

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

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A peace offering to omnivores and vegetarians

In October of last year I finally became a vegetarian, meaning that I chose to not eat meat products anymore. Technically, I am a lacto-ovo vegetarian because I do eat eggs (ovo-) and milk (lacto-) on occasion and not a vegan—one who doesn't eat any animal products. My first year as a vegetarian has been very revealing. Since adopting this new identity, I have learned a lot about myself as well as others. Here I write about why I am a vegetarian (something I get asked all the time now but rarely have the time or energy to answer) and what I have learned since becoming one. In doing so, I hope to dispel some misunderstandings about vegetarians and to reveal some underappreciated aspects about what it takes to become and remain a vegetarian. In what follows, please understand that I speak for one, recently-converted vegetarian, and not for vegetarians in general. In this vein, I'd certainly appreciate hearing from other people discussing why they eat what they eat—meat or otherwise.

Although vegetarians come in many forms, they are often thought to hold to a few set positions. Unfortunately, as is often the case, ascribing all (or most) vegetarians to specific camps is improper. One suspected position claims that it is wrong (or immoral) to eat meat—an act that obviously requires the slaughtering of the animal in question. Though some vegetarians hold to this position, I do not. While it is problematic that people eat excessive amounts of meat, eating meat isn't immoral in my view. And while I don't think meat eaters are somehow wrong, I certainly can understand and respect the position that eating meat is immoral. A second stereotypic position holds that vegetarians despise meat eaters. While there are certainly vegetarians that have issues with meat eaters, I suspect they are no more than the number of meat eaters that find vegetarians objectionable for some reason or another. I believe there are many acceptable ways to think and act and, thus, I don't begrudge those that eat meat or those that choose to think that it is immoral to do so.

The two primary reasons I choose to be a vegetarian are out of consideration for health (mine and others) and a sense of obligation to live a less-demanding, more equitable life. While some might think that these motivations are noble, I hardly think so. I think they are an ample mix of selfish and collective concerns, ones that recognize my desire to live a long, healthy life and at the same time wishing and allowing the same for others.

A well-balanced vegetarian diet is superior to a diet heavy in meat products because it avoids some of the serious health effects associated with the latter. Unfortunately, one of the risks of eating meat derives not from something inherent to meat but rather from the sad state of how meat is produced in the United States and elsewhere. The current farming and processing techniques used to produce meat products are replete with unnecessary hazards. Animals are injected with antibiotics, largely because they are overfed and overcrowded. Animals are doped with hormones to make them unnaturally big. Crops that are grown for fodder, such as maize and soy, have high levels of pesticides sprayed on them. These chemicals, which are largely untested for their human effects, bioaccumulate in the animals upon feeding and then are transferred to those humans that decide to consume them. And, finally, people that work in slaughterhouses have among the most dangerous jobs in the United States. All of these observations shouldn't be news to anyone. (Eric Schlosser's widely read book, *Fast Food Nation*, covers all of this in an informative and entertaining

way.) These realities are not permanent, but they are the dominate forms of current industrialized agriculture.

Despite all the advertising to the contrary, much of the meat that is found in U.S. markets is far less than optimal. I got a glimpse of how meat found here may be poor in quality when a visiting scholar from South Africa was over to eat at my home some seven or eight years ago. Having lived in the U.S. for several years, he didn't understand why when he ate meat here it didn't taste as good as the meat back home. That was until he ate a burger from a cow that was raised on a ranch noted for its humane and free range methods. He was ecstatic, never in the U.S. had he eaten beef that had the rich and flavorful quality that he was used to back home, a "developing" country. (I've since heard similar things from other international visitors to the U.S.) He was mesmerized to learn why he shouldn't be surprised that the meat available to him back in South Africa would be better than the meat available in this country. Unfortunately, most local markets do not even carry the free range variety of meats, at any price (to do so might suggest that the "regular" meat is less than superb), so many customers don't ever get to make the comparison for themselves.

The consumption of meat, particularly red meat, is also risky due to the intake of excessive levels of fat. Heart disease is the most common cause of death in the United States and diets rich in red meat are linked to coronary damage. Low levels of meat, particularly low-fat meat, appear to be okay for the heart, but given the American infatuation with red meat, a sizeable part of our nation's health problems can be attributable to excessive meat consumption. (This recognition is particularly disturbing when one considers the current infatuation with the Atkins diet which promotes eating large quantities of meat (i.e., foods high in protein and low in carbohydrates); it may work to promote weight loss, at least in the short term, but does it needlessly promote heart disease as well? If so, what a trade off.) Additionally, red meat consumption is also associated with elevated cancer rates, apparently, among other things, because it contains a special sugar that attacks the immune system. Over the long haul, continued digestion of meat products appears to compromise the endocrine system as a whole.

Red meat isn't the only meat that comes with hazards. Tuna fish, a carnivore and thus analogous to the lion (not "chicken") of the sea, often contains dangerous levels of mercury and other toxins, such as PCBs. Other fish species can present problems due to our pollution of our precious waterways. Chicken, the legendary "white" meat, suffers due to the practices of the industries that produce the ones that we find in the grocery store. The processing pools swarming with salmonella or campylobacter and other dangerous organisms and the transfer of these contagions to the grocery shelves has been well established. Once again, the sacrifice of our streams and our safety, apparently for the benefit of profit margin, presents all of us with preventable risks and dangers.

In contrast, vegetarian diets promote good heart function and reduce risks of cancer, particularly of the breast and colon. The reasons for these beneficial qualities appear to be two-fold. Vegetarians intake more anti-oxidants (such as Vitamins C and E and beta-carotene) and less saturated fat. The former promotes a healthy immune system and the latter avoids coronary damage. However, a vegetarian diet need not be healthy. A diet full of potato chips, cake and soda pop is vegetarian but clearly not conducive to good health. Additionally,

a vegetarian diet heavy in dairy products will still expose consumers to many of the hormones and pesticides found in meat products themselves; vegan diets or vegetarian diets which consume organic milks and eggs allow one to minimize this exposure. It is obviously important for vegetarians to eat a wide-variety of fruits and vegetables and to get sufficient protein (through tofu, seitan, and beans). It is also recommended that vegetarians take B-12 supplements on occasion. But as long as a vegetarian eats a balanced assortment of fruits, vegetables and grains, he/she will be much better off. In fact, one's choice to forgo meat consumption reduces the amount of hormones, antibiotics, and pesticides that must be used on the land and in other animals which undoubtedly makes us all (as well as our descendants) healthier.

My vegetarian choice had as much to do with health as it did with a sense of fairness. Globally, many people are vegetarians by virtue of their inability to afford meat. Also, water and soil are needed in much higher quantities to produce a pound of meat than a pound of grain, in some cases more than 50 times as much. And despite having enough food to feed the world currently (assuming that the majority of the world's citizens stay away from meat), nearly a fourth of the human population suffers from severe malnutrition. All of these facts made me realize that my meat eating habits were not in keeping with a species that values equality and brotherhood. Not eating meat became an easy sacrifice, especially when I had learned to enjoy healthier options. (There are many other sacrifices that I have yet to make, like driving a car and flying on occasion; these seem much more difficult to "give up" in comparison.) Oddly enough, I feel more connected with humanity since I have become a vegetarian. And since a vegetarian diet requires less land, some land can be reverted back to nature (such as is occurring in the Midwest where governmental incentives sometimes exist to restore farmland to prairie). Knowing that my diet allows this reversion to happen more readily makes me feel more connected with all forms of life, including humans.

Yet for all the benefits that come with being a vegetarian, oddly, it is often uncomfortable to be one in our current society. Most mainstream restaurants have very few, if any, entrees that don't have meat. (I didn't notice this until I became a vegetarian.) The few choices that are on the menu are almost always among the more unhealthy vegetarian options—consisting of huge globs of cholesterol-laden cheese, and/or butter—and vegan options are almost never found. Given the limited options available to vegetarians, often one has to request that the "meat" be taken out of the regular entree. A request of this sort amounts to "declaring" (or "outing") that one is vegetarian, not only to the waiter/waitress but to everyone at the table. I've observed some non-vegetarians respond to this "declaring" by reaffirming their own eating choices, as if they were being attacked or questioned by the vegetarian just because he/she makes an "issue" of it by the mere act of ordering something different. Usually, the omnivores outnumber the vegetarians so this "outing" of one's vegetarianism can result in the creation of a hostile atmosphere. For those not familiar with this response, I liken it to a weaker version of what happens to smokers today amidst a dominant non-smoking population; the difference of course being that my choice of food has no effect on others lungs and throats. Having seen a debate or argument develop like this on several occasions, I am left to conclude that most of us are a bit uncomfortable with what we and others

eat. In less friendly confines, "outing" yourself (something that one must do, and therefore not optional) can lead to not-so friendly jibes or questions asking for the vegetarian to justify or explain his/her curious culinary habit. Contrarily, I have never heard a vegetarian ask a meat-eater, "Why are you an omnivore?" or "Explain your eating habits." This doesn't make vegetarian people better or worse than omnivores, but it does indicate that having a diet that is different from the majority puts you in a position of explaining yourself over and over again. Here, I think it is important for meat-eaters to consider how they would feel in the shoes of vegetarians.

Becoming a vegetarian in our society takes courage and conviction. For the two years leading up to October 2002, I sometimes called myself an opportunistic vegetarian, meaning I didn't go out of my way to eat meat but if it were served to me or if I had a craving I would eat it. Looking back, I think I was unable to make the complete switch to vegetarianism because I lacked the confidence to do so. I also lacked the personal fortitude. One of the main reasons I think it took me so long to come to the realization that I could become a full-fledged and proud vegetarian relates to the demasculization that is associated with being vegetarian. Because I benefit from being a masculine person (tall, male with a deep voice), down deep I don't think I wanted to give up that advantage. According to societal norms, becoming a vegetarian cost me some of my masculinity. In "mainstream" America, eating meat, and lots of it, is highly touted as a manly thing to do. To many men, a thick steak is the prized meal. Becoming a vegetarian meant that I had to be "out." Every time I go to the grocery store and to a restaurant now, my selections communicate my vegetarianism whether or not I want them to. (In time, as more and more people become vegetarians, this problem will likely heal itself, but for now, it is still ever present.)

But, vegetarians are far from perfect either. In the past year, I have been party to and witnessed vegetarians doing things that aren't conducive to good fellowship. I've heard some say to meat-eaters, "Are you going to finish that carcass now?" or "How many animals had to die to make that?" Perhaps vegetarians can justify these actions as responses to the jibes they, themselves, receive so commonly. But I don't believe in the "an eye for an eye" philosophy. Vegetarians also can suffer from a sense of superiority. This can come in the form, "I don't eat meat, you do, so you must be disrespectful of life." It can also come in the form, "I have more willpower than you." But worse, vegetarians often don't realize how privileged they are to be able to "choose" this lifestyle whereas many people in the world eat what they can get access too rather than on what morally "is" right. Actually, this arrogance is not special to vegetarians, meat eaters suffer from it too so it is something we all need to tackle.

In summary, vegetarianism is a means for me to improve my health and at the same time the health of others. It provides me sufficient nourishment while lessening my use of agricultural resources (such as water, oil and soil) and the introduction of hazardous chemicals. A vegetarian diet makes me feel more connected with the natural world because it allows for more land to be restored to the ecosystems that allow for a thriving cornucopia of life. In short, becoming a vegetarian has taught me that one's diet is a very powerful thing and not something that should be taken lightly.

May all of your meals be joyful and meaningful.