

Jared Diamond Is Right

Public Comment to the Sonoma Valley Unified School District by Lauren Ayers 10-12-10

Hello Educators and Parents,

Back in 1987, Jared Diamond wrote an article for Discover magazine called: "The Worst Mistake in the History of the Human Race."

Many of you will recognize his name; he wrote *Guns, Germs and Steel*, and, more recently, *Collapse*.

He starts this way:

"Astronomy taught us that our Earth isn't the center of the universe but merely one of billions of heavenly bodies. From biology we learned that we weren't specially created by God but evolved along with millions of other species. Now archaeology is demolishing another sacred belief: that human history ... has been a long tale of progress.

"In particular, recent discoveries suggest that the adoption of agriculture, supposedly our most decisive step toward a better life, was in many ways a catastrophe from which we have never recovered. With agriculture came gross social and sexual inequality, disease and despotism."

Let me interject that agriculture brought us vastly more carbohydrates than we ever consumed during our evolution in prior millennia. And school food reflects that trend of abandoning a nutrient-dense diet and adopting the cheap carbs and cheap vegetable oils of modern agriculture. As a substitute teacher in local schools, I observe the cold cereal, sport drinks, cinnamon buns, pasta salads, and other empty calories that kids are addicted to.

Diamond continues:

"[We've been told that] agriculture is an efficient way to get more food for less work. ... [Yet the fact is that hunter-gatherers had much more leisure than farmers.] One Kalihari Bushman, when asked why he hadn't emulated neighboring tribes by adopting agriculture, replied, 'Why should we, when there are so many mongongo nuts in the world?'

"While farmers concentrate on high-carbohydrate crops like rice, wheat, corn and potatoes, the mix of wild plants and animals in the diets of surviving hunter-gatherers provides more protein and a better balance of other nutrients."

There are quite a few books out now on the so-called Paleolithic diet, and how much better it is for human health. There's *Primal Body, Primal Mind*, and also *Nourishing Traditions*, and my current favorite is *Deep Nutrition* by Catherine Shanahan, M.D., which shakes up many assumptions. For instance, did you know that the only cells in the body that require sugar are red blood cells? All the rest run better by burning fat. But, as she explains, the polyunsaturated fats modern food processing brings us are the wrong kind of fat.

Diamond explains that anthropologists "examine teeth for enamel defects (signs of childhood malnutrition), and recognize scars left on bones by anemia, tuberculosis, leprosy, arthritis, and other diseases—problems not found in pre-agricultural skeletons.

"Skeletons from Greece and Turkey show that the average height of hunter-gatherers toward the end of the ice ages was a generous 5'9" for men, 5'5" for women." But heights dropped 5-6 inches by 3000 B.C.

Furthermore, Diamond explains that (1) farmers had a very narrow diet, (2) they ran the risk of regular famines, and (3) diseases and parasites spread quickly in dense populations.

"Another curse from agriculture was deep class divisions. Only in a farming population could a healthy, nonproducing elite set itself above the disease-ridden masses. Skeletons from Greek tombs at Mycenae c.1500 B.C. suggest that royals enjoyed a better diet than commoners, since the royal skeletons were two or three inches taller and had better teeth."

I was going to leave out that last part, but then I realized that we have a class system in our schools - some kids can afford to bring food from home or pay full price in the a la carte line, while others must eat the USDA meal in the cafeteria.

"Hunter-gatherers," Diamond said, "practiced the most successful and longest lasting lifestyle in human history." If you put all of human history into one day, it would be 23 hours and 54 minutes of hunting-gathering, i.e. eating nutrient-dense food. But now we are in the 6 minutes of agriculture on earth, with ever-cheaper carbs and vegetable oils, and ever-worsening obesity and disease rates, including mental illness and impairments.

Our school children would be healthier now (and as adults), and will do better in school (and their future work), if we cut down on the refined starches, sugars, and vegetable oils that we feed them, and teach them why those are as bad as tobacco and drugs.

Knowledge is power. As I'll explain in November, it's not only sugars (even from fruit) that undermine health, but also "our daily bread" and other starches that our bodies can't handle well. Even less understood is that cheap vegetable oils cause sickness while the right kind of animal fats (i.e. pastured rather than grain-fed) support health.

"What water?" says the fish. We've been stuck in a *Grain Is Good* world view and didn't know it. Jared Diamond helps us see the big picture so that we realize how misguided we've been and can turn back to the future.

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Once we see our distant goal, then it's easier to see what steps are needed in order to get there.