

## Chapter 15. BECOMING VEGETARIANS

Many people have written about becoming vegetarians, so this chapter makes no pretense of being complete. Rather, we look at a survey of what moved people to change their diet to an animal-friendly one, and several more personal examples. More information is available in Carol Adams' book *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Erik Marcus's *Vegan: The New Ethics of Eating* and Peter Singer and Jim Mason's *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*.

Most people who care about animal rights are vegetarians or vegans; after all, if you think animals are important in themselves, you won't want to have them killed. As the motto goes, "I don't eat my friends." For their book *The New Vegetarians* (1989, 32), Paul Amato and Sonia Partridge made a survey of vegetarians, asking them why they decided to change their eating habits. These people, a total of 320 (82% from across the United States, 6% from England, and 5% each from Canada and Australia), said they became vegetarians for a variety of reasons, many giving more than one. These were:

- a concern over animal suffering or a belief in animal rights (67%),
- a desire to promote personal health (38%),
- religious beliefs or a wish to live a more spiritual life (17%),
- a dislike of meat or a sensitivity to aesthetics (12%),
- the pursuit of personal growth (7%),
- a concern about world hunger (5%),
- a desire for a nonviolent lifestyle (5%),
- an interest in improving the environment (5%),
- a belief that meat-eating is unnatural for human beings (4%),
- the high cost of meat (3%),
- and social conformity (1%).

Most vegetarians approached their new diet cautiously, thinking first about the implications, and then gradually omitting red meat, then chicken, and then fish from their diets. A few, however, the ones that interest us here, made the change almost instantaneously, as the following examples indicate.

**Sometimes people change their behavior merely by seeing something suddenly from a new perspective.** For example, among the people whom Amato and Partridge surveyed was a married couple in New Jersey who bought and protected land threatened by development by turning it into a wildlife refuge. The wife explained that while patrolling their posted land "something happened to change our lives. One day I was talking with a hunter at our border. He knew our stand against killing and asked, 'You eat meat, don't you?' When I said 'Yes,' he smiled and said, 'A deer is just a cow. A quail is just a chicken. What's the difference?' As I walked home through the woods I **pondered his question and had to admit that I was a hypocrite.** I have never eaten meat since that day 25 years ago."

**Other respondents changed their eating habits on being confronted rationally with pertinent information presented in books or articles.** A woman who

interned during her college years at the United Nations did research on hunger and food issues. She wrote, "I became aware of the wasteful inequities involved in meat production, and how a large portion of the world goes to bed hungry each night because of our food choices. I was very concerned with the suffering of others on a world-wide level and felt that my eating of meat contributed to the problems, so I had to stop. **Feeding food that people can eat, such as grains and beans, to animals for slaughter is crazy when there are so many people starving.**"

Several respondents were crucially affected by reading books. Gwen had bought Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* to read, but for a year found the content too distressing to confront. Then one day, **when she was driving behind a truckload of pigs obviously bound for the abattoir, she suddenly realized that she would have to read the book** no matter what: "I knew that they, or others like them, would be on my plate that night. Back home, I pounced on Singer's book, read every word, and knew that I had become vegetarian."

Sarah, a university student, read Thomas Regan's *The Case for Animal Rights* with similar results. She needed it for information for an essay she was writing on the treatment of animals for a philosophy course. She writes, "My term paper was a success (all 26 pages of it). **Before I received my grade I had given up all meat and poultry** but not fish. I soon read other books on vegetarianism, and I knew I was a lacto-vegetarian for life."

Sherri was traumatized by an issue of *PETA News* put out by the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. She writes that one of the features (Vol 1, No 8) was titled "Downed Cow." **"That particular article changed my life.** That entire issue was shocking, sad, and the reason I will never eat meat again."

Another woman was sensitized by information from the animal welfare movement she became involved with and "immediately saw a conflict between saving cats and killing cows. I read a flyer that stated **if I ate chicken twice a week, I was guilty of killing that chicken.** At that instant, my consciousness changed and I knew that I was not capable of harming or killing an animal just for its flesh and couldn't justify having someone else do it for me." Another became a vegan, rather than a vegetarian, after obtaining information about animals from an animal rights meeting (p 54).

**Informative movies and videos can persuade people to change not only rationally, but also viscerally with telling images.** One child of 13 years saw a TV show on the harp seal slaughter: **"I shall never forget seeing the seal pup as it was clubbed to death,** and the way the mother followed the hunters as they dragged the carcass along the ice. I have never eaten, nor used, animal products since." Other influential documentaries have been a PBS program on a cow going to slaughter with tears in its eyes, and *The Animals Film* which deals with the treatment of animals by the meat, cosmetics, and medical research industries.

**Many people, especially children, become vegetarians when they really realize, for the first time, that the food on their plate was once an animal.** They or their parents wrote comments to Amato and Partridge as follows:

\*"One day we were eating a Sunday lunch-- lamb-- when my daughter suddenly asked, 'What was this meat before you cooked it?' I told her lamb, and **she announced that**

**she wouldn't eat it because she liked lambs. She was eight and a half years old."**

She stopped eating all kinds of other meat, too. Her mother started cooking vegetarian meals for her daughter, sometimes sharing them; a year later she had also become a vegetarian. (Becoming a vegetarian because one's friends are is common).

\* One person "stopped eating meat seven years ago abruptly when I took a bite out of a piece of barbecued chicken and found a vein sticking out, half eaten."

\* One child came home from school and saw a leftover roast in a pan. "I saw the bone-- it was a hip. And I began to think, **'What am I doing? I'm eating a corpse.'** The whole thing became repulsive to me and I developed a dislike for meat right then."

\* Another wrote "I had been eating tongue when I saw a cow in my mind's eye. The cow was whole. I couldn't finish the food. I quit eating all flesh."

\* One stopped eating meat at the age of 12. "My friend stuck a fork into a leg of lamb and said 'Baaa, Baaa'. I quit eating all flesh after that."

\* Another recalled, "At an evening meal of homemade soup my sister joked to me, **'There's a dead cow in your soup.'** I looked at the beef and decided that I didn't want to eat dead cows."

**Traumatic personal experiences may also drive people to change their behavior.** One five-year old child became a vegetarian after visiting her grandparents on their farm and seeing an animal slaughtered. "I remember being real upset by it. **I saw the whole process from** the animal being alive and petting it then seeing it butchered. I have vague memories of it now, but I remember it happening and refusing to have anything to do with eating animals after that."

A high school student became a vegetarian after having to dissect a fetal pig. "The pigs that the class dissected had been taken from their mothers' wombs when their mothers had been slaughtered. **This project made me realize the cruelty of killing animals for food.**" (By contrast, animal dissections make many students *less* sensitive to animals, and therefore able to take part in animal experimentation in university.)

Another personal experience is more unusual. As a teenager, Susanna Kaysen (1993) was depressed and unhappy. One day she decided to kill herself. She phoned her boyfriend to tell him, then swallowed 50 aspirin. She realized almost immediately that she didn't want to die, but not knowing what else to do, went to the grocery store to buy milk as her mother had earlier requested. She lost consciousness as she passed the meat counter, "the bloody chops and steaks straining their plastic wrappers" the last thing she saw clearly.

Fortunately, her boyfriend phoned the police who found her and rushed her to the hospital where she had her stomach pumped. They stuffed a long tube up her nose and down the back of her throat, so she felt she was being choked to death. Then they pumped-- "the suction, the sense of tissue collapsing and touching itself in a way that it shouldn't, the nausea as all that was inside was pulled out. It was a good deterrent." The entire experience made her into a vegetarian because **she now associated the meat she'd seen as she collapsed with the horror of her suicide attempt.** But there was more to it. She wrote "The meat was bruised, bleeding, and imprisoned in a tight wrapping. And... so was I."

The implications of being a vegetarian can be far-reaching, as **Peter Singer** found. Singer, a philosophy professor at Monash University in Australia (Mowat, 1990, 105), is now probably the most famous animal liberationist in the world, but he wasn't particularly interested in animals or nature when he was growing up. He became an activist against the Vietnam War during his university days, then won a scholarship to study philosophy at Oxford. He happened to have lunch there one day with a Canadian from Cape Breton. The food served was spaghetti, which his acquaintance refused to eat when he learned the sauce contained meat. Singer was curious about this, because up until then he had believed that only cranks or health-nuts were vegetarians. **His friend invited him to meet with other Canadians, who explained that vegetarianism had a serious ethical basis.** This was not only a sentimental attachment to animals, but a statement against factory farms which treated animals as things to be exploited. Singer immediately began analyzing animal rights as a philosophical concept. He soon became a vegetarian and now believes that all living things are valuable independent of their meaning to human beings. He is author of the best selling book *Animal Liberation* (1975, 1990).

### **Bibliography**

- \* Adams, Carol J. 1991. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. New York: Continuum.
- \* Amato, Paul R. and Sonia A. Partridge. 1989. *The New Vegetarians*. New York: Plenum Press.
- \* Kaysen, Susanna. 1993. *Girl, Interrupted*. New York: Turtle Bay Books, Random House, p 38.
- \* Marcus, Erik. 2001. *The New Ethics of Eating*. Ithaca, NY: McBooks Press.
- \* Mowat, Farley 1990. *Rescue the Earth!* Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
- \* Singer, Peter and Jim Mason. 2006. *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale.