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Interview with Sid Garza-Hillman

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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Following is a transcript of an interview with **Sid Garza-Hillman** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 183.

JASMIN: Today we're going to be talking to the one and only Sid Garza-Hillman, Sid Garza-Hillman. And Sid is the author of a book called *Approaching the Natural: A Health Manifesto*. And Sid also is one of the people who helps to run an incredible vegan resort in California that he's going to tell you all about and then you're going to want to go visit. And he's going to answer some of our questions about what he means by a health manifesto and what that means for us. And I'm just thrilled and excited to bring you Sid Garza-Hillman.

Sid Garza-Hillman is the author of *Approaching the Natural: A Health Manifesto* and the staff nutritionist and programs director at the Mendocino Center for Living Well, located at the Stanford Inn Eco Resort, a vegan resort on the Mendocino coast that features the award-winning vegan Ravens Restaurant. Sid focuses on transitioning to health and happiness through a plant-based, whole foods diet and movement, mindfulness, connection to the earth, and lots of other good stuff that he's going to talk about today. Learn more at transitioningtohealth.net and livingwellmendocino.com.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Sid.

SID: Thank you, it's wonderful to be here.

JASMIN: So good to have you here. I'm so excited about your book, *Approaching the Natural: A Health Manifesto*. The word "natural," it seems to -- it gets used by a bunch of different people in all sorts of different ways, so let's start with that. How do we know what's natural?

SID: When I wrote the book I think it -- I started asking the questions, do our bodies, do our minds, do they reveal to us what is natural? Is there information that we can find out from looking at us as a human species that kind of presents us as what's natural and what's not? And I think that biologically and psychologically there are things that are more in line with our natures and they seem to present pretty clearly to me and I explored those themes in the book.

JASMIN: And when it comes to diet one of the most popular diets based on the idea of being quote unquote "natural" is the paleo diet -- insert scary music here -- which is really

far from veganism. What do you think about the claims of paleo aficionados of being natural?

SID: I think they, it's almost like from the premise they have the right idea, which is let's look at the human species and let's say, okay, how did we evolve and what are the things that we can do for our bodies based on that evolution that will help us to achieve health and happiness? Where they completely go wrong and what makes the paleo diet, what I call scientifically, it's cuckoo.

MARIANN: Is that the scientific term?

JASMIN: Yes, it is.

SID: That's the scientific term; you can google that. They do two things very, very incorrectly. First of all, they make the paleo one diet as if there was a group of ten human beings in Arkansas that ate the exact same thing every day and they go, "Okay, here's what the paleo eat." I mean, obviously if you lived in the northern regions of the earth and you had less access to plants you would probably eat more animals and then if you lived near the equator and you had way more access to plants you would eat more plants. So that's where they go wrong.

The second thing they go wrong is that they completely -- I find in the nutrition world, I'm a nutritionist, people want to eat what they want to eat. And I don't necessarily have a problem with that, except for I kind of do, but even if I didn't I would say at least know what you're eating. So don't drink milk because you think it's going to make your bones healthy. If you're going to drink milk, know that it's junk food. It's that whole thing. So that's what they do with paleo. It's like the next version, it's like Atkins 2.0, right? It's like, this is the next thing that gives us an excuse to eat meat four times a day. Paleo people did not eat meat that much, it was a very small percentage. And the fact of the matter is, when they had access to plants they would eat plants. If they didn't have access to plants they would eat animals. And it's pretty simple. The human body is going to get the best quality calorie source it can in any given situation. In the modern world there's just no need for animal foods. Nutritionally speaking there is zero need for animal food. It's just we can get all the plants we need whenever we want 'em.

MARIANN: So you're not saying it's unnatural to eat animals, you're just saying that given the choice, the best choice is plants.

SID: Exactly, so what I'm saying is that, can we digest animal foods? Yes. Did we do dairy a long time ago? No, we never ran an antelope down and milked it, that's the truth. But I think in the prehistoric times, pre-ten thousand years ago, probably there is a history of eating meat, we have the ability to digest it. Because we have the ability to digest it doesn't mean that it's optimal for us. And I think that we evolved by doing the with our bodies in a given situation. And in that sense, when you talk about optimal health, and I even bridge the gap between health and happiness, for optimal health and happiness, whole plants is where it's at, straight up. And that's not even getting into the ethical and environmental ramifications which I'm sure you're going to touch upon.

MARIANN: Yeah, that really makes so much sense. And since we're deconstructing your title, I'd also like to get your take on that word "approaching," which seems to be a very important thing for you, the idea of approaching. And you want people to approach the natural. Can you explain what you mean by that?

SID: I can. Part of what I wanted to do with this book is I didn't want to do a diet book, right? There's about a billion of 'em and 95% of diets don't work. So part of my goal in writing a book was to try to do something that actually somebody could do forever, for the rest of their lives, to make it accessible and fun and even funny I hope, but something that people could really grasp onto. So the idea of approaching isn't -- I've never -- well, I won't say never, one time, and that's happening right now, is the only time I've ever recommended a cleanse to any client and that's because it's a quick fix thing. People go on two weeks and they drink juice and they cleanse and then they go back to eating all of the stuff that they ate before. And they go back to eating everything else because their life takes over.

I wanted to come at it a different way and say let's just take little steps. Let's first establish what is natural for the human species and then say, okay, how do we start the behavior pattern to incorporate this forever? And that's why it's "approaching the natural" because I know we're all not going to go turn around and live in the forest again, I know that's not going to happen, I'm not going to do it. I'm not living on some commune, I'm just living day to day and going to work and living extremely healthy. So how do I help people get to that same place? And I just think I found the way to do it.

JASMIN: Now tell us about the role of stress in figuring out what our dietary needs are, because this was a really interesting part to me of your book.

SID: Right, and so stress, I kind of melted all this stuff down into this little concentrated thing which is, I look at everything by stress now. And it's really fascinating to me, the human body's natural response to stress. Of course I think that being malnourished I think is the biggest factor that's stressful in our bodies, but it's stress of any kind. It's job stress and marital stress and financial stress and anything else. And how the body responds to that, the physical mechanism of the stress response is really fascinating. Blood pressure goes up, cholesterol goes up, your digestion slows down. Under chronic stress your immune system is weakened.

All these things happen and so when you look at the human body under that stress -- I have to assess my clients' stress. They'll say, "My marriage is horrible; I'm under a ton of stress." Well, I'm not going to advise them on their marriage because I'm not a marriage counselor. I might recommend they see a marriage counselor, but I'm also going to say, "We gotta bring the nutrition up to match the level of stress," so I sort of go, "Okay, let's bring it." I worked with a guy a few weeks ago who's 65 and he's a long distance runner and he's a really fast runner, I went on a run with him and he's as fast as I am. But he's on blood pressure medication. Well, that leads me to believe that either his exercise, he's got to back off on it, or he'd better ramp up the nutrition to match the level of stress that he's exerting on his body so that he doesn't break down.

MARIANN: So we were wondering, what are some other suggestions, in addition to really ramping up your dietary excellence, for regulating stress, for coping with the stress in your life?

SID: So again, in the context of approaching the natural, right? I think it's completely 100% natural to move our bodies. And I'll just quickly touch on the paleo misconception too because, not to get back to, draw on the paleo too much, but again when we were hunting even back then we were what? We were moving our bodies, we were going out. The animals that we ate were moving their bodies. So that's another mistake we make. And I say that because now I'm going to get into other ways we can manage stress, is to simply move your body. It's a completely natural thing for the human body to be in movement. Does that mean you have to spend a hundred bucks at a month at a gym and go for an hour and a half a day? Not only does it not mean that, but sometimes that can be extremely stressful, that can tip the scale. And that's why a lot of guys like Rich Roll, Brendon Brazier, Scott Jurek, these plant-based ultra-athletes are putting some serious nutrition in their bodies because they're trying to match the stress, because they're doing some pretty stressful things in the context of exercise.

But for most people, managing stress is going out your door and walking. And if that means five minutes, that's all you have time for, I say start there. Take a deep breath now and then. And people are like, "Well I've got to meditate, I've got to take meditation class." People can't take on all that stuff but you could take deep breaths so that throughout the day you stop and take a deep breath. One thing we do under stress is we breathe shallow, so we're deficient in oxygen and we're not getting rid of the carbon dioxide efficiently. And so taking little steps to return to -- look at a piece of art on the wall, just take 30 seconds during the day. Those I think are effective things, I think people are drawn to taking on too much too soon and they burn out, and I just try to get around that.

JASMIN: Noted. And you talk about the difference between selfishness and holistic self-interest. Can you explain?

SID: Sure. I think people are afraid of the word selfish. They don't want to be selfish, and that's a selfish thing. And I think that in the modern world that's been equated to greed and I'm certainly not a proponent of greed, I actually think greed is unnatural. I think that when the human species thinks about what is truly -- I think we're drawn to be selfish, I think biologically we're drawn to be not greedy, but selfish. I think we're drawn to do what is best for the human mechanism. I think we're drawn to do what is best for our families.

So if you start with that premise and you say, okay, the human body is designed to survive. That's a fact, your body's going to try to survive no matter what. So when you aid it in that end it's gonna be, it'll allow it to thrive. When you do things to hinder it, it will break down and that's disease and sickness and everything else. So when you're talking about that natural drive, selfishness is totally natural, but the real question is what is truly good for you? Is a Big Mac good for you long-term? No. It'll give you five minutes of reprieve from your crappy day, but you're going to suffer life-long effects of eating really bad food.

So holistic selfishness is what I just called it, which is a bigger, broader view of what is truly good for the human being, which I think is truly good for the human species. Is it good for me to eat animal foods that destroy the environment? No. Why? Because it's my environment and it's the environment of my children and of my friends and the rest of the species that share this earth with us. It's just not a good thing to do for the human species. That's the argument I make.

JASMIN: Well, that really resonates with me, especially because I think when you're looking at holistic health you're not only looking at what's good for you, but you're looking at what's good for those for who you're responsible for and we're responsible in so many ways for our fellow earthlings. So it's ironic, really, that you're calling it selfishness when in a lot of ways it's self/essness.

SID: Yeah. Well I'll tell you, I don't think selflessness exists. And maybe we're arguing semantics here, but I don't think there's a state of selflessness that can exist. I think instead of saying, "Don't be selfish," I think you should say, "Be truly selfish." Like, what is it that's going to benefit you in a real way? And that's why I always talk about health *and* happiness. If I'm a dad and I treat myself really well and I'm happier as a result, then I'm going to be a better father and I'm going to be a better husband. If I'm in a bad mood and angry all the time and eating bad food and overweight and feeling crappy I'm going to be, that's going to affect the way I relate to people and the rest of the world. So I think it's a question of how well you can actually serve yourself that I want to ask.

MARIANN: Yeah, that really resonates with me as well and it really brings to mind something that we always say, is that what's good for you is good for the animals, is good for the planet. There is a synergy amongst what's truly good. If you're truly, if you're selfish in a way that's truly good for you, you're right, it's going to be good for others as well. And speaking about treating yourself well, tell us a little bit about the Stanford Inn, which we would just love to be at right this very moment, and about your work there. And can you walk us through like what maybe a typical stay at the Stanford Inn would be, so we can all live vicariously?

SID: Sure, I mean, if you want to come up, just I'll wait.

JASMIN: All right!

SID: Want to come up here right now? Okay, I'll wait. I'm here.

JASMIN: Yeah, no problem. Can you just hang on for a second? If our listeners could just hold on, we'll be there in about seven hours.

SID: No problem. No, the Stanford Inn, talk about a confluence of events. I moved up here from Los Angeles and I was a full-time actor and musician down there and my wife and I had had enough and so relocated up here and I found this -- I was vegan and I found this restaurant, Ravens Restaurant. My wife actually found it and she goes, "It's a vegan restaurant." I go "Really?" So we moved up here and went to the restaurant, and I went, "Oh my God, this is incredible! I want to move here and start working here." I just wanted to work here, I had this drive to work here. So I go in and apply for a job, just to be in the restaurant. That day that I applied I met Jeff Stanford, the owner, and didn't even know he was the owner, and we sat down and had a really awesome conversation and that began a friendship and I've been here seven years now.

It is truly an eco-resort. And we think that it's the only vegan resort in the entire country, we haven't been able to find another. There's a lot of vegan bed and breakfasts, but not on the level of the Stanford Inn. So it's 41 rooms, it's a really unique place in this sense. It's like a

luxury inn. It's not a hippy-dippy -- there's nothing wrong with that, but it's not a hippy-dippy health resort. Like, it's a luxury resort with 41 rooms all overlooking the ocean. It's got an indoor pool, it's got a fully functioning organic garden. It's got a wellness center, that's what I'm the programs director for. It's called the Mendocino Center for Living Well that has a huge amount of awesome stuff. It's got the Ravens Restaurant which is 100% vegan and mostly whole plants.

So it's this just amazing place in this little town in Mendocino and it is truly eco. The Stanfords, Joan and Jeff, bought it in 1980 and they have been green and eco from day one even before it was a thing. That's just kind of what they did. When they bought materials they would do as environmentally friendly materials as they could do, they serve vegan food in the restaurant, and they use eco cleaning supplies, like truly green. "Green" is like thrown around all over the place now, but they really are. So that's the stay here is you get to stay in a beautiful room with a fireplace overlooking the ocean, eat amazing food, and if you want you can partake in gardening classes and cooking classes and nutrition classes and art therapy classes, and just all this amazing stuff. And a whole spa, massage and facials and all that kind of stuff.

JASMIN: Oh, my God! I'm like drooling, which is inappropriate. I hope I don't get electrocuted because I'm drooling all over my computer and my microphone. This is incredible. So can you talk a little bit more about what you specifically do there and what your role is at the Stanford Inn?

SID: Sure. So my title is Programs Director of the Mendocino Center for Living Well. So other than being the staff nutritionist -- so I do nutrition classes and I do often do cooking/nutrition classes with our chef instructor whose name is Sadhana Berkow, and she and I will do vegan cheese class and it'll have a nutrition part too, so we kind of tag team. I'll talk about nutrition and they'll go in and prepare some stuff and then let that set and then come back in with me and kind of do that stuff. And other than that I'm sort of in charge of how -- like, we've done a new website and rebranded it and we're running programs now and a bunch of private classes, and so I'm kind of overseeing the way that the Wellness Center runs and is marketed to the public. In addition to that I also serve as the kitchen director for Ravens. And so Jeff Stanford and I effectively serve the role of sort of executive chef. We oversee the menu and make sure that we approve and taste everything before it gets out onto the floor and things like that. So that's kind of my role here at the Inn.

JASMIN: Sounds amazing. It sounds like a truly remarkable experience both from where you stand and also from the place of people who visit. I know you focus a lot of your work on weight loss advice. For our listeners who might be interested in losing weight, what is your weight loss advice in a nutshell?

SID: Well, so I will tell you that I actually never talk about weight loss and the reason why is because again, a body that is healthy is a body under minimal stress and that body will be at a healthy weight. And I really want to change the conversation away from weight loss or weight gain and talk about healthy weight because the body will get to where it needs to be if you give it the tools to get there. And what that does for people who are concerned about weight loss is it moves them away from anything to lose weight, i.e. Atkins diet, which will kill you, and it moves them to a picture of treating the body well and giving the body what it needs to survive and thrive. And Mother Nature totally has it right and if we get out of the

way and just give our bodies the good tools and nutrients, it will hit the weight. Like, my stomach is perfectly flat, I'm a long-distance runner, I'm totally healthy, I never get sick and I haven't counted calories ever. I just put really good food in my body and let my body just suss that out. So for weight management or somebody to be healthy, I would say focus on as nutritious of foods as you can get in your body and let your body do the work that it needs to do. Don't think we can overthink it by taking pills and stuff like that that we manufacture. The body knows how to deal with whole plants, and it will do it effectively.

JASMIN: So let's switch gears for a moment and talk about the animals, which is a subject that Mariann and I love to talk about here, as you probably know. You must deal with people who aren't vegan most of the time, which is so interesting to me. From your perspective, do you find that the animal issue is harder to convey or easier to convey than the information about health?

SID: Well, so there's a couple things. So as a staff nutritionist I'm fully dealing with nutrition, right? And so, because people come to me and they're not going to come to a nutrition class and want to hear about animal rights, they're just not going to. In the context of my own personal life I'm vegan and it's as much about -- I was just listening to a Rich Roll podcast with Michael Arnstein and he goes, "If somebody told me steak was the best thing for me, I still wouldn't do it." Like, it's become, it's as important to me as anything else. How I view nutrition in the context of the overall effect of eating animals, I think it's a really good gateway method. And what I mean by that is when you -- because people are looking out for themselves, they really are, and I don't want to deny that, but what I want to do is try to serve people a broader -- get them to look at things more broadly.

And when you start by saying, taking away all the myths, because I think what happens is I think generally human beings are compassionate, I really do, at their core. I don't think if anybody saw firsthand what was going on in the industrial meat factories and dairy factories that they would want to have any part of that. But they'll be able to compartmentalize that in large part because they've been told that they need the protein or they've been told that they need the calcium. And so they'll go, "Well, I know those things are bad that's going on there, but... I need my protein."

So why I think nutrition is very powerful is because I can take the myth out of all that and I can give them the facts and I can say that I came to nutrition myself just purely because I was an asthmatic. It had nothing to do with animals or anything else, but once I began that process of becoming healthy in my body, it was like all this other stuff opened up. I just noticed things. I became vegan purely for health, purely for just like, "I've got asthma, I don't want asthma, done." But because I was vegan, all of a sudden I was talking to people and then all of a sudden I was hearing about the environmental effects of eating animals and then I was hearing about all the horrific things and I thought, man! In the beginning I would kind of cheat now and then, I would have cheese once in a while. And then all of a sudden I learned about all these other things and I went, "This isn't worth it for me" and it was like the easiest transition ever.

So you have to gauge your guest. If you walk up to your guest and go, "Do you know what happens in farms?" They'll just, they've already compartmentalized it. They're going to keep it down in that little section where they don't have to look at it and nothing's going to change.

MARIANN: Yeah, I totally agree with you. I tend to refer to it as getting the meat out of people's ears. If they just stop eating the meat because of any reason, somehow it lets them hear the other arguments. And of course as you referred to, and clearly as the Stanford Inn is focused on, there are the substantial environmental consequences of eating animal foods. Do you do any kind of messaging, or does the Inn do any kind of messaging on that? And if so how do you manage it? Or how do you manage it in your personal life?

SID: We definitely do messaging. Like, on the back of our menu, it's not like totally in your face, but on the back of the menu there's a mission statement. Joan and Jeff have a little note like, "Why vegetarian? Well, here's why." And we don't believe that there's a "sustainable" quote unquote way of raising meat, we just don't think that exists, it's just not sustainable. I've heard it all. "Well you kill plants," and I go, "Well, okay. Well, I kill a lot less plants eating directly plants than I do eating an animal who's eaten a ton more plants than I would eat." It's like to just demystify all that stuff. We message it by putting it out there, but at the same time we also make really good food. And I walk around the floor and I talk to people. Ninety-five percent of us aren't vegan and they want to come and have a really good time and they do. And what that does is start the conversation in a really friendly way. "I feel really good and I saw your farm and that's really cool." It's just this conversation starter. So that's kind of the way that we do it, so it's not this huge sign with a horrific picture on the front of it, you know?

JASMIN: No, I think that's a great way of going about it for a lot of people. It seems like the toughest meal to eat out for healthy vegans is breakfast or brunch, with eggs and bacon and bagels and all that. What are some of your favorite breakfast and brunch ideas?

SID: Ravens has a full -- you should see our breakfast menu. It's frickin' two pages, it's huge. So the last thing that the Stanfords gave up was eggs -- not them, they were vegan, but the restaurant, because when they started it, just along the line, Jeff learned more and more -- Jeff and Joan -- and the more they learned, they started getting rid of stuff, but they had all these returners and, you know, eggs. And they finally gave it up and when we did, we expanded the breakfast menu and it's huge!

So it's got like portabello benedict with a Hollandaise sauce with potatoes. It's got like a crepe, a savory crepe, which is just like an omelet. There's chilaquiles, we have like three different Mexican breakfasts. We have a breakfast burrito, we have enchiladas, chilaquiles. It's like this, it's my favorite thing, with a tofu scramble on it. We've got muffins, we've got waffles and pancakes, gluten-free both. I mean it's like a huge menu. Nobody even bats an eye. One guy, when we transferred away from eggs, he came in and had our Hollandaise, he said, "It's so good, and eventually I'll try your vegan one" and he had just had it. And we were like, "You just had it." And he was like, "Oh my God, I can't believe it!" Like, it was so good. And so it's -- you can -- there's no negative.

Like, Biz Stone from Twitter, he wrote the foreword for me book and he said that exact thing in the foreword. He goes, "It's a gift." To think that becoming vegan is giving up anything if you're not getting the whole story. It is 100% positive, it's a positive change. Yes, you are changing the food that you love, but you're still going to love food, you're just going to love different food. You're going to walk around with less conflict in your body 'cause you're not

causing any harm, you know, much less harm, to any other species and to the earth. It just feels good, it's a decision, an easy decision once you know the facts.

JASMIN: I think that our listeners probably are all trying to book a flight over to the Stanford Inn now for breakfast!

SID: Well, come see me!

JASMIN: Definitely. And Sid, I can't thank you enough. I love your new book, *Approaching the Natural: A Health Manifesto*, and I love the size of it. It's just this small, really accessible book, but it's really full of a ton of important information, not just for people who haven't before explored veganism. But for people like me who've been vegan for a decade, you still get a ton of information in it. And I do hope we can meet in person one day. Thank you for all that you're doing to enlighten people about veganism and to really change the world in your own way. We appreciate your joining us today on Our Hen House.

SID: It's wonderful to be here and thank you too for what you guys do. It's awesome.

JASMIN: That was Sid Garza-Hillman.