Your Belly Microbiome On The Move
Part 4

by Lisa Sarasohn

What's in a belly? To recap previous installments, your belly plays host to 100 trillion bacteria. These single-celled creatures—your gut microbiota—shape your physical and mental health. When the populations of your belly bacteria achieve a balance, they vitalize your digestion, immunity, hormone production, nerve communication, and more.

Imbalance among and depletion of the gut bacteria likely plays a key role in body-mind disorders such as anxiety, autism, obesity, irritable bowel syndrome, autoimmune diseases, and allergies.

In previous installments, I've discussed the possibility that ancient icons of the Sacred Feminine reveal the potentially healing power of the belly's bacteria. I've also mentioned we need to keep replenishing our intestinal bacteria since we lose so many with each bowel movement. Traditional cuisines help us do exactly that by including fermented foods on the daily menu.

I've also asked the questions:

How does the use of pesticides in food production diminish the soil's microbiome?

How do soil depletion and industrial food processing affect our ability to replenish the gut microbiome that's so crucial to our physical and mental health?

Not long after posing those questions, synchronicity sent me plenty of responses, thanks to herbalist Lindsay Wilson. From the New York Times to journals of complementary medicine, the word is: We need to bring soil microorganisms into our bellies for digestive health and body-mind well-being as a whole.

We humans have an instinctive draw to soil, however muted that instinct may become. When I recently asked a group of women how many of the children they knew ate dirt, the reply was "all of them." In another instance, a friend told me about an elderly African American woman she knew many years ago. No matter that the people with whom she worked made fun of her, the woman ate dirt from time to time. And she was never sick.

If you want to replenish your belly's microbiome, shop at your local farmers' market. Eat vegetables that have grown in pesticide-free, organically rich soil.

How else do we support our belly's microbial world?

With physical activity.

Just as cuisines incorporating fermented foods have a long history, so do breathing and movement exercises that mobilize the belly. I can only imagine that traditions of dance, healing rituals, and spiritual practices activate the belly's microbiome by stirring bacterial populations through each other, increasing opportunities for their interaction, energizing their metabolic processes, distributing their metabolic products.

Consider these expressions: Belly dancing. Chanting, powered by deep belly breathing. Martial arts. Yoga, including such belly-exercising practices as *kapalabhati*, *agni sara*, *uddiyana bandha*, *and nauli*.

The 23 center-energizing exercises I teach on the Honoring Your Belly DVD, drawn from a dynamic Japanese style of yoga, activate the belly and, I suspect, its microbiome. Moving through each gesture, you expand your belly out from your spine with each in-breath and press your belly in toward your spine with each out-breath.

Presented in shorter form as The Gutsy Women's Workout in The Woman's Belly Book: Finding Your True Center for More Energy, Confidence, and Pleasure, moves such as Cradle, Bright Blessings, Belly Bowl, Power Centering, Lily, and Wings compress, expand, twist, and rotate your belly. Your belly's bacteria? I can only imagine they're on the move, too, all the more effectively serving your physical and emotional health.

In this and previous articles, I've been reporting on the microbiome in terms of the medical research aligned with the conventional Western paradigm of the human body and our human health. But this research is challenging conventional concepts of the body, health, and disease. With only 10% of your genetic material endowed with the DNA that is uniquely yours, who are you and what exactly is your body?

From the perspective of the pharmaceutical industry, research on the microbiome leads to manufacture and sale of designer probiotics, drugs fashioned to restore the microbiome to a healthy balance however damaged it might have become. Yet this same research is showing that a healthy microbiome is hugely variable, both within individuals over time and among individuals by demographics and geography. That variety will likely challenge the prospect of cost-effective drug development.

In the realm of the microbiome, then, medical research just might put medicine as we know it out of business.

In the next installment, I'll address these same subjects — the microbiome, the nature of the human body, your own planet body in relation to big body Earth — in a more imaginative, intuitive way.

Stay tuned for the codewords: Primordial. Gaia. Torus.