

PREFACE TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION



Our Meals: The Hidden Key to Understanding

This book is an attempt to illuminate our culture's story and to present the outlines of a more empowering understanding of our world. The key to this understanding lies in comprehending the far-reaching implications of our food choices and the worldview they both reflect and mandate. At first glance it may seem unlikely that such a potent key could be found in the pedestrian place that food occupies in our culture, but if we look closely, we begin to realize that our shared cultural reality is profoundly affected by the attitudes, beliefs, and practices surrounding food. There are amazing unrecognized social, psychological, and spiritual consequences to our meals that ripple through all aspects of our lives.

Food is actually our most intimate and telling connection both with the natural order and with our living cultural heritage. Through eating the plants and animals of this earth we literally incorporate them, and it is also through this act of eating that we partake of our culture's values and paradigms at the most primal and unconscious levels. As children, through constant exposure to the complex patterns of belief surrounding our most elaborate group ritual, eating food, we ingested our culture's values and invisible assumptions. Like sponges, we learned, we noticed, we partook, and we became acculturated. Now, as adults, finding our lives beset with stress and a range of daunting problems of our own making, we rightly yearn to understand the source of our frustrating inability to live in harmony on this earth. When we look deeply enough, we discover a disturbing force that is fundamental in generating our dilemmas and crises, a force that is not actually hidden at all, but is staring up at us

every day from our plates! It has been lying undiscovered all along in the most obvious of places: It is our food.

While debates rage over which diets are best in terms of health and longevity, this book is not about diet in this usual sense, but is an exploration of the profound cultural and spiritual ramifications of our food choices and the mentality underlying them. By placing humans at the top of the planet's food chain, our culture has historically perpetuated a particular worldview that requires from its members a reduction of essential feelings and awareness—and it is this process of desensitization that we must understand if we would comprehend the underlying causes of oppression, exploitation, and spiritual disconnectedness. When we practice eating for spiritual health and social harmony, we practice making certain essential connections that our culturally induced food rituals normally require us to block from awareness. This practice is an essential prerequisite for evolving to a state of consciousness where peace and freedom are possible.

We are in the midst of a profound cultural transformation. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the old mythos underlying our culture is collapsing. We are realizing that its core assumptions are obsolete and, if followed further, will result not only in the ecological devastation of our planet's intricate and delicate systems, but in our self-destruction as well. A new mythos, affirming cooperation, freedom, peace, life, and unity, is struggling to be born to replace the old mythos based on competition, separateness, war, exclusion, and the idea that might makes right. Food is a critical key to this birth, because our food habits condition our mentality profoundly—and because meals are the primary way our culture replicates and promulgates its value system through us. Whether this birth of a new mythos and more evolved spirituality and consciousness is successful will depend on whether we can transform our understanding and practice of food.

The Practice of Connecting

Our cultural predicament—the array of seemingly intractable problems that beset us, such as chronic war, terrorism, genocide, starvation, the proliferation of disease, environmental degradation, species extinction,

animal abuse, consumerism, drug addiction, alienation, stress, racism, oppression of women, child abuse, corporate exploitation, materialism, poverty, injustice, and social malaise—is rooted in an essential cause that is so obvious that it has managed to remain almost completely overlooked. In trying to solve the social, environmental, and individual problems we face while ignoring the underlying cause that generates them, we are treating symptoms without addressing the root of the disease. Such efforts are ultimately doomed to failure. Instead, we need to build a web of understanding and awareness that helps us see the connections between our food choices, our individual and cultural health, our planetary ecology, our spirituality, our attitudes and beliefs, and the quality of our relationships. As we do this and act on this understanding, we contribute to the evolution of a more harmonious and liberated shared experience of life on this beautiful but misunderstood planet.

I believe that until we are willing and able to make the connections between what we are eating and what was required to get it on our plate, and how it affects us to buy, serve, and eat it, we will be unable to make the connections that will allow us to live wisely and harmoniously on this earth. When we cannot make connections, we cannot understand, and we are less free, less intelligent, less loving, and less happy. The most crucial task for our generation, our group mission on this earth, perhaps, is to make some essential connections that our parents and ancestors have been mostly unable to make, and thus to evolve a healthier human society to bequeath to our children. If we fail to make the connection between our daily meals and our cultural predicament, we will inevitably fail as a species to survive on this earth. By refusing to make this essential connection, we condemn others and ourselves to enormous suffering, without ever comprehending why.

The Call to Evolve

Though I spent the first twenty-two years of my life eating the large quantities of animal-based foods typical of our culture, I've spent the past thirty years or so exploring the fascinating connections and cause-effect relationships between our individual and cultural practice of using animals for food and the stress and difficulties we create for each other

and ourselves. I've discovered that the violence we instigate for our plates boomerangs in remarkable ways.

It becomes immediately obvious, though, that our collective sense of guilt about our mistreatment of animals for food makes recognizing this basic connection enormously difficult. Eating animal foods is a fundamental cause of our dilemmas, but we will squirm every which way to avoid confronting this. It is our defining blind spot and is the essential missing piece to the puzzle of human peace and freedom. Because of our culturally inherited behavior of abusing the animals we use for food and ignoring this abuse, we are exceedingly hesitant to look behind the curtain of our denial, talk with each other about the consequences of our meals, and change our behavior to reflect what we see and know. This unwillingness is socially supported and continually reinforced.

Our behavior invariably reflects our understanding, and yet our behavior also determines what level of understanding we are able to attain.

The calling we hear today is the persistent call to evolve. It is part of a larger song to which we all contribute and that lives in our cells and in the essential nature of the universe that gives rise to our being. It is a song, ultimately, of healing, joy, and celebration because all of us, humans and non-humans alike, are expressions of a beautiful and benevolent universe. It is also a song of darkest pain and violation, due to our accepted practices of dominating, commodifying, and killing animals and people. In order to confine and kill animals for food, we must repress our natural compassion, warping us away from intuition and toward materialism, violence, and disconnectedness.

The song of the new mythos that yearns to be born through us requires our spirits to be loving and alive enough to hear and recognize the pain we are causing through our obsolete food orientation. We are called to allow our innate mercy and kindness to shine forth and to confront the indoctrinated assumptions that promote cruelty. While we are granted varying degrees of privilege depending on our species, race, class, and gender, we are all harmed when any is harmed; suffering is ultimately completely interconnected because we are all interconnected, and socially constructed privilege only serves to disconnect us from this truth of our interdependence.

This book is intended for readers of all religious traditions as well as those who do not identify with any particular tradition. Like the Golden Rule, which articulates a principle that is pronounced by all the world's religious traditions and is intuitively accepted by people of every culture and persuasion, the principles discussed in this book are universal and can be understood and practiced by all of us, whatever our religious affiliation or non-affiliation may happen to be. A moderately open mind and a willingness to make connections are all that are needed to apprehend these principles, and to see that they never contradict our deeper religious teachings or our spiritual yearnings, but always fulfill and illumine them.

The song of our necessary evolution and awakening is calling. Achieving the deeper understanding this song requires lies in uncovering connections and relationships that have been hidden or chronically ignored. A journey is required, and this is the adventure of discovery that beckons.