There may be nothing more perplexing than how humankind has managed to make eating so dysfunctional. Over the course of human history, we’ve managed turn labor-free, resource-free, naturally sustainable, uncontaminated, nutrient rich, whole food into labor-intensive, resource-intensive, unsustainable, contaminated and polluted, nutrient poor, food-like substances. Making matters worse, a gigantic industry has emerged to advance, exploit, and capitalize upon, the modern day confusion surrounding nutrition. The fundamental origin of this progression is related to our mind-body-earth disconnection. Eating became a disembodied concept guided by the science of nutrition with its macro and micronutrients, and the agricultural and manufacturing industries.

What we needed for nourishment, it was thought, was not adequately provided by nature and so science and technology were needed to determine a better solution. Of course, nourishment was not about health as much as it was about pleasure and convenience. The result was a boom in smooth, sweet, and rich (i.e. fat and salt) foods with fortified micronutrients to counter the increases in deficiency diseases and enough preservative to keep them ready to eat in any place and at any time. Federal subsidies helped make wheat, corn, soy, and rice cheap for the industry. Health deteriorated, obesity became normal, and real natural food became relatively expensive. Calories became evil and were obsessively counted and restricted.

Today, little has changed. These same foods are simply tweaked and marketed to the health conscious. Nutritional science continues to generate new conceptual guidance in the form of good and bad carbohydrates, good and bad fats, and good proteins and amino acids. Health pundits spin out diet book after diet book and diet program after diet program, each claiming novelty but really saying the same thing. Industry continues to make smooth, sweet, and rich foods reflecting these guiding concepts and pundits, and with extra micronutrients and herbs for the well-read public, all promising to make us healthy. Calories may still be counted and restricted, but now with the addition of medical or supplemental gimmicks. Disease and obesity continue to soar to new heights.

What is needed is a return to the simplicity of eating. Eating is not a science, it is a relationship with nature. Healthy eating manifests spontaneously when your mind, body, and nature are connected, communicating, and co-creating the next moment. The body and nature have condensed millions of years of co-evolved wisdom into the only eating program we need, and the only one that works. The disembodied mind (the interpretive and conceptual minds) overlook this somatic wisdom. The deeper work of ecological embodiment, or mind-body-earth connectivity, which can anchor our ecology in a profound identification with nature is discussed elsewhere. From an exclusively “nutritional” perspective, however, the following approaches to eating can profoundly advance personal health and scale free health, person to planet (or holos).
Eat humanely, with gratitude and respect:
We perceive food as an object for the most part. It’s true that much of the food-like substances we eat are more like objects than real food, but we don’t want to eat objects. We want to eat living beings, or previously living beings, and we need to eat with the recognition of this life of food. Try to eat with the awareness that you are ingesting life to continue life. Thank the food (plant or animal) you are eating for its life and your life. Appreciate the fact that it has lived in this world, in your environment, with you, and now it lives as part of you. This shifts our fundamental relationship with food. With this awareness, food is no longer a combination of fuels meant to simply relieve hunger and provide taste while we contemplate other things. Instead, food is a nourishing partner and companion in this complex existence on earth we call life. It is more than macro and micronutrients, it nourishes us with its presence, its life history, and the phenomenal experience of replacing part of our unique body with its unique body. With this awareness, we are no longer pumping food into our stomach like we pump gas into our cars. Instead, we are ingesting the depth of life on earth.

Know who you’re eating:
An extension of the first point is to understand how your food has lived before it became your food. Did it live as part of a naturally connected ecosystem, participating as part of the earth organism, or did it live as part of the built environment and human society insulated from the ways of nature? What did the life you are ingesting eat? The web of ecological connections which allows us to find wholeness extends across the food web (i.e. what food did the food we are eating eat, and on and on). Indigenous hunters often take on the identity of their prey. Through co-existing with their prey, have that ongoing relationship, and skillful tracking, the hunter can mirror the movements and feelings of his prey. This deep understanding and empathy results in the prey giving itself to the hunter, rather than the hunter dominating the prey against its will. Hunting, in this sense, is a gracious request for nourishment from nature. The hunter must become the prey, before the prey will give itself to the hunter, and ultimately become the hunter.

Eat Whole Food:
Whole food is the food nature makes for free. It does not need to be processed, designed, packaged, modified, or preserved. It tends to spoil. This tendency to spoil lets us know that it was recently alive and it is full of digestible nourishment. Whole foods do not can be eaten without preparation and baking, though they can be cooked. They naturally meet and exceed the recommendations of nutritional experts. They are various combinations of low glycemic index/load, lean with healthy fats, high in soluble fiber, and rich in micronutrients and antioxidants. Whole foods are known by common names instead of brand names and do not have an ingredient list. In fact, the ingredients in many whole foods are complex and not entirely known. Most fruits and vegetables contain compounds which have not yet been named or do not have any known function. Nature has spend 4.5 billion years revising the ongoing dynamic formulation of these health tonics. Humankind could never articulate this complexity and nature will keep these secrets. However, nature gives us the final product of this magic for free!

Eat Local, Fresh, and Seasonal Food:
Whole food spoils and loses nutrients quickly. Hunter-gatherers collected plant source foods and typically consumed them immediately or within several hours. Storing and transporting whole foods reduces their nourishment. It also removes them from the context of our local dynamic environment and diminishes the relationship we have with our food. Ideally, we want to eat food which shares our season, soil, air, water, and ecological community. Whole food would then need to be local, fresh, and seasonal. Whole food is food you can grow or raise on your own. Chose foods native to your local habitat and nature will do most of the work for you. Wholeness originates in the local environment, our
local ecology, and wholeness dissolves effort. Wholeness is action without effort from which comes whole food without effort! Seasonal limitations in local food (such as limitations in plant source foods in the winter) is a natural source of relative caloric restriction. Study after study shows tremendous benefit from short term fasting, intermittent (every other day) fasting, long term caloric restriction, and short term caloric restriction (4-8 weeks). Evolutionarily, mild caloric restriction occurred during the cold or dry seasons, depending upon latitude. Even a 30% reduction in calories for 4 weeks can produce great health gains and simulate the seasonal dynamics of our natural evolutionary ecology.

Eat Organic, wild, or wild-like food:
Evolutionarily, food was wild and/or minimally cultivated within nature but in modernity this is rare. Whole food is maximally nourishing when fully connected to nature. Wild plant source foods tend to have more complex micronutrients like phytoalexins, which are defenses against plant pathogens. Numerous nutrients seem to be produced in greater quantities when plants are intermittently stressed in some way. The use of pesticides, fertilizers, and irrigation reduces this stress and flattens the natural dynamics experienced by wild plants. The result is less nourishing food. Wild animal source foods eat wild plants, move about with great activity, and experience the natural dynamics of nature as well. They tend to be leaner with healthier fatty acid profiles, richer in micronutrients, and happier. Raising livestock conventionally, including confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs), initiates a terrible cycle of inhumane interventions which ultimately result in unhealthy and non-nourishing food. Modern approximations of foods which are more connected with the ways of nature include organic, biodynamic, or permaculture based cultivation of plant source foods and grass-fed, wild-caught, free-range animal source foods. Unfortunately, the labeling of foods using these terms often does not accurately reflect the animal’s life. If possible, visit the local source of these foods and get to know the animals and workers.

Maximize diversity:
Diversity is a hallmark of healthy ecosystems and eating within a healthy ecosystem naturally leads to eating a great diversity of foods. In modern times, most of us eat a limited variety of foods. Wheat, corn, soy, and rice (often found in non-whole processed foods) are drastically over represented in our diets. Our nourishment is monotonous, limited, and grossly imbalanced. Go to local farmers’ markets and find all the interesting and unusual vegetables and fruits and try them. Notice what foods grab your attention and then get to know it. Observe it, hold it, feel it, smell it. Learn about it from the farmer who grew it. Sample it if possible. Your attraction to it may suggest that it has the nourishment you need. Be a food explorer. Indigenous populations often identify and consume over 200 different edible plants in their local habitat. How many edible plants can you name?

Eat More Plant Than Animal:
This is the proportion of nature. In most ecosystems and bioregions, there are more plants than animals. Let your plate be the same. Evolutionarily, plant source foods were gathered and eaten with regularity while animal source foods were consumed less reliably and more intermittently. This proportion changes with latitude, as plants become less available at higher latitudes and animals source foods dominate the diet. This is fine for individuals which share the native genetic lineage of these latitudes. The Inuit eat mostly animal source foods, both terrestrial and marine animals, and consume the organ meats. Various Papua New Guinea populations eat mostly plants. For those of us of mixed lineage and living in temperate latitudes, 2/3-3/4 plant to 1/4-1/3 animal source food BY VOLUME is a good balance. Proportions by mass and by caloric content will be different.
Use Somatic Wisdom:
When we are thirsty we assume that we need water and may be getting a bit dehydrated. We acknowledge that our physiological circumstances produce this impulse. Yet, the rest of the time, we ignore the guidance of this somatic wisdom. However, like thirst, we are able to perceive guiding impulses in regard to innumerable physiological needs. This extends well beyond nutrition and eating. For example, your current position in your chair is the result of impulses to move and reposition and, as your awareness is drawn to your position, you are likely now perceiving these impulses more clearly. The same thing occurs with eating. How we decide what food to order to pick out of an assortment of foods is heavily influenced by these physiological impulses. However, we can access this wisdom more effectively and reduce the distraction of the disembodied mind by becoming more somatically aware. Next time you need to select something to eat, quiet your thoughts and let the subtle impulses and affinities for a particular food arise. You can observe the food, smell the food, think about the food, sample the food, or all of the above, to help trigger your physiology to react. Sometimes it is quite obvious (like thirst). If one has an impulse or craving for broccoli and an aversion to carrots, it is reasonable to conclude that the nutrients in broccoli are needed by the body while those in carrots are not. Our physiology and somatic wisdom co-evolved with these plants. The millions of years of interactions between human physiology and plant source foods have produced a wisdom which greatly surpasses our scientific knowledge and reflects the needs of the present moment. This includes the impulse of hunger as well. Hunger and satiety are trusted guides which will not fail us when eating nature’s foods. Whole foods are quite satiating and hard to overeat. There is no need to count calories if we are eating whole foods with gratitude and awareness. However, our somatic wisdom is not developed for the novel food-like substances we encounter today, only the whole foods of nature. The sweet, salty, and greasy elements of processed food are often times desirable because our somatic wisdom reflects a natural world were salt, sugars, and fats are not abundant. Natural sources of these components are quite valuable to hunter-gatherers. But our somatic wisdom can misguide us in the novel world of food-like substances. These artificial foods make fools of us. Avoid them and we are wise.