

INTRODUCTION

It's April in New England. I've been spending time in my garden, clearing away the dead leaves, pruning, getting ready to plant. Where I live in the suburbs of Boston, I have room only for a modest garden. Yet even in this relatively small space life abounds. When you turn the iron handle and walk through the large, white gate, you enter a meadow of wildflowers and peach and apricot trees. Continue following the path around the side of the house, and you'll find the garden with its mulberry tree, roses, plums, raspberry bushes, grape arbor, kiwis, and little rows of spring and summer vegetables. But all of that is to come later. Today, it's still early spring, and I surveyed my garden and decided it's time to prune the grapevine.

This morning I picked up the clippers and set to work, just as I've done for many years. You have to *prune* a plant in order for it to *grow*. I find pruning to be very satisfying; I love the sure, swift sound of the clippers rhythmically slicing through a branch. With each cut, I know I'm clearing away the dead matter to make room for new growth. Periodic pruning isn't just for plants; it's a natural rhythm for all of us. Cleaning your closets, organizing your personal papers, getting rid of clutter, and spring cleaning are all forms of pruning. I find that when the weather is warmer, people naturally recommit to living more active and healthy lives, which starts with internally pruning the parts of their lives that no longer nourish them. This internal pruning helps you discover your hidden potential for growth.

The grapevine looks lifeless in April, like dry, twisted sticks. I snipped away at the branches on the sides of the arbor, and then reached up to clip the coiling tendrils above my head. And then the most amazing thing occurred. The vine began to drip. From each cut, a drop of liquid beaded up and then fell as another and yet another glistening drop formed. Of course, I shouldn't have been surprised; I knew to expect this. But in the early morning sunlight, the sight of those brilliant drops cascading from the vine was glorious.

The grapevine reminded me that we should never underestimate the power of life force. Until I cut the branches, there was no way to know that so much life was coursing through what appeared to be a dead plant. As soon as the vine was cut, you could see tangible proof of life in the pearly drops that rained down from the branches. And in only a few weeks, leaves will bud and open, beginning the growth cycle for a whole new season. If you garden, then you're familiar with this potent life force; you know how it will generate magnificent fruit if you just give the plant some attention and support.

This same life force exists within each of us. You might call it soul, God, Christ, or Buddha nature. I will use “spirit” to describe this sacred life-giving force, since this word can apply most universally without connoting any one spiritual practice. No matter the language we use, this energy is real and vital. It’s our essential make up. Our spirit is abundant in its gifts. In fact, its sole purpose is to help us make connections, heal, and be our truest selves. Our spirit is the place within ourselves that is balanced, connected to the source of life, where we are at home. Deep within us exists a well of nourishment where we can find the sustenance to live joyful and meaningful lives. All that’s asked of us is *to know* that it exists, and then *to feed* this place within ourselves.

We eat every day, all day long. But we are eating on the run, grabbing a doughnut and a cup of coffee on our way to work, heating up TV dinners, or making meals from instant foods. According to *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser’s thorough investigation of our country’s fast food preoccupation, about 90 percent of the money Americans spend on food goes toward purchasing processed food. In the incredible pace of our lives and with the availability of every prepackaged food imaginable, we have lost the connection between what we eat, why we feed ourselves, and how we feel. For the most part, people eat without a great deal of thought beyond the taste. But the simple, daily act of eating has the potential to become a profound catalyst for spiritual growth, from experiencing a renewed sense of vitality and purpose in life to discovering our true vocations and making deeper connections in all of our relationships.

This book is about going to the heart of your true self where the source of nourishment is always available to you. How do we regularly nourish our spirit so that it continually bears fruit? How do we literally feed this part of ourselves? Imagine for a moment that you’ve been asked to be the personal chef to Jesus, the Buddha, Allah, or God. What would you prepare? Most likely, you wouldn’t be inclined to serve instant potatoes from a box or a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken. Instead, you’d pour all of your loving attention into shopping and preparing the freshest, most tasty, wholesome meal you could produce in your kitchen.

Now let’s imagine that you are a spiritual being—which you are!—what would you feed yourself? When I’ve asked people this question, it usually catches them off guard, except for the diehard chocolate lovers who would feed the entire world only chocolate if given their choice. Aside from them, people typically shrug and say they just don’t know. The usual response goes something like this: “I guess I wouldn’t eat what I normally do, but I’m not sure what I would eat instead.” Sandwiches, bagels, pasta, potato chips, fried foods, coffee, and soda just don’t seem like cuisine for the divine. What would you feed yourself if you were a spiritual being isn’t supposed to be a trick question, but answering it requires you to be in touch with your spirit and

to know how to respond to its needs. Only then can you nourish your body, heart, mind, and spirit with the care and awareness you deserve.

If the Buddha Came to Dinner is a guide to learning how to feed your spirit so that you can be fed by it on a regular basis. Nourishment isn't a one-way street; rather, think of it as a loop. Let's take a look at how the nourishment cycle works by returning to the garden for a moment. It would be unrealistic for me to think that my garden could yield all of the vegetables and fruits it does without my efforts. It's fairly straightforward. A garden can only grow if there's a gardener to prune, fertilize, seed, and regularly care for the soil and plants.

It's actually not very different for people. If we want our spirits to soar and direct our lives in rich and meaningful ways, we need to feed ourselves with the nourishing foods, activities, and relationships that encourage growth. What would happen if you treated your whole self—body, heart, mind, and spirit—as a garden worthy of your love and diligent efforts? What dead matter would you clear away? What would you plant? How would you fertilize the soil and nurture the seedlings? What will you do with this plentiful harvest from your garden?

WHAT IS NOURISHMENT?

When we are nourished, we know who we are. We know how we feel. We understand our priorities. We have a clearer understanding of our deep purpose in life. We have the freedom to act in a way that honors our truest self. When we are nourished, we move through life with graceful strength, rather than helplessly reacting to the winds and storms that may blow our way. If you can listen *and* respond to the inner messages of your spirit, then you're in a state of nourishment. On the one hand, nourishment is food, yet food alone will never be enough to nourish us. Supermarket shelves are overflowing, but in this country we are starving for more. We are hungry for the nourishing foods and activities that feed our bodies, hearts, minds, and spirits as one integrated being.

From the time I was a young girl, I have been aware of nourishment as a daily practice. I spent the first eight years of my life in Istanbul. My memories of Turkey all have to do with the smells, sounds, sights, and tastes of food. From the time I was a toddler I practically lived in the kitchen, where my mother, grandmother, and aunts could keep an eye on me. From my seat, I would watch the elaborate and ancient dance of women preparing food to feed their family, which was directed by my grandmother, my *nene*, who most definitely was in charge of the kitchen.

Every morning we would go to the outdoor market to buy the fresh produce, fish, and meat for that day. The day's meals depended on what the earth had yielded. We bought bread from the local ovens, piping hot. When I was old enough, it was my job to get the bread. I loved this daily

chore, walking home with the fresh loaf under my arm, warming my whole body. I always broke off the crusty end and ate it during the five-minute walk home. Under the tutelage of my grandmother, mother, and favorite aunt, I learned how to use all my senses to select the freshest vegetables and fruit in the market. I came to understand that the best, ripest produce carries a certain vibration—in its color and texture you can feel that it had been picked within hours. When I bit into the peach that we bought from the nearby orchard the flavor and nectar burst in my mouth. I could taste the sun, rain, and earth in that piece of fruit. I could feel its life force.

Those happy hours in the kitchen were my first encounter with the hearth of nourishment. I loved the regular rhythms of marketing, cooking, and leisurely eating our meals together every evening with our cousins and other relatives who always dropped by. These rhythms connected me to my family and to my community. I intuitively understood that food's nourishing capacity far exceeded basic physical survival. Food had the power to bring a family together, to connect me to the earth and our planet's cycles, to nurture all my senses.

TRANSFORMATIONAL NOURISHMENT

When we begin to properly nourish our bodies, an amazing transformation takes place: we begin to discover ways for nourishing all parts of ourselves. This is *transformational nourishment*, the process of transforming habitual, constricting patterns and behaviors into nourishing practices that encourage growth and development. Is it really possible that *food* can help us live fuller, more aware lives? The answer is yes! Healthy foods alone won't enlighten you. In fact, they too can become an obsession. The key to transformational nourishment is awareness.

Transformational nourishment isn't a quick-fix food program; it's a set of tools for living an aware life. There are myriad paths for learning self-awareness, from religious traditions and faiths to yoga, meditation, and other spiritual disciplines. In general, however, the connection between food and spiritual development has not been widely explored. Most food models available today tend to focus only on the physical or emotional levels, such as dieting and eating disorders. Transformational nourishment's unique approach turns food and eating into a daily practice for becoming physically, emotionally, and spiritually aware.

The natural human inclination is to continually grow, change, and create. Even as you read this sentence, great biochemical changes are occurring within your body. Millions of cells are being created and dying, and we aren't close to being aware of it. Growth is a constant for all levels of life, from the cellular to the cosmic. So, too, as humans, our natural state is one of growth and change. But sometimes we get stuck. In our culture, we particularly run into problems because we are living more sedentary lives, and we eat the sweet, sticky, salty, highly refined

foodstuffs that perpetuate a sedentary existence. These foods also tend to trap us in places where we feel safe, secure, and resistant to change.

When we are clear about our intention of how we want to develop, the foods that propel us forward usually are the ones that we don't crave. I've been a nourishment consultant for over twenty-five years and I've never had a client who has addictive patterns with vegetables or lean proteins, such as tofu, fish, and organic meat. It may seem simple, but just by shifting your food consumption to more vital essence foods (vegetables, fruit, grains, lean proteins) you will feel more empowered and in touch with a deeper part of yourself.

While transformational nourishment is a subtle, nonlinear process, it's helpful to break it down into its multiple parts so you can see how the physical, emotional, and spiritual interconnect. As you start to eat clean food, the body responds by eliminating what isn't necessary. Depending on the individual, many types of physical changes can manifest over time—from greater energy and clarity of mind to improved digestion, weight loss, disappearance of allergies, and a strengthened immune system. At the same time, a similar process has been triggered on the emotional and spiritual levels. Negative emotional and behavioral patterns may also reveal themselves as “toxic.” Maybe your self-perceptions, relationships, or how you've been living your life no longer support the person you are today, or the person you genuinely wish to become. When the body and emotions are unbalanced, we can't hear the voice that is our spirit, the deeper consciousness that we know to be true. With the body and emotions in a balanced, receptive state, the spiritual part of ourselves is more accessible.

To make lasting changes, you need both awareness and action. Just as something is dying, something new is being born. To make room for your new self, you have to prune the old patterns. Letting go is risky business because the old patterns, the old shell, seem so secure. The choice is yours. You can exert a lot of energy trying to resist your growth, or you can respond to the messages from your spirit.

Deidre first came to see me because she was in a medical crisis. She weighed 250 pounds and could hardly walk. She was on the brink of needing surgery in both of her knees, and was running out of options when a colleague recommended she see me. We worked together for seven months, and during that time she lost 70 pounds and completely healed her knees without surgery. In our sessions, we explored who she used to be when her body didn't carry all the extra weight. She remembered that she used to feel potent, creative, and passionate, but these feelings had been muted for a very long time.

As Deidre shed the layers of weight that she had been carrying for many years, she began to get in touch with that creative and passionate part of herself again. She came to the painful though

welcome realization that she had been using weight to hide from herself. One of the truths that Deidre admitted to herself regarded her sexual orientation. She realized she was gay. Later that year she ended her 17-year marriage with her husband, bought her own house, and met Margaret, her partner whom she is still in love with today.

Deidre's story is not unusual to transformational nourishment. By bringing awareness to how we feed ourselves, we also have the ability to shine the light of awareness on all parts of ourselves. And then we have a choice. We can act on what we have learned to be true for ourselves, or we can look the other way. Once the layers had been shed, Deidre courageously chose to listen to the voice of her spirit and she changed her life accordingly.

By bringing awareness to what you are feeding yourself, you are in fact creating a new relationship with yourself, one in which you listen and respond to your deep needs. When a baby is born, it takes its first breaths and is soon placed on the breast. Our initial contact with the world is one of touch and nurturing. If we regard ourselves as our own ideal loving parent, we can begin to shift how we relate to ourselves, the way we talk to ourselves, how we nourish ourselves. This new relationship affects everything: all of our interpersonal relationships, our sense of work, our sense of purpose in the world. Realizing their jobs had become rote, many of my clients have made major career moves to vocations that are deeply fulfilling. Before practicing transformational nourishment, they didn't give themselves permission to listen to their true needs, let alone act on them.

Transformational nourishment provides a road map for learning how to get in touch with the place inside yourself where you are free. From that place, you can be of great service to yourself, your family, community, and to the world. Once we are willing to let go of our own limitations, we can help others do the same.

WHO ARE YOU FEEDING?

In my private practice as a nourishment consultant I frequently ask clients the question: Who are you feeding? Sometimes *who* we are feeding is an emotion, such as happiness, or depression, sadness, and loneliness. Sometimes it is our petulant inner child who only cares about eating that candy bar right now. Or we are feeding our rebellious adolescent, who knows this particular food may not make us feel very good but goes ahead and eats it anyway, damn it! After exploring this question for themselves, nearly all my clients discover that they have been unconsciously feeding a part of themselves that wasn't nourished. For instance, when most of us feel like we aren't being taken care of—usually when we're experiencing an emotional need—we immediately turn to the foods that were gratifying in childhood. These foods tend to be sweet, salty, or starchy.

Many people feed themselves based on an emotional need, whether the emotions are negative or positive. When people eat this way, they usually have something that's easy, fast, and requires almost no preparation. We are feeding ourselves quick fixes that usually have little nutritive value, and we're eating when we are in a state of emotional imbalance when hunger doesn't even come into the picture. Many of us are caught in old patterns of how we feed ourselves, and we don't even realize it. The question "Who are you feeding?" can be a simple antidote for this unconscious, compulsive behavior.

Let's say that you're at a party where there's a fantastic array of food. You've already eaten a delicious main course, and now a certain plate of chocolate chip cookies has attracted your attention. You saunter across the room, reach for the plate and pop a cookie in your mouth while picking up another one. Let's pretend this is a video and we can rewind to the moment you arrive at the plate of cookies. Instead of grabbing a cookie off the plate, ask yourself our question: Who am I feeding? Maybe you ask your body how it would feel after you eat the cookie. You're already full from the meal, and feel the need to unbutton the top button of your pants. Is the thirty seconds of oral pleasure worth the additional discomfort to your body? Is this something you really want to do? The point isn't if you do or don't eat the cookie; the cookie itself isn't bad. The point is awareness—being aware of your actions and knowing how any particular foodstuff at any particular moment will feed you. By following the guidance and steps outlined in this book, you will learn the rhythms and needs of your body. With practice, it becomes easier to check in with yourself on a regular basis. So the next time you eat or drink something, ask yourself: "Who am I feeding?" And then wait for the honest answer.

THE JOURNEY TO NOURISHMENT

A friend of mine recently got bored with exercising in a gym and has taken to running outdoors. Running is relatively new to her and she's been informing me excitedly of the discoveries she's been making along the way. When she runs quickly and her heart rate is high, she can only last a few miles. She decided to slow down to see what would happen. By slowing her pace just a little bit she found that she could run twice as far and with greater ease. This friend has never regarded herself as an athlete, so she is thrilled to discover she has more strength and endurance than she ever could have imagined. In this country, we're not at all used to slowing down. In fact, just about all of our modern conveniences and new technological discoveries are to help us move more quickly through life. If our lives are supposed to be easier, then why are so many people completely exhausted?

People are waking up. Our spirits are knocking, pleading to be listened to, understood, held, fed, and supported. All we have to do is open the door.

I invite you on a journey of inner growth through feeding yourself with great intention, care, and love. A true journey can't be made in a day or even in a week. Likewise, nourishment isn't a quick fix-it program; it's a slow, steady, lifetime exploration of your inner self. On this journey, there are a few rules—such as making the commitment to care for yourself—but there is no “getting it right.” A Buddhist monk once told his students, “There is no good meditation; there is no bad meditation. There is just meditation.” So if you fall back into addictive food patterns one day, then gently bring yourself back to center the next day. No big deal. Because transformational nourishment is *your* process, it will be uniquely your own.

Welcome to the heart of nourishment. Welcome home.