

Inhabiting a Peaceable Kingdom
Our Relationship With Our Dinner Plate
Beacon Unitarian Universalist Congregation
April 25, 2021
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker

It's 1974. The scene opens on a snow-frosted cabin in Northern Arizona where we are gathered around the dinner table after a day of skiing at a nearby mountain. I am the guest of one of my college friends for the holiday break. Her parents have come up from Phoenix for a day or two and Mom has made dinner for our hungry gang.

She ladles out the stew and we dig in. As a city girl, unaccustomed to wild meats, I try to identify the main ingredient with my taste buds. Is this venison I ask her? "Oh, no dear, it's squirrel. Do you like it?" I tried not to spit out the bite in my mouth as I conjured an image of the sweet little furry friends who frequented our back yard, in; you guessed it, Squirrel Hill. In truth, it tasted yummy, but squirrel?? I was mortified. Who eats squirrel?? It seemed culturally aberrant and some shade of immoral. But it grew on me. I had seconds.

Our relationship with animals, whether at the end of a leash or at the end of our forks has always been complicated. Ever since Yahweh gave man dominion over animals and admonished him to "subdue" the natural world in Genesis, we've been dancing an awkward and sometimes contradictory pas-de-deux with other earthly creatures.

If you had eggs and sausage for breakfast and then tuned in here to sing our first hymn, "We Celebrate the Web of Life" (with its acknowledgement of the divinity of everything from quails to barnacles) then you know what I mean.

My colleague, the Rev. Michael Dowd, compares this "dominion over" perspective to an I-thou mutuality, which recognizes the sacredness of nature and acknowledges that animals, even squirrels, have feelings. I know... you don't want to hear that your bacon is sentimental but pigs top the list of farm animals with complex emotional systems. Can't deny this.

In his book, *"Some we love, Some we hate, Some we eat,"* famed anthrozoologist Hal Herzog ponders the planet's relative cultural ethics in regards to animals. He asks: -Why can a puppy be regarded as a family member in Kansas, a pariah in Kenya, and lunch in South Korea?

We love our pets, don't we? Fido and Fluffy are not entrees; they are family members. And I've learned through my research this week that we're entering a

brave new world of pets (my dog Miss Billie will be happy to hear this – but maybe we should keep it to ourselves...she's spoiled enough!)

Today, cats and dogs aren't just property — they have more rights and protections than any creature in the country. Felony anti-cruelty laws in all 50 states impose up to \$125,000 in fines and 10 years in prison for those who abuse them, and several counties have created animal abuser registries, akin to those for sex offenders. No animal in human history has transcended its status as property, but some scholars believe cats and dogs may be the first. Sure, chimpanzees and dolphins are more cognitively complex, but how many judges have a dolphin at home? Certainly not in Japan, where they hunt and eat dolphins. In India cows are sacred, while in Britain, annual beef consumption is a whopping 176 pounds per capita.

And let's talk veal in Italy *por uno momento, per favore?* On a trip there in 2015, veal was a mainstay on every menu. Clearly, they have not received a bold faced memo about the cruelty of veal production. I remember in the 1970's anticipating my first delicious bite of veal osso buco at a trattoria in Florence. Now, I don't eat veal and I cannot pretend I don't know how veal makes its disturbing journey to the table. Americans seem to agree – veal consumption in America is a measly half a pound per capita compared to 86 pounds per capita of chicken.

The rise of organic food production, Locovore culture and a more mainstream exposure to vegetarianism and Veganism have shifted other statistics as well, while educating us with facts, rather than advertisements, about the advantages of plant-based nutrition. I do love my kale and Swiss chard and roasted beets and well, yum! But, I want to get something straight with you – I am not the Plate Police. I had fish tacos for dinner on Thursday and a turkey and swiss sandwich earlier today.

Before 2009, I was a stage 6 “omnivore foodie.” I ate everything and unapologetically savored the gamut from foie gras on toast points to pulled pork to spicy Thai mango tofu. My daughter Michaela, who is on her way to becoming a registered dietician in Oregon, was leaning more and more towards veganism and as we cooked more meals together, I purchased less and less meat. She received blunt and hard-hitting mailings from Farm Sanctuary, which runs a lifetime, care facility for rescued animals from factory farms.

In a matter of months, I had transitioned to what I call a Veg-aquarian diet (plant-based with some fish). I lost weight (quite a bit actually), felt healthier; my body literally stopped craving red meat, lamb and pork. I learned some great

tempeh and tofu recipes. I switched almond milk for dairy milk and lost a taste for the latter. Around five years ago, I reintroduced chicken into my diet. I was bored and wanted more meal options. I made a choice.

Michaela now eats meat again. She talks about balance and owns her decision. She had an elk burger recently on a weekend trip to Bend and posted a picture of it on Facebook. No shame, no hiding. Maybe someday she will swing back towards the vegan end of the spectrum. It's a choice.

This sermon is about just that - choices and personal ethics. The central theme for exploring that with you on this particular morning is our relationship with animals, especially the ones we eat. But, in the end, and at the end of our forks, it's about being with what's true, grappling with our own choices and owning them. In my view, inhabiting a peaceable kingdom (as my sermon title envisions) is not only about our relationship with animals. It's about all the choices we make, moral and ethical in our individual and communal lives.

It means asking questions like Melanie Joy asks in her bestselling book: "*Why do we love dogs, eat pigs and wear cows?*" Joy, an American social psychologist and animal activist, argues for the term "carnist" (not carnivore) for one who chooses meat-eating based on social conditioning and desire (whether they realize it or not.) Her research suggests that the majority of people (even carnists) cares deeply about animals and do not want them to suffer and that there is a neurological basis for empathy. Nevertheless, we are sheltered from the process by which our food is produced, told consuming animals is both natural and necessary, and sent attractive media messages about the desirability of an animal-based diet. Beef – it's what's for dinner; Pork – the other white meat.

The Writer Megan Kearns agrees with Joy's argument that the system of carnism is at odds with democracy, but takes issue with Joy blaming the system rather than the people who make carnist choices. "It seems incongruous," she writes, "to blame the system and simultaneously hold people accountable to awaken their consciences and exercise their free will." Kearns also notes that not only are there many empathic people who choose to eat meat, but many vegetarians who base their diet on health, not moral reasons.

The statistics are quite breathtaking. We eat more than 58 billion animals a year worldwide, not counting fish (which also have a face, in case you are using the argument I once did, that I wouldn't eat anything with a face.) We eat animals because they taste good. We do not *need* to eat animal foods to be healthy; even mainstream professional organizations and governmental regulatory bodies recognize that.

If you argue that you eat meat products because you need protein, there are plant-based sources galore that are systematically healthier for you in the long run. Humans can get all the protein that they need from green leafy vegetables, nuts, seeds, yeast, grains, beans, and other legumes. The difference in taste profile between lentils and bacon is pretty obvious, right? The thing is that we have a taste for bacon, we love bacon and bacon is not illegal. It's a choice we are allowed to make.

Another typical gambit argues that the human being is designed to and has evolved to be carnivorous. On that score, you will get a learned rebuttal from anthropologists and evolutionary biologists who will tell you that because humans can only safely eat animal flesh that is cooked, it is indicative of a cultivated habit, not an evolutionary one. With fire came meat eating. Although we are capable of being omnivores, our digestive anatomy is almost entirely characteristic of an herbivore. We can (and in fact, are designed) to survive without eating animals. Hard to hear if you have a hankering for a rib-eye, but true.

Vegetarianism is not a new concept and 5% of the US population (16 million people) is currently vegetarian. But wait –Is this the “year of the vegan?” (As a recent New York Magazine inquired). The journalist mused that perhaps because of celebrity vegans like Bill Clinton and Carrie Underwood, or the 22-day vegan adventure of Beyonce and Jay-Z and the “outing” of Al Gore as a recent vegan convert, that indeed, this is the “Year of the Vegan.” Even Martha Stewart, doyenne of Roasted Rack of Lamb, devoted an entire program to vegan cuisine. Pop culture – it never stops “trendy-izing” what some folks take very seriously.

In fact, according to a new Harris Interactive study commissioned by the Vegetarian Resource Group, the number of vegans in the United States has doubled since 2009 to 2.5% of the population. An amazing 7.5 million U.S. citizens now eat vegan diets that do not include any animal products – no meat, poultry, fish, dairy or eggs. If this rate continues, vegans will be 10% of the U.S. population in 2015, 40% in 2019, and in 80 % in 2050!

Nonetheless, ethical relativism and loosey-goosey bandying of terms can arise when a particular lifestyle, like veganism, becomes trendy. A glaring example of this for me is bestselling food writer Mark Bittman who has appeared on countless talk shows espousing his “Vegan before 6” protocol, which he calls “flexitarianism” For Bittman, vegan is a food category rather than a foundational ethical perspective.

In an op-ed for the New York Times, called “Why I am Not a Vegan” Bittman admits that plant-based nutrition is healthier and that animals are often farmed under deplorable conditions but that we like to eat them and they are a traditional part of cultural diets. That’s Melanie Joy’s carnism concept in a nutshell. Some 24-hour vegans consider Bittman a hypocrite and wish he would just take the word Vegan out of the equation entirely, arguing that his “until dusk” timetable is shallow, tantamount to being for gay marriage or reproductive rights between the hours of 12 and 3. I say, “Own it, Mark. Don’t be a poser.”

Like Bittman or Melanie Joy, your diet is a choice for you, for me, for anyone who eats. If we choose to eat chicken (as I do) , then I believe we should inform ourselves about how our chicken is raised, or our cows or our pigs. If we don’t like what we learn, we should do one of two things – stop eating chicken or change the system. Or, at least, choose animal products that were raised more humanely (even though this will be more expensive).

The videos and materials that are distributed by devoted organizations like Farm Sanctuary don’t pull punches. They are graphic and bleak. In order to make and own our decisions, I believe we need to learn rather than hide, reflect rather than deflect, represent choices, not defaults. Similarly, If we are unhappy with gun laws in America, we can either pray we aren’t victims of a “Stand Your Ground” wing nut, or we can create a peaceable kingdom with our votes and voices.

I want to *want* to make the conviction to go vegan, but I’m not there. (Julie Childers shared in her reflection earlier that it took her 10 years to fully make that commitment). Maybe some day I will be there. But not today. And I own that. *I’ve* made that choice. It has not been force-fed, I am not starving and without dietary choices – I do not HAVE to eat any particular item.

In fact, as a middle class American, I have many choices and cannot pretend otherwise. I do not have to subsist on rice and beans (a complete protein) every day like the majority of the world’s population. So when I decide to whip up one of my favorite dishes -tempeh mushroom stroganoff for dinner, with a dollop of vegan sour cream and freshly snipped parsley, it’s a choice I make. It’s delicious, by the way- very “meaty” for a veggie dish, I’ve been told. Not squirrel, mind you, But “meaty.”

Do I feel more ethical when I am enjoying this dish? Maybe a little. But that doesn’t give me a pass the next time I have grilled salmon. UU delegates at our

General Assembly in 2011 would agree. That year they approved a statement of Conscience of Ethical Eating that had been in the works as a congregational study action issue for the previous three years.

The statement calls on UUs to “eat ethically” by becoming aware of the ways that our food choices affect our health and the planet’s health. It makes references to industrial farming, condemns mistreatment of animals and workers in food production, encourages a diet based more on plants than animals, and invites all of us to seek out and advocate for food that is raised responsibly. It invites congregations to work for “food justice” so that everyone can have “adequate, nutritious food.” The full statement can be read on the uua.org website.

A growing number of UUs also have their sights set on changing just one word in our first principle to embody an ethos of right relationship with all creatures. The aptly named First Principle Project.Org is asking us to affirm “the inherent worth and dignity of all beings,” not just persons. The Project’s leaders, including the Rev. Lori Beth Joyner, writes that: This work of living out our principles is never easy for our principles are not an acceptance of the reality under which we live with imperfect justice and compassion, but a vision for which we ache and long.”

Joyner also asked to consider ways we can make the interdependent web in our 7th principle more holistic and less hierarchical by swapping a percentage of animal-based meals with plant-based ones. That could be a starting point for all in our own journeys towards a more sustainable and just relationship between all creatures of the earth and sky.

Each Thanksgiving, the White House participates in the annual (somewhat ridiculous) Turkey Pardon, sending two gobblers to live out their life at the Mt Vernon estate. That’s nice, I suppose, despite the fact that 46 million Butterballs will grace our holiday tables.

Yet, as I surfed the web every November in search of something new, I find dozens of sites offering menus for “Gentle non-meat Thanksgiving” meals that sounded pretty scrumptious. Am I likely to eat turkey that day? We will see. It is likely. Although during my veg-aquarian years, I purchased and prepared a vegan Garden roast with stuffing from Whole Foods and it was delicious and satisfying with rich veggie gravy. So, maybe not. I’ll let you know. Either way, I will strive to express gratitude for all the abundance in my life, including the food I can choose or not choose to consume. The tempeh, the mushrooms, or the turkey.

And I will consider how I might co-create and nurture a peaceable kingdom for us and for those who follow. I do wonder if our great-grandchildren will all be vegans and will look back on this time in history as morally abhorrent and somewhat incomprehensible. You ate cows and pigs? Why?! They might look back at us in the same way we look back at witch burning and slavery.

And they may skip past Genesis and to embrace this creed from the book of Job (words I urge us all to ponder in the here and now as we make our choices): “Ask now the beasts and they shall teach thee, and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee, or speak to the earth and it shall teach thee, and the fishes of the sea shall declare until thee. Every creature is a holy word. “

Blessed be, Blessed we, and Amen.

© 2021 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.