

Food as Medicine

An Interview with Dr. Susan Lord



Susan B. Lord, MD, graduated from Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine and practices Family Medicine. She has a dual appointment at Georgetown University School of Medicine in the Departments of Physiology and Biophysics and in Family Medicine. With a private practice in Washington, DC, she specializes in complementary and alternative medicine using mind-body approaches, nutrition, Gestalt psychotherapy, lifestyle counseling, and energy medicine.

Dr. Lord is a staff member at the Center for Mind-Body Medicine, where she directs week-long intensives in Food As Medicine for medical professionals. Recently, Symbiosis editor Candice Chase and intern Elli Aleece Smith attended the opening day of the training program, which was being held in Berkeley, California.

CC: *Dr. Lord, could you begin by telling us something about the Center for Mind-Body Medicine?*

SL: *Dr. James Gordon, MD, who teaches in the Departments of Psychiatry and Family Medicine at the Georgetown University School of Medicine, is the Center's founder. About 15 years ago, Jim started bringing leaders in the field of mind-body medicine to the Center in Washington, D.C. to offer weekend workshops. It just kept growing from there, and now we have a staff of about 18. I joined the staff in 1996 as Director of Nutrition Programs and Associate Director of Medical Education, so I actually work with all of the Center's programs.*

CC: *How would you describe the educational and health care models the Center uses?*

SL: *As a group, I believe we have developed a new model of health care that is flexible enough to work in a variety of situations with a variety of people, from school children, mothers running families, war-torn countries, or prison populations, to drug addicts. It's a very open-ended, powerful model that we have tested in all kinds of situations. We're trying educate people about this model so that it can be used everywhere.*

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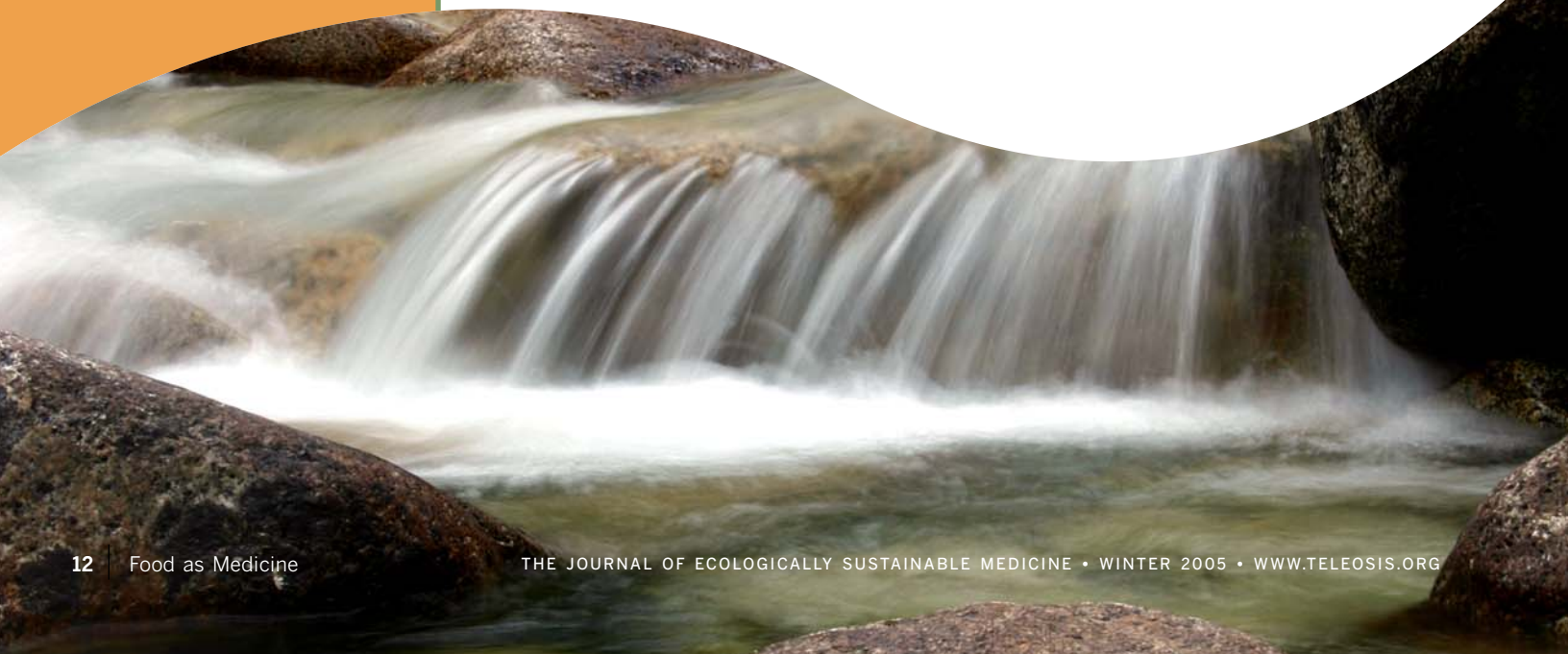
The training model is based on working in small groups and teaching people a variety of mind-body techniques—anything from meditation, biofeedback, imagery, visualization, and drawing, to dance. But what these techniques all have in common is that they facilitate self-awareness. They give you a chance to express who you are authentically in the world. That in itself is very healing and transformative. We feel it is a wonderful tool that is beginning to transform medicine itself into something much more humanistic and powerful. It's really helping health care professionals become healers, both of their own lives and the lives of their patients. It's deeply personal work.

CC: *Have you had any particularly surprising or delightful experiences doing this work?*

SL: Wonderful things happen all the time! Tremendous shifts happen for people. There's a kind of magic to it. When people sit together in an open-hearted way, something happens that is very healing. It's a process that you can't force or *make* happen, and you can't control it, but when you let go of your expectations of wanting to help, wanting to fix, wanting to make a difference, and thinking that you can—when you let go of all those expectations and simply accept another person in that moment exactly as they are, then something happens. It seems that accepting what *is* allows for the possibility of change to occur. I believe it is this exchange of caring—the kind of love called *agape*—that is what allows people to transform in ways that we don't normally experience.

We often feel so out of control that our primary interest is controlling our lives, and that means controlling our own feelings and controlling the people around us. But when you do that, you stop life, you stop the river of life energy or life force from flowing. If you can let go of the need to control, then it flows. And when it flows, it flows in the direction of healing, or resolution, or change; life wants to be balanced. It's what we call homeostasis in the body. The body wants to be in balance; it has all these checks and balances, if you just provide the conditions that allow it to work! If you give your body the food it needs, the rest it needs, the water and the sunlight it needs, it will naturally change itself through biofeedback loops to come into balance.

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Often we tell ourselves, “That’s not acceptable, I shouldn’t feel that.” Or we say ‘yes’ when what we’re really feeling is ‘no!’” But when you allow yourself to experience whatever is truly going on, to feel what you are actually feeling, then you are authentic. You can experience your life in the moment. And if, as a physician, you then bring a patient into that space, all kinds of things can happen. People do things they never thought they could do. They see things differently. This is really what is at the heart of what I do, and what we do at the Center for Mind-Body Healing. What we’re really talking about is a paradigm shift.

CC: *What a different kind of experience from the one so many people have in their doctor’s office—or in medical school!*

SL: Yes. And our main work is with health professionals. The mind-body trainings include both didactic and experiential elements. For the experiential half, participants go into a smaller group with one of our faculty members. It’s here that we try to provide a place for people to simply be present, an environment where they can have the actual experience of what I’ve just been talking about. And once they’ve got it, they’ve got it. Once you know that this kind of interaction is not only possible but transformative, you simply can’t go back to being an authoritarian. You have to let go of your own expectations for other people. What you learn in this process is that you don’t really know anything. I could talk to you for an hour and think, “Oh I know what’s going on and I know what she should do.” But it’s almost always wrong!

As physicians, we tend to feel that we’re supposed to—have to—know everything. We’re ‘supposed to’ know what the problem is and how to ‘fix’ it. But this is so limiting to the process of true healing. So we try to give people the *experience* of what it would be like if we didn’t try to fix each other. It’s fascinating to sit in circles of health professionals trying to fix each other. One person will present a problem and everyone will start to say, “Oh, I know what you should do.” However, we stop them. We say, “Look at your impulse, your own need to fix other people, what is that about inside *you*?” By the end of our trainings, most people are able to be more in touch with looking inside, to be truly authentic and come from a place within themselves. Then they can connect with patients on that basis, rather than trying to control things in an external way.

CC: *What is the Food As Medicine training intensive, and who attends?*

SL: In 2001 I convened the first Food As Medicine training program; we offer one of these intensives each year in a different part of the country. I believe it’s the most comprehensive professional nutrition training program in the U.S. that provides the equivalent of a semester’s worth of curriculum in just one week. But unlike most other nutrition curricula, we teach from a holistic orientation, showing the importance of the interconnections of all aspects of our lives with food and health. We give participants the *experience* of eating in a healthy way—we provide an opportunity for inner transformation, rather than simply ‘information’. The program is designed for MDs, medical students, dieticians, and any health care practitioners who are interested in food, health, and healing.



What these techniques all have in common is that they facilitate self-awareness.

The Food As Medicine program was developed to address three major concerns. One is the troubling increase in chronic diseases, obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and cancer, all of which are influenced by nutritional status. Another issue is the growing demand of patients for nutritional counseling. Finally, there is inadequate nutritional training for medical students, physicians, and other health care professionals.

In the intensive, we look at the fundamentals of nutrition science, prevention and treatment of chronic disease, clinical management of common health problems, the patient care process, how stress affects nutritional status, environmental and public health issues, and more. Graduates come away with the knowledge, confidence, and compassion to guide patients towards life-giving, healthy nutrition. After eating a colorful, healthy, whole-foods diet for one week, our participants are often inspired to transform their own and their families' diets, and to authentically recommend healthy transformations for their patients.

ES: *Isn't nutrition covered extensively in medical schools?*

SL: Amazingly, medical schools generally offer very little training in preventive medicine—including the effects of diet—and what constitutes health. The focus tends to be on disease and treatment. There has been excellent data on the benefits of a healthy diet for many years, yet most physicians are unfamiliar with the literature. This is beginning to change, and more and more physicians now realize that what we eat does indeed directly affect our health, for good or ill. When I was in medical school, I rarely heard the word *health*; we always talked about and focused on disease. So most of us in medical professions aren't oriented towards health and disease *prevention*. Doctors are trained not to teach patients about preventing health problems, but to look for problems and 'fix' things that go wrong. Yet it's too simplistic to say that doctors are at fault. It's the whole system, including the educational system for physicians, that needs to change. What I do almost exclusively is to teach people about the choices available to them and the consequences of various choices. I encourage them to experiment and see what works for them as individuals.

CC: *When I first heard about your training programs on Food as Medicine, I thought, "What a fabulous bridge between holistic and traditional Western approaches to health!" It seems that your work as an educator really bridges the worlds of Western medicine and alternative approaches to medicine and health.*

SL: Exactly. I always knew that part of my role was to be a bridge. Before I went into medicine, I met regularly with a wonderful circle of women healers. I saw them do incredible work, but they were left out of the dialogue. They could never come to the table to talk about anything, they couldn't publish, they couldn't get insurance, and they couldn't earn a living. They couldn't be part of the dialogue about creating a new health care system, and I wanted to bring in their perspective. Now, because I'm an MD, I have access, I have a seat at the table, and I'm bringing these issues to the forefront.



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CC: *Was there a personal experience in your own life that drew you to focus on food and healing?*

SL: When I was in my 20s I started suffering from what was probably chronic fatigue syndrome; but it wasn't diagnosed as that, because 30 years ago most people, including physicians, didn't know about this disease. Even today, many doctors don't believe it exists. I had a lot of food allergies; my stomach was often upset. At my home in western Massachusetts where I was living then, I had a garden, so I started growing my own food and experimenting with my diet. I came up with a diet that, incredibly, eliminated all of my symptoms. When I look back at it now, I realize it was a diet for candidiasis—this is a particular kind of fungal infection that usually occurs in the skin and mucous membranes, but it can also invade the bloodstream. I ate only organic foods—brown rice, fresh fruits and vegetables, and a little bit of fish, no refined foods, sugar, or bread. It made an unbelievable difference in my health and my life.

One risk factor for getting candidiasis is taking multiple courses of antibiotics—and many people do this. We realize now that we have overused antibiotics over the years. We didn't understand that when you use antibiotics you have to rebuild the bowel by re-populating it with beneficial bacteria. Often this is why people crave sweets, because that is what the *C. albicans*—the specific yeast that's involved in candidiasis—feed on!

It turns out that diet can be a factor in producing many, many symptoms of ill health, from aching joints, headaches, fatigue, menstrual problems, behavioral problems, depression, and more. Many alternative health care providers and some MDs are now screening for nutritional deficiencies, infections, and food allergies, but we still need more education.

CC: *My organization, Teleosis, and our journal Symbiosis strive to educate people about interrelationship, about the connections between our bodies, our health, and the environment. Without a healthy environment, we won't have healthy people. Do these ideas fit into your work with food as medicine? Do you think of Food as Medicine as a practice of Ecologically Sustainable Medicine?*

SL: Absolutely. Western medicine, for all of the advances it has brought us, historically has been very reductionistic; that is, it tends to study the smallest parts, rather than the wholes. We are always trying to separate things, because we think that we will get more valid information if we understand the parts. And we do get a certain kind of information. But without awareness that human beings are intrinsically connected to and in relationship with everything in their environment, the picture is too limited.

CC: *Can you articulate how you see the connection between the kind of work that Teleosis does and your programs with food, healing, and medicine?*

Upcoming Programs

Food As Medicine

June 10–16, 2006
Baltimore, MD

Mind-Body Medicine

January 29–
February 24, 2006
Berkeley, CA

www.cmbm.org
202.966.7338

SL: Underlying our educational approach is an orientation towards holistic medicine; we try to get across the idea that health is intrinsically connected to all aspects of our lives, including our environment, social relationships, spiritual aspirations, and so on. It's never about one thing; we approach health from many different perspectives.

For example, in Food As Medicine, we introduce people to wonderful tasting, colorful, organic food. This not only gives participants the *experience* of eating healthy food that tastes good, but it also opens the discussion of the how our farming and pest control practices affect the health of people and of the Earth. An important principle in ecology has to do with keeping a certain balance, or bringing things back into balance from a state of imbalance. This is what we look at: how can our relationship with food help to keep us in balance—with ourselves, our communities, and the Earth.

CC: *It sounds as though you're saying it really is an ecological approach.*

SL: Definitely. It's all systems. The Earth is central to everything.

ES: *How would you like the Center for Mind-Body Medicine to be perceived in the long run?*

SL: We want the Center to be a place that people think of when they want to change their practices or the way they are working with their patients. Our goal for the organization is to become known as a place where you can develop a new way of being with patients. The tools we teach are really from traditions all over the world. It is our birthright to know these tools of meditation and awareness. It's all about the energy and spirit of connection. Our relationship to the Earth is central to everything. 