

RECLAIMING FOOD AS SACRED MEDICINE: SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS OF TRADITIONAL DIETS

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SPIRIT OF NOURISHMENT

In the ways of our ancestors, food is understood to be a gift from the earth. In diverse indigenous cultures, the plants and animals who serve as primary food sources are revered in spiritual practices, stories, symbols and art. Nourishment is found not only in the foods which are harvested, hunted, eaten and shared. Nourishment is felt in the people's intrinsic connection with all the beings involved – the animals, plants and birds, the earth, waters and sun. Food is sacred medicine – a giving and receiving of essential gifts which nourish the continuance of life.

In our contemporary industrialized societies, we have lost touch with the very essence of food, with the vital spirit of nourishment. Our grocery stores, kitchens and restaurants are stocked with products that compromise our health. Blindly settling for a convenient quick fix, we fill ourselves up with impostor foods no matter the cost to our personal health, to the well-being of others, to the sustainability of life on the planet. Lacking essential nutrients, we end up ill and fatigued, stressed, numbed out and addicted.

The wise ways of traditional diets passionately invite us to remember and reclaim our instinctual knowing of true nourishment. Eating in the ways of our ancestors is about feeding ourselves in connected, creative, natural, pleasurable ways – nourishing our bodies, spirits and minds. Even in our contemporary world, we can live with awareness of our innate relationship with the sources of our foods. We can gratefully receive the organic nutrients, energies and medicines in all that we eat, honoring the life-giving gifts shared by our companions on the earth. With nourishment, we awaken the potentials for health and well-being, for happiness, healing and balance within ourselves, our families and communities. The traditional ways call us to remember the spirit of nourishment, to open our awareness to the sacredness of food and the feeding of life.

ANCIENT CEREMONIAL WAYS AT THE KITCHEN TABLE

Traditional ways of life naturally join food with sacred ceremonial processes: prayerful preparations for the hunt; songs for the plants to be harvested; storytelling, drumming and dance as integral aspects of communal feasts. Though currently we may not live in a tribal culture, we can purposefully cultivate a connection between food and

sacred ceremony in our everyday lives.

Sacred Ceremony and Communal Celebrations

In ancestral traditions, the cycles of hunting, gathering and harvesting were profoundly significant. Everyone's survival and well-being depended upon the availability of natural resources and the personal time, energies, and skills given to finding and creating foods. In diverse cultures, the valuing of nourishment is evident in the sacred ceremonies held to honor the hunters, to request spiritual guidance and protection, to celebrate harvests and gratefully receive and share foods.

In contemporary ways of life, much of our food is gathered up in grocery stores, packaged by fast food restaurants, and ordered from written menus. We have increasingly distanced ourselves from the natural sources of food and from the organic processes involved with nourishment. We've lost touch with the places where animals and plants live, with when and how they are harvested, with food preparations, with the people and spiritual elements involved.

Rather than numbly going-through-the-motions to find and make something to eat, everything related with our nourishment can be approached in ceremonial ways. If we are hunting and harvesting, shopping, cooking or eating, we can infuse our activities with passion, caring attention and playful delight. With focused attention, we can reach beyond the bounds of time and space to connect in spirit and share our gratitude with the farm and the farmer, with the plants and animals, with the person stirring the soup in the kitchen. By holding clear intent, we can readily join our everyday nourishments with honoring, appreciation and joy.

Additionally, we may choose to arrange special events for ceremony and communal celebrations. It is helpful to clarify the purpose for the gathering and incorporate ways to create sacred space (eg., smudging with ceremonial herbs, music, candles, building a fire, drumming, food). Ceremonies may be held with a general intent such as honoring the Earth's cycles and the seasonal nourishments. We may focus our ceremony on the health of particular animals and plants, or to welcome the rains, bees and pollinators to our lands. We can celebrate the return of the hunters from their long-distance travels or the gatherers from their journeys to the gardens in the backyard. When ordering pastured meats from local farmers, I find out when the animals will be harvested. On that day, I hold ceremony to honor the life of the animals and offer my gratitude for the generous gifts of abundant nourishment being shared.

Spirit Offerings

In traditions around the world, sacred sites and altars are laden with food

offerings to the Spirits, Ancestors, Goddesses and Gods, Sources of Universal Love. We can readily bring this practice right to our kitchen tables, sharing our food as a gift offering to the spirit world.

In my home, creating a Spirit Plate is an integral part of every meal. Whenever food is prepared and eaten, a piece of each food item is placed on a plate designated specifically for the Spirits. This ceremonial way from North American native cultures is a gifting, a deeply-felt offering of gratitude and respect for the Spirits and their essential presence in my life.

Sharing food offerings is a ceremonial process which can be created in ways that are uniquely reflective of each individual, family or community. What's most vital is the intention being felt and expressed when the offerings are made. The gifted foods are symbolic representations of the requests for spiritual guidance and the sharing of gratitude and respect.

EMBODYING YOUR BODY

The disregard of nourishment in our modern-day world is coupled with a collective discontent with our bodies. We battle against the very bodies we inhabit, comparing and competing, trying to measure up to dogmatic propaganda about what is "healthy" and who is "beautiful." The more we war against our bodies, the more we struggle with food.

In ancestral traditions, nourishment is centered in a deeply rooted love and respect for all life. Instinctively we feed those we love. We nourish what it is we want to grow. Yet we seem to have forgotten how essential it is to generously nourish and love ourselves. Without self-love and ample nourishment, we don't have the necessary resources to be healthy and thrive. We're not able to love others unconditionally if we're judging our own bodies. We're not able to provide nourishment for others if we're inadequately feeding ourselves.

Reclaiming food as sacred medicine calls us to remember the vital link between nourishment and self-love. With clients, I've witnessed how the transition to a traditional diet naturally invites them into a more loving relationship with their bodies. The struggles diminish as the nourishment grows. Eating healthy animal proteins, fats and other nutrient-dense foods creates a grounding in the body and a steady flow of sustainable energy. Removing allergens, additives and processed foods clears brain fog and increases mental clarity and emotional stability. The pleasures of eating are enriched when the senses are engaged with the lush smells and tastes, the diverse colors and textures, of organic life-giving foods. Eating in the ways of our ancestors cultivates a

befriending of the body, a growing sense of being at home in one's self.

With traditional diets, we experience how incredibly satisfying and healing nourishment really feels. We learn to listen to our bodies, rather than the cultural propaganda, to understand what keeps us healthy, in balance, happy and well. Embodying our bodies, being present and aware rather than judging and battling, we more readily choose nutritious, delicious foods that enable us to flourish and thrive. When we generously fill ourselves up with love and nourishment, we gain abundant inner resources which we can utilize and share to pursue the passions and purposes of our lives.

NOURISHING CONNECTIONS

In our ancestral traditions, nourishment was centered in a rich tapestry of relationship. People lived closely with the waters and land their food came from. They were familiar with the animals and plants. They had relationships with the people who hunted, harvested and farmed in their communities. Personal interactions and the sharing of stories, family traditions and cultural lifeways were inherent in the experience of nourishment.

In our modern-day world, we've lost touch with the places and people involved with our food. We often live hundreds if not thousands of miles away from the places our food originated. We don't know the story of the food or its sources or any of the people involved. In striking contrast with the traditional ways, our food today is predominantly embedded in a culture of disconnection.

During the past nine years, eating in the ways of traditional diets, I've discovered the value of personally meeting the ranchers and visiting the lands where the animals and plants live. I thoroughly enjoy seeing the people as much as I delight in receiving the foods – all of which is so nourishing. From farmers, I've heard fascinating stories about the animals' lives. I've watched piglets romp in pastures rooting for pumpkins while dodging the legs of the cows. I've listened to the intriguing voices of goats, chickens, turkeys and sheep. My car was chased down the road by a goose after I stopped by to pick up a dozen eggs. The gifts of knowing those who grow the food, the first-hand experiences with the life of the farms, make the visits extraordinarily enriching and worthwhile.

Organic ranchers, farmers and gardeners often face challenges as they carry ancient traditional ways into a world more inclined toward agribusiness. Our patronage and financial support of local food growers is vital for keeping their businesses alive and

for bringing healthy foods to our tables. Along with the business exchange, the importance of the personal relationships woven among us is not to be underestimated.

A few years ago, I mailed a handwritten note to a farmer to express my thanks for the delicious pastured meats and free-range eggs I'd brought home. On my next visit to the farm, I noticed she'd posted the note on the wall in her barn. I realized how much it meant to her to know that the energy, attention and countless hours she poured into her farm were reaching people's lives in the ways she dreamed it all would. The note posted on the wall offered me a lasting reminder to openly share my gratitude. Building relationships, nourishing our connections, awakens the sacred medicines of food.

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