WN *Columns*

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What do you think?

Geoffrey Cannon



Spirals in the cosmos, identified by the Hubble telescope. The Rose of Galaxies is on the left, and the Pinwheel Galaxy, 25 million light years away, is on the right. Here, Earth is less than a speck

Rio de Janeiro, Juiz de Fora, Cabo Frio. Cosmic spirals this month, sent to me by one of my searchers, Claudio Schuftan. Pause for contemplation… what is the meaning of us, in such immensity? What also though, is the meaning of our lives right now down here on the planet, the way things are right now? Last month I celebrated Eduardo Galeano, writing in the days after his death. This month he is my hero. In his writing and speaking and by his example of his own way of living, he reshapes perceived realities. He will continue to inform and enlighten all of us who live in the global South, and many in the global North also – or so I hope – about human nature and our prospects for survival (threatened for next generations) and prosperity (which as we should now be learning, is not about money or material matters).

Then I have two stories about nutrition and nourishment. The first is on coffee. The second is on fasting. Like alcoholic drinks, coffee is usually not included in reports that generate dietary guidelines, the inadequate reason perhaps being that ethanol and caffeine, being psychoactive, are not food but drugs. So citing the late broadcaster David Frost and the late US president Richard Nixon, I say what I think. What for example happens to blood pressure, when a heavy coffee drinker – like me as was – quits the habit and instead goes on an extended mostly all-raw fast? This is my second story, whose results are confounded by heaps of salads, vegetables and fruits, no alcohol or salt or added sugar or grains, and lots of exercise.

Finally, we at *WN* have been listening to some kind but firm words from our advisor Shiriki Kumanyika on gender balance. This has also prompted more thoughts on age, topic, geographical and ideological balance, and our fairly new *Balance* department of *WN* convened by Hetty Einzig. What do you think?

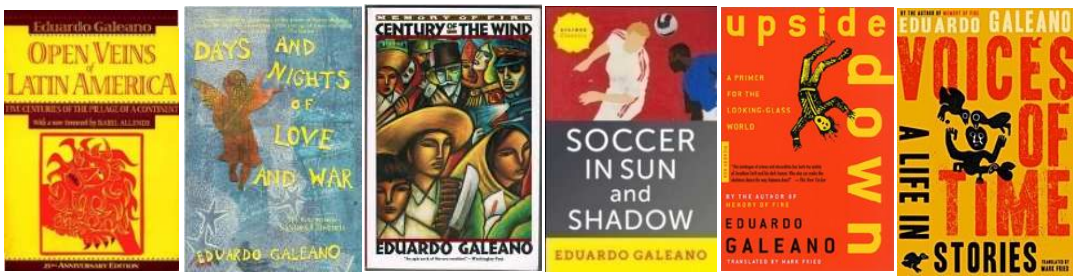


Nourishment

What they believe: 18. Eduardo Galeano Dreaming a continent into being







Eduardo Galeano (with Bolivian president Evo Morales, above left, and with icons of over half a millennium, right) shows the people of Latin America where they have come from, who they are, and where they may go. He is a muse of the social and political movements that have created new popular social democratic governments, such that Latin America is now a beacon for the South and the world.

'In dreams begins responsibility', wrote WB Yeats. Eduardo Galeano (1949-2015) ranks with two of the Latin American Nobel Literature prizewinners Gabriel Garcia Marques and Pablo Neruda. Like them, his writing not only evokes but creates the nature of Latin America. This gives a sense of his stature. But putting him in any list is misleading. It was he, not they, who prompted me to want to move to and live and work in Latin America, which I did in 2000 – I admire what they write, but I wanted to be within and part of what he reveals, which perhaps I am now. His first significant and best-selling book, *Open Veins of Latin America*, I bought in London in 1998, and read it with a sort of shock of recognition, thanks also to the work of his faithful comrade and translator Cedric Belfrage.

How to explain, for those who have not yet imbibed him? When Isabel Allende went into exile after the Pinochet coup in 1973 she had to leave in a hurry. In her letter of love to her friend in the 25th anniversary edition of *Open Veins*, she writes:

> I could not take much with me: some clothes, family pictures, a small bag with dirt from my garden, and two books: an old edition of the *Odes* by Pablo Neruda, and the book with the yellow cover, *Las Venas Abiertas de America Latina*. More than twenty years later I still have that same book with me.

In 2009 Hugo Chavez, when president of Venezuela, gave a copy of *Open Veins* to Barack Obama at a Summit of the Americas meeting in Trinidad. He was doing his best to explain himself to the president of the US, and show in the short time he had, what the newly resurgent republics of Latin America were doing, what they stood for, and why. Now the gift seems even more appropriate than it did at the time.

Staying alive

This is because Eduardo Galeano, while certainly a democratic socialist, has a philosophy of being-in-the-world that is ideological for sure, which transcends the conventional variations of 'left' and 'right', or capitalist and communist. He believes in solidarity, as did the great trades union movements now mostly smashed. He is more radical, acutely aware of need for people, societies and cultures to be and stay alive, and intensely interested in recording the essence of people and occasions, as great painters and photographers do, irrespective of the implications. He would have been a catastrophe in committee. Isabel Allende characterises his writing as

> A mixture of meticulous detail, political conviction, poetic flair, and good story-telling. He has walked up and down Latin America listening to the voices of the poor and the oppressed, as well as those of the leaders and intellectuals. He has lived with Indians, peasants, guerillas, soldiers, artists and outlaws; he has talked to presidents, tyrants, martyrs, priests, heroes, bandits, desperate mothers, and patient prostitutes. He has been bitten by snakes, suffered tropical fevers, walked in the jungle, and survived a massive heart attack; he has been persecuted by repressive regimes as well as by fanatical terrorists…

He himself sketches a time in his life at first in Uruguay after *Open Veins* was published, in a *2008 interview with Scott Witmer* in Chicago:

> In the beginning of 1973, I was in jail for a short period in Uruguay and I decided prison life was not healthy, so I went to Buenos Aires. The magazine was a beautiful experience. *[After the military regime imposed censorship]* it was impossible to go on. We were obliged to choose between silence and humiliation. We could stay alive if we accepted the obligation to lie, or we could shut up. We decided to shut up entirely and not pretend to be free.
>
> Many members of our staff were killed or disappeared or jailed or went into exile, and so it was a good decision to go away. We left behind a very good memory of an exceptional cultural magazine. We showed that it was possible to have a different conception of culture. Not culture made by professional people to be consumed by non-professional people, like workers or anonymous people. Instead, we were trying to hear their voices. Not only to speak about reality, but asking reality, 'What would you tell me?' In the middle of 1976, I was obliged to fly away from Argentina because I was supposed to be on the death squad list to be killed. Many of my friends had been killed, and being dead is so boring, so I chose exile in Spain.

Box 1

The struggle continues

Children of the Days reviewed in The New York Times in 2013 by Greg Grandin

One would think that Latin Americans, after all they've suffered, from the tortures and terrors of the Spanish Inquisition to the death squads and disappearances of the Cold War, would have given up on the idea that history is redeemable. But it seems that centuries of repression and struggle have had the opposite effect, searing into their political culture an ability to recognize the dialectic lurking behind the brutality and to answer every bloody body with ever more adamant affirmations of humanity.

Inspirational wisdom

Eduardo Galeano was driven first out of his own country of Uruguay in 1973 after a military coup, and then from Argentina after another coup. He found refuge in post-Franco Spain, where he began to pioneer a new literary genre. In such books as *Open Veins of Latin America* and the trilogy *Memory of Fire*, he weaves together fact, pre-Columbian myth and snippets from everyday life into not so much people's histories but sprawling people's epics. Think of Pablo Neruda crossed with Howard Zinn.

His new book, *Children of the Days,* is for those who feel that history has become too much of a burden to bear — a collection of inspirational wisdom, its 366 entries, one for each calendar date in the (leap) year, keeping alive the memory of courage and beauty amid the carnage. Well-known horrors born of the conquest of America, slavery, the Holocaust and European colonialism take their place alongside lesser-known events and people: the founding of a Brazilian community by escaped slave women for example, or Simeon Stylites, a Syrian Christian saint who lived for 37 years atop a column, a feat that for Eduardo Galeano is a symbol for the more than one billion people who today live without decent housing.

The whirligig of time

His best entries reconcile opposites. 'The Left Is the university of the Right' notes that Rupert Murdoch's youthful admiration of Karl Marx helped him master the 'inner workings of capitalism.' History tends not to move in the direction he would like: in 1837, Nicaragua's Conservative Party partially legalized abortion; 170 years later, the leftist Sandinistas outlawed the practice 'and thus condemned poor women to prison or the cemetery.' But sometimes defeat creates the possibility for future victories: having lost their country to Franco, Spanish Republican exiles were among the first liberators of Nazi-occupied Paris.

He uses a format that leads to an a-historic, almost medieval experience of time, a liturgical calendar in which the days don't move forward into the future but rather pile up into an eternal present. He celebrates non-Western peoples who experience history as repetition. In the Quechua language, he writes, *naupa* means 'was,' but it also means 'will be'. He reminds readers that moderns are stuck in their own kind of regression: genocide in the 16th century looks a lot like genocide in the 20th.

Thus *Children of the Day*s commemorates insurgents so audacious they thought they could stop time, like the Parisian revolutionaries who on July 29 1830 took stones to the city's clocks, or the Mayan peons in Mexico who on July 31 1847 rose up and seized both the plantations and the local archives, eventually burning the 'documents that legalized their enslavement and the enslavement of their children and the enslavement of their children's children.' Mostly, though, Eduardo Galeano simply wants the word 'progress' to live up to its hype, as the title of his May 15 entry, on the enormous 2011 anti-austerity protest in Spain, suggests: 'May Tomorrow Be More Than Just Another Name for Today.'

Here is how it is

The era of people like Eduardo Galeano in Latin America may be coming to an end. The intense dangers he survived, as did a number of once-young militants all over the continent who are now writers, or professors, or politicians, was of military regimes and secret police hit-squads, openly or covertly financed and supported by successive US governments, that threatened anybody who upheld respect and freedom for the people. His courage and conviction did not spring from nowhere, it was forged in fire. His genius, in the Latin American tradition of inventing and discovering realities which otherwise would have been seen, is in his creation of a style of writing which cannot be classified as 'fact' or 'fiction', and which has the strengths of both types of writing, somewhat similar to 'drama-documentaries'.

He enables the reader to believe what he writes, including when his stories are obviously fabulous, partly because great myths have their own super-reality, and mainly because of his iron integrity. This may explain why, although by all account a charming and courteous companion, he appears in almost all pictures taken of him to be grim. His nature is best expressed in what he writes. Here are some examples, taken from a *2008 interview wth Niels Boel.* Here he is, on eating, culture, and the resurgence of Latin America:

The meaning of eating

> The perfect symbol of globalisation is the success of firms like McDonald's, which opens five new outlets around the world each day. Something more significant than the fall of the Berlin Wall was the queue of Russians outside McDonald's on Moscow's Red Square as the so-called 'Iron Curtain', which turned out be more like a Mashed Potato Curtain, was coming down. The McDonaldisation of the world is planting plastic food in the four corners of the planet. The success of McDonald's has inflicted a kind of open wound on one of the most basic human rights, the right to choose our own food. The stomach is part of the human soul. The mouth is its gateway. It's not about how much you eat but what and how you choose to do so. How people prepare food is an important part of their cultural identity. It matters greatly to poor or even very poor people, who have little or no food but who respect traditions that turn the act of eating into a small ritual.

Identity on the move

> Cultural identity is always moving, changing and being challenged by reality that is itself in perpetual movement. I am what I am, but I am also what I do to change what I am. Every culture is made up of some elements that come from afar. What defines a cultural product, whether it be a book, a song, a popular saying or a way of playing football, is never where it comes from but what it is. The Cuban daiquiri has nothing Cuban in it: the ice comes from somewhere else, just like the lemon, the sugar and the rum. Christopher Columbus first brought sugar to the Americas from the Canary Islands. Yet the daiquiri is considered quintessentially Cuban. The *churro* fritters of Andalusia originated in the Middle East. Italian pasta first came from China. Nothing can be defined or derided on the basis of its origin. The important thing is what is done with it, and how far a community identifies with something that symbolises its favourite way of dreaming, living, dancing, playing or loving.

Box 2

Books by Eduardo Galeano

Guatemala: Occupied Country, 1969. Open Veins of Latin America. Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent, 1971. Days and Nights of Love and War, 1978. Memory of Fire (three books), 1982-1986. The Book of Embraces, 1989. Football in Sun and Shadow, 1995. Upside Down. A Primer for the Looking Glass World, 1998. Voices of Time: A Life in Stories, 2004. Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone, 2008. Children of the Days. A Calendar of Human History, 2011. Women (anthology), 2015. Another 20 books not published in English.

The resurgence of Latin America

This is the popular will, the will of the people to change reality. They have been cheated for so many years. We have become prisoners of what I call 'the culture of impotence.' It's very difficult in Latin America to build a democracy after so many years of military terror and in a non-democratic world that will veto your attempt to change something. The experts will come. Not soldiers, now it is experts. Sometimes experts are even more dangerous than soldiers. They say, 'You cannot. The market is irritated. The market may be angry.' It is as if the market is an unknown but very active and cruel god punishing us because we are trying to commit the cardinal sin of changing reality.

Look at Evo Morales, the president of Bolivia. Bolivia was the richest country in all of the Americas at the beginning of the conquest period. They were the owners of the silver, which enriched Europe. Bolivia is now the poorest country in South America. Her richness was her ruin. Morales is now trying to break with this shameful and humiliating tradition of always working for another's prosperity. When he nationalised the gas and the oil, it was a scandal all over the world. 'How could he? It's terrible!' Why is it terrible? Because recovering dignity is a cardinal sin. But he is also committing another cardinal sin. He has been doing what he promised he would do. We in Latin America are suffering with special intensity the divorce between words and facts. When you say yes, you do no. When you say more or less, you do less or more. Facts and words are never encountering each other. We are trained to lie. We are trained to accept lies as a way of life.



WN *Nourishment*

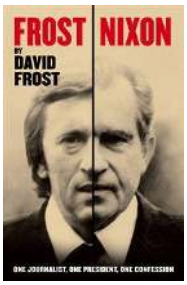
This story carries a new *WN* 'brand image' for 'nourishment'. Our interest is in relationships between foods, meals, dietary patterns and food culture, and mental, emotional, and spiritual as well as physical health and well-being. We propose more attention to delight and less preoccupation with disease. The image is of whole food and each time we use the category, we will use a different image, starting with fruits – here, a papaya, and beginning the story, guavas. Why, is because the visual equivalents of 'diet' or 'nutrition' are graphs, or extracts from dietary guidelines like the now-discredited US 'pyramid', or indiscriminate pictures of foods, or images connected with dieting regimes.



WN *Nourishment. Coffee, blood pressure*

What killed Richard Nixon?









David Frost, best-known internationally for his epic interview with Richard Nixon at the end of which the former US president more or less confessed to the Watergate caper, was a great coffee drinker

This story is about coffee and blood pressure, and also David Frost (above). We all twitch when somebody we know dies. Thus it was for me when the UK broadcaster David Frost keeled over on a Queen Elizabeth cruise in August 2013. He was older than me, but he and I were at university at the same time, him at Cambridge, me at Oxford. *Then and later we worked together.* One of his guides to life, I call The Frostie Principle. He revealed it when we first met. It is 'When you think of doing something, do it'. He had no will-deed gap. This was the secret of his successes. Not that he thought of having a massive heart attack. Hearing about his death, I thought – as one does – what did he do wrong? What am I doing right? Or – is this an awful warning?

Frost-Nixon and coffee

What stuck in my mind was David Frost and coffee. Was this his downfall and his warning? Here is Simon Hattenstone of *The Guardian*, interviewing him in June 2011.

> His hands shake a little as he talks…He pours another coffee. I've never seen anyone knock it back like he does… He laughs to himself, and takes another slug of coffee… He realises he's lost his track and glugs another coffee (his sixth, by my count), spills some on his shirt, dabs it away and continues. 'Oh, it's all right. It will dry'.

Apart from hands-shaking and shirt-spilling this could be me, I thought. On any 10 point tick-list of addiction, I scored. First thing in the morning, yes. Insistence on *super-forte* roasted pulverised brands, yes. Not caring about the quality as long as I got the jolt, yes. Asking for coffee after arrival at a business meeting, yes. Rush given by first gulp, yes. Raised energy after drinking multiple cupsful, no. Anxiety when coffee not available, yes. This felt pretty close to 10 out of 10, other than extremes such as getting up at night to brew a thermosful, which I did not, or inability fully to function

without a fix, which I thought not – but how could I know unless and until I quit? David Frost's greatest coup as an interviewer was his 1977 epic sessions with Richard Nixon, in which the disgraced US president sort-of confessed to his guilt in the 1972 Watergate affair. Richard Nixon also was a great coffee drinker. Thus I read:

> Richard Nixon would always have a cup of coffee with breakfast. Then, when arriving at work he'd have a second. 'He is not a chronic coffee drinker, a staff aide explained' according to a story in the *Washington Post* just before Nixon's inauguration in 1969. 'But he does offer coffee to his visitors throughout the day and he drinks a cup with them.'

Having suffered from blood clots and a heart condition for many years, including a coronary thrombosis in 1974, Richard Nixon died of a stroke age 81 in 1994. You see where this is leading, so let me say that there are plenty of reasons why he suffered circulatory pathology as from his mid-60s and why David Frost died as and when he did. Both diced with disease. Besides, the idea that people die from one cause, which has some validity with infectious diseases, is almost always just silly applied to non-communicable chronic diseases.

But I am going to plunge on and consider coffee. It rarely figures in reports on food, nutrition, health and disease. This is odd, because according to *a thorough account in Wikipedia,* 120,000 tonnes are consumed every year, which averages out at one cup of coffee a day for everybody on Earth. It may be overlooked because it is not a source of dietary energy as measured by calories, or else because like alcohol, ministries of health classify it as a drug not a nutrient, and therefore not their concern. These are bad reasons. Coffee has to be relevant to health.

Coffee and blood pressure

This said, the idea that coffee, or rather the caffeine in coffee, has any effect on any disease irrespective of dose, is absurd. Coffee is not an elixir, nor is it strychnine. Professionals have an invidious habit of saying that saturated fat, say, or sugar, or salt, cause disease, and that vegetables and fruits, say, or dietary fibre, protect against disease. Of course they do not. Such nutrients, substances or foods have their effects only when habitually consumed above certain levels. A hamburger will not kill you, and a pineapple will not cure you. Yes, I know this is obvious, but it needs saying.

Thus as applied to coffee, or rather caffeine: what are the amounts above which the risk of any disease is affected? If it is risky, is there no threshold, so any amount is a risk? Or is it a question of getting up to Frost-Nixon-Cannon levels? Besides, what if any are the problems, apart from shaky hands and sleepness nights – not my case?

High blood pressure, also known as hypertension, is the answer. Everybody knows that caffeine raises blood pressure; and the huge *2011 Global Burden of Disease study* done by the Seattle-based, Gates-funded Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation said (as summarised by the American Medical Group Association) that high blood pressure was then the *world number 1 cause of death and disability,* above tobacco use and alcohol overuse and abuse:

> The *Global Burden of Disease Study,* published December 13, 2012, was produced by 486 researchers at 302 institutions in 50 countries, and is the most detailed look at health on the population level ever attempted. It charts 235 causes of death, and examines the effects of 67 risk factors that can lead to illness.
>
> Hypertension was identified as the leading risk factor for disease… CDC says high blood pressure contributes to nearly 1,000 deaths a day and accounts for an estimated $156 billion in healthcare services, medications and lost productivity. One of the most effective ways to control high blood pressure is for the patient to work with a coordinated health care team to get their condition under control. The team-based approach involves physicians, nurses, pharmacists, health coaches and other members of a medical team working together to provide the best care to patients.

That's just for the US. Worldwide the GBD2011 study (to give it its snappy acronym) attributed 9.4 million deaths worldwide a year to high blood pressure, one-eighth of all human deaths on Earth, which amount to roughly half of all deaths from cardiovascular diseases including heart attacks and strokes.

It is pernicious to identify high blood pressure as such, as a cause of disability and death. This leads to the medical treatments indicated in the quote above. These include drugs whose ill-effects include dizziness, fatigue, depression, insomnia, constipation, impotence, gout, and excess hair growth. The internet accounts I have been reading say that 'many people' do not experience such effects, which to me suggests that a whole lot do. Hands up those who want to become a sad blocked tired limp lame werewolf!

The issue is not high blood pressure (rare inherited conditions aside). The issue is what causes high blood pressure. The usual suspects, singly and collectively, are smoking, too much salt and alcohol, and not enough vegetables+fruits and physical activity. Stress is also often mentioned. This can include freaking out when the doctor straps a sphygmomanometer on your upper arm and you become a potential suitable case for treatment. This is known as the White Coat Effect.

Curiously though, coffee or caffeine does not figure in any of the lists of 'risk factors' I know of, and I have not found any general dietary recommendations saying that coffee-caffeine is an issue. Animal experiments produce pretty clear results. But having trawled around the internet, I find that everybody seems not to know or agree that caffeine causes high blood pressure. Here for example is the no-big-deal conclusion of 'gold standard' meta-analyses of randomised controlled trials published in 2011, with Ben Caballero of Johns Hopkins as a co-author:

> The results suggest that habitual coffee consumption of more than 3 cups/d was not associated with an increased risk of hypertension compared with less than 1 cup/d; however, a slightly elevated risk appeared to be associated with light-to-moderate consumption of 1 to 3 cups/d.

Lots of studies come to similar conclusions. Epidemiological observations and interventions are equivocal or contradictory, or have trivial results. But see Box 1.

Box 1

The DGAC, The Guardian, and me

Here is an edited feature by Luisa Dillner of The Guardian on 18 May, with my reply sent to The Guardian below:

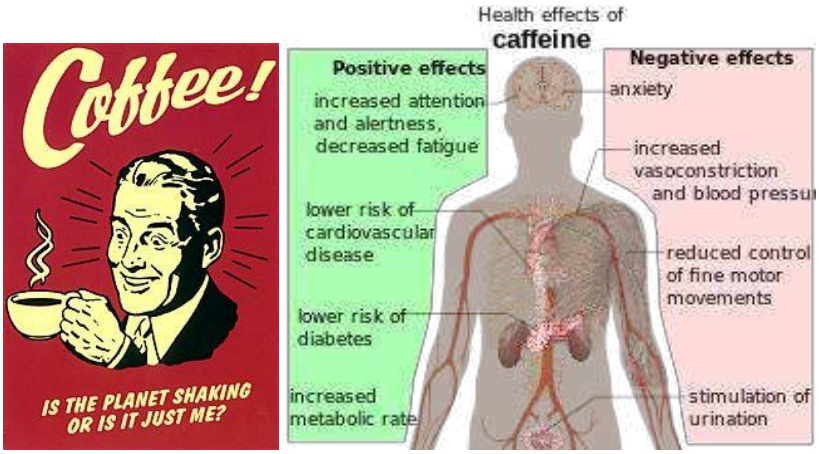
It is the world's most popular drink after water. But do you think you should cut down? That more than a couple of cups isn't good for you? Isn't coffee linked to pancreatic and kidney cancer, and doesn't it make your blood pressure go through the roof? Prepare to be amazed. Somehow coffee has made it on to the healthy list. The latest US Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee says there is strong evidence that drinking three to five cups a day (or up to 400mg/d caffeine) does no harm at all and that research consistently shows that coffee reduces the risk of type 2 diabetes and heart disease. High-caffeine drinks, however, are not the same as coffee and should be avoided by adolescents and drunk sparingly by adults. These drinks have sufficient amounts of caffeine to cause insomnia, jitteriness and palpitations. But coffee doesn't seem, in reasonable amounts, to do any harm at all. So can we all stop worrying and order another cup?

It's really black or ordinary white coffee that is linked to health benefits, not the creamy, sugary versions from coffee shops. A meta-analysis, including the results of 59 studies, suggests that coffee may actually reduce the risk of many cancers. This study didn't include randomised controlled trials, so it's impossible to definitely say that coffee was the reason for the reducations in cancer. But the evidence is, nevertheless, stronger than from any individual trials showing a link between coffee and a rise in pancreatic cancer. There are over 1,000 chemicals in coffee, some of which have credible anti-cancer effects – caffeic acid can inhibit cell pathways involved in tumour growth, and cafestol stimulates antioxidants in the cells to defend themselves against cancer development. Another meta-analysis found that four cups or more a day did not increase the risk of stroke but may, in fact, reduce it – although the authors say the studies they included were not of high quality.

However, not everyone should have five or more cups of coffee a day – pregnant women are advised to stick to two. And no one is yet suggesting that we should drink more coffee to protect us from cancer or Parkinson's disease. Coffee is a complex collection of chemicals and the health benefits are still unclear. A study found a reduction in heart disease with three to five cups a day, but no such impact from the decaffeinated variety. But it is, at least, now reasonable to stop feeling guilty for drinking as much coffee as we want to.

My reply

Geoffrey Cannon replies. I admire Luisa Dillner, and *The Guardian's* food, nutrition and health coverage, but the conclusion of her piece is a mistake – as is the section on coffee in the US Dietary Guidelines report, which shows a naivete rather common among eminent expert panels. If the issue was just one of a modest range of cups of coffee then the suggestion in the report would be reasonable – although J-shaped dose-response curves need scrutiny and plausible biology. But the over-riding issue is not coffee. It is caffeine, which like ethanol is addictive. When people say they need their coffee hit or fix they are not talking fancifully. Cola manufacturers do not put caffeine in their drinks for the taste but to get children, young people and adults drinking the stuff all the time, hence catastrophic rates of obesity. And it's the caffeine that makes designer coffee drinks containing the same dietary energy as a meal so popular. Also, if caffeine was harmless, even if addictive, why the warnings about 'jolt' drinks? Rational advice on caffeine translated to coffee is much the same as for ethanol and alcoholic drinks. One or two a day is fine, but if you have any inclination to drink more, cut it out, stop, drink none at all.



Summaries of the good and bad news about caffeine are as shown in this Wikipedia figure above. Agreement about the jolt and the shakes (as seen above left), apparent good news about diabetes, but contradictory conclusions about cardiovascular disease and blood pressure… something wrong here…

The US committee suggestion is a mess, as indicated by the diagram above, showing caffeine as protecting against cardiovascular disease, while also increasing blood pressure! Something wrong here! Nutritional epidemiology is problematic. Clear results would require standard procotols, which do not exist, and all confounding factors allowed for so that coffee or caffeine is unequivocally isolated, which I doubt has been done. So I do not believe the crunched meta-analytic numbers. My view is that caffeine does increase blood pressure, and that the only question is how much, by how much. Now I read that the European Food Safety Authority recommends a top limit of 400 milligrams of coffee a day, equivalent to five cups of coffee.

Sphygminged!

In the midst of these musings, early last September the family went to get checked for malaria. The health centre waiting room had a coffee dispenser, so I took some swigs of Brazil's best black stuff. When my turn came I suddenly realised that the paramedic checking me out was taking my blood pressure. Eh? Brazil's health service is in a panic over diabetes and stroke, so I suppose that everybody gets sphygminged.

Not to make a fuss in front of my family I let her go ahead. What! The numbers were at a level at the 'thank goodness we found this out now before it would be Too Late' level, which figure in 'Top Doc Cures All' books as 'when Elmer Fudd first came to see me his blood pressure was…(big numbers)'. If I was a pliable patient I would now be on the anti-hypertensive treadmill. Werewolf stuff. But I am impatient, and stomped out, and at home brewed another flask of coffee. The next month I was in London, went to Boots Oxford Street, and got me a home blood pressure measurement kit. Its instructions say 'the good news is that while high blood pressure usually can't be cured, it can be treated'. Well, a pharmacy chain would say that, wouldn't they. More werewolfery. Then I formed a plan, which took until April – last month, as I write – to turn into action. See the next story, below…



WN *Nourishment. Fasting*

A fast is good as enough



My Daniel fast is all-raw salads, vegetables and fruits, and also legumes, nuts, seeds and minimally processed oils, plus herbs, spices and their teas, and water, except that my variation excludes grains

This story is about fasting, which is neglected by conventional nutrition science, despite the fact that a high proportion of the human race have observed regular periods of fasting throughout history, and still do. Odd, you may think – the neglect, not the observance. Like vegetarianism, fasting takes many forms, from restriction or omission of specified foods, to water-only, and can be studied methodically only when the type and nature of fasting is specified.

While fasts, like dieting regimes, normally reduce dietary energy, their purpose is not usually to reduce body fat. They are followed in order to focus and enhance physical, mental, emotional or spiritual health and well-being, and are often required as part of a philosophy of life or religion. Here is my own latest adventure in fasting. It backs what 'outlaw' advocates of radical whole food or raw food diets or fasting like *Herbert Shelton*, *Leslie Kenton*, *Joel Fuhrman* and Albert Mosseri state and claim in their writing and practice.

Daring to be a Daniel

Six weeks before writing this, I decided to go on a water-only fast for some weeks, preceded and followed by an extended raw-only salads, vegetables, roots and fruits fast. As I write I am six weeks into what I now discover is a raw version of the *Daniel Fast,* illustrated above, which also includes what I had been seeing as cheats – minimally processed legumes, unsalted nuts and seeds, olive oil, herbs, spices and their teas, as well as water. Whole grains, included in Daniel, and any form or product of

grains, I am not eating at all. Seeds I am also eating in the form of tahini fresh made by a Lebanese shopkeeper in town as salad dressing. My choice of herbs is garlic, and of spices ginger and cloves. Overall it happens to be a type of vegan diet (no food of animal origin in any form).

Why am I doing this? Well, as outlined in the story above on coffee, last September I thought I should stop drinking coffee and caffeine in other forms as in tea, having had the very nasty surprise of discovering that my blood pressure was high. What, me, hypertensive? But I am no good at giving up things, and am averse to conventional medicine. So after half a year of dithering I decided to go all-raw Daniel (as I now learn) but with no grains in any form. This would be a positive adventure, much more inspiring and interesting than 'giving up' anything.

Daniel as tweaked by me does not feel like denial. Obviously it implies no caffeine and no alcohol, as well as no added sugars, very low sodium, no cooked food, absolutely no bread, biscuits, cakes other baked foods, pasta or pizza, or stuff like that, as well as no food of animal origin. Oh and plus more physical activity in the form of more short runs, brisk walks, and daily lifting of my hand weights brought long ago at Joe Weider's *Muscle and Fitness* shop in London's Strand.

It adds up to what my naturopathic mentors Kirsten Hartvig and Nic Rowley call a 'catabolic diet' in their book *You Are What You Eat,* meaning that its dietary energy as conventionally measured is below 'normal' balance. But with avocados, as well as lots of nuts and the olive oil and tahini, not I think by much. Certainly I continue to feel replete with the bulk of the salads, less hungry except for snacks of handfuls of nuts, and after a few days have had no interest in alcohol or bread, or desire for caffeine in coffee or tea. Overall it feels like I have regained a natural appetite.

No pressure

As mentioned, the red light for me was finding that my blood pressure was at 'suitable case for treatment' level – some way above the 'hypertension phase 1' threshold of 140-90. The measure was taken in a clinic whose outer office supplied free jolts of black coffee which I had swigged, and was part of a procedure meant to check to see if I had malaria, so I was already agitated. My plan #1 was to try to decide that the measurement was rogue, but this did not work. My thought #1 was of doom. Thought #2 was that I should kick my heavy caffeine habit and then check again. This I did after my dither, starting six weeks ago, armed with my very own sphygmomanometer, by daring to do a Daniel as a prelude to a water-only fast. Which of these changes – fresh and minimally processed food only, raw food almost only, more physical activity, no alcohol, salt, sugar, caffeine, not to mention the effect of getting a grip, would reduce my blood pressure, and by how much? No idea, because I was and am interested only in the overall effect. Forget specific 'risk factors'!

Always I have been super-sceptical about the findings of any conventional intervention designed to reduce blood pressure. For instance, a recent meta-analysis of 34 trials

involving 3,230 people produced by Graham MacGregor and distinguished colleagues associated with World Action on Salt and Health, published in *BMJ,* concluded on the basis of overall findings of an average drop of 5.39 systolic and 2.82 diastolic pressure in hypertensive people, that a permanent low-salt diet would prevent 35,000 deaths from stroke and heart disease in the UK, and 2.5 million deaths worldwide, every year.

The evidence on salt and blood pressure is rock solid, but I do not believe that such a small drop could generate such big numbers. Also, a sharp reduction in salt alone is unrealistic. Plus to me it makes tidy science but bad public health to isolate salt – the sensible approach is overall changes in dietary patterns and ways of life, plus laws regulating industry. Further, the heroic mathematical extrapolations that produce such exciting global numbers are inherently dubious. In my view, to be really effective at personal or population level, systolic and diastolic numbers measured as hypertensive would have to come down by a whole lot more than (rounded figures) 5.50 and 3.00. Personally if I had to pick a single cause my money would be on caffeine. But I will never know, because Daniel is not a focused but a big-picture approach.

Results! My first reading late this April was 142-87. This, two days after I had quit coffee for tea, was way below the horrible September reading, but as health-conscious people will know, is borderline hypertensive. Horrid! But a week later, still drinking some tea, it was 127-78. A week after that, having quit tea for hot ginger and clove drinks, and sticking to Daniel plus more physical activity, it was 117-71, somewhat below the 'normal' or 'standard' levels of 120-80, except that it is now agreed that the lower the better. The next weeks it was 107-66, then 111-63, then 113-67. So taking these most recent weeks as averaging 110-65, within a month my systolic pressure has dropped over 30 points and my diastolic pressure over 20 points. Ha! Vindication!

This is very gratifying of course, and no doubt feeling pleased with myself also reduces all sorts of pressures. Plus this is exactly what the 'outlaw' advocates of radical whole food and raw food diets and of fasting, state is the effect of their regimes. Any doubter is free to think that I and they are outliers, freaks. The slope of the curve has levelled out and no longer points to a final 20-00. You will I guess wonder if Daniel has affected my weight. Yes, I now weigh 9 kilograms or 20 pounds less than I did six weeks ago. As a veteran author of three books on dieting regimes, physical activity and long-term weight, body fat and health, I am well aware that much of this is water bound up with glycogen. 'You have got skinny' said a neighbour. Hardly! Plus the places in the body where humans are evolved to store fat in case of famine (mimicked by diet regimes) which are bellies with men and hips and bottoms with women, are always the last to shrink. But my daily exercise should I hope be training my body to retain its lean tissue. It is also time to start thinking about life after the Daniel – water fast – Daniel cycle, which I guess will be around the beginning of August.

What will happen next when I progress to my water-only fast, remains to be discovered. 'Is this safe?' friends ask. 'Safe, phooey, I live in Brazil' I enigmatically reply. More on fasting in my next column.

How do I feel?

What effect has six weeks of Daniel had on me? Well, as said, first of all I feel pleased with me. Also I have always enjoyed activities that most people think of as extreme. Indeed, deciding to move from Britain to and live and work in Brazil as from the year 2000 was and still is a big adventure. Perhaps I am an example not to follow, such that this column should have been called 'outlier'.

All the books and blogs that recommend 'cleansing diets', the modern do-it-yourself versions of 'taking the cure' at spas, are right in claiming rather wonderful effects. All the senses become sharper – younger, I would say – and with me especially touch and smell. Foresight is improved. Appetite now, or so I sense, is natural and I have no cravings. Eliminations are copious, plus I have been producing industrial amounts of phlegm. Pulse is now back to the usual under 60.

But be advised of 'healing reactions'. It is stated by advocates of 'cleansing regimes', like diets that eliminate ultra-processed products, and most of all prolonged radical fasts, that the body is then best able to heal itself. It is well attested that symptoms of diabetes, heart disease, and gut, joint, muscle and other disorders fade or even vanish.

In this healing process, accumulated debris and toxins released from body fat and vital organs, may cause a 'healing reaction' or 'crisis', whose symptoms commonly include cold shivering fever, fast heartbeat, aches, reminders of previous infections, and need to sleep a lot. Some medicos say that all this can be dangerous or even cause death from failure of this or that organ. On my previous two-week water-only fasts I had no such experience. This time, after three weeks I did, the whole lot above for two weeks, during which I could do only one week's work. If you believe that the reaction is indeed one of healing, and is natural, and that a week taken up by healing is a better choice than years probably disabled by (say) diabetes, angina or stroke, not to mention heroic surgery plus the rest of your life on drugs, here is something to celebrate and nothing to worry about. As I write now at the end of May I feel rejuvenated.



WN *Nourishment*

This story carries a new *WN* 'brand image' for *'Nourishment'*. Our interest is in relationships between foods, meals, dietary patterns and food culture, and mental, emotional, and spiritual as well as physical health and well-being. The visual equivalents of 'diet' or 'nutrition' are graphs, or extracts from dietary guidelines like the now-discredited US 'pyramid', or indiscriminate pictures of foods, or images connected with dieting regimes. Very dull. We propose to pay more attention to delight and to be less preoccupied with disease. Thus, *Nourishment.* 'branded' with images of whole food. Each *Nourishment* story will use a different image, starting with fruits – here, ginger, the root that gives fruits zest, and at the beginning, passion fruit.



***WN** Balance. Gender*

'Women serve the food, men do the science'



Shiriki Kumanyika (left) and then WN team members in this issue, Ashok Bhurtyal and Dushala Adhikari, Isabela Sattanini, Brooke Aksnes, Maria Alvim, Sara Garduno-Diaz, Hetty Einzig

Shiriki Kumanyika, current president of the American Public Health Association (left, above), is always a wise advisor to *WN*. Referring to this month's *Update* on the US GLiMMER initiative, she wrote to me as *WN* editor, saying:

> I was struck by the few women you featured on the photo gallery. What does this mean? Are we really so few among those whom you consider leaders or who have signed up to GLiMMER? Regarding gender balance, indeed it should be better. It is not quite as simple as 'women serve the food and men do the science', but sometimes it looks that way.

Shiriki may have been referring to the GLiMMER directors chosen for the *WN* Update story, or to the GLiMMER council of directors as a whole. In either case she is right. Of the 142 council of directors, 35 are women. Of the 20 chosen for the WN *Update*, story, 3 are women – 'worse', and no excuses!

The trouble with men

Shiriki is right. Her note reminds me of what my mentor and partner the late Caroline Walker exclaimed, faced with what she saw as impenetrable or implausible dietary recommendations or for items like 'daily reference intakes' produced by male-dominated expert committees. 'Men! What do they know? They don't shop, they don't cook, they get their meals served at home and eat out at fancy restaurants. They know nothing!' As rants go, this was good stuff. There are plenty of exceptions – on both sides – but her frustration has bite. A less combative way to make the same point, is that the people to trust on nutrition, are those that also know about food and meals. And yes, it remains true I think that these tend to be women.

Therefore Shiriki's concern is doubly pointed. The gender that should be ascendant in nutrition is in practice still a minority, and often a small minority. As always with righting imbalances, the answer is to raise consciousness of the number of men who are preferred because they are men, and the number of women who are overlooked because they are woman, and when able to do so, act accordingly. The same point applies to other types of imbalance, which also are troublesome in practice as well as in

principle. Geography, for example. Thus, GLiMMER is positioned as a global initiative but over three-quarters of its council of directors are from the US. This imbalance is evident within other US-based organisations – Gates, for instance – that claim world competence. Most people in the US, and other 'anglo' countries, have a take on the nature of human and natural affairs that is not shared for example in many countries in Asia except by those trained within the 'Western' paradigm. Another example is age. The rigid constraints of current academic and professional training make it too hard for people under the age of say 40 to make their voices heard, unless they have achieved fast-track professorial positions at an unusually young age or – which some do – work with senior professors whose ethical policy is to give them limelight.

Big picture balance

There is a bigger imbalance, which *WN* editorial team member Hetty Einzig (above, right) is helping to put right. This is ideological, between the idea of nutrition as a quantitative biological discipline concerned with nutrients, physical growth and health, and an entirely broader concept of nutrition as also a quantitative discipline concerned with society, cultural and the environment, and with mental, emotional and spiritual health and well-being. For us on *WN* this right now is the most exciting challenge.

Editors can make a difference. The other people pictured above are *WN* team members contributing to this June issue. Ashok Bhurtyal and Dushala Adhikari are authors of our cover commentary on Langtang in their country of Nepal. Isabela Sattamini from Brazil has written our lead *Update* on pesticides. Brooke Aksnes from the US, based in Belgium, writes our guest editorial, and she and Maria Alvim from Brazil contribute *Feedback* letters, on current conventional curriculums. Sara Garduno-Diaz from Mexico, now based in Kuwait, writes on Middle Eastern cuisines. Hetty Einzig from the UK writes on Vandana Shiva. So *WN* is progressing. Also as Shiriki says, 'This is a much longer conversation'.

Status

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