

LET THEM EAT EGGS – SOFT BOILED

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Recently, certain revisionist-minded folk have delighted in new Federal diet guidelines which seem to deemphasize the danger of eating saturated fats. A government advisory committee has suggested that ingesting a modest amount of eggs, meat and cheese might not be so bad for our health after all. Without arguing the merits of that proposition, it reminds me of a story that I heard more than a half century ago, in fact around 1958 when I was a first year student at Tufts University Medical School. At this late date I can't vouch for all the details, but this is how my fading memory recalls the event.

We fledglings were being addressed by Dr. Samuel Proger, the chief of medicine at Tufts, who described an experience that his Harvard friend Paul Dudley White had recently encountered. During the 1950s Dr. White was probably the most famous cardiologist in the world (doctors think White of the Wolff-Parkinson-White Syndrome.) He had consulted on President Eisenhower's heart attack two years earlier, as well as the likes of Albert Schweitzer, Andrew Carnegie, William Randolph Hearst and various heads of state. Dr. White was a proponent of preventative cardiology – especially the virtues of exercise and a healthy diet and by the time that I was a freshman medical student, eggs – especially if, God forbid, accompanied by bacon, ham or cheese – were strictly forbidden for anyone with a whiff of heart disease. But Dr. Proger had a caveat for us which I recall to this day, and it came in the form of a vignette.

In June 1957 the eminent eighty year old cellist Pablo Casals was recovering from a heart attack which he'd suffered while rehearsing for the first concert of what would become the annual Casals Festival in Puerto Rico. Although he was recuperating well enough he was extremely depressed and at the insistence of the Governor of Puerto Rico, Paul Dudley White was summoned from Boston to consult. As Dr. Proger explained to us (I'm not sure if this was his idea or

whether he was repeating what Dr. White told him), when you're called out of town to consult, never make the local docs look bad – otherwise they might not invite you back.

Naturally, Dr. White took an extensive history and probed to learn why Casals was so sad. What follows here is how I remember the story all these years later, but perhaps Dr. Proger, himself, may have misunderstood or colored some of the details. I'll try to sort truth from fiction afterward. It seems that Pablo Casals was a man obsessed with routine, none more important than how he started each day. His morning ritual was three-fold: first he would "service" his bed-partner; next he would arise and play the same Bach suite on his cello and only then would proceed to breakfast which always was two soft-boiled eggs. Any deviance from this sequence was terribly upsetting and the rather fussy Casals also was known to be prone to fits of depression. Alas, now the local Puerto Rican doctors had thrown a monkey wrench into the routine – "NO MORE EGGS!" The cholesterol thing. The old man was inconsolable and, no doubt, this effected his playing – on the cello and, I guess, on his then twenty-year old lover. Perhaps that's what Proger told us or perhaps it's just my salacious mind. We shall soon see. But then Paul Dudley White demonstrated why he was such an outstanding consultant. He paused for a minute or two and then offered this consolation: "It will be permissible for you to have soft-boiled eggs, but only twice a week!" That was the art of compromise which Dr. Proger wanted to teach us novices. Never say never.

I confess that this next is my own invention, but I can imagine the eighty-year old cellist jumping up and kissing Dr. White (himself 71 years old) – and soon afterward, kissing his twenty-year old lady friend Marta Martinez – and, I like to think, that soon his various morning exercises also improved. What is known for sure is that a few months later, despite their sixty year age differential, "Pau" and Marta eloped (since her parents disapproved,) married and lived happily together

for some sixteen years until Casals died in 1973 at age 97. (Paul Dudley White made it to age 87.)

Well it makes a charming story, but recently I did an internet research to corroborate the facts. Most interesting of all was a lengthy interview of Marta Martinez Casals that was conducted in London in 2013 which can be found on You Tube. (Two years after Casals died, Marta married the concert pianist Eugene Istomin.) She said nothing about soft-boiled eggs nor about early morning marital romps – she was far too discrete for that -- but in all other respects the White/Proger narrative seems plausible. She confirmed that Casals did have an obsessive morning routine which, as she recalled, began with him arising from bed and walking on the beach, then returning to play certain scales on the piano, then having breakfast before spending several hours playing one of his beloved six Bach piano suites – a different one every day.

Marta explained that, as a promising young cellist, she was introduced to the maestro by her uncle when she was about fourteen. After he listened to her play, Casals told her to return to her home in New York City, but when her uncle felt that she was ready, to return and he would take her on as his student. That happened in 1955 shortly after his second wife had died and soon, in addition to becoming his favorite student, she took on a secretarial role – and apparently more. When Casals had his first heart attack in 1957 Marta was constantly at his bedside, to the dismay of her parents, and when he was well enough to return to Europe, they eloped. As Marta described it, she was dedicated to being helpful in any way to the great man whom she admired not only for his music but for his passion for social justice, especially for his native Catalonians. Casals never forgave the United States for not supporting the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War and in 1939 he went into self-imposed exile in Prades, a French village just across the Pyrenees from Catalonia. Both the vivacious Marta and his mother, whom Casals revered, were born in Puerto Rico and there was a

remarkable physical resemblance between the two women in photos taken at comparable ages, so perhaps there was a Freudian aspect to the attraction.

Pablo Casals was a child prodigy and his long career was remarkable. At age 23 he had played for Queen Victoria and at age 85 for President Kennedy. Photographs often showed him with a ubiquitous pipe in his mouth and an open umbrella in hand even in full sunlight. In one interview he explained, "I am a simple man, I don't like complications. I like what is natural – both in music and life." When asked why he practiced the same six Bach cello suites every morning, even into his nineties, the maestro would say, "I think I'm making progress. I think I see some improvement." That kind of determination and optimism probably had more to do with his extraordinary longevity than the daily soft-boiled eggs, but you never know. As for Paul Dudley White, although he was famous for promoting an emotionally and physically active life style, he was less of an apostle for the emerging enthusiasm for reduced dietary fats – as a biographer recalled, he took considerable liberties with his own diet favoring milkshakes for lunch and lots of ice cream. Nevertheless, he certainly hadn't made "the locals" look bad when he offered an acceptable dietary compromise to the octagenarian newlywed Pablo Casals.