

The Vegetarian
Myth

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CHAPTER 1

Why This Book?

This was not an easy book to write. For many of you, it won't be an easy book to read. I know. I was a vegan for almost twenty years. I know the reasons that compelled me to embrace an extreme diet and they are honorable, ennobling even. Reasons like justice, compassion, a desperate and all-encompassing longing to set the world right. To save the planet—the last trees bearing witness to ages, the scraps of wilderness still nurturing fading species, silent in their fur and feathers. To protect the vulnerable, the voiceless. To feed the hungry. At the very least to refrain from participating in the horror of factory farming.

These political passions are born of a hunger so deep that it touches on the spiritual. Or they were for me, and they still are. I want my life to be a battle cry, a war zone, an arrow pointed and loosed into the heart of domination: patriarchy, imperialism, industrialization, every system of power and sadism. If the martial imagery alienates you, I can rephrase it. I want my life—my body—to be a place where the earth is cherished, not devoured; where the sadist is granted no quarter; where the violence stops. And I want eating—the first nurturance—to be an act that sustains instead of kills.

This book is written to further those passions, that hunger. It is not an attempt to mock the concept of animal rights or to sneer at

the people who want a gentler world. Instead, this book is an effort to honor our deepest longings for a just world. And those longings—for compassion, for sustainability, for an equitable distribution of resources—are not served by the philosophy or practice of vegetarianism. We have been led astray. The vegetarian Pied Pipers have the best of intentions. I'll state right now what I'll be repeating later: everything they say about factory farming is true. It is cruel, wasteful, and destructive. Nothing in this book is meant to excuse or promote the practices of industrial food production on any level.

But the first mistake is in assuming that factory farming—a practice that is barely fifty years old—is the only way to raise animals. Their calculations on energy used, calories consumed, humans unfed, are all based on the notion that animals eat grain.

You can feed grain to animals, but it is not the diet for which they were designed. Grain didn't exist until humans domesticated annual grasses, at most 12,000 years ago, while aurochs, the wild progenitors of the domestic cow, were around for two million years before that. For most of human history, browsers and grazers haven't been in competition with humans. They ate what we couldn't eat—cellulose—and turned it into what we could—protein and fat. Grain will dramatically increase the growth rate of beef cattle (there's a reason for the expression "cornfed") and the milk production of dairy cows. It will also kill them. The delicate bacterial balance of a cow's rumen will go acid and turn septic. Chickens get fatty liver disease if fed grain exclusively, and they don't need any grain to survive. Sheep and goats, also ruminants, should really never touch the stuff.

This misunderstanding is born of ignorance, an ignorance that runs the length and breadth of the vegetarian myth, through the nature of agriculture and ending in the nature of life. We are urban industrialists, and we don't know the origins of our food. This includes vegetarians, despite their claims to the truth. It included me, too, for twenty years. Anyone who ate meat was in denial; only I had faced the facts. Certainly, most people who consume factory-farmed meat have never asked what died and how it died. But frankly, neither have most vegetarians.

The truth is that agriculture is the most destructive thing humans have done to the planet, and more of the same won't save us. The truth is that agriculture requires the wholesale destruction of entire ecosystems. The truth is also that life isn't possible without death, that no matter what you eat, someone has to die to feed you.

I want a full accounting, an accounting that goes way beyond what's dead on your plate. I'm asking about everything that died in the process, everything that was killed to get that food onto your plate. That's the more radical question, and it's the only question that will produce the truth. How many rivers were dammed and drained, how many prairies plowed and forests pulled down, how much topsoil turned to dust and blown into ghosts? I want to know about all the species—not just the individuals, but the entire species—the chinook, the bison, the grasshopper sparrows, the grey wolves. And I want more than just the number of dead and gone. I want them back.

Despite what you've been told, and despite the earnestness of the tellers, eating soybeans isn't going to bring them back. Ninety-eight percent of the American prairie is gone, turned into a monocrop of annual grains. Plough cropping in Canada has destroyed 99 percent of the original humus.¹ In fact, the disappearance of topsoil “rivals global warming as an environmental threat.”² When the rainforest falls to beef, progressives are outraged, aware, ready to boycott. But our attachment to the vegetarian myth leaves us uneasy, silent, and ultimately immobilized when the culprit is wheat and the victim is the prairie. We embraced as an article of faith that vegetarianism was the way to salvation, for us, for the planet. How could it be destroying either?

We have to be willing to face the answer. What's looming in the shadows of our ignorance and denial is a critique of civilization itself. The starting point may be what we eat, but the end is an entire way of life, a global arrangement of power, and no small measure of personal attachment to it. I remember the day in fourth grade when Miss Fox wrote two words on the blackboard: *civilization* and *agriculture*. I remember because of the hush in her voice, the gravitas of her words, the explanation that was almost oratory. This was Important. And I understood. Everything that was good in human culture flowed from

this point: all ease, grace, justice. Religion, science, medicine, art were born, and the endless struggle against starvation, disease, violence could be won, all because humans figured out how to grow their own food.

The reality is that agriculture has created a net loss for human rights and culture: slavery, imperialism, militarism, class divisions, chronic hunger, and disease. “The real problem, then, is not to explain why some people were slow to adopt agriculture but why anybody took it up at all, when it is so obviously beastly,” writes Colin Tudge of The London School of Economics.³ Agriculture has also been devastating to the other creatures with whom we share the earth, and ultimately to the life support systems of the planet itself. What is at stake is everything. If we want a sustainable world, we have to be willing to examine the power relations behind the foundational myth of our culture. Anything less and we will fail.

Questioning at that level is difficult for most people. In this case, the emotional struggle inherent in resisting any hegemony is compounded by our dependence on civilization, and on our individual helplessness to stop it. Most of us would have no chance of survival if the industrial infrastructure collapsed tomorrow. And our consciousness is equally impeded by our powerlessness. There is no Ten Simple Things list in the last chapter because, frankly, there aren't ten simple things that will save the earth. There is no personal solution. There is an interlocking web of hierarchical arrangements, vast systems of power that have to be confronted and dismantled. We can disagree about how best to do that, but do it we must if the earth is to have any chance of surviving.

In the end, all the fortitude in the world will be useless without enough information to chart a sustainable forward course, both personally and politically. One of my aims in writing this book is to provide that information. The vast majority of people in the US don't grow food, let alone hunt and gather it.⁴ We have no way to judge how much death is embodied in a serving of salad, a bowl of fruit, a plate of beef. We live in urban environments, in the last whisper of forests, thousands of miles removed from the devastated rivers, prairies, wetlands, and the millions of creatures who died for our dinners. We don't even know what questions to ask to find out.

In his book *Long Life, Honey in the Heart*, Martin Pretchel writes of the Mayan people and their concept of *kas-limaal*, which translates roughly as “mutual indebtedness, mutual insparkedness.”⁵ “The knowledge that every animal, plant, person, wind, and season is indebted to the fruit of everything else is an adult knowledge. To get out of debt means you don’t want to be part of life, and you don’t want to grow into an adult,” one of the elders explains to Pretchel.

The only way out of the vegetarian myth is through the pursuit of *kas-limaal*, of adult knowledge. This is a concept we need, especially those of us who are impassioned by injustice. I know I needed it. In the narrative of my life, the first bite of meat after my twenty year hiatus marks the end of my youth, the moment when I assumed the responsibilities of adulthood. It was the moment I stopped fighting the basic algebra of embodiment: for someone to live, someone else has to die. In that acceptance, with all its suffering and sorrow, is the ability to choose a different way, a better way.

The activist-farmers have a very different plan than the polemicist-writers to carry us from destruction to sustainability. The farmers are starting with completely different information. I’ve heard vegetarian activists claims that an acre of land can only support two chickens. Joel Salatin, one of the High Priests of sustainable farming and someone who actually raises chickens, puts that figure at 250 an acre.⁶ Whom do you believe? How many of us know enough to even have an opinion? Frances Moore Lappé says it takes twelve to sixteen pounds of grain to make one pound of beef.⁷ Meanwhile, Salatin raises cattle with no grain at all, rotating ruminants on perennial polycultures, building topsoil year by year. Inhabitants of urban industrial cultures have no point of contact with grain, chickens, cows, or, for that matter, with topsoil. We have no basis of experience to outweigh the arguments of political vegetarians. We have no idea what plants, animals, or soil eat, or how much. Which means we have no idea what we ourselves are eating.

Confronting the truth about factory farming—its torturous treatment of animals, its environmental toll—was for me at age sixteen an act of profound importance. I knew the earth was dying. It was a daily emergency I had lived against forever. I was born in 1964.

“Silent” and “spring” were inseparable: three syllables, not two words. Hell was here, in the oil refineries of northern New Jersey, the asphalt inferno of suburban sprawl, in the swelling tide of humans drowning the planet. I cried with Iron Eyes Cody, longed for his silent canoe and an unmolested continent of rivers and marshes, birds and fish. My brother and I would climb an ancient crabapple tree at the local park and dream about somehow buying a whole mountain. No people allowed, no discussion needed. Who would live there? Squirrels, was all I could come up with. Reader, don’t laugh. Besides Bobby, our pet hamster, squirrels were the only animals I ever saw. My brother, well-socialized into masculinity, went on to torture insects and aim slingshots at sparrows. I became a vegan.

Yes, I was an overly sensitive child. My favorite song at five—and here you are allowed to laugh—was Mary Hopkin’s *Those Were the Days*. What romantic, tragic past could I possibly have mourned at age five? But it was so sad, so exquisite; I would listen to the song over and over until I was exhausted from weeping.

Okay, it’s funny. But I can’t laugh at the pain I felt over my powerless witnessing of the destruction of my planet. That was real and it overwhelmed me. And the political vegetarians offered a compelling salve. With no understanding of the nature of agriculture, the nature of nature, or ultimately the nature of life, I had no way to know that however honorable their impulses, their prescription was a dead end into the same destruction I burned to stop.

Those impulses and ignorances are inherent to the vegetarian myth. For two years after I returned to eating meat, I was compelled to read vegan message boards online. I don’t know why. I wasn’t looking for a fight. I never posted anything myself. Lots of small, intense subcultures have cult-like elements, and veganism is no exception. Maybe the compulsion had to do with my own confusion—spiritual, political, personal. Maybe I was revisiting the site of an accident: this was where I had destroyed my body. Maybe I had questions and I wanted to see if I could hold my own against the answers that I had once held tight, answers that had felt righteous, but now felt empty. Maybe I don’t know why. It left me anxious, angry, and desperate each time.

But one post marked a turning point. A vegan flushed out his idea to keep animals from being killed—not by humans, but by other animals. Someone should build a fence down the middle of the Serengeti, and divide the predators from the prey. Killing is wrong and no animals should ever have to die, so the big cats and wild canines would go on one side, while the wildebeests and zebras would live on the other. He knew the carnivores would be okay because they didn't need to be carnivores. That was a lie the meat industry told. He'd seen his dog eat grass: therefore, dogs could live on grass.

No one objected. In fact, others chimed in. My cat eats grass, too, one woman added, all enthusiasm. So does mine! someone else posted. Everyone agreed that fencing was the solution to animal death.

Note well that the site for this liberatory project was Africa. No one mentioned the North American prairie, where carnivores and ruminants alike have been extirpated for the annual grains that vegetarians embrace. But I'll return to that in Chapter 3.

I knew enough to know that this was insane. But no one else on the message board could see anything wrong with the scheme. So, on the theory that many readers lack the knowledge to judge this plan, I'm going to walk you through this.

Carnivores cannot survive on cellulose. They may on occasion eat grass, but they use it medicinally, usually as a purgative to clear their digestive tracts of parasites. Ruminants, on the other hand, have evolved to eat grass. They have a rumen (hence, *ruminant*), the first in a series of multiple stomachs that acts as a fermentative vat. What's actually happening inside a cow or a zebra is that bacteria eat the grass, and the animals eat the bacteria.

Lions and hyenas and humans don't have a ruminant's digestive system. Literally from our teeth to our rectums we are designed for meat.⁸ We have no mechanism to digest cellulose.

So on the carnivore side of the fence, starvation will take every animal. Some will last longer than others, and those some will end their days as cannibals. The scavengers will have a Fat Tuesday party, but when the bones are picked clean, they'll starve as well. The graveyard won't end there. Without grazers to eat the grass, the land will eventually turn to desert.

Why? Because without grazers to literally level the playing field, the perennial plants mature, and shade out the basal growth point at the plant's base. In a brittle environment like the Serengeti, decay is mostly physical (weathering) and chemical (oxidative), not bacterial and biological as in a moist environment. In fact, the ruminants take over most of the biological functions of soil by digesting the cellulose and returning the nutrients, once again available, in the form of urine and feces.

But without ruminants, the plant matter will pile up, reducing growth, and begin killing the plants. The bare earth is now exposed to wind, sun, and rain, the minerals leach away, and the soil structure is destroyed. In our attempt to save animals, we've killed everything.

On the ruminant side of the fence, the wildebeests and friends will reproduce as effectively as ever. But without the check of predators, there will quickly be more grazers than grass. The animals will outstrip their food source, eat the plants down to the ground, and then starve to death, leaving behind a seriously degraded landscape.

The lesson here is obvious, though it is profound enough to inspire a religion: we need to be eaten as much as we need to eat. The grazers need their daily cellulose, but the grass also needs the animals. It needs the manure, with its nitrogen, minerals, and bacteria; it needs the mechanical check of grazing activity; and it needs the resources stored in animal bodies and freed up by degraders when animals die.

The grass and the grazers need each other as much as predators and prey. These are not one-way relationships, not arrangements of dominance and subordination. We aren't exploiting each other by eating. We are only taking turns.

That was my last visit to the vegan message boards. I realized then that people so deeply ignorant of the nature of life, with its mineral cycle and carbon trade, its balance points around an ancient circle of producers, consumers, and degraders, weren't going to be able to guide me or, indeed, make any useful decisions about sustainable human culture. By turning from adult knowledge, the knowledge that death is embedded in every creature's sustenance, from bacteria to grizzly bears, they would never be able to feed the emotional and spiritual hunger that ached in me from accepting that knowledge. Maybe in the end this book is an attempt to soothe that ache myself.



I have other reasons for writing this book. One is boredom. I'm tired of having the same discussion, especially when it's not an easy discussion to have. Vegetarians can sum up their program in neat sound bites—Meat Is Murder—and self-evident solutions, like those compelling sixteen pounds of grain. I could come up with my own slogans—Monocrops Are Murder? The Million Microbe March?—but they aren't understandable to the general public. I have to start from the beginning, from the first proteins self-organizing into life, moving to photosynthesis, plants, animals, bacteria, soil, and finally agriculture. I call this chat “Microbes, Manure, and Monocrops,” and I need a good thirty minutes for the backstory, which is essentially a basic education in the nature of life. And yes, this is information—material, emotional, spiritual—we all should have been given by the time we were four. But who is there left to teach us? And isn't everything that's wrong with this culture embedded in that question?

But it's not just the amount of information that makes the discussion hard. Often, the listener doesn't want to hear it, and the resistance can be extreme. “Vegetarian” isn't just what you eat or even what you believe. It's *who you are*, and it's a totalizing identity. In presenting a fuller picture of food politics, I'm not just questioning a philosophy or a set of dietary habits. I'm threatening a vegetarian's sense of self. And most of you will react with defensiveness and anger. I got hate mail before I'd barely started this book. And no, thank you, I don't need any more.

But I'm also writing this book as a cautionary tale. A vegetarian diet—especially a low-fat version, and most especially a vegan one—is not sufficient nutrition for long-term maintenance and repair of the human body. To put it bluntly, it will damage you. I know. Two years into my veganhood, my health failed, and it failed catastrophically. I developed a degenerative joint disease that I will have for the rest of my life. It started that spring as a strange, dull ache deep in a place I didn't know could have sensation. By the end of the summer, it felt like shrapnel in my spine.

There followed years of ever increasing pain and ever more frustrating visits to specialists. It took fifteen years to get a diagnosis instead of a pat on the head. Teenagers' spines don't fall apart for no reason and so, despite my perfect symptom description, none of the doctors considered Degenerative Disc Disease. Now I've got pictures, and I get respect. My spine looks like a sky-diving accident. Nutritionally, that's about what happened.

Six weeks into veganism I had my first experience of hypoglycemia, though I wouldn't know that's what it was called until eighteen years had gone by and it had become my life. Three months into it I stopped menstruating, which should have been a clue that maybe this wasn't such a good idea. The exhaustion began around then, too, and it only got worse, along with the ever-present cold. My skin was so dry it flaked, and in the winter it itched so badly it kept me up at night. At twenty-four, I developed gastroparesis, which, again, wasn't diagnosed or treated until I was thirty-eight and found a doctor who worked with recovering vegans. That was fourteen years of constant nausea, and I still can't eat after 5 PM.

Then there was the depression and anxiety. I come from a long and venerable line of depressive alcoholics, so clearly I didn't inherit the best mental health genetics. Malnutrition was the last thing I needed. Veganism wasn't the only cause of my depression, but it was a big contributing factor. Years went by when the world was made of a pointless, grey weight, endlessly the same, punctuated only by occasional panic. I would routinely dissolve into helplessness. If I couldn't find my house keys, I'd find myself in a heap on the living room floor, immobilized on the edge of The Void. How could I go on? Why would I want to? The keys were lost and so was I, the world, the cosmos. Everything collapsed, empty, meaningless, almost repulsive. I knew it wasn't rational, but I couldn't stop until it had run its course. And now I know why. Serotonin is made from the amino acid tryptophan. And there are no good plant sources of tryptophan. On top of that, all the tryptophan in the world won't do you any good without saturated fat, which is necessary to make your neurotransmitters actually transmit. All those years of emotional collapse weren't a personal failing; they were bio-chemical, if self-inflicted.

Is there anything as boring as other people's medical problems? I'll try to keep this brief. My spine isn't coming back. But eating a diet of grass-fed animal products has repaired the damage a bit and made a moderate dent in my pain level. My insulin receptors are also down for the count, but protein and fat keep my blood sugar stable and happy. I haven't missed a period in five years, though if I end up with cancer in my reproductive organs, I'm blaming soy. My stomach's okay—not great, but okay—as long as I take betaine hydrochloride with every meal. Between my spiritual practice and my nutrient-dense diet, I am now depression-free, and I am thankful every day. But the cold and the exhaustion are permanent. Some days breathing takes more energy than I have.

You don't have to try this for yourself. You're allowed to learn from my mistakes. All the friends of my youth were radical, righteous, intense. Vegetarianism was the obvious path, with veganism the high road alongside it. And those of us who did it long term ended up damaged. If I'm questioning your lifestyle, your identity, you might feel confusion, fear, and anger while reading this book. But take my word: you don't want to end up like me. I'm asking you to stay the course, read this book, and explore the resources in the appendix. Please. Especially if you have children or want to. I'm not too proud to beg.



Smokers will tell you that there is nothing like an ex-smoker. The urge to proselytize the Good News seems to flow with the attainment of salvation, or maybe in their case, with oxygen. I have done my best to avoid a tone of moral superiority and aim for engagement. I hope I have succeeded. Ultimately I would rather be helpful than right. Especially considering the future we are facing and how much is at stake. The underlying values that vegetarians claim to honor—justice, compassion, sustainability—are the only values that will create a world of connection instead of domination; a world where humans approach every creature—every rock, every raindrop, all our furred and feathered siblings—with humility, awe, and respect; the only

world with a chance of surviving the abuse called civilization. It is in the hope that such a world is possible that I offer this book.