

On Becoming Vegetarian

by Mark Braunstein

Prelude

Now in the mid-1980's, everyone has heard reasons for becoming vegetarian, whether one has become it or not. But 20 years ago, causes were less well publicized. Those who converted often did so for reasons that they understood little about then and that we still may know little about now.

Act I, Scene I

A suburban family gathers at the dinner table. The main course is steak. At the bottom of the steak platter gathers a pool of what ma and pa call "juice." Tonight their son, a high school teenager, of a sudden restless that the "juice" is grease and blood, says "No, thanks," he is not so hungry tonight--please pass the carrots.

Act I, Scene II

No thanks, please pass the string beans. No thanks, please pass the sweet potatoes. No thanks, please pass the bread. For the next half year, he simply is not hungry tonight. Finally, ma and pa inquire, has their son become a vegetarian? Yes, he answers--please pass the salad.

Act I, Scene III

Out of the closet--and into the cupboard. There he sits at the dinner table and eats his peanut butter and jelly sandwich. As he eats, he thinks why he will never again drink blood. And he thinks these thoughts:

Because he wants to help animals, he wants to become a veterinarian or a zookeeper--pets and prisoners being the only animals he knows. Because everyday his unknown little friends, calves and lambs, disappear down a million mouths, and why make it a million and one? Because thousands of his brothers become cutthroats in slaughterhouses, since the



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job pays well, and who pays them? Because he does not want someone to eat his parakeet, he does not want to eat someone else's chicken. Because he likes peanut butter and jelly sandwiches the best.

Act II, Scene I

He has had no trouble adhering to his year-old diet because his "vegetarianism" includes eating fish and other animals that swim and squirm in the streams and sea. Tonight with friends in a Chinese restaurant, he orders shrimp chow mein. As always when he dines with carnivores, the conversation touches upon his eccentric diet. One of his buddies recounts a lobster dinner: to kill it, the friend threw a live lobster into a pot of boiling water. That it is more humane to pour the boiling water over the lobster to stun it instantly is not the point. The point is that the lobster feels pain, that its inability to reason is no measure of inability to suffer. And with that meal, with half the shrimp on his plate and the other half in his stomach, he vows never again to eat anything that moves--please pass the vegetable chop suey.

Act II, Scene II

As a kitchen worker in a summer camp, his jobs are many. He mops the congealed blood off the floor of the walk-in refrigerator. He scrubs the pots of their burned grease. He scrapes the hundreds of plates of their leftover mounds of food: half a hog thrown away today, six chickens wasted yesterday, the random pieces of an entire cow tossed

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into the trash by the end of summer. He tolerates his job and every evening washes his hands of the matter. So long as he does not share the meal, his conscience remains as clean as the floors, pots, and dishes. One morning, however, the chore of cracking the fresh eggs for breakfast omelettes causes alarm. Of every hundred, one or two contain a spot of blood--the same blood which initiated his vegetarianism. If it is neither vegetable nor mineral, flesh in a shell must be animal. That morning he vows never again to eat eggs--please pass the oatmeal.

Act II, Scene III

A college friend invites him to visit the family dairy farm. All forty cows have names and are treated like members of the family. He deeply respects this family, perhaps more than any other he has met. In fact, his love for these people is matched only by theirs for their cows. Yet even under these ideal conditions, the cows deserve better. He sees they are prisoners, allowed only to stand up and sit down for all but an hour of the winter day. Their moos sound like cries of pain. None are truly healthy, which means none are truly happy. Yet these are the best of conditions.

He discovers the worst of conditions awaits the calves for whom the milk is intended. The farm family knows the true cost of milk, the price that must be paid with blood. Every week the truck from the veal farm hauls away their one or two new calves. They greet the truck as though it were a hearse. They regret the doom to which they condemn their calves, and as carnivores, they steadfastly refuse to eat veal. Likewise, as a vegetarian, he now steadfastly refuses to drink milk--please pass the tofu.

Epilogue

Years pass. All these scenes belong to someone so deep inside him from so long ago that those reasons for his becoming a vegetarian are now feeble compared to the reasons he remains one. A reward he never suspected is good health. And now reward becomes reason. Indeed, his health sets the best example for others to become vegetarians. But health is another story, to save for later, to tell when he reaches 101.

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