

## CHAPTER FIVE

# ***"SISTAS"*, HANDLE YOUR BUSINESS!**

The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for white, or women created for men.

Alice Walker

Ok.....this is where I get to vent. Actually, vent is not exactly the right word; I guess the word I'm looking for is *plead*. Yes, plead is the word which describes how I feel about the plight of my "*Sistas*" in the world nowadays. And when I say "*Sistas*", I mean *all* women because in truth we are all sisters in womanhood, regardless of what country we live in or the color of our skin.

As a woman who has lived among many different races, economic classes, and religions, I have seen a common thread emerging in the last generation or so. Although it is true that we have made great strides in the workplace, education, politics, and in society in general, you have to ask yourself; at what cost? Now don't get me wrong, I'm the last one to tell a woman that she needs to stay at home and be "barefoot and pregnant" because Lord knows I sure didn't, but I will say that we need to start putting ourselves first, then our families, and then whatever else we feel we need to pursue. Putting ourselves first, which is a completely foreign concept to a lot of women, starts with the spirit within and then with the temple (our body) that our spirit resides in. How can we be at our best, how can we be the strength and the backbone of our families and communities if we are sick, tired, and stressed all the time? How can we nurture our men and our children, not only physically but spiritually and emotionally as well if we don't give ourselves that same level of attention? I have always believed it was such a special honor to be born as a woman and with that honor comes responsibility to ourselves first and then to those who, whether you realize it or not, depend on your strength and nurturing nature for their very existence. Somehow along the way we have forgotten this fact and it is starting to show in our spirits and our temples.

Even though this chapter is directed at all women, I am especially concerned with the state of Black women since of course, I am one. *Sistas*, we REALLY need to *Handle Our Business!* Just look at the state of our community! Look at the state of our health! Look at how we disrespect ourselves and each other at a rate that is unprecedented in history! What’s going on? Personally, I’m not one who points the finger at anyone for my circumstances. Once I know I have done everything within my power to better myself, then and only then will I look to circumstances outside of me for the cause of my troubles. Normally, I don’t even get that far because I still have far too much work to do on myself! As Leo Tolstoy once said; “*Everybody thinks of changing humanity and nobody thinks of changing himself.*”

Because the focus of this book is diet and health and the other effects of eating meat, I am going to try to limit myself to this realm. But, I must tell you that it’s hard.....really, really hard because this is a subject that is so close to my heart. I have seen too many of my Sistas live in a perpetual state of helplessness, in fact even hopelessness, and it just breaks my heart. It’s time for us to take control of our lives and our bodies and regain the power and our rightful place in our families and our communities.

By now, you have been inundated with facts and figures about the perils of eating meat so I won’t spend too much time on that in this chapter. However, there are a few statistic we need to go over that directly affect our people – Black people – who are now officially the sickest group in the United States with no visible sign of turning back. Just pick up any issue of *Ebony* or *Jet* – EVERY issue has at least one article in it about the major health concerns that our people face as illustrated below.

## Black Folks are Killing Themselves with Their Forks

I’ve already quoted the American Obesity Association (AOA) statistic that 64.5% of Americans are now overweight or obese (see CHAPTER THREE, *Why We Were Not Meant to Eat Meat*), but what I did not mention in that chapter were the statistics from that same AOA study with respect to African Americans:

- African American women are the most overweight and obese people in America. According to the AOA, **78% of all African American women are overweight, and 51% of these women are obese.** Of that 51%, 15% are morbidly obese which means that they are grossly overweight to the point where it is life-threatening. To me, this is totally shocking. Four of every five black women are overweight, and one in every two of these is obese!
- The statistics are just as alarming for African-American men: **60% are overweight and 29% of them are obese.**

*“Throwin’ Down” Vegetarian Style!*

- Diabetes: *26% of African-Americans between the ages of 45 to 74 suffer from diabetes*, most of them from Type 2 (adult onset) diabetes, which is a direct result of excess weight and poor diet and exercise habits
- Cancer: Obesity appears to contribute to the higher risk of *pancreatic cancer* among African-Americans
- Hypertension: the high prevalence of obesity is a contributing factor to the high prevalence of hypertension in minority populations, especially among African Americans who tend to have an earlier onset of this disease and have more severe cases.
- Heart Disease: Among African Americans, the high prevalence of hypertension and Type 2 diabetes are factors that contribute to the high death rate from coronary heart disease.

Personally, as a Black woman, and having been raised by a single mother (who is obese, has type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, heart disease, is on oxygen, and takes over 10 medications each day, including insulin), I know how hard life can be for us in this society in general, because it seems like the cards are stacked against us sometimes. I understand all of that but I believe that one of the gravest problems Black folks face (men and women alike) is our widespread neglect of our health. Sure, we have social issues we need to deal with as a people but why not start with what we can immediately control – ourselves? We are literally killing ourselves with our forks and jeopardizing the quality of our lives and even our children’s lives because of our ignorance. We need to understand how the food we eat every day directly affects our physiology which is making us sick and weak not only individually, but as a *people*. We simply must do something if we wish to be strong and reclaim ourselves, our families, and our communities.

I know there are several factors that contribute to the dire state of our people, primarily economic factors and the limited access to healthy foods and facilities in our communities. Believe me, I am *very* aware of how drastically things change when you cross over to the “other side of the tracks”. In fact, that is one of the missions of the *21<sup>st</sup> Century Vegetarians*, to set up some sort of infrastructure, either through our own facilities or through a network of existing ones, where people in underserved communities will have a safe place to come to work out and get healthy foods. (*So spread the word about this book, y’all! I’m gonna need some money to get this thang done!*) Understanding that there are some legitimate concerns regarding our economic state, we can’t blame our bad habits totally on that. This reminds me of when my husband and I lived in Maryland just before moving back to Los Angeles last year. Our home was in a middle to upper class racially mixed community, with quite a few Black folks. One weekend, I had to (unfortunately) get my hair “*did*” on a Saturday morning because my

usual mid-week monthly appointment was already booked. My stylist scheduled me for 6:00 am! I was like; “WHAT? 6:00 am? Does the salon even open that early?” I really had no idea. As it turned out the salon opened at 5:00 am on Saturdays. When I arrived at 5:45am, the salon was standing room only! Every chair was filled and the waiting area was already packed. I could not believe my eyes. I did a quick mental scan, and true to the AOA statistics, four out of every five women there that morning were overweight. While I was waiting, I overheard one of the stylists talking about a \$450 Louis Vuitton® dog carrier she wanted to buy for her new poodle, (the poodle cost her \$700). I quickly did the math (always the CPA!) and realized that, not even including dog food and training, she could have purchased a two year membership to the local gym where my husband and I were members. Yes, economics is an issue when it comes to our health, but sometimes I think the priority is more on the health of our hair than the health of our hearts.

### The Real Chemical Addiction

One factor which I mentioned in CHAPTER THREE, *Why We Were Not Meant to Eat Meat* is the effect that all of the chemicals and growth hormones in animal food has on our bodies. I know I’ve said this before but it warrants repeating again; if our chickens, pigs, and cows are pumped with this crap so that they will grow large and fat rapidly and unhealthily, isn’t it logical that we will as well? If we continue to feed ourselves these doses of chemicals wrapped in a hamburger or fried in a chicken, won’t our bodies eventually become addicted? We are fighting a losing battle. Just like when the drug addict sticks the needle in his arm. You already know the outcome. You can’t rationalize or reason when you are addicted to drugs. Your body literally starts running things and you are dragged down the path it takes you, no matter how humiliating that may be. Does this sound even remotely familiar? Sure, we are not talking about crack or heroine, but how many people do you know who are prisoners in their own body – because of appetite control issues? It’s really not fair when you think about it. It may not be the case for everyone, but some people may be more susceptible to chemical dependencies than others, yet no one seems to make this connection when it comes to food. Overweight people are made to feel like they’re undisciplined which leads to a cycle of self-consciousness and shame. And shame is one of the lowest emotional vibrations you can put out there. Every thought that we think, every feeling that we have, has a vibration that is released and acts like a magnet. The lower your vibration the more you continue to attract the wrong feelings, circumstances, and even people which perpetuate this cycle of shame and depression. This ultimately robs you of your self respect and your joy. Once you lose your joy it is hard to be joyful toward anyone else.

There is a bigger picture than just being undisciplined. In my opinion, meat is the real chemical addiction. Maybe all these years we have been fighting a gun battle with sticks and stones.

## Being Sick is not the Norm

This past year was very trying for me because my Mother fell ill and it seemed like she got very sick literally overnight. My sister and I spent quite a few sleepless nights trying to figure out what to do for her and what doctors we needed to find to get her well again. Over the course of a month, I personally spoke to all of her doctors and attended all of her appointments so that I could get up to speed and help set up a system for her to follow to recover.

Now, mind you, I have not been to see a doctor for anything other than routine physicals since I gave birth to my son almost 20 years ago. I hardly ever get sick. My husband hardly ever gets sick. My kids hardly ever get sick; except for the occasional crud they catch living in the dorm with hundreds of other college students. So I was completely shocked when most of the doctors just responded with "Well, she's just getting old.....that's going to happen to all of us....there's not much we can do" I was like, "WHAT?" So it's just a forgone conclusion that by the time I'm 75 years old I will be sick and feeble? NO. I simply refuse to accept that as reality. I was so upset with these doctors because they were validating my Mother's feelings that she was "just old" and "we all get sick when we're old".

It absolutely does not have to be that way at all. Barring any unforeseen accident or illness, there is absolutely no reason that we cannot be in good health and good physical condition until the day we die. Like the quote I mentioned earlier in this book "Growing old does not make us sick.....it's growing sick that makes us OLD!" You see, when you eat death, you become death and inevitably you will start to decay like the dead things you have eaten. Eventually, in your 30's or maybe even as late as your 40's or 50's if you're lucky, this decay will start to catch up with you and it will manifest physically in excess weight, bad skin, wrinkles, poor digestion, disease, or other physical ailments. We can slow down the aging process dramatically by eliminating dead things from our diets and by being more careful about what we put in our bodies. It's sad to say, but most people take better care of their cars than they do their bodies. In fact, I once read a quote that really rung true to me concerning the typical everyday diet and lifestyle in general. It said; "Most people do not die, they slowly kill themselves." Think about that. By substituting even just a few meals each week with live, healthy food, you will noticeably reduce and maybe even reverse the aging process.

*Sistas*, we owe this to ourselves. We deserve the very best out of life, just like any other human being does. But we *have* to take care of ourselves. The time is NOW, not when we're lying in a hospital bed or confined to our homes. It's never too late, but at that point it sure is a lot harder. When I'm in my 70's I still want to be globetrotting with my husband and hangin' with my kids and grandkids. I want to be an active participant in life, not a passive observer.

## Get Back in the Kitchen!

OK, I know a lot of you don't want to hear this but *it is time to get back in the kitchen*. No excuses. We simply cannot afford to leave our most precious resource, our health and the health of our men and our kids to McDonald's® Burger King®, or Kentucky Fried Chicken®. I'm not trying to be rude but let's be real – *they don't give a damn about you! Or your kids!* Why would you turn over something so important as your health and your family's health to a cheap fast food restaurant? There has to be an end to this madness. Take back your health and that of your family by getting back in the kitchen! They will appreciate it and you will all be better off! If not for yourselves, at least do it for your kids. They are totally dependent upon you for every morsel and it's *criminal* to let them eat fast food on a regular basis, especially when childhood obesity is at a critical stage these days and our young girls are starting to menstruate at the age of 8 because of all the extra hormones in meat. It's absolutely a form of child abuse. Our kids don't know any better. They only know what we teach them. Actually, what we show them by our own example.

I know some of y'all are like; *“She don't know what she's talking about....I don't have time, and on top of that it's expensive to eat healthy.”* Trust me, I know all of that. I had (have) a very challenging career, I have been “broker than broke” more times in my life than I care to remember, but yet I still had to put food on the table since, in accordance with our lifestyle, eating fast food on a regular basis was not an option. It wasn't always convenient. It definitely wasn't always easy. But it was our way of life and I was not about to compromise that. I “*got in the kitchen*” and handled my business. I still do. And my family appreciates it – whether we are eating beans and rice when things are tight, or one of my seven course vegetarian “*Throw Downs*” when we have a little extra cash. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that I take responsibility for my family's health and I am proud to say that I have also set that example for my daughter Kamaal, who recently turned 21. Ever since she was in junior high, she has been in the kitchen with me. If I was running late getting home from work, or out of town on a business trip, - no problem. Kamaal had my back and she got dinner on the table for her brother and her father.

Another friend of mine who I worked with early on in my accounting career did the same thing. She had two small children, was divorced, and drove over an hour to work to and from her home each day. I was amazed by this and her unwavering commitment to her children. She always had dinner on the table for those kids and managed to make time not only for their extra curricular events but also for her career. She even managed to get an advanced degree (she earned her MBA in the evenings and is now a Director for one of the largest companies in America). She was so organized and dedicated it made me step up my game! So, I understand, there are a lot of reasons why women have gotten away from taking control over the nutrition

of their family but, frankly, that's irrelevant. If you don't do it, who will? When you think about it that way there really is not much choice.

But what if you can't cook? Learn! You can learn to do anything you want to do. It's all about what you consider to be a priority. When I got married, I could not even boil water. On top of that I was still working 60 hours per week and, to make matters worse (or better, depending upon how you look at it) I got pregnant on my honeymoon!!! I felt so bad for my husband because 1) I couldn't cook, 2) I was too tired from working to cook even if I knew how, and 3) I was too sick from the early stages of pregnancy to cook even if I knew how or was not too tired! Add up all of these factors and what you have is what my cousin Taisha so eloquently refers to as a "hot a\*\* mess." I had been married just three weeks and knew I *had* to get it together because I didn't want my husband to - at worst leave me, or, at best talk about me for being another triflin' black woman that wouldn't or couldn't cook. And, most importantly, I was starving since I was now eating for two! So, what did I do? What any newly married woman in a crisis would do - I called my Mom! I grilled her and wrote down all of her favorite recipes (many of the ones in this book can be traced back to her) and I just replaced the meat and chicken with whatever meat substitutes I could find. She gloated with "I told you so" since she had been telling me since junior high that my sister and I needed to learn how to cook because the way to a man's heart was definitely through his stomach! Turned out she was right! But the best news was that I learned that most of the vegetarian meat substitutes take just minutes to cook. These foods are not only tasty and far healthier than their meat counterparts, but they can actually be cooked in a fraction of the time which is a huge plus for a busy family such as ours. You see, with vegetarian meat substitutes, you are basically just warming up the food and letting it cook long enough to blend the spices or other flavors. THERE IS NOTHING DEAD SO THERE IS NOTHING TO KILL.

And it's not that you have to love to cook. I don't love to cook either yet I end up writing a cookbook! How crazy is that? You see, this book is about more than a collection of vegetarian recipes. I don't necessarily love to cook - I love to take care of my family. However, over time, through them I have learned to love to cook because it warms my heart so much seeing how appreciative they are to have home cooked food that was made with love and care. That's priceless to me. Instead of getting an extra dose of hormones, feces, and antibiotics in their food, my family gets an extra dose of love and care. I want *my* love going into what they eat, not the cruelty of sick and abused animals that end up on a greasy griddle served up by some teenager that God knows where their hands have been! There simply is no short cut. You have to get in the kitchen and take care of yourself and your family.

## **If You Cook It, They Will Eat It**

Don't *even* try to tell me that your kids or your husband won't eat "healthy stuff." If you cook it, they will eat it. In fact, if you do it up the way we do (and the way I've shown you in

this book), they won’t even know they are eating healthy! That’s what we mean by “*Throwin’ Down!*” You can’t be comin’ home with a tub of tofu and some alfalfa sprouts talking about “we’re going to start eating healthier.” I have seen far too many people do that (I admire the courage) but the problem is you will lose your family forever! The kids will be *running* to McDonald’s!®

Recently, while I was in New Mexico visiting my Mom, my son came over for dinner after basketball practice. He was by himself which was unusual. The one teammate who normally comes with him had to “babysit” a visiting recruit so he was tied up for the evening. When I asked about his whereabouts, my son said that he could not make it, but that if I was cooking Chic-ketts®, could I please prepare a “doggie bag” for him or as we say in the ‘hood “*fix him a plate.*” Now this is a 21 year old black man, from D.C. whose nickname is “Fat Cat”, and he is actually *asking* for the *Fried Chic-ketts*®. When my son finally got back to the dorm with Fat Cat’s “plate”, another teammate (who had eaten with us in the past) was in the room and asked, “Hey man, is that those Chick-etts®? Let me git one of them!” This is just one example of how, if you know what to cook and how to cook vegetarian food, then your family will eat it. If my son’s teammates like my food, chances are that you and your kids will as well.

This reminds me of yet another example of how good the meat substitutes are these days. When my daughter graduated from high school in the summer of 2004, we decided to have a big family party since she was turning 18, graduating from high school, and would be leaving for Costa Rica for a year (all within a two week time period). In addition, my husband, son, and I were leaving later that summer to move to Maryland for a couple of years. So, we decided to invite nearly all of our family and friends over for a big going away party. Over thirty people came the day of the party.

Normally, we always bring our food to family events because there is really nothing we can eat there but salad. Our family accepts and respects our lifestyle, and I appreciate that but do not expect much more. But this time, the tables were turned. As the invitations went out and the R.S.V.P.’s came in, nearly each one of them asked “what are we going to *eat*?” They knew that we did not allow meat to be cooked in our house and that we would not serve it under any circumstances. I just told them, “Don’t worry about it! Just show up! Being a vegetarian for one day won’t kill you!” The women were up for it. The men joked that they would be stopping by Burger King® or McDonald’s® on the way!

My daughter and I spent a week planning the menu. This was our chance to show our family that our food really was good! We had a huge variety of items – enough choices to please the young and old alike. We made a six-foot vegetarian sub with vegetarian smoked turkey, foccacia bread, avocado, and all the fixings, a huge vegetarian “Meat” Lasagna, a couple of large trays of Enchiladas in Red Sauce, Spicy Cajun-Style Hot Links, all sorts of salads and sides, and the best vegan chocolate cake on the planet (compliments of my Mom – I *still* don’t know how she makes it!) Everyone raved about the food and there were absolutely no leftovers (not because we did not have enough, but because people took food home in Tupperware)! In a brief moment of rest, I reflected on the party and was so pleased and happy

that it was a success, when I noticed two of my sister-in-laws "gossiping" in the corner. I thought that was strange and asked them "what's up?" I just *knew* I was going to get the latest family dirt and I was not about to be left out of the loop. Then, one of them said, almost accusingly,

"So, I thought you said you would never cook meat."

I replied, "That's right, I won't. Why are you asking that all of the sudden?"

"Then what's up with the lasagna and the enchiladas? I know that's real meat."

At this point, I knew we had changed a paradigm forever. I just laughed and took her by the hand, led her into my kitchen, opened the freezer and showed her the two vegan products I used which she claimed was "meat." She was shocked. And then she wrote down the names of the products and asked me for the recipe!

The story does not end there. Just a couple of days ago, I was talking to my mother-in-law on the phone and she told me she had a discussion with my brother-in-law about the party and the food I served that day. She mentioned to him that the recipes in the book would be good for vegetarians and non-vegetarians since most of the people at the party could not tell that they were not eating meat. He was like, "What are you talking about? Martha had two sections – meat dishes and non-meat dishes." She replied, "No she didn't. You know Martha wouldn't do that!" His response was, "Well, I know I had meat that day so I think she made an exception and cooked some just for us." To that she said, "Not Martha. She won't even let meat in her house let alone cook it!"

My mother-in-law knows me well. I thought it was funny because basically, for the past three years, he just *knew* he had eaten real meat that day. The point of the story is this - if you cook it, they will eat it. Whether you tell them it is vegetarian or not is up to you. Just do what you have to do to take care of the health of your family.

## Let's Get It Together

So, my *Sistas*, let's get it together and do our thing. There is so much at stake here. A few extra pounds on the scale or a few extra inches around the waist is the *least* of our problems. We are talking about an entire generation of people that are getting sicker and weaker, day by day. Is that the legacy we want to leave our children? Poor health? No, of course not; but it starts and ends with us. No one can do it better than we can. Let's start today. Right now. Do your research and make a commitment to take better care of yourself, the men in your life, and your children. Reclaim your power. The power to nurture a nation. *Handle Your Business!*