soft and Self-centered

Recently I've been thinking that these single-serve coffeemakers are not so much kitchen appliances as they are just one more sign of the self-centering of the average American.

After all, what many of us seem to want most these days is instantaneous gratification. For movies, there's On Demand. For Internet connections, there's broadband and high speed. For merchandise, millions of us Google and Amazon our way to ordering and expect our haul to be delivered within a day or two. For music, there's the iPod. For books, the most impatient of us expect the libraries of the world to be able to land in our Nooks, Kindles, and smartphones. Click—done.

No surprise then that when it comes to coffee time, there's a growing need for custom-tailoring to our own individual wants and desires. French vanilla? Decaf? House blend? Colombian? You make your choice. I will make mine. Who cares if we agree? We don't have to—not anymore.

And so, rather than share a full pot with our family members and friends—all managing to agree on a brew and flavor, as our grandparents did and their grandparents before them—we serve our own self-interest as we sip our own personal cup.

One TV commercial for single-cup coffee products shows a smiling woman sitting at the kitchen table, being served a lone cup of hot brew by her husband, who then disappears from the screen. Telling and sad. Wonder what he would have said if he had carried a carafe to the table, set down two mugs, and settled in for a chat?

Growing Apart

I wish this was the only sign of this sort of burgeoning self-focus of the American consumer. But it's not.

Look around your home or workplace, and it's not hard to see other examples of this phenomenon in action. Find a house in this day and age in a new development that does not include double sinks in the master bathroom and it's something of a novelty.

And yet what is this trend toward his-and-hers sinks but the most basic of household statements about the need for our own stuff, even after marriage, homebuilding, and the arrival of children?


Bathrooms in homes built in the World War II era—I know this because I used to live in one—had communal toothbrush holders bolted to the matching ceramic tile walls, ready for use. Today, many families can't even spit into the same basin.

And yet coexisting is different from existing *next* to someone else, which is what the double-sink vanity asks us to do. In the past we never had to spell that concept out. Now we do.

Shared Moments

How much of a surprise would it be, then, if people who make their own single-brew cups of coffee each morning, after brushing their teeth at their own private sinks, before reading newspapers on their own private iPads, lose something of the ability to live *with* others, not merely *among* them? That might not be the worry that keeps everybody awake at night, but it has given me pause.

There is something special in a shared moment—whether it is flossing at night with your spouse or sipping coffee made in a pot that everybody gathers around. It is something that can't be found in our heedless pursuit of the single-serve, only-for-me size.

You might call it sociability or hospitality. I'd call it something else—something closer to grace. 

Charity Vogel, a western New York native who earned a doctorate in English from the University of Buffalo, is finishing a book on a forgotten American train wreck, *The Angola Horror*, for Cornell University Press. Learn more about this project at angolahorror.com.

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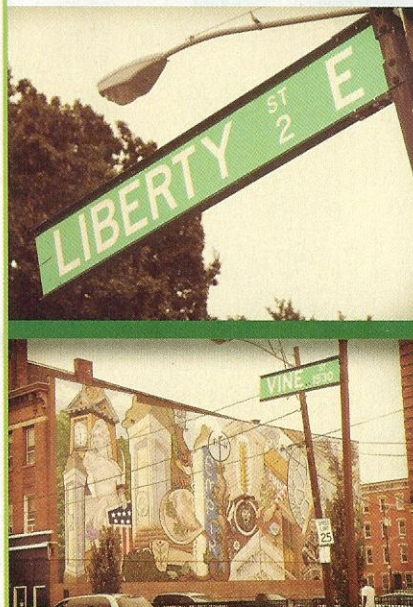
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