

# It's Rarely Just About the Food

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## ABSTRACT

Why are you a dietitian doing what you do? Although we absolutely must keep food central in our conversations about nutritional well-being, our work is rarely ever about food alone. There's always so much more than meets the eye. Reflecting on an entrepreneurial path over 3 decades, the meaning of it all became clearer with each role. Patricia shares perspective on how the more deeply we understand this "thing", the more success we'll have. It's crucial to our effectiveness as communicators, counsellors, colleagues, and citizens of the world. To truly make a meaningful difference and have a tremendously positive impact on the health of Canadians, we must talk about it.

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## RÉSUMÉ

Pourquoi êtes-vous diététiste et pourquoi faites-vous ce que vous faites? Même si les aliments doivent absolument demeurer au cœur de nos conversations sur le bien-être nutritionnel, notre travail porte très rarement exclusivement sur les aliments. En effet, il y a toujours tellement plus qu'il n'y paraît. C'est en réfléchissant au parcours entrepreneurial qu'elle a emprunté au cours des trois dernières décennies et à tous les rôles qu'elle a occupés que ce constat a pris tout son sens pour Patricia. Elle nous explique que selon elle, plus on comprend ce concept, plus on est susceptible de connaître du succès. Il s'agit d'une notion essentielle à notre efficacité en tant que communicateurs, conseillers, collègues et citoyens du monde. Pour faire une différence significative et avoir un impact extrêmement positif sur la santé de la population canadienne, nous devons en parler.

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## INTRODUCTION

The live presentation of this lecture began with a video to the simple words of children's musician Raffi [1]. *"All I really need is a song in my heart, food in my belly, and love in my family. And I need the rain to fall, the sun to shine, to give life to the seeds we sow, to give the food we need to grow. And, I need some clean water for drinking, some clean air for breathing, so that I can grow up strong, take my place where I belong."* Many colleagues were acknowledged for being part of Patricia's career.

## ON COMMUNICATION

Imagine you're looking at someone you love dearly. Reflect on how you truly feel about them. Visualize them full of joy. Do you feel calm and happy? Still with your eyes closed, imagine you're with them and they're thriving, but YOU can no longer see. Your other senses are still working, and they get even stronger, but you can't see. Think about how this changes your feelings. Are they intensified? Imagine that you wouldn't be able to see again. Would you still be able to communicate? Do you feel an even deeper desire to express your love?

Although 80% of communication is nonverbal and assumed to be visual (actually 93%) [2, 3], does not being able to see make us love the people and projects in our life any less? Maybe it puts us even more in tune with our true feelings? There's always more than meets the eye in the relationships in our personal and professional lives. Perhaps there's been a missing link in how we communicate? Maybe there's a tremendous opportunity to not only communicate verbally and visually but also from our heart?

Life is full of gifts, sometimes packaged in the most difficult to open wrapping. It's serendipitous I should end up sharing my story in a year themed "More Than Meets the Eye." When our one and only child was 8 weeks old, I lost 100% of my eyesight. For 1 month, I couldn't see him or anything. The doctors didn't know if or when I'd regain my vision. Over the course of a very dim, foggy year, my vision gradually returned to 80% where it's at today. That year, 19 medical specialists later, I was diagnosed with bilateral optic neuritis and later, celiac disease. A counsellor from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) helped me deal with the reality of possibly never seeing again. My experience was one of the scariest things that's happened to me. It was far from the worst thing that can happen. Like any crisis or loss, if there can be a silver lining, it puts things into perspective and brings us closer to what really matters. I always tried to operate with compassion and empathy, but as a person who makes a living as a communicator, I later came to realize the gift that this vision loss was in helping me communicate from and to the heart.

## CAREER STORY

In my professional life, as I suspect it has been for many colleagues, it's always about trying to create peace of mind for people around food in their lives. It's been far less about number crunching and diet math than it has been about love. I've done most of this as an entrepreneur.

Two Saskatchewan farm kids were my earliest influences. My Dad was a teacher and the same for 2 of my sisters; the other, a talented pastry chef. My Mom was a lab technician, mostly a Mom and a true foodie I lovingly refer to as

“Martha Stewart of the prairies”. I was 16 and working at McDonalds when I first heard about the College of Home Ec at the University of Saskatchewan and realized that being a dietitian might just be the perfect combination of teaching, health, and food with endless opportunities to be creative in helping people.

I was lucky to begin my education under Dr. Shawna Berenbaum. As the years passed, I realized my career foundation was influenced by one of the most imaginative thinkers in our profession. In her Ryley-Jeffs (RJ) address, Shawna reminded us of the importance of imagination in driving our profession and shaping our future [4]. During internship, I was lucky to attend a game-changing marketing workshop by legendary entrepreneurial dietitian Helen Bishop MacDonald. I’ve encountered numerous imaginative colleagues along the way, including the stories of pioneers Violet Ryley and Kathleen Jeffs, who’ve inspired me to continue pushing the envelope. Always remember: As long as people eat and age there’ll be work for dietitians!

Having spent much of my career needing to be my own “marketing department”, early on I developed strong convictions in my philosophy of practice. Before advising anyone, I feel it’s critical to listen carefully and really hear what they’re after. I talk about the “wheel of health” where food is just one of many spokes influencing health and peace of mind. Self-worth and exercise play equal roles to food. I’ve never looked at a food diary without acknowledging the many other realities that affect each person’s unique food decisions. I’m a strong advocate of an 80–20 approach to healthy eating. Remembering to keep food in all nutrition discussions is critical.

In thinking about any impact I’ve made by breaking ground in practice, I share from 8 roles, or branches of my tree. In each, I’ve tried my best to mentor colleagues who’ve also taught me so much.

### Nutrition counsellor

After my first position in the biz as a Public Health Nutritionist in rural Saskatchewan with outstanding early mentors, I started a private practice. Leave a pensioned position? Who’ll pay for nutrition services? said the naysayers (now haters). In 1995, I moved from Saskatoon to Vancouver. With no contacts, I took out a yellow page ad and rented office space. In my first month, I saw 1 client who paid \$165. With over \$1000 per month of fixed costs, I was very motivated to connect with medical, sports, business, and school communities—anyone who could benefit from dietitian services. Pre-internet, this involved a ton of in-person networking. I became one of the first dietitian members of the Vancouver Board of Trade. I learned that my clients’ success was going to be the most important advertisement, and if I wasn’t effective in helping them, this business would go nowhere fast. I’d spend a minimum of 3, 1-hour appointments with each person to together create results-orientated plans.

I built the business to the point of attracting 30 new clients and doing 10 speaking engagements each month. I travelled to every corner of British Columbia’s (BC) lower mainland. Four other dietitians and many student volunteers joined me. One was Diana Steele who later bought the company that continues 22 years later. It was rewarding work, yet my heart became incredibly heavy as I listened to countless stories of struggles with food, weight, and illness. I’d hear about funding for practice-based research but had no time to pursue it. The lessons I learned from those many clients profoundly shaped my understanding of how to truly help people eat well and what it really takes to live a healthy lifestyle. This influenced how I approached EVERYTHING moving forward including not letting inflexible work or bad relationships compromise health and how damaging it is for creative people to be in an environment that doesn’t allow creative freedom. RJ winner Sandra Matheson powerfully reminded us that the entrepreneurial mindset is available to anyone prepared to rely on their own abilities for their economic security and expect no opportunity without first creating value for others [5].

### Media spokesperson

In 1995, I did my first TV appearance. Global TV invited me to discuss pros of a new diet, *The Zone*, while heart health dietitian Shauna Ratner, who I met for the first time on the air that day, talked about cons. I knew we’d be on the same page. Two weeks later folic acid in pregnancy was news and I was asked back for comment. The producers invited me to be a regular. After 260 appearances, I was ready for a break. I connected them to Diana Steele who has appeared every Tuesday since. Just 5 minutes on the “nooner” and I was recognized almost everywhere I went in BC. I’d get free meals at restaurants and spied on when grocery shopping. It was an exciting time! Business thrived and I created an audience for my first book. It also had a dark side. I’d be asked about irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) by random people in the drug-store and provide free consultations on taxi rides. Feedback was 99% positive, but I also faced haters even in those pre-social media days. I later did a series of *Meal Solutions* segments for grocer Save-On-Foods and 48 episodes of a national show *What’s Cooking*. I earned the nickname “*The People’s Dietitian*”. Helping other dietitians do great work in media remains a passion and we’re so lucky to have amazing leadership on this front from Sue Mah, Gina Sunderland, the DC Media Team, and today’s many dietitian superstars putting us on the map in hospitals, academia, and many other settings.

### Writer and recipe creator

In 1999, I published my first book “*The 101 Most Asked Nutrition Questions*”. I provided a bottom-line for questions ranging from “*how do I lose weight*” to “*which is better, butter or margarine*”. Although some of my contemporaries didn’t agree, I knew consumers needed me to take a stand to truly help them. I went on to write 5 cookbooks, have regular

newspaper columns and many recipes published in magazines. I've shared with many colleagues about how to write a book. When I first finished internship, I taught a cooking program for pregnant teens. Today, I've come full circle back to teaching cooking classes, which seems to be the perfect place to share everything I've tried to teach consumers over the past 3 decades.

### Sports nutritionist

I had the opportunity to be one of the first dietitians to work with an NBA team in Canada. From 1996–2000 I was a member of the sports medicine staff for the Vancouver Grizzlies. Working with a pro sports team seemed to be worth more than any university degree to consumers and this led to much work with athletes and the Coaching Institute of Canada. I've assisted in creating new sports dietitian positions in BC and mentoring aspiring sports dietitians—a huge opportunity in our field for those willing to get well-equipped for the game.

### Retail dietitian

Now onto 2000. I'm heavy-hearted again from so many sad stories of talented athletes fixated on being 6% body fat, women trying to lose 5 pounds to keep the attention of their straying husband, or wanting to lose weight because "*being thin is better than being cancer-free*"!? I felt so alone with the load. I took 6 months off. After almost leaving the profession, I circled back to thoughts I'd had as a first-year student. Maybe intervening with consumers right at the point of food purchase was a logical place for a dietitian to work? I pitched an idea to a grocery chain and spent 9 years developing programs for customers, employees, and suppliers. I created a second full-time dietitian position and maintained opportunities for over 90 BC and Alberta dietitians as tour leaders in a Shop Smart program originated by entrepreneur Laura Kalina. Grocery was an outstanding vantage point from which to watch the low-carb wave first roll in. Pre-wheat belly, I attended a gathering in Rhode Island of North American bakery experts discussing what the long-term impacts of this trend would be. I toured the Natural Foods Industry in Colorado. I was a founding member of Canada's first retail dietitian advisory group and had a tremendous opportunity to share and learn from leaders in retail dietetics—an expanding area of our profession with so much untapped potential.

### Product developer

Time in the grocery business combined with being an avid baker sadly faced with a diagnosis of celiac disease in 2010, led me to venture into food product development. I googled "*Can regular people invent food products?*" and created an all-purpose gluten-free flour that was sold in stores. I plan to do more product development particularly with pulses. I encourage all dietitians who see innovative products in the store and think they could have invented it, to go for it.

### Speaker and businesswoman

Being a dietitian has allowed extensive travel for me. *What's Cooking TV* took me to beautiful Quebec City 12 times. Board work has taken me from coast to coast. I've toured almond orchards in California, potato fields and a McDonald's French fry factory in Idaho, and a massive fresh food commissary in Virginia among other farm and food tours. I've learned the value of continuously networking, maintaining existing and building new relationships throughout your career—and letting go of the unhealthy ones. I've addressed hundreds of audiences and talked about building a successful brand to dietitians in Canada and the U.S. As a mentor, I encourage always putting yourself in the shoes of the learner. In the dark side of business, I've unfortunately witnessed lying and bullying in the workplace and even in the sadly "competitive sport" of parenting. There is absolutely no situation where this is healthy, productive, or acceptable and we need to stand up against it.

### Mom

My most important role by far, one that has taught me the most about nutrition, is that of Mom. Although I've purposely kept them off social media, I've never downplayed my family or acted like they were secondary to my work. I've chatted with many colleagues about the importance of always maintaining work–family balance as these years won't come again. I'm currently 12 years into a 20-year "break" but thanks to social media I'm continuing to leverage our family meals into billable projects.

### IT'S ALL ABOUT LOVE

Each branch on the career tree moved me closer to understanding the role of love in our work. Love isn't necessarily something we study or formally talk about. In fact, it's often easier for us to discuss bowel function than love. Yet, love (or even just like) is the one thing most people want or at least wouldn't complain about getting more of. You can still push the envelope, inspire others, advance the profession, and make the world better by operating with love and not being a big jerk. Dietitians are some of the kindest people I've ever met, and we need to share that, not hide it. We're brilliant and already tough!

Unfortunately, our inability to differentiate between romantic love and compassionate love is why we often forget about love in our work lives [6]. Yet we live and work in the business of relationships. Employees who feel they work in a culture of love have less absenteeism, better teamwork, and less exhaustion [7]. For a loving work culture to happen, if we're in management we must behave like decent human beings. It's not about being sappy, but showing genuine concern. In our work and beyond, loving people can become habit by doing 3 things: believing in people's potential, knowing people's dreams and celebrating their accomplishments, and sacrificing our time for them [7–9]. According to ancient

Greeks, there are 7 kinds of love [10]. I want to highlight a couple of these as they relate to our work.

### Self-love

In her RJ address, Vesanto Melina reminded us that to inspire others to make healthful choices we need to keep ourselves healthy [11]. To effectively help others, we must put our own oxygen mask on first. That doesn't mean we're selfish. Vesanto also said that when you're on the cutting edge it's challenging and people are likely to resist. You need to make your own cup so full and then surround yourself with amazing friends, partners, co-workers, and clients who will benefit from soaking up your great ideas and joy instead of being abusive or jealous. Shawna advised us to stay away from negative people as they can kill our creativity and make us afraid to think outside the box [4].

### Loving what you do

This requires being good at it or at least quite comfortable with it. To be good, you must work hard in a way that authentically fits for you and feels like an extension of your personality; a way that allows you to express yourself creatively. You need to be in tune with your true passions, know why you're a dietitian and what you're trying to do to make the world a better place. Trust your expertise and give yourself credit for your talents, because others may not. Don't fear sharing from your own important experience along with the evidence in the published literature. Celebrate your resourcefulness—the world needs it!

### Love your clients and others

Really listen, genuinely care, share, and embrace how much you can learn from them. Make things make sense to them and their level of understanding. You get what you give. Don't be afraid to talk with them about the importance of self-love in making good health choices. Have you ever felt unloved or rejected? Had a job layoff? At times like those, did you feel excited to make almond butter energy balls or read labels to eat less sodium? Don't be bitter if someone has a showpiece kitchen they never use and you don't. Be happy for them and encourage them to use it!

### Love and support your colleagues

It's true that we are stronger together. Respect and learn from those who came before, those here now, and those who will come after us. It's human nature to compete to survive but we can't forget about love. Be open with colleagues about the emotional load of our work and take opportunities to decompress together. Don't look at leaders or stars in any area of our profession with hatred or jealousy. The sky doesn't have one star only, and every star twinkles in its own way making a very important contribution. Recognize the passion and grueling work they've done to get where they are. The late Mary Sue Waisman said we need to celebrate our accomplishments

and cherish one another [12]. On collaborating with colleagues, Kelly Anne Erdman said new eyes have new vision, new insight, and creativity to improve what has been created [13]. And sometimes when collaborating, you have to speak with one voice, even if it's not your preferred one.

### Love good food

We must always keep food in our nutrition messages. People eat food, not numbers. And they want to eat, not do diet math. Don't wear your own amazing food preferences like a badge. Instead, share in a way that is accessible for people. Respect the realities facing many Canadians who may not be able to eat 100% organically or locally grown. Reassure them they can still achieve great health and there are many entry points on the healthy eating continuum.

Recognize that fear and what I and others [14] call a "love deficit" may be behind many of the issues people struggle with. We don't talk about a love deficit much but in my own evidence-based years spent counselling, this was very apparent. I've seen it in relation to some weight struggles, food intolerance, and orthorexia situations. We're in a weird time of dizziness-induced malnutrition of the wealthy with issues like orthorexia, photographing food but not eating it, judging harshly, and everyone being a food expert, qualified or not. I've also seen a love deficit in cases of jerk behaviour. Sometimes a supplement, perhaps in the form of love and deep understanding, is needed to bump things back up to normal before going forward.

Dietitians must take their rightful place as creative leaders in this field [11]. To effectively do this, we need to operate from a genuine place of love. We need to observe, listen, and feel what our clients really need from us. We must understand that there's always much more than meets the eye. We also need to keep putting dietitians on the map in a BIG way and show Canadians that there's also much more than meets the eye with what an amazing dietitian can do to help them be their healthiest.

Thank you for this tremendous honour.

The live presentation of this lecture ended with the song Put a Little Love in Your Heart [15].

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