

I have a theory that probably would not stand up to serious scientific testing. But, I still think it is valid. It has come to my attention that most people have a “default setting.” Probably, in fact, each of us has more than one. Some individuals, when worried, eat. Others can’t consume a thing. I know people who, when they don’t know just what they should do, exercise. Others sleep. So, default settings can come into play in many ways.

What I am thinking about, though, involves what we do when we really know we should be performing some kind of useful labor, but nothing is all that urgent. I believe each of us reverts to the default setting in this case. One person I know mows grass, even if it hardly needs it. A friend told me she looks for something to clean. Another woman said she tidies drawers in her kitchen cupboards.

There are those folks, of course, who have a default setting that does not involve some task they would eventually have to do—the people who, when nothing is urgent, go shopping. Or maybe my retreat to a book falls in that category. And, of course, television watching or computer games could be a refuge for others.

But, I am talking about useful labor that each of us has to do, but which we go to when nothing else is necessary for the moment. If we have a healthy work ethic, this can happen quite regularly. Many of us would rather be absorbed in useful labor much of the time instead of merely whiling our hours away with something that has no meaning for us.

This theory probably would be disputed by many. In regard to myself, though, I am pretty sure I have such a default setting. When I don’t have tasks that are urgent, I go to the household job I enjoy most. I bake.

This does not mean that our freezer and cupboards are overrun with baked goods. For one thing, baking our daily bread takes one morning a week, and I do have other work that occupies me most of the time. But, when I have a few hours that are not planned for necessary labor, I do some optional baking.

I have had an excellent sourdough starter for several years. A bakery/restaurant owner gave me a start that I have kept in good health, and it has taken on its own power and flavor from our particular surroundings. So, sometimes, I use the sourdough to make something I have not tried before.

Recently, though, I read about baking *on the levain* or the *chef* method of bread baking. A French technique that is probably used in many other countries, too, this kind of leavening for bread fascinates me. So, using a recipe in Zingerman’s baking book, I made a couple of loaves of *levain* leavened bread. Then, I took a handful of dough, put it in a covered bowl, and stored it in the refrigerator. This is the *levain*. I had no idea how long it would be viable, and I pretty much forgot about it, a habit that leads me to regard cleaning the refrigerator as one of my least favorite tasks.

A week or so later, I decided to see if my *levain* still had some power. It was kind of dry and crusty on the outside and sticky in the middle. I pulled it apart in little pieces and submerged them in warm water. Using my hands, I smushed it all together until there were no more dry pieces visible. Then, I

added enough flour to make a very thin batter, covered it, and left it until the next day. By that time, the mixture had become bubbly, and when I smelled it, I detected a mild sourdough aroma. It smelled very good.

I threw in some salt and a couple of handfuls of rye flour left from the last grinding, then stirred in unbleached flour to make a dough that was stiff enough to knead. I stretched, folded, and kneaded the dough until it was nice and smooth and elastic. Then, I lightly buttered a big bowl, turned the dough to butter both sides, and covered it.

I left that dough for several hours and did whatever else was on my agenda for the day. When I thought about the dough again, I looked under the plate I had used to cover the bowl, and saw that it was twice the size it had been after kneading. I pulled off a handful, put it in a little covered container, and stuck it in the refrigerator. That would be the next *levain* with which to leaven another batch of bread. Then, I made two baguettes of the dough and let them rise. Before I baked the bread, I brushed it with water to give a little steam in the oven at the beginning of baking, slashed the tops, and turned the oven to a pretty hot temperature.

I am complimenting the *levain* method, not myself, when I say that those baguettes were very tasty. They were crusty, flavorful, and had good texture. So, today, when I really should use my baking time to put some cookies or cinnamon rolls in the freezer, I will probably devote it, instead, to starting another batch of *levain* leavened baguettes. With butter and a little cherry jam or apple butter, that bread will be better than cookies, anyway.