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Healthy Diet and Lifestyles in the Race for Life on Earth

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Environmental devastation, social injustices and countless other global problems sometimes seem overwhelming to anyone wanting to create healthy relationships with themselves, one another, and Earth. In the face of many complex crises, advocates for environmental and social sustainability can take responsibility for their own health first. Health is fundamental to being a participant in the race for life on Earth. Without health, it is difficult for people to live meaningful and happy lives, to relate with one another joyfully and fairly, and to exist harmoniously with the global ecology. A vision of true health and an understanding of the conditions wherein health flourishes lead directly toward implementing sustainable lifestyles and finding solutions to world problems.

In *Natural Hygiene: The Pristine Way of Life*, Herbert Shelton, the foremost proponent of Natural Hygiene in the 20th century, writes, "Our word health is derived from the Saxon word for whole...Taken in its fullness of meaning, health is completeness and perfection of organization, fitness of life, freedom of action, harmony of functions, vigor and freedom from all strain and corruption – in a phrase, it is 'a sound mind in a sound body.'" Based on Shelton's definition, truly healthy people are rare finds. If people felt good and healthy would there be a \$78 billion dollar pharmaceutical industry, a \$15 billion dollar supplement industry, or an incalculable "health-care" industry?

Natural Hygiene is a study that began in the mid-1800's as a reaction to the poor results of the medical drugging practice and continues today as a study and science of optimal health and well-being. Shelton writes, "Of all animals man should be the healthiest, for he has it within his power to control the elements of his environment in his own interest and to provide himself with all the elements of a healthy existence." A healthy existence is not hard to find; we need only to look to the natural world to find solutions for issues related to health and human performance. What is nature's design for human beings? And how can we design our lifestyles to reflect the values of health, sustainability, interdependence, and ecology?

The basic conditions for health include biologically appropriate foods, clean water and air, exercise, rest and sleep, sunlight, and emotional well-being. These may seem like common sense, but common sense and reason do not always determine our daily lifestyle decisions. Every lifestyle choice has consequences on our health and our environment. And it's worth knowing the cost of our consequences, so we can make informed decisions (and sometimes compromises) in our quest for personal and planetary health.

As an athlete, I have long been interested in optimal nutrition for human performance. For many years, I reduced nutrition to a study of nutrients without comprehending the infinite complexity of human biochemistry. In the study of nutrition, as in so many other disciplines, Fritjof Capra's words ring true: "To understand this world we need to think systemically – in terms of relationships, connections, and context." We need to look at the big picture.

What do we need from our food in order to meet the needs of the human organism while minimizing the impact on – or better yet regenerating – the earth in the production and consumption of our food? Nutritional science has largely focused on analyzing individual nutrients and their effects on the body. While laboratory

methods reveal specifics of nutrition, they only give us part of the whole. If we look for foods in nature that provide optimal nutrition while minimizing ecological impact, we will find that fresh fruits and vegetables can supply human's dietary needs and can be grown in ways that regenerate the Earth.

Comparative anatomy yields some clues as to human dietary design. We can designate a species based on the type of food it eats. Mammalian frugivores (fruit eaters such as anthropoid apes), herbivores (grass eaters such as cows), omnivores (mixed diet eaters such as pigs), and carnivores (meat eaters such as cats) each have different dietary specializations. Humans categorically match the anatomical characteristics of mammalian frugivores: eyes that look forward, skin with millions of pores, well developed incisors, blunt molars, identical dental structure, smooth tongues, 2 hands and feet, flat fingernails, upright posture, a stomach with duodenum, a colon 12 times the length of the body, a convoluted colon, mammary glands on the chest, and a discoidal placenta. Geneticists may point out that the 2% genetic difference between chimpanzees and humans is a wide chasm of speciation, but the anatomic and physiological similarities suggests that, like our genetic cousins, fruit is an important part of the human diet.

When eaten in sufficient quantities, fruit and leafy green vegetables provide all of the nutrients that humans need, including carbohydrates for cellular fuel, amino acids from which to build essential cellular structures, essential fatty acids that perform critical endocrine and structural functions, soluble fiber to aid in digestion, and bio-available vitamins, minerals and other factors such as phytonutrients in the proper amounts and forms. In ripe, delicious, colorful packages, nature gives us all we need.

In terms of the caloric macronutrients – carbohydrates, protein, and fat – fruits and vegetables best match our real nutritional needs. Sports nutritionists and athletes recognize that human performance depends on carbohydrates. Glucose, a simple sugar, is the critical fuel that supplies the Krebs Cycle, the chemical process that creates ATP, the source of cellular energy. When your body runs out of carbohydrates, it must convert fats or proteins into glucose. In endurance activities, this is commonly referred to as “hitting the wall.” Ripe fruit provides simple carbohydrates in a convenient package that quickly digests. Fruit sugars are easily assimilated and utilized by the cells that need fuel.

Protein is a largely misunderstood nutrient, and, as a result, many people consume far too much of it. Even on a diet of only fruits and vegetables, protein deficiency is next to impossible if you consume sufficient calories. Human mother's milk contains about 1.5 grams of protein per 100 grams. Fruit provides a comparable amount of protein and ranges from 0.5-1.5 grams of protein per 100 grams. Protein is necessary for building and repairing tissue. If 1.5% protein (by weight) in food is enough for a growing baby, it should stand to reason that a similar amount meets the requirements for a grown adult.

The human body makes most of the fats we need to stay healthy. Linoleic Acid (LA), an omega 6 fat, and Alpha-Linoleic Acid (ALA), an omega-3 fat, are two essential fats that we must get in our diet. These fats are critical for certain endocrine functions and cellular structures. For example, ALA, with the assistance of enzymes, is processed into DHA, a fatty acid found in high concentrations in brain cells. When not enough ALA is consumed, cellular membranes that depend on DHA no longer function properly. Most often, people consume too much saturated fats and LA, which disrupts the balance of essential fats and the enzymatic processes that depend on them. Fruits and dark leafy green vegetables provide both essential fats in ratios and amounts optimal for human biochemistry.

Fruits and vegetables also supply soluble fiber and bio-available vitamins and minerals. Whereas too much insoluble fiber (as found in grains) can irritate the bowels, and too little fiber (as found in meat and dairy products) can lead to constipation, the soluble fibers in fruits allow for optimal nutrient absorption and optimal elimination of waste products. Dr. Doug Graham, author of *Nutrition and Athletic Performance*, points out, “The #1 best source of vitamins is fruit, and vegetables are #2. The #1 best source of minerals is vegetables, and fruit is #2.” Calorie per calorie, fruits and vegetables meet our nutritional needs better than any other source of nourishment.

For the health and longevity of our species, foods with negative effects on person and planet must be eliminated from our diet. Meat consumption, for example, wreaks biochemical havoc on our body's systems,

and meat production yields massive ecological disasters. Grains also, though a staple in the human diet for thousands of years, are difficult to digest and are of far less nutritional value than fruits and vegetables. Grain production perpetuates an agricultural system dependent on the centralization of resources and capital-intensive operations.

Growing fruit, in contrast to grain and meat production, normally requires planting trees, which as J. Douglas and Robert de J. Hart state in their book *Forest Farming*, "The 'tool' with the greatest potentials for feeding men and animals, for regenerating the soil, for restoring water-systems, for controlling floods and droughts, for creating more benevolent micro-climates and more comfortable and stimulating living conditions for humanity, is the tree." Done responsibly and organically, fruit production yields bio-diversity, strong soils, and abundant health for those who partake in its bounty.

Though no one person has all the answers when it comes to diet, nature's design gives us many clues as to what is best for our diet. An essential dietary choice to maximize human performance is to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables. Diet alone, however, does not create health. Many other lifestyle factors contribute to developing healthy bodies, minds, and communities.

There is no debating that the human body is designed to MOVE! In the race for life on Earth, exercise and play are a requisite component to a sustainable lifestyle. I need not expound here on the benefits of exercise, but the global crises we face require that each individual be as physically fit as possible. The movements for social and environmental justice need all the lung and heart power, muscular strength, and flexibility that we can muster. It's going to take a lot of effort, for example, to teach the world about health, build sustainable infrastructures, and clean up our air and water.

Clean air and water are both essential for optimal human health. "No component of human nourishment," writes Buck Levin in *Environmental Nutrition*, "is more susceptible to toxic insult than drinking water." With a body made up mostly of water it is critical that our drinking water be as clean as possible. Likewise, polluted air diminishes our access to life-sustaining oxygen. We are literally being asphyxiated by our own smog and poisoned by our water, so we make compromises when we choose to live in cities with poor air quality or drink from the tap. Those who live in cities or work indoors can also be deprived of necessary sunlight. A study done by the Sports Medicine Department of the German National Olympic Team Training Center showed that routine exposure to sunlight improves recovery, response to stress, and other health indicators. Solar energy is critical for sustainable living, not only for our economy but perhaps more importantly for our health.

Adequate rest and leisurely recovery are key to being successful in our race for life on Earth. Sleep deprivation causes emotional disturbances in people, and eventually, this can catch up with you in the form of burnout, fatigue, or sickness. You can make many excuses as to why you need to stay up later or stimulate yourself into action with chemicals like caffeine, but without sleep your body will not have the time or energy to respond and recover from each day's stresses. With over 50% of the adult population in the US drinking coffee everyday, we are a sleepy nation addicted to stimulants.

If you need coffee or caffeine to get going in the morning, you are sleep deprived. According to Stephen Cherniske, author of *Caffeine Blues*, you're also supporting an industry where "70 million acres of the most fertile land on this planet is devoted entirely to growing a product with no nutritional value; one that actually has proven and significant anti-nutrient properties, that is addictive and that contributes to a long list of disease states." Under-sleeping and stimulant addiction show no love for yourself or for nature's design, and we need all the love we can get.

"I am human and I need to be loved," sang Morrissey, "just like everybody else does." Poet Robert Browning wrote, "Take away love and our Earth is a tomb." Without this elemental spirit we disconnect from a fundamental life-sustaining force of nature. Action of the heart and a heart of action revitalize relationships between people and Earth, and I believe love to be the motivation for taking care of your health and joining the race for life on Earth.

Whether you participate in the race to be the best you can be or to be a good teammate for humanity, your lifestyle choices play an important role in rejuvenating personal and planetary health. In living out your biological design, you will be an example of what clean, healthy living means. "Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing," said Albert Schweitzer. So eat your fruits and veggies, have fun and play, drink clean water, breathe the best air possible, let the sun shine, rest and sleep when you need to, and most of all, share the love. We'll have a group hug when we reach the finish line together.

Bradley is the founder and president of OrganicAthlete. Bradley is a former professional cyclist with a passion for organic foods, healthy living, and ecological sanity. Early in his athletic career, Bradley realized that sport can and should bring about positive changes in our society, but that little was being done about it. Bradley grew dissatisfied with the prevalence of unhealthy commercial messages in sports, and last year he redirected his energies from racing and training to developing OrganicAthlete's mission to promote healthy, plant-based living and ecological stewardship through sports. Please visit the OrganicAthlete website at www.organicathlete.org.

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