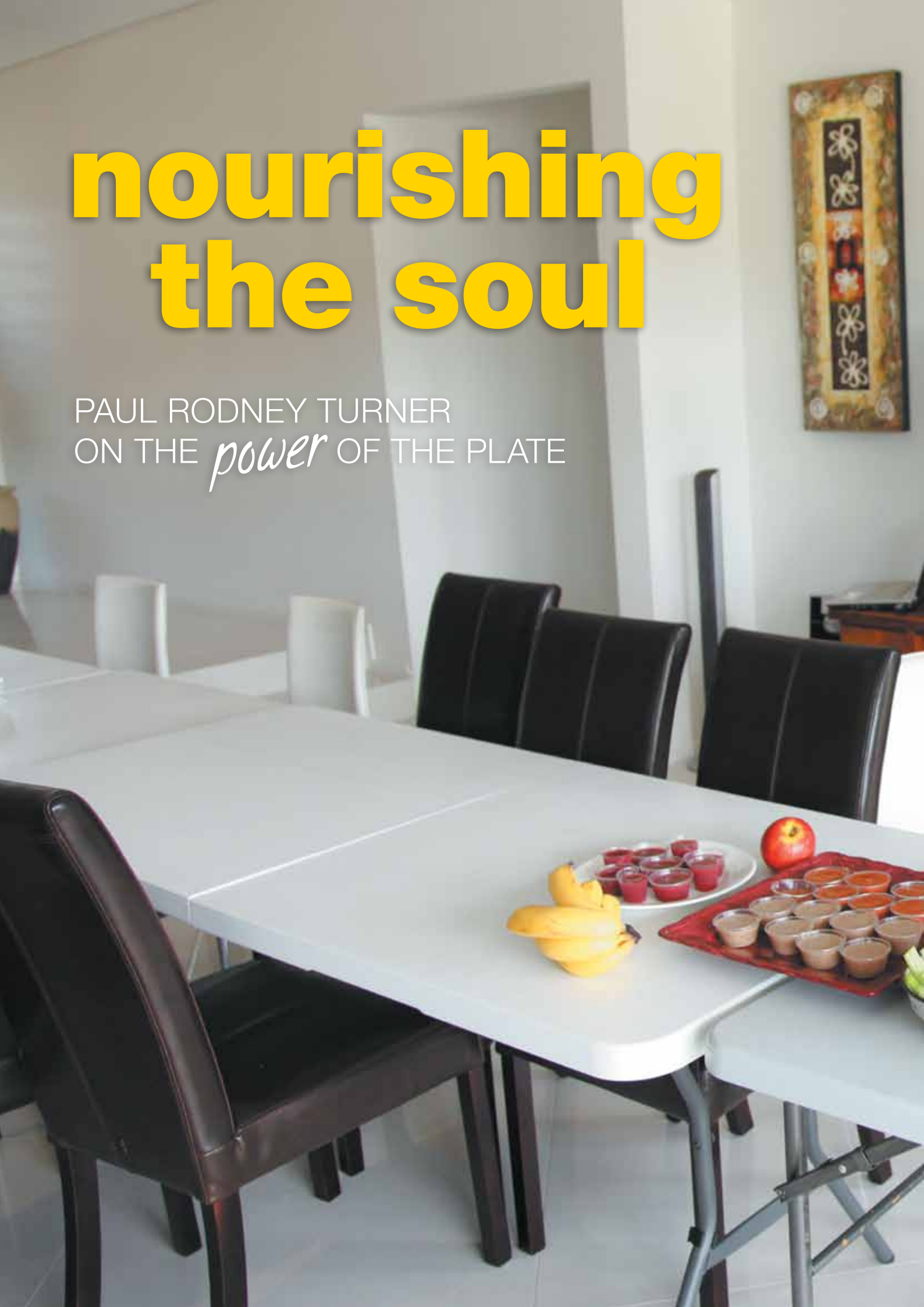


nourishing the soul

PAUL RODNEY TURNER
ON THE *power* OF THE PLATE





The YOGA of EATING

Carmen D'Amico (Food Trainer)

Email: FFL@FFL.org

Web: www.FFL.org

Web: www.FFL.org

www.FFL.org

Sitting on a beach in Sri Lanka at the beginning of his world tour earlier this year, Food For Life (FFL) Global director Paul Rodney Turner was quietly reflecting on his life journey. “I pondered why I find myself travelling so much?” he wrote on his blog, *Travel Diary of a Food Yogi*. “Why I can’t seem to settle? The easy answer to that is, because I can. I am single, without any debts and a worldwide mission.”

But there is more to this story. “Yes, I travel for those reasons,” he says. “However, I also travel because I am searching for ‘home.’”

What does home mean for this yoga devotee who was born and raised in Sydney’s western suburbs and who now directs the largest plant-based food relief organisation in the world? “In its purest definition home is the spiritual domain, or where the soul is most happy,” he says. “Since I am not qualified to be in the spiritual domain at this time, I can only hope to find a sense of home by being in a place of soul happiness.”

Turner believes that in order to be qualified to enter into the spiritual domain we need to achieve a state of purity whereby our consciousness can tune into a higher spiritual frequency. “Being in a place of soul happiness means that, until our consciousness is fixed in the higher spiritual frequency, we can at least relish our connections in this world in the purest way possible – through unconditional love,” he says.

With its slogan *Uniting the World Through Pure Food*, Food For Life Global operates on the hope that the liberal distribution of plant-based meals prepared with loving intention can help bring peace and prosperity to the world. Founded in India in 1974 by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, its volunteers, who are currently active in over 60 countries, serve more than 1.5 million free meals daily through initiatives such as free food

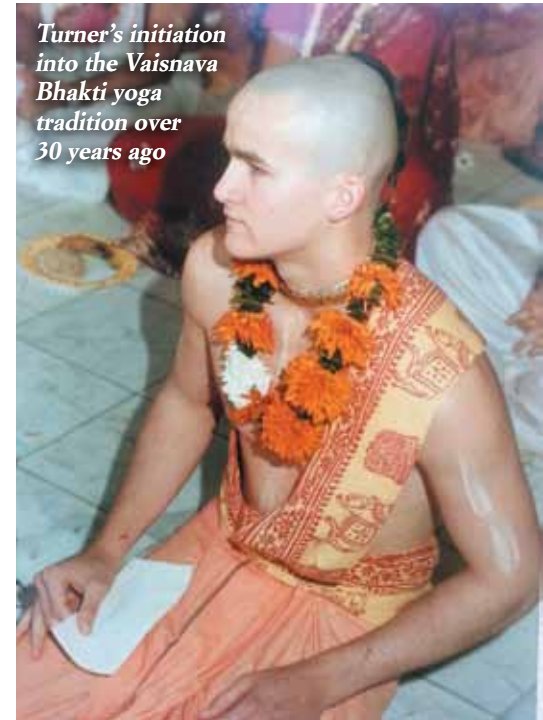
restaurants, home delivery services and school feeding programs. Responding wherever there is a need, the charity has also provided aid in many of the world’s worst natural disasters and war zones, including the 1994 war in Chechnya, the 2010 Haiti earthquake and the 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami.

“Life is all about connection, and the more we realise how important food’s role is in creating this connection, the happier we will all become,” Turner says.

Tall and lean with clear blue eyes and a handsomely weathered face, Turner is also an accomplished vegan gourmet chef, numerologist, yantrologist (talismán) designer, poet, sought-after speaker at vegetarian conferences, and author. On his current world tour he is working to expand Food For Life projects, along with conducting raw food workshops and promoting his book *Food Yoga: Nourishing Body, Mind and Soul*. Keen to impart to others what he has learned through his decades-long immersion in holistic vegan cooking, Turner wants to emphasise that the “spiritual and nutritional value” of food is not just about what foods you consume but how you consume them

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as well. “Your food choices impact you physically, emotionally and spiritually,” he says. “When you eat with a sense of awareness of the blessings of food and its power to transform and unite, you will find that this same awareness will follow you throughout your other activities, helping you to be wiser in your decisions.”



Turner’s initiation into the Vaisnava Bhakti yoga tradition over 30 years ago

Early days

Turner’s evolution into the ‘food yogi’ began when he was initiated into the Vaisnava Bhakti yoga tradition over 30 years ago as a teenager. At the age of 19 he moved to an artist commune in Sydney’s Blue Mountains where he was introduced to the fundamentals of Indian cooking by a former Hare Krishna monk. Searching for a sense of identity, Turner became a monk himself. “I always had an inquiring mind and wanted to know answers on karma and reincarnation,” he told me. By studying the Bhagavad Gita

he believes he found the answers he was seeking. “The Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita wonderfully explains how the soul is eternal and that it can never be cut, burned or destroyed in any way,” Turner says. “Only the body perishes, but the soul – the seat of consciousness, lives on past the demise of this body, receiving a new body, which is determined by one’s

state of mind at the time of death. I loved the idea that God would give us another chance if we made a mistake in this life.”

Turner learned to cook gourmet vegetarian food in his early years as a monk, and it wasn't long before he was in charge of preparing the Sydney Hare Krishna temple's Sunday Feasts, which attracted up to 300 guests. He was drawn to India's Vedic culture of hospitality, whose ethos is that no-one should go hungry, and it was the example of their selfless capacity to provide food for the needy that inspired him to start his own food outreach program.

“My first service was helping to make meals for the free café that we used to have in Parramatta,” Turner said. “A few years after that I started my own Food For Life projects at Sydney University and Macquarie University, where I would provide a free vegetarian lunch for students.” Turner quickly learned that food had the power to influence people. “Pretty soon, I was getting free advertising for my charity work through the local media department, having my recipes posted in the student newspaper and doing paid catering gigs for the Student Union meetings.” Following this success, he graduated to the mainstream media, where he worked to raise awareness for Food For Life through radio and television interviews, including a guest appearance on The Ray Martin Show.

Social issues in Oz

As Australia entered an economic recession in the early 1990s, Turner became troubled by what he saw as worsening social issues, such as high unemployment and the on-going destruction of the environment. “One of the things I now teach our Food For Life leaders is the importance of being relevant in the minds of the public,” he says. “I stress that whatever they do in their community, they must also try to target the social ‘weak point’.”

Turner sought funding from the federal government so that his charity could employ long-termed unemployed people to grow organic vegetables on Food For Life farms. Funding was granted and the project was a success, with participants

leaving the program with extra skills and a newfound sense of confidence. Seeing the way this was able to strengthen what Turner saw as an example of a social weak point – resulting from Australia's high unemployment – he says, “What this did for me personally was convince me that with just a little bit of creative thinking you can find a solution to any problem using food as your medium,” he said.

Another social weak point Turner identified was poor nutrition in children after he heard about local school children missing out on a proper breakfast because their parents had to leave for work early. He approached a school in Millfield, NSW, and offered to start a ‘Breakfast Club’ where students could come to school a little earlier and get a healthy breakfast courtesy of Food For Life. “We usually made fresh wholemeal pancakes, farm fresh milk, granola and fruit. It was a big hit with the children,” he recalls.

Current Food For Life programs operating in Australia include the Crossways Restaurant in Melbourne, which serves discounted food to the

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elderly and concession card holders, and the Perth-based PAWS organisation, which is involved in food distribution and community gardens. Crossways manager Jay Vaghela says he and the eight volunteers working in the restaurant supply around 300 discounted meals per day, with patrons benefiting from the healthy and nourishing food that is vegetarian and freshly cooked. “We also provide free meals for those who cannot pay,” Vaghela said, “provided they are ready to help us for at least half an hour on our request.” Volunteers are always needed, and “we engage them as per their availability in this ecstatic service to humanity,” he said.

Sustainable food production

Successes like these have encouraged Turner to position Food For Life Global not just as a food relief agency but as a social change organisation as well. Keen to encourage sustainable food production rather than just food provision, the charity has developed farming and training projects in areas stricken by starvation, such as the Ruzzizi Valley Project in Congo where over 200 different varieties of organic crops are grown, harvested and sold. In talking about the project in an interview on the USA television program ‘Good People, Good Works’, Turner said the project was going very well – with sustainable use of land and over 2000 people employed. However he acknowledges that, with the United Nations stating there are upwards of one billion undernourished people in the world today, much more work is required.

Turner believes that a plant-based diet, which, according to the Smithsonian Institute, is more cost-effective and environmentally friendly than a meat-based diet, would go a long way towards solving the world-wide inequitable

distribution of food. “The most damaging expression of selfishness is the growth of factory farming,” he says. “Of all the agricultural land in the US, nearly 80 per cent is used in some way to raise animals. Furthermore, to service the growing demand of animal agriculture, over 35 per cent of all grain production in the world is fed to livestock and not humans.”

Orphanage initiatives

An additional initiative of Food For Life Global is the running of several orphanages in Southern Asia, including the Gokulam-Bhaktivedanta Children's Home in Sri Lanka. By providing safe accommodation and three balanced,



*"FFL helping build a new democracy"
- Nelson Mandela*



Paul serving in Sri Lanka, 2005



Tsunami Relief in Sri Lanka, 350,000 meals served

vegetarian meals a day, the 150 children who live there are able to focus on their education as well as having improved physical health. During his current world tour Turner visited the orphanage and was very impressed. "We had to keep reminding ourselves that this was no ordinary school," he said. "Some of the children were actually 'war orphans', having suffered the traumatic experience of seeing their parents killed in front of them. And yet, here they were, studying to be good Sri Lankan citizens, obviously satisfied in the warm loving embrace of this exceptional children's home."

The efforts of Food For Life Global have not gone unnoticed. World leaders and politicians such as former South African President Nelson Mandela and US senator Arlen Specter have given the charity glowing testimonials. And former Prime Minister of Chechnya, Salambek Hadjiev, was once quoted as saying, "I pray that your Food For Life Program will expand to bring about a peaceful world."

Tireless work

It is towards this goal that Turner and the thousands of Food For Life volunteers are tirelessly working. "By connecting with people through food, you can connect with them in every other way," Turner says. "Food For Life Global therefore serves food indiscriminately, and by doing so, no-one is denied. Let the world come, we can feed them. All we really want from this effort is to see peace and prosperity in the world."

I first read *Food Yoga* when I was seven months pregnant with my first child. As my yoga instructor had pointed out to me, it was a time to embrace the changes my physical body was going through. She believed that an expectant mother's body was like Mother Earth's soil, and I should provide a positive, fertile environment that

would be sustainable and nurturing. And reading Turner's book inspired me to do just that. It left me wanting to consume the best and purest foods to nourish not only my own body and soul, but, more importantly, the body and soul of my unborn daughter as well.

Turner who has his own daily yoga routine says, "Food choices are an integral part of the yoga path because according to these same traditions the body is our personal temple. Imagine practicing yoga while feeding yourself nothing but meat, white breads, sugar and caffeine. No doubt, your mind and body would be completely disturbed by such a diet. It's easy to see that a balanced, calm mind is much easier to attain if you nourish your body-temple properly."

One of the most important rules of food yoga, he says, is that of ahimsa, or the principle of non-violence. "The foods you eat should not cause harm to you or anyone else," he says. "The natural questions therefore are: Is the food I am eating causing damage to my body? Was anyone or anything harmed unnecessarily in the creation or processing of this food? If the answer to either of these questions is "yes", you are not practicing ahimsa and therefore not practicing yoga in truth."

Turner puts this principle into practice by shopping for fresh produce at local organic markets and is happiest subsisting on a diet largely made up of green smoothies, kale salads, homemade dhals, fruit, and seed or nut patés.

Unlike many health food books, *Food Yoga* does not actually outline specific meals or special dietary guidelines to follow. Rather, Turner acknowledges that everyone has different needs and no one diet will suit all. What he does advocate, however, is that we should make the effort to incorporate more raw foods into our

diets. "My personal experience has shown that the more live fruits and vegetables people eat, the more sensitive, intuitive and respectful of nature they become."

But as much as *Food Yoga* is about making better food choices for yourself, it is also about sincerity and respecting the source of the food. It is about conscientiousness and being grateful for the food we receive. And it is about nurturing our fellow human beings and acting selflessly with the food we have. "This is how one thanks Mother Nature in a practical sense," Turner writes, "by feeding some of her children in gratitude to her. It is also another way of ... acknowledging that all food is intended not for mere self-gratification, but for the greater good of all beings."

It all comes back to Turner's worldwide mission to promote the work of Food For Life Global. "Food For Life literally is a revival of India's ancient Vedic culture of hospitality, which is based on the principle of equality," he says. "We're trying to teach people that we're all brothers and sisters, we're all part of one family ... and we should respect every human being on the planet. If you honour the land, if you eat pure food, if you share this food in a loving way, you can literally transform villages, transform towns, and transform consciousness, because food is a very powerful medium of love."

Suvi Mahonen is a freelance writer with articles appearing in *Practical Parenting* and *Child* magazines, and *The Weekend Australian*. Her latest fiction was included in *Griffith Review's* 'Women and Power' issue. www.redbubble.com/people/suvmahonen