

English 280, Third Place; Professor, Dr. Bill Knox

Real Food

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When I think about what “real” or whole food means to me, I must look back at my own personal history with food and its impact on my life. Prior to 1994 I ate whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted and never thought about ingredients, calories, or fats. I also gave no thought to the amount of sugars or salts I was ingesting; I simply ate what I enjoyed.

It was 1994 when I really started to pay attention to what I was putting in my body. This *attention* was not out of any desire to eat healthy, lose weight, or reduce the risk of heart disease or diabetes—it was more a matter of survival. The year 1994 is significant because that is when I began suffering from migraines. Each miserable occurrence pushed me to look for an answer.

In my search for an answer, I went to my doctor who was unable to provide a satisfactory medical reason for my ailment; it was then that I turned to what I was putting in my body. After a long process of tracking what I was ingesting, it became evident that highly processed foods and supplements were the cause of my migraines—I had to make some changes.

Through this process of self-discovery I became a food-label reader. Then, as now, I read all food labels prior to purchasing in an effort to weed out those ingredients that may bring about a migraine. Typically foods that cause my migraines contain words I struggle to pronounce, let alone spell, like monosodium glutamate. I came to know these foods as highly processed, which to me equals *highly dangerous* to my health.

Unintended at the time, but now a part of my daily life, I sought out foods with the fewest ingredients. This also led me to eat more “organic” fruits and vegetables to eliminate my

exposure to pesticides, and without knowing it, moved me toward whole foods. My new-found *health consciousness* prompted me to buy grass and vegetarian fed livestock and poultry—pushing me into the world of “whole” or real foods even more. In fact, Whole Foods is my favorite grocery store.

My history with food and its ingredients over the past nineteen years has led me to the conclusion that real or whole food is not produced in a factory containing ingredients created in a laboratory; “real food” is *what comes from nature*. But one must be careful even with foods from nature as the food industry, supported by the government and marketing departments, has turned real food into a confusing commodity.

The August 2013 edition of *Consumer Reports* features an article on food labels identifying those that are useful in describing the content of food and others that are not. The label “USDA Organic” is a good label, as it certifies that the product’s ingredients are at least 95% organic; in addition, no synthetic fertilizers or pesticides are used in their production. This “organic” labeling also applies to meat products and indicates that they are free from antibiotics, growth hormones, and genetically modified feeds (“Food Labels to look for (or ignore)” 12).

Two other good labels are, first, the “Animal Welfare Approved” (AWA) label, which ensures that animals reared for eggs, dairy, or meat products received humane treatment from birth to death, including access to pasture lands. Of note is that only cooperatives and family farms can receive the AWA label of approval. The second is the “American Grass-Fed” label, which provides USDA certification that the meat is from an animal that spent 99% of its lifetime with access to pasture lands (“Food Labels to look for (or ignore)” 12).

When you see the labels “Free-Range” and “Natural,” buyer beware. “Free-Range” (used for poultry only) signifies that the animal had access to open air each day, but the amount of time

spent in the open air is not specified and five minutes is considered acceptable. “Natural,” on the other hand, has no standard definition when used, especially with snack foods. Food producers can use it at will, even in products that contain high-fructose corn syrup and those with genetically modified ingredients (“Food Labels to look for (or ignore)” 12).

I spoke with Amber Kastler, a licensed dietitian with Hy-Vee food stores in Fort Dodge, Iowa, to gain her opinion on whole or real foods. Kastler specializes in sports nutrition, diabetes, weight management, and food allergies. We discussed food and its relationship to what are called *Western* diseases, e.g., obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. Her belief is that there is a direct correlation between diets high in processed foods and those *Western* diseases. Her advice is to avoid what she refers to as the SAD diet (Standard American Diet), which are diets high in saturated fats, processed foods, and meats (Kastler).

Kastler suggests that the best way to lose weight and reduce your risk of heart disease and diabetes is to shop the periphery of the grocery store—seeking fruits, vegetables, whole grain pastas, and whole grain breads. These foods are less likely to contain chemical additives, added sugars (in various forms), and salt. In fact, she counsels her clients that whenever possible they should buy certified organic foods. And if one cannot afford to buy 100% organic, at least consider substituting those foods on the “Dirty Dozen” list with organic versions (Kastler).

The “Dirty Dozen” is a list of fruits and vegetables with the highest levels of pesticides detected during scientific analysis. The list is compiled and published by a non-profit advocacy group called the Environmental Working Group (EWG). The EWG produces this list to educate consumers as to which fruits and vegetables should be sourced from organic growers and which are okay to buy from non-organic sources (McCaffrey).

Dee McCaffrey, who wrote the Dirty Dozen article for the *processedfreeamerica.org* site, goes on to say that independent research scientists, supported by US and International governments across the globe, all agree—*there is a health risk from exposure to pesticides*. In addition, reducing exposure is critical as studies have linked pesticide exposure to such diseases as cancer and brain toxicity (McCaffrey).

An article written by David Katz for *Prevention Magazine*, in March of 2010, cited research from the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that the risk of contracting a major chronic disease can be reduced 80% by eating natural or “clean” foods. Clean foods are those that are free from additives like coloring, flavoring, hormones, and sweeteners. In other words, they are whole foods subject to minimal processing (Katz).

Katz goes on to write that we literally are what we eat. Our bones, cell membranes, blood, etc., all feed off the nutrients we derive from the foods we eat: garbage in-garbage out. Katz states that since he started eating whole foods he’s, “seen an increase in energy, a reduction in gastrointestinal problems, and an overall improvement in my outlook” (Katz). Furthermore, he goes on to cite other compelling studies as to why diet is so important to our health.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) published results from a 2004 study that showed participants who ate healthy, were not overweight, did not smoke, and stayed physically active were 80% less likely to contract a chronic disease. In 1993, J. Michael McGinnis, MD, and William Foege, MD, published a paper stating that of the 1 million premature deaths in the US in 1990, 700,000 were from smoking and poor diet (Katz).

As I take into consideration the research I have done I have to ask, *is there any value in foods containing additives?* Personally, I don’t think there is, but I do think that it depends on your perspective. If you’re a food producer, you can make food cheaper and more abundant for a

starving country, and that's a good thing. It's also good for the bottom line and for the shareholders. If you're on a tight budget and cannot afford to buy the highest quality foods, then cheap is good, even if it's highly processed food. On the other hand, you simply may not care where your food is coming from. As long as it is in the store and budget friendly, that's the only concern; after all, if the government says that it's okay to eat foods with additives, it must be, right?

Abbey Bauer in her article "Food Additives: Good or Bad" provides some perspective on the good and bad aspects of food additives. Bauer first explains that additives can be helpful to people as they help keep foods fresher longer by preventing the growth of molds and bacteria. In addition, some additives extend the shelf life of foods and others can even make food taste better. On the other hand, she then points out additives can also be harmful. Butylated Hydroxyanisole (a preservative) and saccharin (a sweetener) caused lab rats to develop tumors. Sodium Nitrite, which is used as a preservative in foods like processed meats, can become a cancer-causing agent when combined with chemicals in the stomach (Bauer).

As with anything, there are two sides to every story. Some want convenience and may feel no ill effects from a diet filled with processed foods—or you could be like me. The discovery of my high sensitivity to food additives compels me to watch everything I eat. I think each person has to make his or her own decisions when it comes to diet and lifestyle and live with those consequences: good, bad, or indifferent. As for me, I continue to move farther away from those processed foods and chemically enhanced meats and poultry that I used to enjoy without a thought as to how it might be affecting me. These days my diet consists mostly of real, whole, and clean sources of food, and I am the healthier for it.

Works Sited

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McCaffrey, Dee. "The Dirty Dozen and the Clean 15 for 2013." *Process Free America*, 29 Apr.

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Writing Record-Research Essay

July 7, 2013

It's approximately 1030 a.m. and I'm comfortably seated at my old wooden table with light-classical music playing in the background. The blinds are open and I can see out onto the forested landscape behind my home.

I spent the better part of the morning just sitting on my couch thinking about my paper, attempting to construct the chapters in my head—before moving to my desk.

Now at my desk I re-read the assignment and the Ways of Thinking/Ways of Writing Flashcards.

I also re-read the material that I intend to cite in my paper, which is a combination of print and on-line sources along with a personal interview I conducted while on vacation in Iowa.

It was a very productive day as I wrote until 5:00 p.m. completing a five page draft of the research paper.

July 8, 2013

It's Monday evening at approximately 6:30 and after having a few crackers to hold me over I moved to the old wooden table that serves as my desk, put on the light-classical music station, and began to re-read and edit my paper.

I'm concerned about the works cited section. While I'm comfortable with the three from my Annotated Works Cited paper, I needed to confirm the others and consulted the APSM. One entry I'm still not sure about so I sent Dr. Knox an email. The other I feel okay about.

In addition, I used the APSM to ensure I was crediting my sources correctly in the body of my paper. This is a point of concern for me, as I just feel a bit unsure about it.

July 9, 2013

It's 5:30 a.m. and I spent 20 minutes reviewing and editing my paper from my favorite writing spot—the old wooden table. I think I've cited my sources correctly in both the works cited section and in the text of the paper.

It's 6:30 p.m. and I'm sitting at my desk where I just finished reading my paper, making edits based on feedback from in Dr. Knox's reply email. It's time for dinner.

It 9:47 p.m. and a thunderstorm has knocked out the power to my home. I'm sitting at my desk using a lantern to light up my keyboard. I rewrote a paragraph of my paper as I didn't like how the words flowed. My laptop battery is waning so I need to close for the night. I hope to have power in the morning—not looking forward to a cold shower.

July 10, 2013

I did not edit my paper today. I did, however, take time during my lunch hour to read my paper.

I sat at my desk, read the paper, ran it through spell check and finding no errors, I closed the file.

July 11, 2013

It's approximately 4:30 p.m. and I'm sitting at my favorite desk. I read my paper—painstakingly looking at every word to ensure its proper use and spelling. While spell-check is great, it's not 100% fool proof. I reviewed my works cited section again to ensure accuracy and think I'm on track. I then moved to the paper where I reviewed how I gave credit to my sources. This is where I get nervous, but I think I've made the correct decisions.

July 12, 2013

It's 5:30 a.m. and before leaving for work I read my paper one last time, changing one word.

Writing this paper was interesting and informative especially since I have a food allergy and have to pay so much attention to what I put in my body. While I was concerned about how I was

to hold a personal interview, that just seemed to fall into place. A brief conversation with my daughter led me to a local nutritionist in a neighboring town. One email later, we had an appointment.

It's time to post the paper, but that will come later in the day, as I have to leave for work.