

THE LOSS OF SUBSTANCE: EATING MEAT

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For many even the discussion of why or why not to eat meat is like talking about religion or politics. When I speak of giving up meat, I really am on more sketchy ground, for society as a whole (or even in all its parts) does not yet recognize meat as something to give up. And meat is not addictive chemically (although most meat is full of chemicals and other stuff), but rather is a habit, something we picked up eons ago. And the reasons for giving it up are not so much physical as moral. Who ever heard of an addiction that perhaps should be given up for moral reasons? Think again folks; we have many of them. Just look at Washington and the folks there we should give up for moral reasons!

I was raised eating meat with never a thought to giving it up or that it should be given up, so I am not throwing stones in a glass house here. I still struggle a little with eating meat, although for great stretches of my life I have gone vegetarian, only to fall back into eating meat once again. Go figure. I might go ten or fifteen years eating veggies and then in the blink of an eye just eat a hot dog. I can't fully trust myself when it comes to meat, although I believe the worst is over. And here is a good story about that.

The first time I travelled to Tibet my family and I were all vegetarians and had been so for years. We were not roasting, broiling, boiling, frying, or otherwise cooking meat, and we struggled to cut out fish when we could. As for poultry, we had long ago declared chicken a vegetable, and one that we did not eat, mostly because of the way chickens are forced with antibiotics, treated, and raised. Anyway, I digress.

When we got to the mountains and high-plains of Tibet, one thing we found is that they not only had no trees, but they had damn few vegetables either. They have meat, dairy, and grain. That was about it. All of the Tibetans ate meat, because that was what was there, mainly thanks to their yaks. It was yak meat, yak fur, yak tents, yak milk, yak yogurt, yak butter, yak cheese, and so on – yakety yak.

It made it really hard for us, because we would eat no meat and, as mentioned, vegetables were scarce to nonexistent. To make it worse, when we did manage to explain to Tibetans that we were vegetarians, we then became subject to whatever their misinformed idea of a vegetarian was. And they had no idea what vegetarian food should taste like. And this is true even in this country as well.

When we visit places or friends where they know we are vegetarian, we don't get wonderfully cooked veggie food, but rather some tortured idea of what it might be like to eat vegetarian, often boiled, watery, and overcooked olive-drab vegetables, good only to be tossed out – like legendary hospital food. Meat eaters have no idea of what vegetarians actually eat. Anyway, back to my Tibet story.

Somehow we managed to make it all the way through our Tibet pilgrimage without eating meat, and to do that we ate some pretty terrible things, when wonderful meat dishes (like the Tibetan meat dumplings called 'momos') were sitting there before us steaming and waiting to be eaten. No such luck. We ate some of the worst food I have ever eaten instead, mostly breads made with bad oils that had some weak sugar mixed in them, bananas, and hard-boiled eggs. There

were always the hard-boiled eggs.

And the funny part of this story is that when I finally got to our home back here in Michigan, about the first thing I did was to go to the local restaurant (where we were known vegetarians), order a Porterhouse steak, sit in a back corner, and eat it all up, while the waitresses marveled at the event and pointed me out from a distance. And I did this for three nights in a row! Needless to say that event marked a distinct falling off the eat-no-meat wagon back into eating meat, and it went on from there for years. If only I would have made that move BEFORE we went to Tibet, our trip would have been so much different. Go figure.

The hypocrisy in all of this is that as a naturalist and lover of animals I could never kill one. I carry bugs outside when I find them and check my shower each morning to be certain no spider has set up shop in there. If they have, I make sure they get safely out. I don't smack mosquitoes, but gently brush them off as the Tibetans do. At the same time, for years I have had no trouble filling up my shopping cart with whatever meat strikes my fancy. Now, I draw the line when it comes to live lobsters, but that only shows up my greater failings more clearly.

And I have loved eating all kinds of meat, fowl, and fish. I am not so in love with steaks and filet mignon type meat, as I am with flank and skirt steak roasted on the grill and cut against the bias. I also like good hot dogs and the 'worst' kind of sausage, like bratwurst, knockwurst, and weisswurst. Italian sausage, embedded in paella with chicken and seafood is a favorite.

When I am off meat and a practicing vegetarian, then I sometimes tend to get at times a wee bit evangelical about it. In fact, my own arrogance about being a vegetarian has propelled me back into meat eating more than once, just to purify my uppity-ness. I can remember one time in New York ordering spaghetti without meat, just marinara sauce. When the dinner came I could see little flecks of meat in it and called the waiter on it. His reply: "No sir, we took the meatballs out." I have been known (as mentioned earlier), after years of being a strict vegetarian, to randomly or suddenly pick up a hot dog and eat it. What does that say about me?

And yet if you ask me, I don't believe in killing any animal for any reason. There you have a brief and ugly glimpse of my moral dilemma with eating meat. Right now I am not eating meat, mostly thanks to the suggestion from His Holiness the Karmapa (like the Dalai Lama, but from another lineage) that we consider not killing animals and eating them. It was not a demand, but only a suggestion, but one from someone I met in Tibet (when he was eating meat) whom I respect enough to shame me into doing what my own conscience has told me all along. Right now I am vegetarian, but I am not perfect. I have lapses.

I have been known (when my family is off on some excursion) to have meat parties with the dogs, who very much appreciate this kind of occasion. I go to the store, buy some flank steak, grill it, slice it up, and eat it. Well, actually, I sit down with the dogs and we share it. I give one piece to each of them and then eat a few myself, and on it goes. I am not proud of this, but am just watching myself do this. If challenged, I would not do it. If everyone else were home, I would not do it. However, if left to my own devices, I sometimes do it and like doing it.

In a similar way, if I am a guest at someone's house and they serve meat, I eat it and am glad for the opportunity. There are others in my home who don't share my proclivity for "found" meat dinners. I am trying to not do this kind of thing, because it is hypocritical and if suddenly called before my maker (use your own words here), I would come down on the side of not eating meat.. But this is how it is for me, very much in midstream.

Therefore when I write about giving up meat, I am on sketchy ground. I debated back and forth whether to even include this blog at all, since the outcome is in question and my hypocrisy so blatant. It is a struggle I still am in the middle of, although I have turned the corner once again. And, as mentioned at the beginning of this blog, not eating meat is a moral dilemma more than physical. However, it is true that much of the meat (and most of the chicken, and now the fish) is filled with so many chemicals, antibiotics, and other cumulative crap that you're doing yourself a favor not to eat it, even if you have nothing against killing animals.

And if you have never been to a slaughterhouse you are missing an essential motive for not eating meat. It is beyond description horrendous, and I will leave it at that.

So, the bottom line for me is that I do believe that all animals are sentient beings like me. They just want to be happy and don't like to suffer. Morally I am not a person who can condone killing and eating them. Practically, I am not so mature, but I am working on it. How about you?

Tomorrow I will post the last and most vicious of all my vices, the problem of over-eating, eating too much.

