Just Eat It

Emily Carter wants a cheeseburger and coffee--and hold the health lecture. She's in touch with her inner nutritionist.

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Many a time I've sat with some otherwise-reasonable friend who is advising me to do the unthinkable: Seek out a nutritionist. Nutrition, I am told, is very important for PWAs. I don't dispute that, but while HIV may have compromised my immune system, it has not yet turned me into an imbecile, so there is no need to consult a paid professional to tell me how to eat. At the time of this writing I still remember how to insert food into my mouth, apply repeated denticular pressure until it is sufficiently masticated, and swallow it. OK, sometimes I forget not to talk with my mouth full, but generally I take care of business well enough.

I don't mean to make light of the importance of good nutrition—just to point out that it's not the complicated activity we have made it. Nature provides us with exactly what we need to keep healthy, as well as the instincts to pursue it. We omnivores—if left to our own devices—will happily consume fruit, grains, meat, vegetables and dairy, without any input at all from a "wellness consultant."

Lest you take me for some kind of knee-jerk, preservative-addled junk-food apologist, let me reiterate that I am actually arguing for respect for nature. We don't need to analyze and second-guess her to death. In fact, when we apply cerebral pressure to nature's bounty, we often get bad results. It was nature who came up with the good idea of opium poppies, beautiful plants that provide a mildly euphoric relief for pain, easing old age for elders in many a village. It took human compulsion to come up with opiate addiction, and it took human logic to figure out how to make heroin. As for tobacco, it was smoked ceremonially on special occasions until we got the brilliant idea to roll it up into convenient little tubes that we can carry around in packs of 20. Nature is balance and moderation defined; we are excess.

The current obsession with nutritional "wellness," for example, is a form of psychological excess. How can we have taken the simple, homey dictum "eat right and get enough sleep" to the anxious extremes of colonics and costly, time-consuming macrobiotic diets? Certainly the food of every PWA is full of multisyllabic additives and vicious toxins. But so is the food of just about everyone on the planet. It's the "build a better mousetrap" mentality that leads to pesticide use in the first place.

Besides, eating right is merely a prerequisite of good health, not a guarantee. I have lost friends to AIDS who pursued every kind of nutritional and spiritual wellness plan with serene zealotry. By the same token, I've known cheeseburger-slogging, coffee-drinking, stressed-out citizens (like myself) who have yet to develop a single opportunistic infection. Not that if I ate nothing but cheeseburgers, drank nothing but coffee and did nothing but worry, I wouldn't fall ill, but my internal mechanisms regulate my behavior, if I let them. I eat something green every day, get a reasonable amount of sleep and even exercise—simply because that's what my body tells me to do.

Listening to my body does not imply undue focus on my biology. I do not chart my menstrual cycle to ward off PMS or write down the things I eat to see if I need more whole-grain fiber. I just go along with the plan. A while back, for instance, I began to crave certain kinds of fish. Herring, tuna, mackerel. I didn't want to eat anything else for two weeks. Fortunately the craving lasted only briefly, disappearing before I began to actually grow flippers and balance balls on my nose. One afternoon I was leafing through the lifestyle section of the newspaper and came across an article on how the very kinds of fish I had been craving contain fatty acids that bolster the immune system and help to prevent disease. It's quite possible that I was working on some kind of infection and my body itself came up with a perfectly palatable prophylactic approach.

Perhaps the most important reason that PWAs shouldn't obsess about what we eat is that we already have enough to worry about. One of the symptoms of HIV infection is a persistent case of hypochondria. Is that a hickey or a KS lesion? Morning cough caused by dust-bunnies or first-stage *pneumocystis*? Sleep in my eye or CMV? Our anxiety list is real and extensive. An activity as simple, God-given and pleasurable as eating dinner should not be an occasion for nervous strategizing. It should just be…dinner.

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