My interest in food came at a very young age. My father died suddenly of a heart attack at 41 years of age. He was thin and active. If you looked at him, a body displaying every sinewy muscle, you would see him as a picture of what our country deems healthy. However, he was everything but healthy and his early death displayed that better than his looks.

My father was a good man, one of the best men one could know, but I only knew him until I was 6 years old. Actually, I hardly knew him and only have begun scratching the surface of his true self long after he died. It is nearly 40 years after his death and I have gradually learned some things about him.

When my father died in 1980, I found out that I was lucky enough to also carry his gene for familial hypercholesterolemia. While doctors at the lipid clinic had many dietary suggestions, they were not encouraging kids to take any medications at that time.

Back then, my brother and I were known to be the carriers of this gene.  I would not say the diet they thought was better for me and my brother was actually better. We were not allowed to eat any saturated fats and very little fat in general. We were told we could no longer drink whole milk nor eat real butter. I was a milk lover and was devastated by having to drink skim milk. Our butter was quickly turned to margarine which was potentially and unknowingly destructive to our health. I was allowed to eat a piece of bacon once a year and eggs were confined to only the whites.

When I graduated from 1st grade, we were each given an ice cream cone. After a year of no sweets, I ate it. I told my mother and received a devastating verbal lashing. I did not understand but looking back, I can see how terrifying it must have been to lose your husband assuming that fatty foods were the cause. The last thing she wanted was for her children to have the same fate as her husband. After all she was left to raise a 6, 9 and 11 year old on her own. Over time, my mother softened a bit about our ability to have sweets here and there, but we never drank whole milk nor ate real butter during our childhood.

It was my father’s early death and my brother and my poor genetic health that led to my pursuit of a natural cure for familial hypercholesterolemia. I investigated every diet out there. I researched the zone diet and Dean Ornish’s diet for the reversal of heart disease and many others that existed at that time. I used my own body to experiment. Back then, I was only able to test my cholesterol every 6 months so it was difficult to know what was working or not. I had to follow it long enough to verify if there was any change. If there was, it was a diet I had to adhere to for the rest of my life.

In my teens, I became a serious runner.
With my high speed, excessive running and minimal intake of fats, my cholesterol had never been so low. It was in the 200’s when normally I ran in the high 300’s. Looking back at that time, I always reported how that diet was the best for my cholesterol but was absolutely not sustainable. It was closest to the Dean Ornish diet for the reversal of heart disease. I could not and would not live a life requiring such a diet.

Years passed with many new diets and fads. I developed issues digesting wheat likely from acquiring amebic parasites in my late teens. The fiber in wheat was one of the things I felt was helping remove cholesterol from my body, but I could no longer tolerate it. I hated being part of the gluten free fad but it was seriously affecting my health. I could not prove it and refused to obliterate wheat from my diet without a known reason.  It was not until I developed severe digestive problems for which I did not want to take medicine that I stopped eating wheat. I would have to find other dietary changes to help my cholesterol.

Sometime in my 20’s they started reporting the harms of trans fats found in margarine, something they had told me to eat for almost 20 years prior to this discovery. I was disheartened by what the medical system did NOT know yet preached they did know. I was in medical school at the time. I was advised to tell my own patients with high cholesterol to avoid fats and especially saturated fats. I had to recommend medications such as statins to lower cholesterol. Despite studies proving the efficacy of this drug, I no longer believed what the doctors told me. Studies could prove any side of a situation. I would no longer accept that it was cholesterol that had killed my father. I believed it was sugar and stress.

As I became a physician, I grappled with what I was taught versus what I truly believed. I did not think a number of 200 for cholesterol was risky at all. I did not feel drinking raw milk which was unpasteurized, unhomogenized and full of fat was a risk to anyone’s health if the cows were raised to be happy and healthy. I did not believe eating meat was bad. On the contrary, as long as your meat was happy and raised humanely, I believed it was great to eat it in small quantities. I believed in consuming whole foods, never its parts and definitely not low or partial fat foods. After all, it was the same people who told me to eat margarine who also told me to avoid fat. Most of what I was told by the medical system held truth to me anymore and here I was a part of that system, legally bound to suggesting what I did not believe in.

As I struggled with ongoing cravings for sweets, I realized that these cravings went away when I ate fat. Fat had hormones that made your brain feel satisfied. If you never ate fat, you never felt satisfied. You would continue to eat which led to overeating. Also the consumption of foods with low fat often had high glycemic indices which led to diabetes. There was a good chance that the medical system advising me to not eat fat led me to crave more sweets. Sugary foods satisfies my high caloric needs as a runner. I could eat a quart of frozen yogurt and still feel unsatisfied wanting more. I eventually discovered that real full fat ice cream satisfied me faster. It had fat which was slower to absorb and did not cause the rapid sugar spikes of low fat foods which contribute to diabetes.

In working with patients with bulimia, I suggested they eat more fat, contrary to what the standard American diet recommended. I suggested variety, like consuming dark meat as well as light meat, beef, pork, liver and all parts of an animal rather than just a chicken breast.

Our western diet lacked variety. We craved what we were missing but we didn’t know what that was. We filled our empty tummies with sugar calories when we actually needed fat and variety of nutrients. The low fat diet led to never feeling satiated and overeating which stretched our stomachs and led to a greater need to eat to fill the space. This is my opinion of what led to the obesity epidemic. We have morbidly obese people who are actually starved for nutrition.

Despite my father’s perfectly thin physique, he ate a horrible diet loaded with sugar. I believe he was an unknown diabetic. Diabetes is a heart disease equivalent meaning your risk of a future heart attack is the same as someone who already had one heart attack who is not diabetic. His chances of having a heart attack were very high if he had unknown diabetes. With the foods he ate, the sugars he loved, and the stress he was under, it is very likely that he was diabetic explaining his heart attack in terms of blood sugar rather than his cholesterol.

I too had always struggled with sugar addiction. My brother and I were both sugar addicts. One thing I remembered about my father was that he was addicted to sugar. During medical school, I expressed to my friends my belief that sugar contributed to my fathers death, not fat. My friends scoffed at me saying that was ridiculous. About 10 years after finishing my training, evidence was revealed that the sugar industry paid a mere $20,000 to hide the harms of sugar. Fats had been erroneously targeted as the culprit. My father was one of the victims who died as a result of the hidden truth about sugar.

In conclusion, despite a medical education, I am weary of the advice given to us from the medical system.  I have experienced it’s faults thinking the system knew best. It hid truths that led to many deaths, one of which was my own father. This is unforgivable- sacrificing lives for money. We currently are surrounded by that sentiment where money supercedes anything humane that promotes the wellness of the world.  I will never give in to such systems. I can’t help but be surrounded by them, but I can choose to make the right decision for myself. By “being the change I hope to see in the world” (Ghandi), I hope to influence others to also do the same for a better future.