

BRINGING AWARENESS AND COMPASSION TO OUR EATING

A story and invitation

By: Jorge Aráuz

Ten years ago, at lunch time at the FGC Gathering in Johnstown, PA, a Friend asked me why I was not eating the chicken meal that she was eating. I told her that, given what I knew about the way the meat was being produced, I could not eat it in good conscience anymore. Later, she told me that the interaction had a long lasting and eventually transforming effect on her. She is now a vegetarian. I, for my part, have become a vegan.

The road to the place I am now has been long and winding. I grew up on a small farm in the Andes, where I had access to chicken meat, eggs and milk from our own animals, and on Sundays, to beef, pork or lamb that mother bought at the village market. Once a year, mother would kill a pig that we had raised for the purpose of celebrating my father's saint day.

I saw my mother kill hens, roosters and chickens once in a while since I was a young child. I remember the animal dying in contorted, if silent, movements. It was an animal we had raised with love, which we had cared for, fed and protected. We had looked after them with a mixture of joy, tenderness and awe when they were but tiny, chirping puffs of life, and learned to see their mother hen's devotion and zeal as an example of loving care. We had nurtured their growth, celebrating a young rooster's first, awkward attempts at crowing, and a young hen's first egg.

I now recognize the pain and disgust I felt when I witnessed the killing of an animal that had been a friend – a member of our very household. I pushed my remorse to the borders of my awareness, while joining my human family in the eating of our friend's remains. And I remember my pain and confusion when the pig that we had raised, and in whose care I had had a special role as a male child, was killed. My parents hired someone to carry out the slaughter, as they felt unable to perform that task, at least in part, I believe, because of the emotionally tearing impact of hurting a larger animal who forcefully protested his treatment. My father would go away into the fields so that he would not even hear the loud, intense squealing, and return home only when the ordeal was over.

I left home at age twelve to attend secondary school in the city, and entered a world where meat was consumed twice a day seven days a week. I never again met the animal I was eating or witnessed its slaughter, as this was done at a municipal facility, removed from the restaurant where I had my meals.

Slowly, very slowly, and haltingly, I allowed my feelings of horror and compassion to return to the table. Especially at the beginning, vegetarianism seemed boring and burdensome – a marginal life style of marginalizing effects. As I learned about the miseries of the industrial production of animal-generated food, with the extreme cruelty and suffering it inflicts on chickens, hens, ducks, pigs, cows, calves, etc., a door was opened in my soul that I could never keep shut again.

Then, the more I allowed my eyes to see the connections between the animal food industry and the scandals of massive malnutrition, world hunger and environmental damage, the harder it became to participate in it. I realized that participating in an activity injurious to us humans, the animals and the planet also injured my soul. It required that I smother my conscience, ignore my compassion and abdicate my responsibility to act according to my knowledge and to the light I was given.

Recently, I have felt moved to openly share with Friends my concern about how we relate to animals and what it means for their welfare and dignity, and for our world, our health and our spiritual integrity.

An elder Friend has warned me that inviting a discussion of our food habits can generate discomfort.

What I desire is to stimulate a conversation that I feel is long overdue. If you still eat meat or other animal products, I simply hope that you will open yourself to an exploration that I believe has enormous potential for a transformed life. For me, this journey has been liberating. It has blessed my soul with growing peace, joy and fortitude, allowing me to nurture an ever deepening communion with non-human and human beings, Earth and God.

I am convinced that this exploration is especially urgent and important for us as Friends. Taking the promptings of truth and love seriously, we have historically nurtured a strong interest for simple living, the integrity of Creation, peace and justice. I believe the Spirit is waiting for us to take a close, honest look at the way we obtain and consume our food, as something crucially relevant to our concerns.

That Friend also suggested that, following Quaker practice, I share with you a few queries. Please consider the following two:

How do you see the connection between how you eat and how you relate to other humans, the animals, the planet, and Spirit/God?

How does Spirit influence and shape your choices regarding food?

I thank you for the time you have taken to read this message, and would be delighted to have your response. May the Light of divine love and mercy shine powerfully in you.

Greeley, CO
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Here are some online resources, which I hope you will find helpful:

<http://www.vegetarianfriends.net/> (a project of the Animal Kinship Committee of Orange Grove Friends Meeting, Pasadena, CA)

<http://quaker-animals.co.uk/> (a website by the British Quaker group Quaker Concern for Animals)

<http://www.all-creatures.org/>, <http://www.all-creatures.org/cva/bibliography.htm> (a Christian perspective on our relationship to all creatures)

<http://jewishveg.com/>, <http://jewishveg.com/schwartz/> (Jewish perspectives on vegetarianism)

<http://www.pcrm.org/health/> (a site of Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine)

<http://www.shabkar.org/> (a website dedicated to vegetarianism as a way of life for Buddhists)

<http://www.islamicconcern.com/> (a website presenting a Muslim perspective on vegetarianism)

<http://www.jeffreymasson.com/> (Jeffrey M. Masson writes books on the emotional life of animals).

Two books in particular have been particularly helpful to me:

The Face on Your Plate: The Truth About Food, by Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson

A review of the book in the Los Angeles Times can be found here:

<http://articles.latimes.com/2009/mar/16/entertainment/et-book16>

The World Peace Diet: Eating for Spiritual Health and Social Harmony, by Will Tuttle

A review of the book by Walter Jacobson, M.D. can be here:

<http://www.vegsource.com/walter-jacobson-md/book-review-the-world-peace-diet-eating-for-spiritual-health-and-social-harmony-by-will-tuttle-phd.html>

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