

Cause no pain -- In defense of eating meat

BARBARA:

“For everything that lives is holy, life delights in life.” William Blake. At the same time, John Robbins reminds us "Humans are part of the web of life. What we do to the planet, what we do to other species, and what we do to other people, we end up doing to ourselves."

How then, can we continue to eat meat? The way meat is produced in this country is shocking. The methods used cause extreme distress to the animals, harm the environment, and threaten our health. There is quite a lot written about this and I have no desire to go on for hours. To give a brief summary, animals are crowded together in feedlots. Pigs and chickens have no freedom of movement. No sanitation is provided. Waste disposal is a awful, unsolved problem.

Cattle, for example, are kept in pens where they stand and sleep in their manure that is feet deep and reduced to dust. Cattle digest grass with a special stomach equipped with rumen. They have evolved to be leaf eaters. Rumen works very well on leaves, but is not adapted to digest seeds. Cattle are fattened on a special diet of processed corn supplemented with animal protein including blood from their own species. This diet does indeed fatten up the cattle, with well marbled meat, but it makes them sick. The entire time they are being fattened, they are ill and are fed strong antibiotics. At the same time, the rumen, which is normally neutral in Ph becomes acid. The conditions are perfect for development of acid resistant strains of E coli, which present a grave and present danger to human health. In addition, large quantities of petroleum are used, first to manufacture the fertilizer, and second to power the farm equipment used to grow the corn. Third to manufacture the food. Fourth to transport the meat. In *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan estimates that it takes the equivalent of 35 gallons of oil to grow a steer to slaughter weight. One fifth of America's petroleum consumption goes to producing and transporting our food.

The health of the people eating these animals is also threatened in another way. We are greatly affected by what we eat has itself eaten. Plants grown in compost are more nutritious than those grown in sterilized soil with artificial fertilizer added. You can see the difference between the eggs of chickens produced under the conditions of the chicken laying factory and eggs layed by chickens allowed to range freely in optimal pasture. We are all being urged to eat ocean going fish because the ratio of omega 3 fat to omega 6 fat is higher than for other foods. However, studies are showing that grass fed beef has a much higher proportion of

omega3 fat than corn fattened beef which has a dangerously high amount of omega6 fat. Eating the way we do is giving many of us heart failure.

CINDY:

But wait, Barbara, that is not the only way to raise animals. We must be careful not to mix up the issue of whether or not it is immoral to eat meat with the morality of how we treat the animals before we eat them. I, too, abhor factory farms. But I still eat meat. To do that ethically, I am pursuing a different way.

I am a farmer of sorts. In collaboration with UU neighbor, I keep a flock of chickens in my back yard. When my friend and I decided to get chickens, we did so for many reasons that are intimately bound up in our Unitarian Universalist values.

Initially we were inspired by a trip to George Jones Farm – members of the fellowship were helping this organic farm put in their spring plantings. The farm uses chicken tractors as an integral part of their organic growing practices. Chickens make excellent tractors! Their clawed feet are made for stirring up the ground as they look for seeds and grubs. They eat pests and weed seeds that would make an organic garden less productive if left in the ground. And out the other end comes some of the best fertilizer in existence! What an inspiring example of how domesticated animals and humans can live together in a way that truly honors the web of life of which we are a part. We have truly co-evolved together.

But we also were -- and still are -- committed to eating as locally as possible. Our chickens give us fresh eggs that required a bare minimum of fossil fuels to bring to the table. Through their manure and romps in the garden each fall, they enhance our ability to grow fresh, healthy vegetables, and decrease our reliance on produce flown in from California or Peru. This is a service not only to ourselves, but also to other humans and all life on the planet as we do our part to shrink our carbon footprint.

There is another benefit from keeping animals – we are better, more ethical people for interacting with them. It is an opportunity to teach our children important lessons of responsibility for other living things. And I delight in watching my chickens go about their business. They are beautiful. They help remind me that life in fact is quite simple.

My chickens live long, happy lives – longer and happier than in a factory farm, and certainly longer than they would in the wild. They coevolved with humans, and

would not survive without our patronage. And although our chickens are not primarily raised for meat, we do kill and eat them when they have stopped laying. To not eat them would be wasteful. We are omnivores, and like our non-human omnivore cousins in the wild, we eat meat.

BARB:

But as omnivores with self-awareness, and with so many other dietary options before us, why eat meat? We don't have to. Why end the life of an animal prematurely when you could have a veggie burger instead?

And not everyone agrees that what is "natural" is moral. Peter Singer and other animal rights philosophers do not consider nature a model of virtue. Far from it. Matthew Scully in *Dominion* calls predation "the intrinsic evil in nature's design."

CINDY:

Yet nature's design is what we've got, and it is what begot us. We could not be here having this debate without the ruthless natural selection processes that created our wonderful opposable thumbs and our giant brains. As a Unitarian Universalist and someone who strives to be humble, I cannot presume to make myself a judge of the very system that created and supports me. I don't like watching predation scenes in nature films either. My heart cries out for the creatures brought down by predators. But would we deny the wolf its right to life, given its biology requires it to eat meat? And if we eliminated the predators, would we rather its prey suffer from starvation as they overpopulated their environments?

BARB:

I absolutely agree. In the end, I find Buddhist arguments most persuasive because they stress the importance of our individual choice and of our everyday living. Remember the Rainer Maria Rilke quote that Cynthia read last Sunday? It went something like, if we can live the question now, we may be able in time to live the answer. I have a story to share with you that perfectly illustrates Rilke's conviction. This story may seem far a-field at first, but I think it will help make my point.

"Chowtime" is an article in the newsletter of the UU Buddhist Fellowship. The author, Michael, is a prisoner who discovered Buddhism and UUs after he made it to prison. His story begins:

"Chow! Mealtime is announced by the clank of the door, the raised voices, the passive march to the feedlot trough. Another dinner in prison. Not much to

look forward to especially if you are a vegetarian. Almost anything good is meat or has meat in it. Joining the others in the line, I was in a foul mood. Knowing my dinner would consist of odd tasting meat substitute, overcooked, bleached out vegetables, a salad of wilted lettuce and chopped up “horse carrots,” the same carrots you can buy for your livestock for pennies on the pound...they are ever present.

As my tray was filled, my low expectations were met. Wanting to be alone, I found an empty table. My goal was to shovel the food down and leave. As I worked at my task I was joined by another inmate. Dan is a casual acquaintance who falls into the large group of those whom I know by name but otherwise interact with rarely. ... I weakly said hi, silently hoping he did not want to talk. But of course he did.

Almost immediately Dan asked me if I had heard about the meditation group that has been meeting in the chapel.” Michael reluctantly put on a smile, admitted that he does attend and serves as one of the inmate facilitators. Dan wanted to talk about a book he had read about ‘meditation, enlightenment and mindfulness.’ Michael, who is uncomfortable talking about practice, refers him to books and invites him to come to the meditation group. Dan kept asking question after question until

“Finally, Dan asked about Mindfulness, describing how the book had mentioned being in the moment. “This I know about!” I thought. Responding, I talked about the past being history the future being fantasy, telling him that our only chance to live is here and now. Turning to our meals I began to explain that being mindful included understanding that many things died so we could eat: a cow to provide the beef in his dinner, the plants for the vegetables and salads on our plates, the countless insects and microbes that have been wiped out to provide us food. Sure of myself now, I share that many humans had labored for this meal: farmers, field hands, shipping clerks, truckers, prison guards, and inmates. How all of rely upon each other to live. How everything is interrelated, had always been so, and will always be so. I went on and on, ending with the scientific understanding the components making up our meals had once been part of a star, how each of us had been part of a star, how everything had been energy in the Big Bang. This, I explained to Dan, is the understanding needed to live in the present moment.

I just repeated to Dan what I had seen expressed in many Dharma texts in many ways over the past two years. I thought I had grasped these concepts. I was wrong. Returning my attention back to my tray everything I thought I had “known” fell away. It was beautiful. I took a breath and with tears in my eyes I ate as if it was for the first time.”

So what has this to do with being a vegetarian? Being aware of all these connections does not require us to become a vegetarian, but awareness does expect that we will be able to look into the eyes of the animals we may contemplate eating. Is their sacrifice reasonable for us to ask? In *A Path with Heart* Jack Kornfield writes, “Spiritual practice does not ask us to place more beliefs on top of our life. At its heart it asks us to wake up, to face life directly. . . .It is in the intimacy of each moment that all of spiritual life is fulfilled.” All living things, plants as well as animals, do require respect. Are we not interconnected? Whatever we do to another being we do to ourselves. Many Buddhists prefer not even to swat a fly. That seems extreme and at some level as romantic as the animal rights adherent who prevents his cat from eating meat. But I don’t believe it is. Buddhism is not a product of modern industrial society. For several thousand years, practitioners have lived in a very simple way with their material needs reduced to a minimum. Many have looked their animals in the eyes, saw there real capacity for pain, and chose to devote themselves “helpfully to all life that is in need of help.”

CINDY:

I too have looked into the eyes of my animals, and while I honor their capacity for pain, I still kill and eat them. We did this recently. I admit, we put a shot of schnapps in the hot chocolate we had before going out. The chickens we killed were old – many of their sisters had died already from infected kidneys or old age. We thanked each one for their years of egg-laying, covered their eyes to calm them, and swiftly chopped their heads off with a sharp knife. Pain was minimal and brief, and certainly less than dying from a kidney infection.

As Unitarian Universalists trying to live out our principles, we are indeed called to look animals -- and ourselves -- in the eye. The food we eat is an expression of our moral values, and as such, we should make our choices knowing fully what we are doing. I honor the choices of vegetarians just as I honor the animals that feed me. I am reminded of the words of Kalil Gibran. No matter the choice you make for yourselves, Gibran urges “Let your board stand an altar on which the pure and innocent of forest and plain are sacrificed for that which is purer and still more innocent in us.”