

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
"Ethical Eating"

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore November 8, 2009

SERMON

I've dreaded doing this sermon from the moment I picked the topic. I feel somewhat compelled to address the topic because we picked "Ethical Eating" as the subject for generating a Statement of Conscience at our yearly denominational General Assembly in Fort Lauderdale, June of 2008.

As a dedicated carnivore who loves a good steak, Buffalo chicken wings, sausage, bacon and eggs, I didn't want to deeply consider the ethical implications of my eating habits. I didn't want to know how those animal products showed up in those attractive packages in the meat department or on my plate in a restaurant. But I remember vowing during my last sermon in June to follow the example of nineteenth century minister Theodore Parker who didn't shy away from tough issues and was prepared to take strong stands on what were the tough issues in his day - like slavery.

So today I'm prepared to do both.

To decide what to read, I consulted with University at Albany grad student, Daniel Feuer. Part of his research interest is looking at the ethics of eating. He helped me zero in on controversial and highly respected Princeton philosopher and animal rights activist Dr. Peter Singer. I picked his recent book titled, *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*, as an excellent way to dive into the topic. He and co-author Jim Mason focus on the eating habits of three families, a Wal-Mart family, a Trader Joes family, and a Vegan family to direct the readers' attention on the connections between their eating preferences and what the markets provide. My illness of last weekend, from which I've pretty much fully recovered, gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in his arguments.

I thought originally I'd be talking to you this morning about the ethical implications of killing animals for food. That was before I started reading about, then researching, the way those animals are raised for slaughter.

Although we may be dimly aware of the life cycle of animal food production, learning about the level of indignity is one shock after another. Our meat isn't raised in bucolic family farms anymore. Almost all of the chicken breasts on our plates come from chickens confined in huge indoor facilities that force them to live in extremely crowded conditions. Their beaks are trimmed to keep them from killing each other. Pigs live in stalls that do not permit them to turn around. Egg laying chickens are kept in cages so small they can't spread their wings. Cattle are fattened in feedlots on corn that is unhealthy for their digestive systems. To stimulate growth and prevent disease, these animals are fed hormones and anti-biotics. Each animal is treated like a widget traveling down an assembly line as fast as possible to maximize return on investment, rather than worth and dignity.

Now I knew some of this already. But Singer and Mason gave me more detail that made the grim realities of factory farming more real. As part of the research for their book, they wanted to get the perspective of those raising the animals and hear their defense. None of the large farms were willing to let them anywhere near their facilities. When corporations want to hide what they are doing, it suggests to me they must have their own ethical qualms about what they are doing. So I went to the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals web site and saw the covert videos of these farms and slaughterhouses. I challenge each and every one of you to look for yourselves at how animals are raised for food on factory farms and then let's talk about the ethics of this form of food production.

I listened to a moving podcast by an animal rights activist who infiltrates factory farms to document the illegal abuses of animals that happen there. I believe he was the one who exposed the story of grinding up live male chicks on a factory egg farm. Because he is undercover, he has to do exactly what the other workers do, which means abuse and kill animals rather than rescue them. He talked to the interviewer about what working in a farm does ... to the workers. Being forced to brutalize and kill animals has terrible effects on their spiritual health and well-being. And often this is the only halfway decent paying work to be found in rural America today. Family farms are no longer economically viable as costs are driven relentlessly down by the factory production methods.

The concentration of animals in a small space also concentrates their waste. The volume of waste from these facilities is enormous. Anyone who drives in the country these days can smell the pig farm from miles away. Imagine living within a mile of one of these facilities. These residents and their children suffer

from serious respiratory diseases and can't open their windows in the summer. Flies, rats and mice run at epidemic proportions. Uncontainable pollution from these farms contaminate ground water, making it undrinkable. Lakes, streams and estuaries are seriously contaminated with animal waste. Why? All in the pursuit of buying a cheap burger at MacDonald's.

I'm just cracking the lid on the topic of factory farming and the fumes are overwhelmingly bad. Without a doubt in my mind, I can say with certainty that this method of food production is ethically wrong from any number of reasons. The only reason we tolerate it is because we just don't know or don't *want* to know. Once all the aspects to this method of food production are considered, I must condemn it as morally unacceptable. We shouldn't support it with our food dollars, tax supports, or permit it by regulation.

Okay, so if factory farming is immoral, are there better choices if I want to continue to eat meat? Thankfully there are. There are farmers who treat their animals with dignity and respect, let their cattle roam free eating grass, allow their chickens to scratch in the dirt outside, and give their pigs a happy life. The Honest Weight Food Coop offers such meat from carefully approved vendors of chicken, beef, pork, dairy and eggs. I know some butchers, like Cardonas, provide grass fed beef. Bison may be another grass fed choice for free ranging animals. I encourage you to vote with your meat dollars for animals to be humanely raised and slaughtered.

What about seafood? Fish have good lives out in the oceans before being caught. Advocates for eating fish talk about their high omega 3 content. Should we switch to fish for our protein?

Given the over-fishing going on right now of the oceans, I'm not sure I'd recommend going to just fish. Fish stocks are collapsing one by one around the globe. In response, we've now got factory farming of fish developing along the world's coastlines. And to feed these fish, trawlers are out collecting little fish to grind up into fish food. So the farmers end up using enormous amounts of fuel oil to catch fish to feed fish, the very thing the wild fish do for themselves. And these fish farms that concentrate fish together, have all the same waste problems that land based farms do.

Mercury contamination is another big problem with fish. The contamination of the oceans with the soot from coal-fired power plants means there is much more methyl mercury accumulating in fish, particularly larger predatory fish. Eat

swordfish sparingly! Still, there are fish caught using sustainable methods that don't harm the environment too much. Little fish like sardines and Pollock seem to be sustainably harvested, at least for now.

I postponed considering the ethical implications of killing animals for food earlier in my sermon to deal with the evils of factory farming. Killing fish, particularly creatures like shrimp and clams without much of a nervous system probably doesn't cause much suffering.

But there is another approach to this topic. I've saved for last what I believe to be the most persuasive argument for not eating any animal products that does not revolve around whether it is right or wrong to kill. It revolves around what we need for good health.

I asked Bob Zima to step in for me last Sunday to lead the 9:00am meditation. He recommended I take a look at the recent book called, *The China Study*, emailing me an excerpt from the introduction. After reading it with interest, I downloaded the book into my Kindle. As you were sitting in the service on Sunday, I was devouring *The China Study*. This book presents the most revolutionary science I have ever read on diet. I recommend everyone read this study as I believe it will change your approach to eating.

The author, Dr. T. Colin Campbell, professor of nutrition at Cornell, early in his research career studying how to feed a hungry world, looked carefully at peanuts. The problem with using peanuts to feed a hungry world is aflatoxin, a highly carcinogenic spore that can contaminate them. He stumbled upon research about this dangerous carcinogen that shocked him.

In a study that originally came out of China, rats were given a carcinogenic dose of aflatoxin. Some were given a 20% protein diet. Others were given a 5% protein diet. All, I repeat, all, the rats with a 20% protein diet got cancer and died. None, I repeat, none of the rats with a 5% protein diet got cancer. Campbell repeated the experiment again and again getting exactly the same results.

Then he noticed what kind of protein he was feeding the rats - milk protein. He ran the experiment again with a vegetable protein at 20% and 5% levels. None of the rats came down with cancer. Campbell had discovered a link between the consumption of animal protein and getting cancer.

If this wasn't amazing enough, he got a chance to validate his research when working with a visiting scientist from China in the early 1980's who informed him about a recent, massive China study of the incidence of cancer. In the entire history of the human species, no one had ever brought together this much data about the incidence of cancer before, across a fairly homogenous genetic population. The opportunity to analyze some of this data and then visit China to take blood and urine samples, was a once in a lifetime opportunity on par with the greatest scientific discoveries of all time.

Just like the rats, the Chinese who ate almost no animal protein were practically cancer free. They suffered of diseases of course, but they were the diseases we can easily avoid here in the West. The data of the China study makes it abundantly clear which of our illnesses are the result of eating a diet rich in animal protein and which are not. So many of the diseases that make aging miserable for us are reversible and preventable by eating a whole foods, plant based diet.

I don't have the time this morning to give you so many of the powerfully persuasive, rigorously documented, scientifically sound studies the book quotes. Campbell has a mountain of high quality scientific data to back up his claims that eating whole foods, plant based diet drops your risk of cancer dramatically and can even stop cancer in its tracks if you've got it. As someone who has dramatically improved his health through careful eating, I find this research very exciting. My mother died of breast cancer. My father endured prostate cancer. I'm ready to do what I can to avoid cancer by changing my diet to a whole foods, plant based diet as much as I can.

Okay, I know I presented you with a lot of information this morning that will be hard to take in. I marinated in this data all last weekend before it became crystal clear to me that I needed to change my diet. What interested me in this persuasion process was I didn't need to consider whether or not it is right or wrong to kill animals. I didn't need to look at the arguments about using ten pounds of grain to get one pound of meat. I didn't need to think about the international implications of eating meat. I could have given you sound arguments for not eating meat based on living light on the earth, not killing sentient beings, saving precious fresh water and preventing pollution. And I'm not sure how persuasive those arguments would have been.

What nailed it for me was what was good for my own health. It certainly looks to me like eating animal products significantly increases my risk of getting

cancer. I don't want to die of cancer and I am at a significant family risk of doing just that.

I acknowledge I can't hear the brussel sprout scream as I throw it in the steamer or know the agony of the soybeans as they are ground up in my soymilk maker. At this point, without the ability to eat 100% synthetic food, we must consume life forms to survive. We can, however, minimize that suffering while also maximizing our own health.

I strongly encourage you to do your own research and come to your own conclusions. That is our beautiful Unitarian Universalist way of doing ethics and values. Look at where your food comes from. Examine the effects of what you eat on your health. Reflect on the results of our food production and consumption on the environment, on the rest of society and the world and come to your own conclusions about what is right and wrong. And let us then come together to share what we find.

Believe me, I'd love it if you can help me find an ethical way to eat my steak, Buffalo chicken wings, and bacon and eggs for breakfast without compromising my health.

So far I'm completely persuaded that I need to become a vegan!

BENEDICTION

I'd like to leave you with two quotes. The first comes from Gandhi:

The earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not enough to satisfy every man's greed.

The second comes from Anna Sewell, author of *Black Beauty*:

There is no religion without love, and people may talk as much as they like about their religion, but if it does not teach them to be good and kind to beasts as well as man it is all a sham.

May we find a path to both compassion and good health by ethically considering what we eat.

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