The Compassionate Plate: Healing Ourselves and the Planet Transcript

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Introduction to the Regenerative Life Podcast

Hi, I'm Dr. Scott Stoll and welcome to a regenerative life podcast where science becomes hope, food becomes a catalyst for healing and every conversation explores the profound connections between personal health, human flourishing and the earth and future that we will share together.

But more importantly, we'll explore one of the most important questions of our time. What happens when we actually begin living in alignment with the way we were designed?

You know, I love the idea, the power of the plate. And I wanted to talk to you about the ideas of a compassionate plate, and I was thinking about, you know our conversation, what really resonates with me, do you have a compassionate plate?

Sit down every day. We have something on our plate and often we're disconnected from everything. You know, we are disconnected where our food came from, the people that produced it, resources that were there, how it ended up coming to us.

What does that disconnect mean to you? The disconnect is largely about not living in alignment, not with integrity, living a way that is not to the best of our humanity.

And in our food system today, most citizens are eating food that comes from practices that would be appalling to them if they saw it, so they're disconnected.

Most people are eating food that makes them sick without recognizing that their food choices have massive health consequences.

The Compassionate Plate and Food Disconnect

And most people, you know, eating the standard American diet or eating foods that is destroying the planet, contributing to the climate crisis, loss of biodiversity, and they don't recognize it.

So they are disconnected from the impacts of their actions. And I think this all sort of occurred over time as our food system became more mechanized, where citizens became consumers and became just basically markets for the industry.

And then people become disconnected from their own well-being and start getting developing habits. that are somewhat mindless and unhealthy, and that's kind of where we are now.

We're disconnected from, you know, living our best lives. So we're just connected from eating food that nourishes us. You know disconnected, from our own humanity.

And we were eating foods that comes from systems that we would just be, very upset to pay attention to. Right now we need to try to pay attention and then ultimately make choices that we can feel good about instead of saying I don't want to know, which is again being more connected to our values when we live and eat in a certain kind of more compassionate way.

Yeah, there's a cognitive dissonance, isn't there, around this? That's your point. Some people don't want to know. And why is it that they don' t want know?

I think a lot of times when people do not want t know, it's because they do n't think they can change. They're afraid that if I know this, and I'm still going to do this I am going t feel really bad.

because what is happening to animals in the food system is horrendous, and most people think it's terrible, they don't want to look at it, but if they knew they could change, if the knew that there was something they can do, I think more people would be much more inclined to because there is a way forward.

But I thing a lot of people assume they need to eat animal products for nutritious reasons. They assume that this is just how it is supposed to be. And they believe that they may not have alternatives.

And I think that that's a big reason that people are afraid to look. Or they might even just be afraid that, I'm not going to like the food. Might be as simple as that.

Yeah, a lot of preconceived ideas about what that change might look like. Yes, yes. And foods are deeply rooted in our identity, in culture, other people, and our acceptance by groups, brats and beers, ordering the salad and not the brat and beer.

Yeah. Right. Exactly. It literally is incarnate. What we eat is what we become and who we are, what's in us. And it's also culture, yes, and saying no to my ancestry.

Cognitive Dissonance and Cultural Food Identity

Many people may believe by not doing this, I'm saying, no, to family. when it's not that at all. It's living according to values and things that we have learned from our families about the importance of relationships, the important of respect, and the import of being responsible.

But there are these notions that somehow is difficult and that it is a saying no to history. And it it an acceptance of certain types of history that want to live in, in a world we want create, I think.

but it also an acknowledgement that, we've developed some bad habits. that have been immensely harmful. And I think for a lot of people, they would rather not pay attention to that.

Yeah, sometimes when you're overwhelmed, like compartmentalizing, at least temporarily makes you feel like you have some level of control where things are okay.

And we know that the compartmentalyzing doesn't negate those, but atleast it gives a version of the control, and people have done that with the food system.

Yes. You know, it's a piece of chicken in a burrito piece, of something between buns, but disconnected from where it came from and what it will do to us.

And what is was before it turned forward. Yeah, compartmentalization, reductionist thinking, as opposed to looking at the whole supply chain, the impacts of what happens at that restaurant and going back to the warehouse, going to back the farm, and all that went into that.

Consumers today are not connected to the source of their food, which means that it's a lot easier for agribusiness to tell consumers that these animals are treated humanely or that farmers are acting sustainably and responsibly when in fact that is not the case.

So I think what's really important is for citizens, consumers to pay more attention to become more aware and that's why conferences like this are so wonderful because you have so many people that are providing such great information and insights about our whole food system and how all the pieces sort of touch on each other and influence each and each of us as individuals can make conscientious choices that can ultimately make a world of difference.

But, you know, we just need to pay attention and then be mindful, make personal choices, but also we as individuals live within a community and within, a machine.

And so it's hard sometimes when you have fast food restaurants in every corner and farmers markets, pretty far away. For some people, anyway, it's harder to make the healthy, humane, and more sustainable choice.

And so that's where we need to work on system reform to the make healthy food, the plant-based food more accessible in the factory-farmed products.

Compartmentalization and the Food System

less accessible. Right. So for somebody who's looking to understand this, you know, I think there's some hesitancy to look behind the curtain, because you almost know what you're going to experience.

There's a visceral response. It touches you deeply emotionally. And I there is a reticence to peek behind a curtain because once you see it, and you can't unsee it.

Yes, it is painful to see the reality, and a lot of people don't like to deal with hard realities, especially when they feel like they are stuck to be involved with that ugly reality.

And this is where I think doctors making the point that we can live well without eating animals is so important because we grow up believing we need animal products for health and nutrition and to able to thrive.

There's so many narratives that we grow up with, and many people around us believe these things. And so the idea that don't need to eat animal foods is a sort of a minority point of view.

There are significant interests in challenging this minority of point view, there's a lot of money that is made on illness. And I'm not saying there's a big conspiracy around things, but there is an old Upton Sinclair quote, it's hard to get somebody to see something if their job depends on them not seeing it.

And you know, I think we are sort of rational animals, what I thing it is more accurate to say that we're rationalizing animals. And if we're doing something, we are making a living doing some thing, and then we learn that what we were doing is causing enormous harm and we don't know what to do instead, it's hard to look at that.

And I think for people in the food industry, for the pharmaceutical businesses, the Pharmaceuticals, many of them do actually want to help people. believing they're helping people, but pharmaceuticals also have enabled a very unhealthy food system, in terms of feeding farm animals enormous amounts of antibiotics, giving people drugs when they have health problems that could be prevented with improved diets.

Why People Avoid Looking Behind the Curtain

So it's a system. And we're all in it. And as planet-based advocates, we are sort of swimming against this mainstream current. Very strong current, yeah.

Oh, it's a very strong one. A very very one, and it is socioeconomic and narrative. You know, its beliefs and stories about how we were supposed to live on this planet.

It's exciting to think about, how can we live this on planet? in a more compassionate way, in more connected way in healthier way and live here among other animals, you know, we're fellow earthlings.

I want to go like back in history before we come back to the present and like a historical view of like diets and largely, and you can correct me if this is wrong, but throughout most of human history, it's been largely plant-based, a planet predominant.

And animals served, you know, a very small part, whether it was hunting or an animal that was raised on the farm. It was part of the family, but they were very a small apart until the 1800s.

Yes. So maybe you can give us a little perspective. I think historical perspective is important. And then we'll come

back to the present. Historically, most people survived primarily on plants because it's more efficient.

And even today, if you think about different ethnic foods like Indian food or Thai food, or Mexican food and Ethiopian food. It's primarily plant-based.

Meat has historically been associated with power and elite lifestyles. And so the people with the power would tend to eat more meat. With the Industrial Revolution and the growth of a certain kind of an economy, you ended up with more wealth in certain areas, especially.

So countries like the United States became very wealthy. We eat a lot of meat here. And today, even countries like China and India are becoming more wealthy.

They're eating more meat. There's this, I think, sort of assumption that wealth is a good thing. Certainly, it's nice to be comfortable. But with wealth comes meat, and there's an assumption, therefore, meat is good.

In fact, when you see societies eating animal products, you now have diseases of affluence. And we are now addressing those, you know, with drugs like ozempic.

So we're on this strange kind of treadmill, but I think sort of there's this whole fundamental question of humanity and the attraction to power. and meat and power tend to go together.

And I think that that is a big fundamental question that, that has wrapped up in this.

Historical Diets, Wealth, and Meat Consumption

Often when I've talked to people about not eating meat, it's like you're taking something away from me, you are taking away my choice, but I thing subconsciously you taking way my agency, my power.

But why do we as humans feel entitled to take the lives of these other animals so routinely. And I think that we adopt certain habits and beliefs around these practices when we have power and we are able to do things that then disconnects us from the impacts we're having on others.

So I this has been a long process, but I in affluent countries like the United States, certain behaviors and habits have become normalized. And it's very different from how humans have lived for hundreds of thousands of years or tens of thousand years.

And I think it would be much healthier for us to adopt some of the ways of our ancestors to be closer to the land, more connected to our source of food, even maybe sometimes more involved in producing the food ourselves.

Yes. Having gardens. It changes something inside, doesn't it? When you plant a seed and they care for it, That's all you do, it grows and produces. It's magic, but it's beautiful.

And we can nourish ourselves this way. Yeah, and it is empowering. I mean, a big part of this is being empowered. So it was a disempowering or a disentangling from this idea empowerment to actually be truly empowered?

I think that's very well said. Yes, yes, and it's empowered in community, empowered connection, as opposed to empowered extraction or entitlement. It's a different form of empowerment that is good for everybody.

A win-win instead of a win lose or some taken, some have things taken from. That's the form shared power and shared thriving instead The system we have now where you have, you know, folks who have power who are not treating others without power very well, whether they're animals or human beings, in the factory farming system, and slaughterhouses.

These are people that are treated very not well. people who live near factory farms and have their land being polluted. It's not good for them. So it's a system of extraction.

And I think that it may appear to be empowered for individuals who are extracting from others. But ultimately, I don't think from a human standpoint, taking from mothers is a very positive thing.

And so empowerment to me is really shared and it's community oriented and its about mutuality instead of extraction. Right. The word that comes to my mind around all of this with inaction and mutualities is compassion.

Yes, compassion, which also involves empathy and understanding another's feelings and their lives and lived experience and what they're going through.

And this is also part of being connected to ourselves. It begins with self, doesn't it? It does. on this sort of treadmill, even if they're very powerful and have a lot of things.

Sometimes they don't have sort-of self-respect, and they may be looking for the self value in things like money and boats and whatever it is. So it's very fundamental to the question of our humanity and how do we live on earth and are we well as humans?

Power, Compassion, and Shared Thriving

And I think right now we just have enormous conflict and enormous you know, waste and harm and suffering and killing and violence. And our food system is kind of the baseline of normalizing violence, but it goes beyond that.

You know? And with the animal agriculture system, there's also stress on oil, water, land, resources. So it is also a contributor to wars and international conflict, access to resources.

And the good news is, by shifting to plant-based agriculture, we need so many fewer resources that a lot of this conflict could be alleviated, I believe.

So somebody that's watching and maybe they've never really connected empathically with themselves, which allows them to be empathic towards others in the food system, How can we start?

You have such a gift of that, of being empathic. I don't know if you were born empathetic like that. But how can somebody just begin to connect with themselves?

I think one of the most important things is just to breathe, breathe deeply, take time, be present. You know, but so often we're rushing around and we are distracting ourselves with phone devices or other things and just paying attention to how you are feeling, how your body is acting and what is important to you.

There are ways of knowing in our brains but also in out bodies. Breathing slowing down helps us to understand more about ourselves and not worry so much about what we're supposed to do in terms of being successful, in term of making a certain amount of money or having a position.

But just being ourselves, breathing and being in nature is one of, I think, the most important things is to be in a nature that heals us. It really does.

With the eyes, a curious mind leads you to awe and wonder. There's a watch a squirrel on a tree. I watched two squirrels the other day when I was outside with my tea.

And they were little baby squirrel. But I watch this little squirrel just run up to the edge of this branch. He was going to make the leap, and he couldn't make it.

They watched him for like 20 minutes. Think about making the jump and not making a jump. That little bit of experience just left me feel so much joy and awe in wonder, it's paying attention to the beauty of the world, right?

And living in that beauty. And we need to slow down to pay attention that. That's right. So moving from that kind of present, you know, because we're talking about power of a plate and what we put on that plate, and then thinking

intentionally and consciously about building a compassionate plate.

What are the elements that people should be thinking about around this concept of compassionate plates?

Self-Connection, Breath, and Nature

Well, I think the first thing to think about when it comes to a compassionate plate is you don't want to have death on that plate. Then that means no flesh of animals that were slaughtered in violent ways.

It means deriving our nutrients from foods that we're grown in sustainable, responsible ways, so ideally organic, plant-based foods. I think that just recognizing that everything that is on our plate has a story that goes back, including the lives of workers, whether they're slaughterhouse workers if it's animal products, but also farm workers who, in some cases, even on plant-based farms, might not be treated very well.

So in an ideal world, for me, the kind of food we would be putting on our plate comes from nearby farms where we actually know the farmers, where maybe we've even participated in the producing of the food, so we're more connected to it.

Because as we become disconnected, there are marketing machines that make things sound better than they are, whether they're animal products or even plant-based foods.

And so I think local fresh produce from small community-oriented farms is the best. But definitely plants, not animals, and getting to know farmers and going to farmers markets and just being more connected to the community and the source of our food is a very important part of building a just and compassionate food system.

Yeah, I love that relational aspect that you're describing. When my kids were little, we would often just take time before we ate and prayed. We'd say, all right, let's think about how this food got to our plate.

And we were both like an imaginative exercise. Think about the farm family. How many kids do they have? Do the kids help plant the seeds? Who's out there?

Building a Compassionate Plate

who pulled the weeds? What time of year did they gather these crops? And who came to pick them up? We walked through the whole process. Maybe we bought them at the farmer's market.

Or remember, so-and-so at a farmer market? I love that. We got it early to bring the food there so we could buy it. I love that. And where did the money come from to buy the food, right?

Oh, yeah, dad went to work. You know, you start tying all these things together. Yes. Yeah. That leads to the place of gratitude and compassion. Wow. So much went into this plate.

And you eat it differently. Yes, you appreciate it more and you pay attention. Paying attention is huge. What do we pay our attention to? Our food is so fundamental to our own health and well-being and the health of the planet and everybody who lives on the earth.

I love that exercise. Where did this come from? And imagining. from the farm and who was there growing and picking the produce or whatever and delivering it and transporting it, and then ultimately selling it at the farmers market, you know?

And to your point earlier, we're internalizing the external world. The energy that was involved, the resources, life, whatever was involve becomes a part of us.

Absolutely. We are what we eat. In more ways. So many ways, not just physical incarnation, but I think energy, you know, and we need to be mindful of that.

I, think, we, eat violence and it causes us to act, I thing, with more violence. And it also causes, us not to pay attention and not empathize with the harm we're causing.

That's where, i think we are disconnected as modern consumers in this country. are participating in enormous harm. And that is not something many people like to think about because it is painful to thing about it.

But ultimately we need to take responsibility. The good news is we have all kinds of opportunities. to live and eat in a way that does not cause unnecessary harm to others and actually is really good for us and good to the earth.

It sure is. So people watching now, maybe this is the first time they've had an awareness of the concepts we're talking about. How can they get started on this journey?

What would you recommend for that? I think everybody has different kinds of opportunities, but, you know, shifting away from supporting the factory farming system by, if people are buying milk in the grocery store that comes from cows, there's all kinds plant-based milks now that people can get, and people who are more ambitious there can actually make their own plant based milks.

Pretty inexpensive, right? Very expensively, comparatively. Yes, yes. So there's different levels that people are willing to go or able to.

Practical Plant-Based Swaps and Community Support

I kind of hesitate to say, but if people end up at a Burger King, they can get the Impossible Whopper. It's a vegan burger at Burger Kings. Now, that's not perfect.

That's no ideal. But it's certainly less bad than a beef burger. at Burger King, but you know, beans and rice are very affordable. Vegetables can be very affordable depending on where you get them.

And I think just, you can actually just leave meat out of the dish. You can have spaghetti and meatballs without the meatballs. or just put veggies in there, or you can even get plant-based meatballs now in mainstream grocery stores.

So different people have access to different opportunities, but there are plenty of opportunities. I think it's also important and very helpful to get to know other like-minded people in the area.

There might be a vegetarian group, an animal group or a plant based doctor group in your community who could provide a lot of support because as an individual sometimes it is difficult to act independently, and ultimately none of us are totally independent.

We're part of a much bigger system, but we need support, we needs social support. And we learn from those around us and people who have been vegetarian or vegan and who having plant-based are very good sources of advice, even with recipes.

Now you can even get recipes online. You can just Google vegan lasagna. Check GPT can create them for you, right? That's right. It's easier. Easier than ever.

And where can people learn more about your incredible work and your history? And I want to have you back when we can take another hour because I wanna dive deep into this topic and work.

But where they can learn about what you've done with Farm Sanctuary and the expensive work you have done over the last four years?

Farm Sanctuary and Closing Remarks

Yeah, well I think check out our website, Farmsanctury.org. and we have Instagram, we Facebook, the social

media stuff, so that's a really good place to learn about Farm Sanctuary.

People can also visit our sanctuaries in Watkinsland, New York, and also in Acton, California, just outside of Los Angeles. And we do tours, people get to meet the animals and hear about their stories.

But yeah, I'd love for people to visit and get involved in whatever way they're interested. That would be amazing. Thanks for being here, Gene. I am so grateful.

Thank you, I appreciate it. I look forward to our next conversation and lots of good work together. Right on.