2012 May column
Geoffrey Cannon



Barcelona, Rio de Janeiro. This is completed in the Novo Mundo hotel overlooking the *Praia do Flamengo* (Flamengo Beach) in Rio. The views from my window of the ocean, the *Pão de Açucar,* and the Catete Palace Gardens, are fabulous. It's the final day before our *Rio2012* congress starts. As a laconic old Anglo friend of mine sometimes said, things could be worse. Wish you were here! Well, some of you are in-flight as I write, and at the end of today this column, our website, and *World Nutrition*, will be on-line, thanks to Martin Evans, who is working for us outside Aberdeen in the north of Scotland.

This month I choose two heroes. Here they are above, with their props. These are the my friend, food writer Claudia Roden (left) holding fruit, whose 19th book is on *The Food of Spain*. And here (right) is the public intellectual Christopher Hitchens, propped with smokes, coffee and Black Label, whose memoirs *Hitch 22* were completed when he knew he would soon die, which he did last December. More of them below.

I also write about my eldest son Ben, who lived with me in his final years at school and then in the vacations from university. He and is developed a fine line in dinner parties for my friends, some of whose meals were as specified by Claudia. Alas, we failed to write a book together, and never will, for alas he died some years ago, and so part of this column is a celebration of Ben.

Finally, this column is concerned with the social (including cultural), economic and environmental dimensions of nutrition. It suggests that we might do well to think less of nutrition and more of nourishment, and in terms of what marks us out as human, which are the heart, mind and spirit.

Spirit? Not surely whisky, you may be thinking. No no, ten times no, but well, read on. Let's hope we all agree that nutrition and public health are certainly about food and drink as prepared, cooked and enjoyed, as Claudia Roden is reminding us above with characteristic gentle charm. But she and other fabled food writers are about more than food as a source of nutrients. Oh, much more! Again, read on.

Cannon G. My heroes: Claudia Roden. Nourishment of the heart; and Christopher Hitchens, Nourishment of the mind, and other stories *[Column]. World Nutrition* May 2012, **3**, 5

My hero: Claudia Roden

Nourishment of the heart





Mediterranean settlements around 200 BCE, and the Mediterranean as the middle of the world seen by Greek cosmologer Hecataeus around 500 BCE

Before *Rio2012*, the best conference I helped to organise was held in London in the late 1980s. At that time I was secretary of the Guild of Food Writers, also known as the foodies' club, of which the inspirational presidents were the broadcaster and writer Derek Cooper, then of the BBC Radio Food Programme, followed by Colin Spencer, for a long time columnist for The Guardian, an artist and playwright, and also an authority on vegetarian food and culture. Derek and Colin were also bon viveurs, dedicated to the enjoyment of life and especially through food and yes drink – still are, as far as I know. The meeting was organised jointly with the UK Nutrition Society, where all the professors (and some food industry luminaries, but let's not digress) hung and hang out.

Nutrition …. and food

The Guild and the Nut Soc shared responsibility for the day's conference and its speakers. Guild member Prue Leith, then owner of a restaurant by Hyde Park's Serpentine styled as a big tent, did the celebration business. I am telling this story for two reasons. One is that the event was a soaring success, because of the synergy between the two organisations, and why it did not become regular is a mystery to me. What was most striking, was that during the conference and over supper, some of the top profs were conspicuously star-struck by the leading food writers – not by me, I add hastily, I refer to the writers who were also television personalities. It was sweet to see MD PhD FRCPs asking for autographs 'for their children'.

The second reason was that for me and others, the star of stars was Claudia Roden. She may have had a television series on at that time. What was most striking though was the erudition of her talk. It immediately became apparent, listening to her, that the best way to understand the history and culture of the whole Mediterranean littoral was through knowledge of the 4,000 evolving years of its food and nutrition

systems, and enjoyment of its food and drink. This is illustrated by the two maps above. The first on the left shows the empires created by the Seleucids, the Ptolemies, the Greeks, the Romans, the Carthaginians, and others, around 200 years before the Christian era. The second map on the right is more illuminating. It was made by the cosmologer and first known Greek historian Hecataeus of Miletus (546-480 BCE) around 300 years previously. It shows the Mediterranean as it was then perceived by those who lived around it, and as its name means, as the centre of the world.

Even at that time, as Claudia showed to us, the Mediterranean food systems (for there are several, overlapping and all generally harmonious) were established in what are now Spain, southern France, southern Italy, Greece, Turkey, Cyprus, Crete, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco and Tunis. The Holy Roman Empire based in Sicily, as it was re-recreated by the stupendous Emperor Frederick II, who almost invented the European Renaissance of the 13th century, was all about a culture within which food systems and supplies, and what people ate, was central.

Nutritionally Mediterranean food systems as developed from the earlier historic and also prehistoric times, had many points in common, as we all know from accounts of 'The Mediterranean Diet'. As well as this, they nourished Mediterranean societies in a much broader sense. The governance and the nature of the whole lives of the peoples of the Mediterranean were delineated, almost defined, by the food and nutrition systems of those times, from the period of first recorded history, and certainly before then too, until fairly recently.

When food supplies became unsustainable, empires fell. Territories were conquered because of the fertility of their soil. Some of the most meticulous science ever, took the form of plant and animal breeding. Family farms and also great estates based on the land and its produce became founts of knowledge and wisdom usually in tune with manual work, the rhythms of the seasons, the crops that grew best. And with all this, social and family life was based on all that was involved with the getting of food and the preparation of family and social meals, and occasional feasts. In the Mediterranean, food was not incidental to life. It provided nourishment in all senses to those societies. Claudia changed my mind that day. From then on, I saw the world differently and as a richer place. Listening to her was a spiritual experience.

What Claudia Roden says

With all this, she is also a wonderful writer, and the best way I can show this is to quote her, writing about her latest book on the food of Spain. Here is what she writes. Smile, enjoy, and wonder at her genius! She writes:

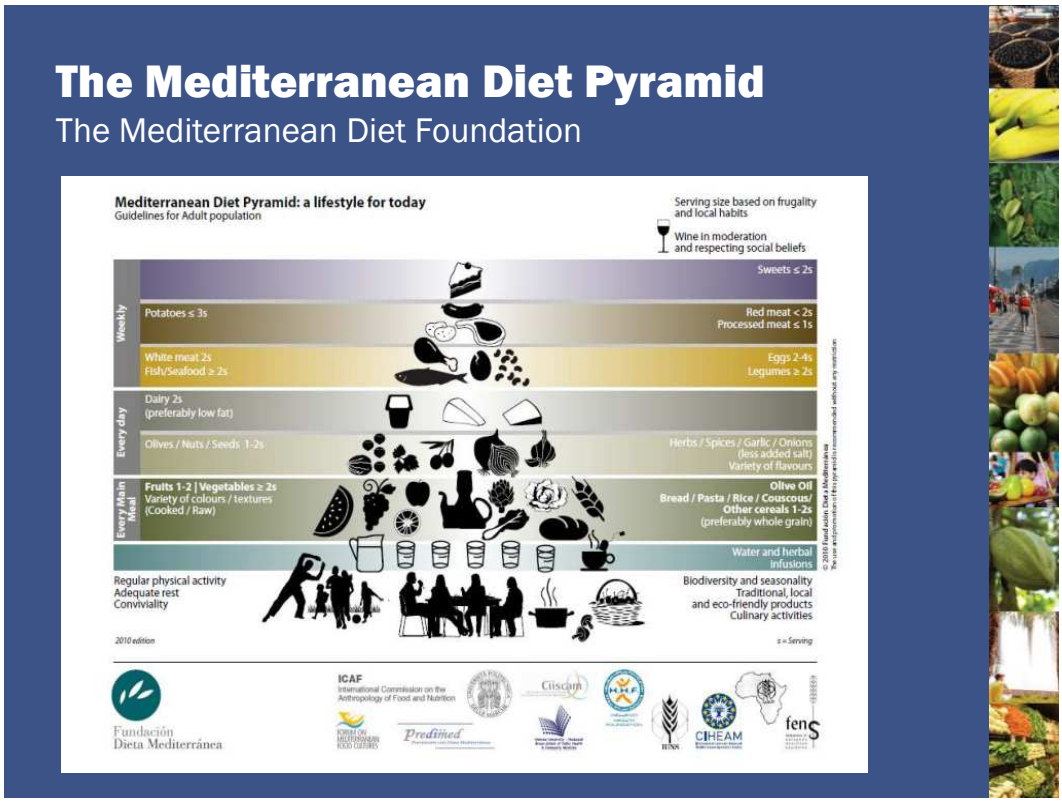
'My grandmother, Eugénie Alphandary, spoke an old Judeo-Spanish language called Ladino with her friends and relatives in Egypt. They were descended from Jews who

had been expelled from Spain in 1492. Their names – Toledano, Cuenca, Carmona, Leon, Burgos – were a record of the cities their ancestors had come from. Their songs about lovers in Seville and proverbs about meat stews and almond cakes were for me, as I was growing up in Cairo, a mysterious lost paradise, a world of romance and glorious chivalry.

'When I travelled to research *The Food of Spain*, traces of the old Muslim presence – Arabesque carvings, blue and white tiles, a fountain spouting cool water in a scented garden – evoked memories of the Arab and Jewish world I was born in. At the sight of an old minaret I imagined hearing the call to prayer. The way people cooked, the ingredients they put together, their little tricks, their turn of hand, were mysteriously familiar. A word, a taste, a smell, triggered memories I never knew I had.

'It took me five years to finish the book. I loved dipping into people's lives and listening to their stories. I understood everything they said and they understood my mix of Italian, French, Ladino and Spanish. It was pure joy to eat seafood *paella* on the Valencia coast, *cocido* in a little restaurant in Madrid, suckling pig in Segovia, cuttlefish in their ink in the Basque country, and duck with pears in Barcelona, and to drive through landscapes dotted with castles, monasteries and churches'.

What is the Mediterranean Diet



Here is the new Pyramid of the Mediterranean Diet. Most interesting is what is below the base – the images of commensality, the family, the meal

It was in Barcelona in March that I began to draft this item. My colleague and friend Association founding member Lluis Serra-Majem had invited me to make a presentation at the conference organised by the Mediterranean Diet Foundation, supporting 'the plate' (as in the current US 'My Plate'). This was meant to be against the Pyramid now advocated by the Foundation, with its emphasis on conviviality and on meals, as shown in one of my slides above. I failed to do this, because his outstanding presentation convinced all but a handful of the packed room – and also convinced me. But I did get the chance to project the slide below – notice the spiral – and more on this theme in a following item below.

Lluis promised that Claudia will now be elevated to the Foundation's pantheon. So all this so far are reasons why she is one of my heroes.



Christopher Hitchens

Nourishment of the mind



Ernest Hemingway (left) and Ian Hamilton (right); Christopher Hitchens with friends and Johnny Walker Black Label (centre). The arrow is not mine

Cannon G. My heroes: Claudia Roden. Nourishment of the heart; and Christopher Hitchens, Nourishment of the mind, and other stories *[Column]*. *World Nutrition* May 2012, **3**, 5

Now I come to my second hero of this month: Christopher Hitchens. A sufficient reason to celebrate him, is that he is a truly great writer, and anybody who wants to learn to write well, on any topic, nutrition and public health included, will do well to read him. Start with his memoirs Hitch 22. He has – or had – two qualities in common with Ernest Hemingway (left) and my friend from university days the poet and critic Ian Hamilton (right). All of them are – for their work lives on – great thinkers and writers. And all three were serious drinkers. They all died young, by modern standards, in their early 60s: Ernest Hemingway shot himself, and Christopher Hitchens and Ian Hamilton died from cigarettes and whisky-related cancers.

So no, this item is not about to say that piss-artists are for this reason protected against physical diseases – or mental ones either, for that matter. It is true that some celebrated topers like the fabulous painters Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud lived into old age, but I am happy to identify them as outliers. So, no, no, a hundred times no! If your main concern is to avoid chronic diseases, don't hit the bottle.

Also, and this is where good knowledge of ways of life and their relationship with disease comes in handy, we all, professionals especially, have a responsibility to know the dangers of what we do and to state these clearly. Thus I think it is less likely that Christopher Hitchens and Ian Hamilton would have become heavy smokers as well as serious drinkers, had they known in adolescence and as young men what smoking does to you. And to others also. So if you thought I might be making a case here for The Weed, no no, a thousand times no.

Why are poets drunks?

Lately I have been reading the fine biography by Carole Angier on the novelist Jean Rhys, and by Jon Stallworthy on the poet Louis MacNeice, as well as meditating on Christopher Hitchens, whose recent wake in New York was packed with friends and admirers. He was driven by cigarettes and whisky, and some wild wild women (and men too, in his earlier life).

That old thought came to mind. Here we go. 'Is the right question, why are so many poets drunks, or, why are so many drunks poets?'. Novelists and painters also. Let me put this another way. Biographers and commentators who tut-tut about artistic types being topers, and say how much better they would have been at their work had they stuck to China tea and orangeade, may be – or even probably are – missing the point. Which is (and I know this is a terrible horrible thing even to think, let alone write in a public health context) that their genius was – and in some cases now is – fuelled by psychotropic substances, of which alcohol is one.

Or to put this yet another way: do the psycho-active substances in booze impede or even destroy human consciousness, or do they enhance or even create it? This is a big question. The answer surely, is both. It simply is not true that all the great hearts,

spirits or minds were – or are – abstemious.Perhaps if we want genius to flower among us and to be longer lived, maybe we should recommend a weaning process to say magic mushrooms or marijuana.

If we admit that psychotropic drugs can illuminate the imagination, we are accepting that we, inasmuch as we are only focussed on absence and avoidance of disease and length of life, we do not have all the answers to what it is and means to be fully human.

My son Ben
Nourishment of the spirit



Be very careful! An 1896 advertisement for hallucinogenic absinthe (left). Artisanal arak being distilled (centre) and then matured in clay jars (right).

Now for some of my fine times in London in the late 1970s with my eldest son Ben. It's said that writers can go to their graves happy after having published a biography, memoirs, a travel book, a book of verse, a book for children, a tract that changes history (maybe in their own field), an erotic text (but too hot for a publisher to handle), and a cookbook. That's two down and three of the rest to go, for me.

Probably I blew my chance of a cookbook in the late 1970s. Actually I had two genius ideas. The first was *Fuel*. This was going to be co-written with Ben. He lived with me for his three years before university. He and I specialised in dinners for 12. We worked our socks off preparing feasts all from one country. I did the shopping and the pre-preparation, including making our downstairs dining room beautiful. Ben became increasingly top-class at menu planning and feast presentation, and the final preparation in the adjacent spacious kitchen, while I welcomed the guests.

This was great fun, because half an hour after the last friend arrived, we would all be drinking wine upstairs, and they all, believing that I lived alone, would be thinking 'is Geoffrey about to order takeaways, or do we go out to a restaurant, or is this a mistake, or what?'. Then just as they were getting restive, Ben would bellow from

downstairs 'Supper is served!' and was the host for our meal, and welcomed everybody to their seats, with name-cards and printed menus, and served the food in pots placed on our grand table, with wine in grand carafes, while I acted as if I was a guest also. Ben loved this responsibility. Arianna Stassinopoulos (she of the HuffPost) and Martin Amis have reminisced about his style.

We had adventures. Ben and I planned the whole occasions together. One decision we took was to go for a Lebanese feast. Claudia Roden was already a hero, because our most favoured, thumbed and falling apart cookbook was the Penguin edition of her first masterpiece *A Book of Middle Eastern Food*. Claudia delighted in telling stories about food. Thus *imam bayildi,* the aromatic aubergine simmered in olive oil with parsley, tomatoes, garlic and spices, means 'the sultan swooned' because, or so the story goes, the first time the great man was served this newly concocted dish, his pleasure was so intense that he fainted. The feast we concocted needed to be washed down with arak, not a drink I knew, but I knew a man who would know. This was Gerry of the Delmonico family wine and liquor shop now long gone, then at 64 Old Compton Street in Soho. 'Do you have… arak?' I asked. He smiled and steered me towards a whole row of bottles, from Iraq, Syria, Iran – and Lebanon. Oh, OK, I said, realising that I knew nothing, but that I was in the presence of an honest trader.

Then I explained the concept of the planned feast, and said 'what do you use to dilute arak?' Gerry smiled again, and paused, and said: 'Vodka?'

Well, I had been warned. In Iraq, arak is known as 'lion's milk', because it is said that only those with a constitution of a lion can handle it, with its range of 50-65 per cent pure alcohol. Later I learned that being flavoured with aniseed, it is a cousin of absinthe, now still commonly banned because of its reputation of inducing hallucinations, the heebie-jeebies, madness and death. (Arrack is something else – go google if you want to know)

Here is a message to those of you, my dear readers, who partake of the potions of oblivion, especially if you are not experienced, and most especially if you are trying an *eau de vie* or firewater of a type so far not known to you. Do not serve it as pre-meal cocktails. Do not offer it at table with the meal, whatever the cookbook says. Conceal the bottle. In case of temptation, lock the bottle and post the key to yourself. Bring it on at the end of the meal in a small crystal decanter holding just enough for one substantial glass for everybody to toast and drink at the same time.

Even now I am still trying to piece together the fragments of memory of that evening. Arianna says she was not there that time, but she was at another time when she showed up with her man on the side John Tooley, then running the Covent Garden Opera House. The arak evening I think included Arianna's sister Agape, and my then employee Jane Wellesley. Also Vivien Young, a then toast of the French House, the one Soho pub that got anywhere close to the Paris bars in which history

was imagined. I just got a skype message from Vivien in Sarasota, Florida, confirming some of this. Meanwhile I will not resist showing a 1896 advertisement for absinthe (above), which inspired Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud and Vincent Van Gogh. Next are pictures of arak being distilled artisanal-style, of the clay jars traditionally used to store and mature arak.

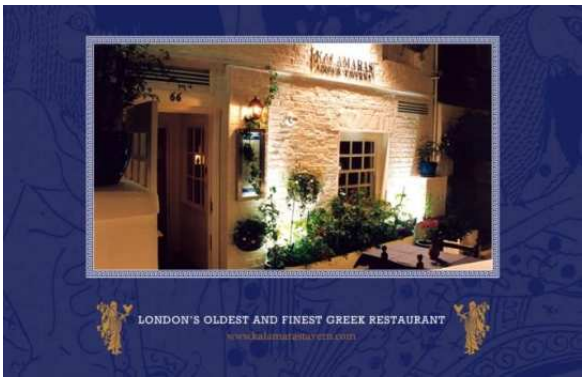
The first unwritten book. Fuel

Ah yes. *Fuel*. The first missed opportunity. Ben then went to York University. He lodged in a student block whose dud 'kitchen' was a surface, a cupboard, and two gas rings. Nobody used it, apart from Ben. He did, because one of my gifts to him was a tower of steamers that are sold in any Chinatown, in our case in Gerrard Street, five minutes from Gerry's. With these he could and did rustle up fresh delicious nourishing three-course meals for a party of eight, and nobody else on his block could do this. No steamers, no know-how, no self-confidence. Mind you, Ben also became a maestro at putting on a three-course supper for two, together with table linen, nice cutlery, candles, and terrific chat. His pulling power was magnified.

The idea of our book was not *Pull,* but *Fuel*. How to enjoy cheap easy food on a student budget that is terrifically good for you, makes you feel terrific, boosts your stamina for all-night essay crises, and keeps you going during the epic crisis of finals.

Oh, and as well as that, at the back of the book, we would have said that all this also evidently makes it less likely that one day you will be told by your physician that you need to be cut open, or have feet or legs cut off, or be drugged, or otherwise mutilated, or poisoned, or bits replaced with plastic or metal, because of a diagnosis of heart failure or diabetes or cancer or mouldy old bones. Students don't think much about stuff like this. Actually most people of any age don't, until it happens to them and they are told they don't have a choice. *Fuel* was a good idea. It still is.

The second unwritten book. The meaning of food





My haunt Kalamaras in Inverness Mews near Queensway (left) and (right) kleftiko, one of the main dishes made there by owner Stelios Platanos's sister

For over a decade one of my good friends in London was Stelios Platanos, owner of the Greek restaurant Kalamaras, which people thought meant 'squid' in Greek but in fact means 'scholar' (the connection being ink) or, some say, a person from the Greek mainland. No difference, Stelios might say. The point of the word being that most people think London is stuffed with Greek restaurants, and this is not true. All the rest are (or were then) from Cyprus which, Stelios stated, and his food proved, is not the same thing. Stelios did not like Turks. Anybody who asked for pitta bread in Kalamaras got the hard eye. He retired to his estate in Lefkes in the centre of Paros a long time ago, and the tarted-up version of Kalamaras now under other ownership is shown above, left.

Stelios's sister was a fabulous cook. She usually stayed in the background, while Stelios's bevy of gorgeous young women (do not say *harem*) waited on table. Stelios himself was usually sitting at his own table by the door, often playing a *baglama*, a stringed instrument a little like a ukulele. Another crucial thing about Kalamaras is you had to know where it was, down the end of a cul-de-sac close to Queensway. It had no passing trade. Some of the time I was an habitué, I worked for *The Sunday Times* and had a company car. I would drive into the mews, park, and after a couple of hours of merriment, back out in one swift movement, which required skill with the swerve, because the mews had a kink.

When the time came for me and *The Sunday Times* to go our separate ways, I handed the car in and soon after got a call from the legendary general manager Peter Roberts. 'The back end of your car looks like it's been in a demolition derby' he sighed. 'Your car now', I said. 'Tat ta'.

Great days, and nights. Stelios was a fabulous host, and you knew you were in when he beckoned you to his table. Indeed, I stayed at one of his Cycladic houses in a castle, and another on the hill for three successive summers, and wrote books at the local taverna when my companions swam. One year every day I got up before dawn, run the eight kilometres from Lefkes to the sea at Piso Livadia (dodging red-eyed hounds trained to mean serious business), dive in, swim around, and then run back up the hill to Lefkes, no walking, and get in the house before anybody else was awake. Other days I'd run the longer distance to the port town of Paroikia, past the marble mines where it's said the Venus de Milo was quarried. I mention all this in response to occasional complaints from chums at Coke and Pepsi that I never celebrate physical activity. I do!

Stelios was a philosopher. Greeks often are, especially when they have got an act together. So I started to ask him about the significance of Greek food. Mostly it is all about the crops and the weather and the way people live, and on the Greek islands the sea. There is something special about going to a *taverna* in the morning and ordering crab or prawns or octopus or whatever swam into the net, and then watching the brother or cousin of the owner chug his little boat outside the bay to

catch your supper. Olive oil tastes different when you reckon it has come from local trees that may be 500 years old. And *retsina* is nectar only when a locally made version is drunk ice-cold in the shade on a scorching hot day, together with a vast salad and the fish or seafood of the day.

Anyway. The meaning of Greek food. Take *kleftiko* (pictured right, above) said Stelios. I may have been enjoying a portion of this lamb cooked in its own juices in foil, at the time. Do not confuse it with kebab. Yes? I asked.

Well, he said, the word derives from the Greek for 'robber'. When bandits robbed owners of their sheep, or – his eyes glittered – partisans hid in the hills and mountains in between swarming down into the towns to chop Turks into little pieces, they needed to find a way to cook lamb *without making smoke*. So they heated and buried stones, marinated the meat with lemons and oil, inserted garlic, wrapped it in clay, covered everything with earth, and waited. Thus the name, which means 'the dish in the style of the Klephts', or 'robbers' food'. Except that, added Stelios, with quiet emphasis: 'many of them were patriots'.

Aha! There was the killer idea. Just as Claudia Roden does, a whole history could be written centred on the meaning of the words for traditional dishes. *The Meaning of Food* is the working title. Maybe it should have a snappier title like *Daylight Robbery*. This was a good idea. It still is.

Alimentation and nourishment
The effects of words

To circle back to where this month's column started, why are we as a profession so focused on nutrition while paying so little attention to nourishment? Answers and comments, let's have them, below please.

As a preliminary thought, I feel we often also will do well to reflect on words, and on what they once meant and what they have come to mean. One example is the Portuguese word *alimentação*, which is sometimes wrongly translated into English as 'food'. In fact what it means is the act of eating or, to use a word that now has dropped out of use in English, 'alimentation'. Rather interesting, don't you think? For 'food' is an object, detached, out there, separate, whereas 'alimentation' (or *alimentação*) is connected, in here, intimate, a process.

Another example is the word 'nutrition' (the Portuguese *nutrição* has the same connotation). We know what 'nutrition' means. At least, those of us who are trained in nutrition as a science think we know what it means. But do we? Try asking colleagues, and see what they say. My guess is that most people in their answer will in effect make

reference to what current nutrition textbooks include in their contents. More exactly, I guess that most answers will refer to the role of diet in biochemical processes, and in health in the sense of the presence or absence of disease. Rather dull, don't you think?

So I have a suggestion, which helps to explain what follows here. Once upon a time 'diet' referred to the philosophy of the good life well led, in which food and nutrition in all their aspects is – for it still is, or should be – an integral part. That's what dietetics was all about, once upon a time. Then it become more and more narrow in its practice and meaning. Now apply this to 'nutrition'. My suggestion, is that just as we should be aware of the connections between the words 'whole', 'holy', 'hale', 'healing', 'health', and their meanings, we should embrace the connections between 'nutrition' and 'nourishment'. Nourishment is of the mind, heart and spirit, as well as of the body.

And why all this focus on the body? Can this possibly be because physical functions can be *measured*, whereas what distinguishes us from animals and plants, our minds, hearts and spirits are matters of *quality*? We could go further and stop using the word 'nutrition' altogether. 'Public health nourishment', anyone?

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