Healthy Lifestyle: A Virtue in Search of a Vision

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A Google search on the term “healthy lifestyle” generates 1,310,000 hits, pointing the inquirer also in the direction of the related concepts *healthy lifestyle for kids*, *healthy lifestyle jobs*, *healthy lifestyle National Health Service*, *what is a healthy lifestyle*, *healthy eating*, and *healthy lifestyle tips*. Whatever a healthy lifestyle might constitute, it seems that a lot of us want a piece of it. It also seems that we define the term in many different ways.

The history of the word itself reveals the paradox at the heart of the search for a healthy lifestyle. First coined by the Austrian psychotherapist Alfred Adler in 1929, the term originally denoted “a pattern of reactions and behavior that is established in childhood and remains characteristic of an individual” [1]. During the 1960s, however, the neologism came to denote “a way or style of living” [1] that could be chosen, bought, and shaped at will. As the British newspaper *The Guardian* observed in 1961, “the mass media... continually tell their audience what life-styles are ‘modern’ and ‘smart’” [1].

The King of the High Cs

An excellent example of this paradox is the great Italian operatic tenor Luciano Pavarotti (1935–2007). A gargantuan figure in every sense of the word, Pavarotti was “one of the 25 most recognizable people on earth” [2, p. 11] in his day, a colossus whose career spanned half a century. Known as “the King of the High Cs” [2, p. 11], Pavarotti could in fact “comfortably reach top E flat, three

Luciano Pavarotti: “One of the very nicest things about life is the way we must regularly stop whatever it is we are doing and devote our attention to eating” [7]. Luciano Pavarotti, Mandalay Bay, 1999, by Dan Perry. Licensed under CC BY 2.0. https://www.flickr.com/photos/golf_pictures/2329493400.

semitones above top C” [3, p. 19], developing a completely new technique to reach these notes [3, p. 36]. He performed in all the great opera houses of the world, and his stage performances, recordings, and television broadcasts made him the best-known and most commercially successful tenor of his age; he once broadcast live to an audience of 950 million [3, p. 91].

Pavarotti was also famous for his sheer size, his passion for food, and his struggles with his weight. According to his manager Herbert Breslin, “Anyone who (crossed) Luciano’s threshold (would be) inevitably greeted with the same question: ‘Do you want something to eat?’” [2, p. 99]. Breslin continues waspishly: “This (was) true even when the visitor (was) a doctor, summoned for a house call because of one of Luciano’s innumerable maladies.” The tenor was,

according to Breslin, “very self-conscious about his weight” [2, p. 120], and his extreme bouts of dieting were as famous as his vast consumption of food. These were not always successful: one attempt to lose 50 lb. (22.7 kg) is reported by Breslin as having led to a weight gain of 50 lb [2, p. 120].

This begs the question as to whether Pavarotti’s life is a symbol of all that is unhealthy, or – in some deeper way – all that is healthy. One could argue that anyone who needs to lose 50 lb is unhealthy – and that someone who gains an additional 50 lb in the process of dieting is unhealthier still. Certainly, Pavarotti was unhealthy according to the World Health Organization’s criteria, which defines obesity as a BMI ≥ 30 .

And yet, Pavarotti had a career that spanned half a century, covered most of the great operatic roles written for the tenor voice, and delighted millions around the world. He lived to the Biblical age of threescore years and ten (plus a couple), garnered numerous awards and distinctions, and also raised considerable sums for charity, particularly for victims of the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. If that is not precisely a healthy lifestyle, it is certainly a more than healthy achievement and one which many a person might envy.

Precarious Balance

The original definition of the term “lifestyle” might help shed some light on Pavarotti’s obsessive relationship with food and his oscillations between conspicuous overconsumption and self-punitive abstinence. According to the Encyclopedia of World Biography, Pavarotti “was born on the outskirts of Modena in north-central Italy on October 12, 1935. He (spoke) fondly of his childhood, but the family had little money. Pavarotti, his parents, and his sister were crowded into a two-room apartment” [4].

Pavarotti was 7 when the Allied invasion of Italy commenced during the Second World War and 9 when Nazi Germany surrendered and the Italian Fascist dictator Mussolini was executed by the Italian Resistance. He therefore spent some of his formative years knowing a great deal about deprivation – not deprivation of love and affection, but of food and other creature comforts. This experience drove him to gorge himself when the possibility became available, triggering – to paraphrase Alfred Adler – a pattern of reactions and behavior that was established in childhood and was to remain characteristic for the rest of the singer’s life. If accounts of Pavarotti’s relationship with food show the great singer behaving childishly, this is because he was doing precisely that: behaving like a child.

Lifestyle as Choice or as Destiny?

Seen in this light, the concept of “lifestyle” might seem less a matter of choice than of destiny. Certainly, the process of opting for a healthy lifestyle might be more complex than is sometimes suggested, with genetics and experience, nature and nurture, making it hard for the individual to follow even the best-meant counsel. Indeed, if we are to believe Prof. Mike Gibney – a specialist in the topic of personalized nutrition – one does not need to be a Pavarotti, or even to have a penchant for opera and spaghetti, to be at risk of obesity in today’s society.

Writing in *Ever Seen a Fat Fox?* Gibney observes: “Humans are the only species that get fat. We and the fox can develop many common cancers or diseases of the gut or heart. Each species can suffer parasitic, bacterial and viral infections. We each can injure a limb and suffer traumatic injuries. But foxes, like all feral animals, don’t develop lifelong obesity leading to major illnesses from diabetes to hypertension. Humans have a unique relationship with food that neither the fox nor any other species has” [5, pp. xiii–xiv]. Gibney goes on to conclude: “It is to me blindingly obvious that, notwithstanding the common sharing of most of our genomes with animals we are fat because we organized society in such a way as to make that not simply possible but probable” [5, p. xiv].

If this is the case, then advocates of a healthy lifestyle, and of the role of personalized medicine and personalized nutrition within that lifestyle, need to do much more than to measure BMI indexes or advocate renewing the gym membership and eating more kale. Reversal of the global obesity epidemic, which according to WHO claims 2.8 million lives a year [6], requires more than guidelines: it requires a vision.

Guideline Fatigue

Medical bodies around the world regularly revise their guidance on the intake of substances such as salt, sugar, animal fats, and alcohol. Governments and public health bodies simplify and amplify these messages, creating campaigns that encourage individuals to make dietary and “lifestyle” changes in pursuit of improved health. And self-appointed gurus take to the internet to advocate diets that are supposed to lead to longer, happier lives – the Atkins Diet, the 5:2 Fasting Diet, the Baby Food diet, the Cabbage Soup Diet, the South Beach Diet, the Paleo, the Dukan Diet, the Master Cleanse, the Alkaline Diet, the Weight Watchers Diet, and the Raw Food Diet, to

name but a few recent examples – not to mention the good old Grapefruit Juice Diet, which dates back as far as the 1930s.

One problem is that the official advice varies from country to country. Spain sets the maximum recommended weekly consumption of alcohol at 35 units for men, Australia at 17.5; the maximum recommended daily salt intake is set at 15.2 g in Kazakhstan, 3.4 g in Canada. Another is that the advice regularly changes: the 2015 version of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, for instance, removed the recommended upper limit of total fat intake, completely reversing the trend of low-fat dietary advice that had taken off in the 1980s. Thirdly – although by no means lastly – government, medical, and other “lifestyle” guidelines tend to view eating and drinking as a biochemical process rather than a phenomenon with complex psychological, social, and cultural dimensions. Note how Pavarotti, who grew up in a family rich in love but poor in material wealth, always invited visitors to eat when they knocked at his door.

The consequence of these well-meant injunctions, whether founded on empirical science or on wish-fulfillment, is confusion in the midst of plenty – plenty of food (in the greater part of the globe, at least); plenty of knowledge about how to produce, store, transport, prepare, and consume food; and plenty of knowledge about the action of food on the body. Indeed, one could argue that the obesity epidemic has increased in direct proportion to the growth of our understanding of the very factors that promote obesity.

Homo Emerens: Supermarket Man

We are regularly advised to do less of this or more of that in order to have more years of healthy life. In the essentially secular, consumerist societies within which Western medicine operates, however, little mention is made of what we should, or could, be doing with those years. We are certainly not expected to use them to “build the house of God,” “forge the Revolution,” or “help win the war” – stirring objectives that history shows to be highly motivational. Rather, we are tacitly expected to use them working, paying our taxes, contributing to our pension schemes, and of course, shopping, which includes shopping for food, and exercising healthy choices in the purchasing decisions we make. It is no wonder that this vision of a world as a well-run supermarket does not inspire people to fight against what Prof. Gibney perceives as our species’ innate tendency to obesity. On the contrary, the bigger the supermarkets, the bigger the waistlines are likely to be. We have organized ourselves into excess.

Luciano Pavarotti certainly organized himself into excess, turning from a normally-built would-be professional goalkeeper [7] into an outside everything. Was his life a healthy or an unhealthy one? The case can be argued either way. However, whichever side of the fence one comes down on, his is an exemplary story. In a society dedicated to peace and consumerism that is devolving more and more of its activities to machines, how is a societal balance between energy input and energy expenditure to be achieved? And what would all those beautifully honed and balanced bodies actually do with themselves during the few hours that they were not slumped in front of computers and TV screens? Pavarotti was right: we should interrupt whatever we are doing very regularly and devote our attention to eating – although perhaps not in quite the sense that he meant.

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