

Personal Reflection:
My Perspective on and Connection with Food
NUTR: 153 Dynamics of Food and Society
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Personal Reflection: My Perspective on and Connection with Food

On the first day of class we were asked how we value food on a scale of one to ten; where one stood for “Eating to Live” and ten stood for “Living to Eat”. This was actually a question I found to be quite challenging to answer because my relationship with and perception of food is currently in a state of flux. There are myriad reasons and experiences that have led me to re-evaluate the way that I view food including my family background, college experiences, and post-graduation time in the real world. Though the experiences in themselves are generally unrelated, they all lead back to a philosophy that I am seeing take shape regarding the way I look at food.

I have always been a foodie, understandable since I come from a family of them who very much believe in the idea that “food is love”. My parents come from upper middle-class families in India. They were never poor or starving but still, being an upper-middle class family in India in the 70s is not the same as being in the same class in the United States today. They never went hungry but still ate simply everyday and only had lavish meals when company was over or during holidays. Scarcity of resources was and still is a problem in India so there is naturally a greater respect for food built into the culture and while my parents were lucky enough not to experience hunger they saw it everyday on the streets. When my parents immigrated to America they brought their ideas about food over with them. While they have adapted to circumstance and time, the fundamental principles they raised my sister and I with have always remained the same. You never waste food. Take seconds or thirds of you like but always start with a reasonable portion and finish everything you take. Wasting food is not acceptable. Don't

snack too much; eat three good meals and you shouldn't really feel the need to. Always offer your guests food and drink (specifically chai), and even if they decline the offer, still place a glass of water and some light snack foods in front of them because it would be rude not to.

As I write these rules out they sound strict but growing up and even now they don't feel that way; it's just our norm. Maybe it's because the norm was also to have plenty of food on the table. Growing up we were a family of 4 but my mom always cooked for at least 6. If we are expecting 10 guests my mom will cook for 20. And all through college until today even though I could cook or order food for myself my mom never lets me leave to go back to school without at least a week's worth of food; just in case and just because.

My family is the reason that Indian food is my favorite type of food. It's what I always come back to because it is what I know, what I find comfort with, and what brings back childhood memories. Every member of our family has always maintained a busy schedule and eating meals together at a table was never really something we did except for on Sundays. Sundays always remind me of family brunches. Even today, we are lucky enough to all be together on some Sunday afternoons that at least once a month my mom will prepare all of our favorite dishes and we sit in our family room sharing that meal while watching a Bollywood movie. Sharing a meal is always how we have spent time together as a whole family and it is one of the reasons why I think I love food so much; food means family. It also means a lot of different things.

In my senior year of college I joined an organization called Peer Health Exchange that was responsible for teaching health programs at underserved high schools in the D. C. Metro area. I wanted to teach the mental health program as that most closely related to my major, which

was Psychology, but ended up being assigned to teach and lead the Nutrition and Physical Activity lecture. This is where I started to feel my perception of food expanding. The kids that we were teaching were intelligent and they were knowledgeable enough to know the basics. Physical activity? Good. Eating Candy? Bad. But what are both the short and long term effects of good nutrition and proper physical activity? Blank. Are all fats bad for you? Wrong. How can you overcome obstacles that make it difficult to maintain a healthy lifestyle? We can't. We're stuck.

Before having this one-on-one experience, food in terms of proper nutrition was never really an obstacle. Yes, I have struggled with weight gain and appetite control but it was never due a lack of accessibility to good foods or knowledge of what I was doing to my body. As a young adult I think it is easy for me to take for granted the fact that I do not have a family to provide for and that I can make decision about what I put in my body on my own. But parents do have this responsibility and kids do not have this choice. At home they eat what caregivers are able to provide and at school they eat what always limited funding can give them. For the kids in the high schools we taught in it was just such a status quo that when other things were going wrong, say with mental health, physical health, or grades, trying to change their nutrition was never an option that was seriously considered. This is when I started to see that food is also responsibility. Parents are responsible for giving their children the most nutritious options they can. Educators are responsible for helping children understand the value and effects of food; and children are responsible for taking decisions into their own hands when they can and making choices that are right for them. I didn't quite realize it then but the time I spent teaching in those

schools helped catalyze my shift in focus from psychology to nutrition and thus a change in my perspective on food.

When I graduated, I began to work for my father who is an internist. While working for him, I had the opportunity to shadow him while he saw patients and transcribe notes for him. I quickly began to realize that one of the most common issues that my father had to counsel his patients about was diet. No matter what the disease, if the patient did not follow a healthy diet and maintain a healthy weight there was not much that could be done but prescribe, prescribe, prescribe. Doctors obviously have the base knowledge to help patients understand the importance of maintaining a proper diet but, more often than not, do not have time to delve into details, work out a plan with the patient, or have the knowledge about more specific information that might help the patient. I saw that even educated adults didn't always understand how to maintain a good diet or use certain tools and methods for themselves. This is when I realized that food is also a challenge, and by virtue of the fact that we need to consume it daily, it is a large and constant one. It did not take me long before I realized that I wanted to pursue the study of nutrition so that I too could do my part in allowing people to build health rather than combat illness.

During the time that I was working for my father my sister also became pregnant with her first child. As soon as she found out her main focus was her diet. She would talk to me and my mom everyday about what she should eat and what she shouldn't. What had become painfully clear though, was that food had changed a lot since my mother was last pregnant and being pregnant with a child in India versus here was very different in terms of the food eaten. When my mom was pregnant with my sister in India, and even 24 years ago when my mom had me in

the United States, it was a lot easier to eat natural, organic, healthy foods because processed junk was not as ubiquitous. Not as many additives or food coloring were used and you mostly knew what you were consuming. My sister spent a lot of time her first few months in emotional distress because she simply could not figure out what was safe to put in her body for her child in the long run. When I would hear her talk about her struggles and began to look into things myself I got angry. Food is a necessity but it is also EXTREMELY confusing and that simply isn't fair.

What all the above experiences have taught is that while food has myriad meanings to me one umbrella term can summarize what I think. Just in writing this short reflection I have noted that food to me is love, culture, respect, preference, nostalgia, family, responsibility, necessity, challenging, and often confusing. So in one word, food is powerful. There are few things if any in the world that can have such an effect on both an individual and society as a whole the way that food can. While I do constantly struggle with balancing my love of food with my desire to maintain proper nutrition I can honestly say that what I love and appreciate the most about food is the diversity of its impact.

It is because of this impact that I chose to channel my love of food into the study of nutrition. The need for proper nutrition education for the masses is getting stronger by the day. But thankfully so is the breath of research and information available to us so that we can help impose change and make a real difference in people's lives. I can't wait to share this love and impact with future patients.

Considering such, my current perspective on food is we as a society need to respect food more. We need to raise awareness. We need to respect our bodies enough to understand that

what we eat has a strong connections to the way we are able to live our lives. But in order to do, so the government needs to take strong stances on regulating foods and promoting healthier farming practices. If they have taken control of our food supply than they also need to take responsibility for the effects it is having on public health outcomes and not just look at the bottom line. That being said though food is also meant to be enjoyed and I think it is ok and even necessary to enjoy a soda here and bag of chips there. On a given day my stance on the 1-10 scale can be anything between a 3 and 10 but one thing that doesn't change, and I hope never does, is that I absolutely love food and for me, that is the most important perspective I can carry with me.