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In this day and age, where there is an abundance of information on diets and dieting, it is interesting to note that Americans seem more disconnected from food than ever. Food is everywhere, and yet our relationship with it can be described as an ongoing struggle reflected by the increasing number of individuals experiencing obesity, overeating, and/or eating disorders.

Food plays a prevalent role in the media and our culture. We are bombarded daily about weight-loss diets, genetically modified or irradiated foods, food-borne illnesses, famine relief, organics, and food-linked health ailments. Most individuals would also view food as a basic tool for survival. Food, therefore, is included in multiple aspects of our culture: body image, entertainment, religious practices, art forms, and myriad social rituals. Somewhere among this cacophony of messages are ideas about our relationships with food and how it supports our general welfare beyond the physical aspects. In other words, what role does food play in our spiritual well-being?

**Food and Cultural Traditions**

The concept that food choices can impact our spiritual well-being is not new; numerous examples come from a variety of religions and cultures. These various world traditions frequently serve as guides for how to live and denote the connection between food and spirituality. Regardless of personal beliefs about food, these valued traditions encourage us to honor food and consume it with reverence and sincerity. When approached in this manner, food then nourishes both body and soul in a deeper, more satisfying way—a relationship that is difficult to achieve through a fast-food takeout window and a Happy Meal.

Specific cultural examples highlighting the spiritual dimensions of food include how Judaism’s dietary laws are designed to honor the sanctity of life that is in both animal and plant-based food and that following the prescribed dietary laws is a reflection of respect for creation.

Christians honor the divine by connecting to Jesus Christ through the ceremony of Holy Communion. In this particular ritual, the taking of bread and wine has a significance of something much larger than the rite itself. The ceremony, which invites Christians to experience Jesus’ godliness through the ingestion of the bread and wine, nourishes a multidimensional hunger. It might be expressed as an experience designed to nourish not only the physical but also the emotional and spiritual.

Islam also offers an appreciation for the connection between food and spirituality. Understanding Islam and the Muslims (Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 1988) states, “The Prophet taught that … the consumption of wholesome food … [is a] religious obligation.” Specific dietary laws detailed in the Koran ask Muslims to approach food with a heartfelt thankfulness and awareness of God’s great gifts. This thankfulness and awareness of God’s bounty expressed in food is especially evident during the holy time of Ramadan. During this time, millions of devout Muslims throughout the world fast, observe the scripture, and pray...
from dawn to sunset. As the Ramadan fast is broken each day after sunset, prayers of appreciation are given for the food and all of life’s gifts and blessings.

Another example comes from Buddhism, which maintains that enlightenment or awakening beyond everyday word and thought is our “natural” state. This enlightened state may be experienced by bringing a mindful, meditative awareness to all aspects of our lives, including food: its selection, preparation, serving, and eating.

There is a common thread—virtually all religions and cultural traditions encourage treating food with reverence and cooking it with love. In addition, many traditions incorporate the idea that food nourishes and restores us on multiple levels. In other words, food and our relationship with it can address physiological problems and deficiencies, unite us with a spiritual dimension, and connect us to a sense of community.

**Spirit-Filled Food**

Deborah Kesten, in her book *Feeding the Body, Nourishing the Soul: Essentials of Eating for Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Well-Being* (Conari Press, 1997), describes how food can actually be transformed by love so that it is “infused” with spirit. Her firsthand experience with this process came from spending an evening with Leonard Laskow, MD, physician and author of *Healing with Love: A Breakthrough Mind/Body Medical Program for Healing Yourself and Others* (Wholeness Press, 1998), who not only explained the method of infusing liquids and food with loving energy but also demonstrated it on that particular evening’s meal. Kesten notes that after the “infusion” experiment, the individuals around the dinner table could smell and taste a difference between the “loved” and “unloved” nourishment.

Is this possible? Does what you’re thinking and feeling while you are cooking influence the quality of the food? Who knows for sure?

There are, however, hundreds of published studies on the interaction and exchange of awareness between people and plants. A classic example is *The Secret Life of Plants* (Harper & Row, 1972) by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, which gives a variety of demonstrations illustrating how a person’s intention—to harm or to care for—affects the plant. Other research detailed in Laskow’s *Healing With Love* suggests that plants and food somehow sense and respond to verbal and nonverbal communication from humans.

You may find these ideas extraordinary or perhaps outrageous and unbelievable. Nonetheless, they suggest an interconnectedness of all life. At the very least, by bringing a loving consciousness to food, you connect at a deeper level to the nourishment process. Kesten suggests that you consider creating your own spiritually imbued food and see whether or not you can detect a difference between foods prepared by hand in a conscious, loving manner and those that were not.

**Journey to Mindful Eating**

It has been a typical, busy day. You managed to drink a cup of coffee before dashing into the early morning staff meeting. Back-to-back patient appointments forced you to skip lunch. Late afternoon finds you at your desk munching on a stale bagel and washing it down with
warm orange juice. You’re not enjoying the food or even sure if you are hungry, but you know you should eat something.

Sound familiar? How many times have you eaten and then wondered what you had for lunch? Or left the table full, only to find yourself munching your way through the refrigerator one hour later? When you are not mindful and attentive, food and eating become just another activity, an unconscious habit.

The concept of mindful awareness meditation and its application to eating is not specific to any religious practice. Mindfulness may be used at any time, in any setting, with any meal, and involves regarding food and its preparation as sacred. The process requires only your willingness to shift from being on automatic pilot to being fully aware of the moment. Here’s how to begin:

**Focus**

Take several deep breaths and allow yourself to relax into the present moment. When you are rushing, your thoughts and energy are somewhere else. Turn off the television or radio and put away the newspaper. Do not answer the telephone. Rather, focus on maintaining a present-moment awareness throughout the entire meal preparation and consuming process.

**Visualize and Plan**

See in your mind’s eye what you are going to prepare. See each individual food. Focus on the steps you will take to prepare the meal and whom you are preparing it for. As other thoughts enter your mind, simply let them pass and bring yourself back to the meal visualization.

**Prepare**

Continue your mindful awareness as you prepare the food. Notice the crispness of the vegetables, aroma of the onion, and sizzle in the pan.

**Savor**

To begin, consider offering a few words of thanks or appreciation for the food. Savor the aroma; chew slowly and experience the variety of flavors. Observe how the food feels in your stomach. Did you eat the right amount for your hunger? After the meal, spend a bit of time appreciating the connection with food and the sense of nourishment eating brings.

What you eat or don’t eat is important, but it is not the primary ingredient for mindful eating. The fundamental key to mindful, healthy eating is learning how to change your state of mind. The wisdom of ancient cultures shows that food has always been a tool for spiritual growth and healthy living. Mindful eating provides a template on how to live consciously and with an awareness of how all aspects of life—from food to spirit to community—are connected.

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