

Practicing Plant-Based in Israel

*After trying many therapies that were “not it,”
I finally found my place.*

by Miriam Maisel, M.D.



When people ask me what kind of a doctor I am, I don't have an easy automatic response. Usually I end up saying something long-winded like, “Well, I am a Family Practitioner (GP) emphasizing a whole-food, plant-based diet, for health promotion and first-line treatment of many medical conditions.” This is really a mouthful, apart from being a somewhat alien concept to many people, including most doctors that I know.

I studied medicine at the Boston University School of Medicine, and did my residency at the Family Practice Residency Program at Brown University/Memorial Hospital of Rhode Island. I later relocated to the UK where I did some further training, obtaining the UK general practice qualifications, subsequently training and working in palliative medicine (hospice medicine) as well, all in the socialized UK National Health Service. In recent years I returned to Israel, where I now have a small private clinic, emphasizing nutrition and lifestyle.

My interest in health started at a very early age, growing up in the shadow cast by the “heart condition” of my mother's mother, who was very dear to me. A tiny, plump and radiant woman with an infectious laugh, her beautiful smile framed by pure white hair, Grandma was frequently in the hospital or housebound. There was also the shadow of the absence of a grandfather that I never met, my father's father, who had died of a heart attack at the age of 50, when my father was only 19. Somehow I was really touched by the fact that poor health brings with it suffering and loss. Of course, I did not know then that my little family was far from exceptional and that heart disease is a number one killer.

From an equally young age, I had a love of nature, getting dirty, and growing things to eat. I started a tiny vegetable garden in a corner of our back yard, growing mainly cucumbers and tomatoes. I remember the sharp smell of the furry



tomato plants and the way they stain your hands yellow, and also the old-fashioned cucumber plants, their rough

leaves, and the fat, prickly cucumbers hiding among them that I got to pick for our dinner salad. Happy moments.

In my early teens, I was inspired to become a vegetarian after delving into hatha yoga, through books. I felt sure that it was a kinder choice, and, if I believed the yogis, probably better for health as well. At the time this was a fairly unusual step and the grownups had real doubts as to whether humans could live without meat, chicken, and fish, but somehow I survived. I remained a basic vegetarian for many years. Not knowing any other vegetarians did not make life easy. The vegetarian cookbooks at the time, and even the classic *Diet for a Small Planet*, included dairy and eggs.

As time went on, I instinctively leaned toward traditional Eastern methods and found myself learning tai chi in its very early days in the West. I even met an elderly woman who claimed to have cured her severe arthritis through this practice. I felt very comfortable with the central idea (shared with yoga) of a life force, a natural self-healing energy that was the basis of health and could be cultivated through traditional techniques. This interest led me to Japan with a clear plan to learn a traditional method like shiatsu, as a way of helping others, using the energy



Miriam (in red shirt) in 1967 with cousins at a fast food restaurant. At far left, Miriam age 8.



Mariam Maisel at age 13 just before adopting a vegetarian diet.

principle. But upon arriving there I was faced, for the first time, with sectarianism, rivalry between schools and teachers that seemed to be mostly based on personality rather than principles. It was difficult to know what to make of this and also to know what to make of claims of cancer cures and so on. I could not quite articulate what was bothering me at the time, but with hindsight I see that I was looking for more objectivity. In the end, due to practical

conditions, I was unable to remain long enough to complete a course of study. But by then I also somehow felt that, for me, these therapies were “not it.”

Western Medicine Pursuits

It was only after that period that I began to pursue a Western medical education, specializing in Family Practice, which is the broadest specialty. I recognized that during those very intensive years of training, I would probably need to put my other interests aside. Even so, during the medical school years I explored homeopathy, reading all the classic literature and attending continuing education courses for homeopathic doctors. The theory interested me, again involving the idea of a life force, but with a Western perspective this time.

I was intrigued by the idea that a single specific remedy could be the key to restoring an ill patient to health, and the method of finding that key, the detailed history of symptoms, was also very attractive. The high-level professional conferences that I attended all involved case studies, but it seemed that the top medical homeopathy experts, who were teaching, seldom if ever agreed on the correct remedy. This came as a great surprise to me, given the theoretical basis of homeopathy, and at some point I had to say that, for me, homeopathy was also “not it.”

I began a course in Western Herbal medicine through the College of Phytotherapy (UK) and somehow I was able

to complete the academic part, amounting to several hundred hours of coursework, during my years of medical school and residency. At the same time as enjoying learning about the medicinal plants, including their botany and biochemistry, pharmacology and folklore, in my work on a daily (and nightly!) basis, I was witness to the severe and life-threatening pathologies suffered by hospitalized patients, where high-tech interventions made the difference between life and death. It was like living in two different worlds.

During my medical school and residency years, I became more and more aware of the vast amount of illness due to poor lifestyle, and I recall, for example, the shock of learning that fully one-quarter of hospitalizations had alcohol as a causative or contributing factor. And this was only the tip of the iceberg. I witnessed the cancers and disabling lung disease due to smoking. Every day involved also caring for patients with heart attacks and heart failure, as well as patients whose lives had changed forever due to a stroke.

It was understood at the time that these conditions were at least partly preventable, but it was assumed and taught that medication and surgery were the real life-savers. In the hospital there were also many patients with diseases that no one could really explain, such as malignant hypertension, multiple sclerosis, lupus, inflammatory bowel disease and so on. We were taught that the causes of these were not known, and that the best we could do would be to relieve symptoms with pharmacological treatment, albeit at the cost of known toxicity.

There was a frustration here, with the assumed inability to alter the unrelenting course of these and other chronic debilitating diseases, even though patients could feel and function better

with drug treatments. Faced with this huge burden of dire illness and suffering, I was unable to see where the herbs and other natural therapies could possibly fit in. Could they really be helpful for such serious pathologies, or were they simply less toxic, without being effective enough?

I spent several years working in palliative medicine (hospice medicine), motivated by the thought that, at least, when cure is not possible we can care for people compassionately around the end of life. I continued to explore the health question, separately. Macrobiotics seemed interesting, but I was wary of the amount of salt in this style of eating and the near avoidance of fruits and raw vegetables. Grape “fasts,” juice “fasts,” raw food diets, and “fasting” with potassium broth all made health claims but I could not find any clinical data to back them up. Perhaps, as the joke goes, the real way to be healthy was just to wisely

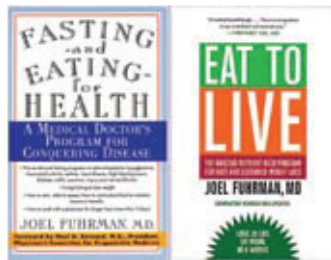
“During my medical school and residency years, I became more and more aware of the vast amount of illness due to poor lifestyle.”

choose one's grandparents!

Falling into Place

It was only when I came across Dr. Joel Fuhrman's books, *Fasting and Eating for Health* and *Eat to Live*, that things finally began to fall into place. This marked for me the beginning of my understanding of the degree to which the Standard American Diet (SAD) is a cause or contributor to so much pain and suffering. This also was the beginning of the understanding of the huge potential health benefits derived from a diet based on plants and whole foods.

I visited Dr. Fuhrman's New Jersey office, as an observer, and also arranged to spend time at TrueNorth Health in Santa Rosa, California to experience and learn



about water fasting and see the profound clinical benefits of the whole-food, plant-based, no SOS (salt, oil, sugar) diet. This set me on track to read, or rather, devour, *The China Study*, and the writings of Dr. Ornish, Dr. Esselstyn, Dr. Barnard and Dr. McDougall. I followed up my reading with three in-depth online courses on nutri-

tion and health: the e-Cornell Plant Based Nutrition Course, Dr. Fuhrman's online Nutritarian Studies through the Nutritarian Education Institute, and Dr. McDougall's Starch Solution Course. After a few intensive years I came to feel that I really had learned enough, and not only could I help people through emphasizing nutrition in my medical practice, I really must do so. And at that point I took a great leap and opened my clinic in Tel Aviv.

Even though Western medicine does acknowledge a role for nutrition, the mainstream is very far from recognizing the huge potential of nutrition to prevent and reverse heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension, to improve and bring about remissions in autoimmune conditions and to prevent, and even alter, the course of established cancer. Despite the long and winding road that I have travelled, I am now fully confident that health can be vastly improved through means that are both natural and rational.

In addition to my clinical work I have started lecturing and also volunteer some time as a moderator on Dr. Michael



Dr. Maisel enjoys gardening to this day.

Greger's nutritionfacts.org website, as well as writing on nutrition and health subjects for online Hebrew and English publications, and for my website www.dr-maisel.co.il. This summer marks the launch of the Healthy Dining Project, which I initiated in order to encourage restaurants to

include whole-food, plant-based choices in their menu. I have contributed the chapter on nutritional approaches to chronic diseases, in the textbook *Nutrition and Integrative Medicine: A Primer for Clinicians*, which will be published by Taylor and Frances in 2017.

I continue to nourish myself professionally, with information and inspiration. In 2016 I had the privilege of again spending several weeks at TrueNorth Health, experiencing and learning, and on the way to California was able to visit the Cleveland Clinic to see how Dr.

Esselstyn conducts his formidable patient education days. My next project, this winter, is to complete an internship at TrueNorth Health, in order to gain confidence in fasting supervision. I intend to continue working, learning and growing with the aim of helping more and more people restore, improve and preserve their health, through clinical advice, writing and teaching, and being a personal example to the best of my ability. 🌱NHA

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