

THE STATE OF THE MEME

BY FRANK FORENCICH



AN EXUBERANT ANIMAL® PUBLICATION

THE STATE OF THE MEME

“The beginning is the most important part of the work.”

Plato

Paleo is smoking hot these days, hot enough to roast a hindquarter of antelope to a mouth-watering golden brown. All the hippest fitness people (the “hip-fit”) are talking about our ancestral origins. They’re reading and writing books, going to conferences, sharing ideas and speculating about the future.

The enthusiasm is well-placed. Paleo holds immense promise for reshaping the trajectory of health, medicine, fitness and human welfare in general. The big-box health and fitness industry is doing its best to ignore this trend, but there can be no putting human biology or evolution back in the bottle. Ancestry has the potential to touch everything in our modern lives, from health and medicine to business, education and social organization.

But what exactly is “Paleo” anyway? Depending on who you talk to, Paleo might be a period in human history, a philosophy for living or a way to maximize one’s athletic performance. It might be a “caveman” lifestyle or a diet of meat and vegetables. Paleo may be all these things, but there’s one description that we need to add to the list, one that hasn’t gotten the attention that it deserves. That is, “Paleo” is a meme.

WHAT’S IN A MEME?

A meme is simply a unit of culture that replicates, with variation across space and time. The word was first made popular by Richard Dawkins in his 1976 bestseller, *The Selfish Gene*. The basic idea is that memes behave like genes. They make copies of themselves and spread out into the cultural environment. And like genes, they mutate, spinning off variations that may or may not survive in the wild. Some memes replicate in astonishing numbers and remain viable for years or even centuries, while others quickly perish.

Once we understand the nature of memes, we get a sense of how best to introduce them into the wild. That is, if you’re out to create a powerful and sustainable meme that will change the world, that meme must have clarity and appeal. If people don’t understand what it is, it won’t replicate with fidelity. If it’s vague, it will quickly splinter off into a range of styles and sub-specialties. If it’s poorly defined or not credible, it will disappear from the cultural radar and go extinct.

With a highly successful Ancestral Health Symposium now on the books, we have a golden opportunity to shape the future of the Paleo meme. If we create a coherent, clear and compelling message, we can shape the conversation around health, medicine and fitness in the 21st century. This idea—that our bodies have a history and that we can improve our health by behaving in ways consistent with that history—has the potential to completely transform the way we live. But if we get it wrong, things will take an entirely different course. If we craft a meme that is fragmented, inaccurate, boring or irrelevant, it will fall by the wayside and perish.

As it stands, we're already seeing some distinct variations on the Paleo meme:

ACADEMIC PALEO

The original version comes to us from university lecture halls, laboratories and the fossil beds of East Africa. This is the labor-intensive, hard-won, scientific version of human prehistory. The advantage of this meme is that it's highly credible and probably accurate in most respects. Unfortunately, it's damn hard work. To really get to a complete picture of human history at this level, we've got to be fluent in paleontology, evolution, molecular biology and a host of related sub-disciplines. We need the authority of this meme, but it's almost a full-time job in its own right.

CARTOON PALEO

At the other end of the sophistication spectrum we find “cartoon Paleo.” In this variation, slackers are content to go forth with the caveman image and are not inclined to ask deeper questions. For many, “Meet the Flintstones” is all the explanation they need. This meme is quick to propagate because it's easy to comprehend, never mind the fact that it's completely inaccurate and profoundly misleading. Fortunately, the Flintstones meme is starting to crumble under a mountain of hard evidence.

ROMANTIC PALEO

Also known as “New Age Paleo,” this meme views human prehistory as a time of perfect physical health and spiritual connection with nature and the cosmos at large. In this utopia, there was no hardship, no disease, no anxiety and no unhappiness. This vision, of course, is nonsense. In actual fact, life in the Paleo would have been a mixed bag of pleasure and pain; we can be certain that many individuals suffered excruciating injuries, predator attacks, sunstroke, hypothermia, starvation, snakebites and poisoning by toxic plants. Human health was robust in prehistory, but life was not a free ride.

ATHLETIC PALEO

This is the “Born to Run” variant in which athletes, usually runners, cite and embrace evidence that supports their favorite athletic pastime, usually running. There's lots of cherry

picking going on at this level, leaving us with the impression that the Paleo was little more than a grassland version of the Ironman or an ultra. In this meme, there's so much talk about athletic performance that proponents become blind to other dimensions of paleo living. What about tracking, gathering or natural history? What about social living and tribal cohesion?

MACHO PALEO

Closely related is macho-Paleo, fueled by testosterone. In this predominately male fantasy, human prehistory was all about getting together with your mates, killing animals and having an outdoor barbeque. This meme dovetails nicely with popular chest-thumping boasts such as "Your workout is our warmup." (Crossfit) "What off-season?" (Nike) and "My best vacation is your worst nightmare." (Mountain climbers) This meme has more to do with primate dominance behavior than it does with the actual nature of human history.

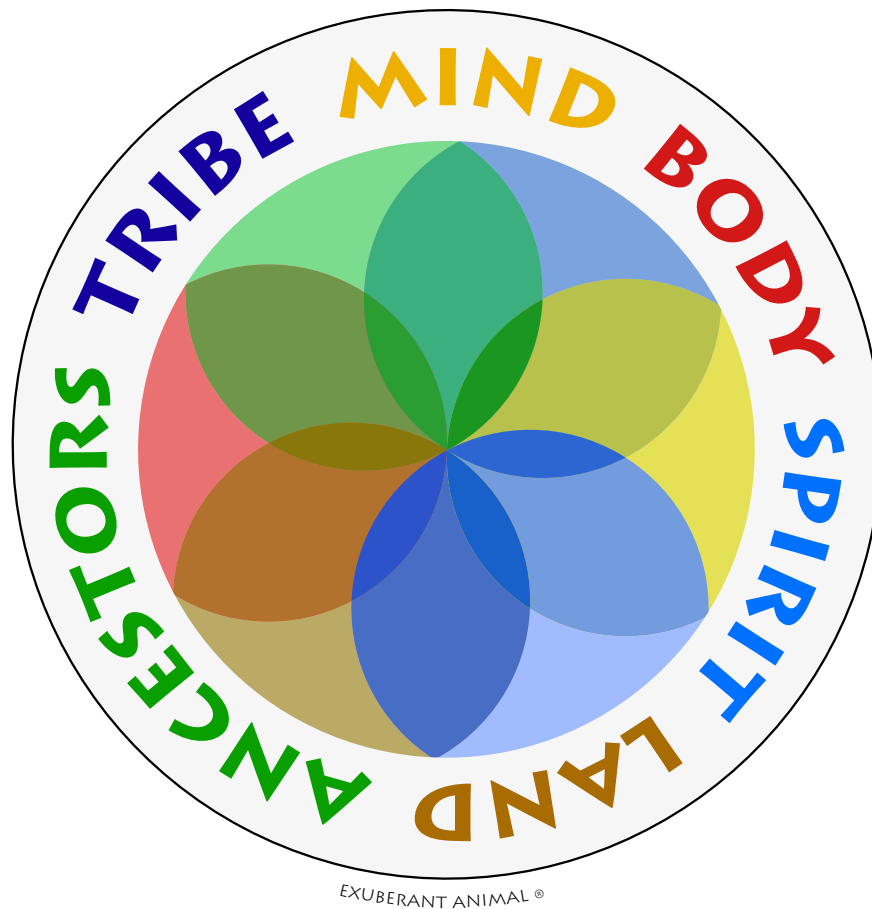
DIETARY PALEO

Then there are those who focus on the dietary dimensions of Paleo life. These pundits attack grains and vegetarian diets with great authority, but sadly, they never get much past the digestive tract. The problem with this variation is that it's a fragment of a much larger story. And because it's a fragment, it tends to get pigeon-holed with every other diet meme out there. In the Barnes and Noble system, "The Paleo Diet" winds up alongside every "Five Minute Diet Guide for Getting Skinny." This brings Paleo down to the level of pop health where it loses its meaning and its power.

WHOLE PALEO

As we can see, all the current Paleo memes have limitations. Most are fragments, some are caricatures. Few of them deliver the whole scope and potential of what the Paleo has to offer. My proposal is that we craft a "whole Paleo" meme, one that's comprehensive and true to the authentic Paleo experience as it was lived, on the ground, by the people at the time. Of course, we can't interview such people directly, but we can refer back to early work done by anthropologists who lived with and studied native cultures and indigenous peoples. While not strictly "Paleo," (as in "old stone age") these people and their accounts are the closest thing we have to a genuinely Paleo world view.

What does this inquiry reveal? In short, a holistic view of experience, one that includes far more than just the body, the digestive tract, weight loss and athletic performance. Rather, this view weaves mind-body-spirit-land-tribe-ancestry into a single, massively interconnected orientation. In primitive cultures across the globe, from Australia to Africa to the Americas, these interconnected elements are cited with astonishing regularity. In fact, primal peoples find our Westernized focus on single elements to be not just curious, but completely out of balance, even bizarre. In many cases, they are right.



The beauty of the holistic-primal orientation is that it's both descriptive and prescriptive. It tells us about the comprehensive world view of our ancestors, but it also suggests a sophisticated, sane way forward in a modern world run amok. Specifically, it encourages us to study, not just the characteristics of individual elements in isolation, but the relationships between elements. And in this sense, it's all about rapport: with our bodies, with each other, with our habitat and our work.

“Wholeness” is a meme too, of course, one that's appearing with greater frequency in just about every dimension of modern human experience. Not only are we beginning to appreciate the importance of eating whole foods, we also understand the “whole body” approach to functional fitness training. Similarly, the case for wholeness is now being made in disciplines as diverse as psychology, engineering, urban planning, politics, education, corporate management and criminal justice.

And so, this “whole Paleo” meme has immense promise. Not only is it balanced, comprehensive and historically accurate, it keeps our attention moving across a broader range of possibility. It allows for detail, but it also keeps us from getting stuck in isolated

specialties and sub-specialties. It inspires us to work creatively and systemically, building relationships that create a more complete and thriving experience. Most importantly, “whole Paleo” unifies the three most important activist movements on the planet today: environmentalism, public health and social justice (including economics). By focusing on the intersection of mind-body-spirit-land-tribe-ancestry, we turn the past into a powerful force for a saner future.

So, let’s launch this “whole Paleo” meme into the wild and encourage its propagation. Let’s talk about diets, athletic performance and medical issues, but let’s keep our attention moving over our entire habitat and experience. Let’s keep our meme historically accurate, relevant and emotionally appealing. Let’s keep it clear, coherent and compelling.

If we tell this story in the right way, it’s going to change everything.

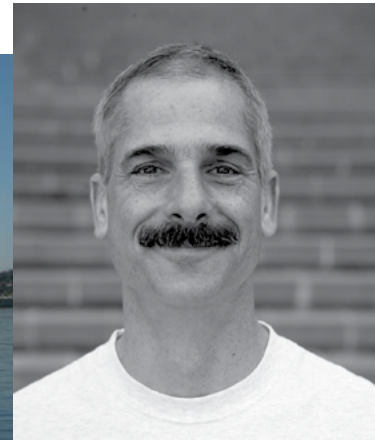


ABOUT EXUBERANT ANIMAL

Exuberant Animal is an innovative health leadership organization that promotes performance, team cohesion and physical happiness. We offer a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach that's invigorating, liberating and intensely meaningful.

Exuberant Animal is the creation of Frank Forencich, author of *Play as if Your Life Depends on It*, *Exuberant Animal* and *Change Your Body, Change the World*. Frank is an internationally-recognized leader in health education and performance training. He earned his B.A. at Stanford University in human biology and neuroscience and has over 30 years teaching experience in martial art, functional fitness and health promotion.

- Partner at The National Institute for Play
- Expert consultant to WildFitness UK
- Featured presenter: First Annual Conference on The State of Play Science, October 31- November 1, 2008, Stanford University.
- Guest lecturer: Stanford University Institute of Design, April 2009 -2011
- Featured presenter: Ancestral Health Symposium UCLA 2011



CONTACT FRANK AT FRANK@EXUBERANTANIMAL.COM

WWW.EXUBERANTANIMAL.COM