

Go Tell the World!

After Dinner Speech for NW Veg by Bob Schaibly given on

September 21, 2008

I used to be the quarter-time Consulting Minister at West Hills Unitarian Fellowship. And during that time a young mother asked, “How can we do social action and involve our children beyond writing checks? We want them to be generous--we want them to give money--but is there anything we could do for social change that is intergenerational?” I asked the congregation to please be open-minded and listen to one proposal. “You ought to vote on a motion that all church potlucks, all church suppers, and all church gatherings at which food is served, be at least vegetarian if not vegan.” This would relate to the reality of life on Planet Earth: #1) a world food shortage that is in the newspaper every week; #2) the degradation of the environment because of raising meat; and #3) health issues coming from the overconsumption of meat. You can do it yourself at least the one time a month you eat here together; you can tell your kids why for all the different reasons. They can feel good about doing something instead of being indifferent to all the other people of the world.

Then I told them the things they already know, and you know them, too. You have already read these things in books, on the Internet, and in the daily newspaper. Planet Earth can't take much more wasting of bushels and bushels of grain fed to raise animals that are grown larger so as to be sent to slaughter. Dear friends, that grain has got to go to feed people! At the risk of gender stereotyping allow me to say that in general, men will have improved blood chemistries for cholesterol, and women will suffer less osteoporosis, and both genders less heart disease and fewer cancers. But you already knew that.

Well, this congregation already knew that too, and I think huge numbers of our friends and acquaintances know a lot of this information. So what's next? Motivation and support from--you guessed it--us! Did you know that October 1, a Wednesday this year, is World Vegetarian Day? October is Vegetarian Awareness Month. The web site is worldvegetarianday.org.

The Zen master I have studied with, Thich Nhat Hanh, recently brought to our attention a 2005 report [from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)]. The title is *Livestock's Long Shadow: Environmental Issues and Options*. The report points out that every day 40,000 children die from hunger or malnutrition. At the same

time corn and wheat are largely grown to feed livestock. “Over 80% of corn and 95% of oats produced in our country are for feeding livestock. [This next sentence is awkwardly put:]The world’s cattle alone consume food equivalent to the caloric needs of over 8.7 billion people, more than the entire human population of earth.” In other words, if we did not breed the cattle and feed the cattle we would have more than enough grain to feed the people. The Zen master: Eating meat mindfully we become aware that we are taking food off the plate of an emaciated little child. Wow.

You know how hard it is to support a vegetarian or vegan diet in this society; you may remember your frustration on the path to eating the way you do; it is hard for all the people we know to try to eat differently. As a kid in the midwest I grew up assuming everyone celebrated their birthday by going out for filet mignon, a baked potato, and an iceberg lettuce salad with your choice of French, Blue Cheese, or Thousand Island dressing. But we changed! And we can change some more! And we can motivate the people we know to change just as I laid it out for West Hills. Find out where your friends are in social awareness and build on that. In Oregon at least in Portland there’s a high level of awareness about the environment. We are overburdening nature. We are creating more environmental

issues. There are the humanitarian issues most people know about, such as how calves are made to suffer so that we can have veal. Ten billion animals a year are slaughtered in the USA and 15 billion sea animals. Surely those who eat meat are complicit in their horrific living conditions and in their nasty deaths. You may have seen the secretly filmed videos of disabled cows unable to move being prodded into the butchery in Southern California in February. Chickens' beaks are cut off so that they do not peck each other in their crowded cages. You can tell your kids we don't eat animals because the way they are treated is a way no one would ever treat their dog or cat. We stand for compassion for all living creatures.

You would have to get comfortable saying out loud the words *feces*, and *urine*. Every single day chicken factories in Arkansas produce as a byproduct the amount of waste equivalent to 8 million human beings! That's daily! Each meal we enjoy can have a positive or negative impact on the environment. The positive results could be more clean drinking water available for people and less pollution. In some of the United States the feces of billions of animals are a major problem, both the stench, the soil pollution and the subsequent runoff causes water pollution with pathogens such as e coli, chemicals, and antibiotics that were added to the

feed. One cow produces 23 times as much waste as one human being. Methane exacerbates global warming. In parts of the world logging continues—now Oregonians ought to be familiar with logging!—logging to increase pasturage for grazing, and the result is increased CO₂ emissions. That's climate change! Two sentences from the United Nations food report: "Livestock's contribution to environmental problems is on a massive scale and its potential contribution to their solution is equally large. The impact is so significant that it needs to be addressed with urgency."

It is time everyone knew about the connection between the environment and meat eating. According to the Union of Concerned Scientists, the two most damaging things a person can do to the planet is drive a car and eat red meat. Steven and I drive a hybrid Prius, so I was a bit alarmed by an article that asks, "Is going vegan better for the environment than driving a Prius?" Yes! Yes, it turns out it is. Not that getting 45 miles to the gallon is anything to scoff!

As you know we Americans subsidize the development of biofuels in an effort to be more independent from oil. Time magazine called that "a scam." Come to find out, producing a gallon of ethanol from corn consumes most of the energy the gallon contains. The land used to grow

corn for ethanol is not available for growing food for folks. That plan has to be rethought.

It is time to teach everyone. Amazingly and wonderfully our children are learning this in school. The issue of a global food shortage has escalated so quickly that it is in every newspaper. All over the world food prices are increasing suddenly. Overall the price of food has gone up 77% since 2005 [according to Harper's Magazine January 2008]. And the price of wheat doubled in the past year. You may have read that in some countries there were riots over food. Said a Haitian woman, "We can't accept this situation we are in. People can't feed their children. They can't do anything for them. We can't go on any longer." Haiti's most vulnerable have resorted to eating dirt to try to ease their hunger. The result is devastating to those people who must spend a high percentage of their income for food. It isn't just the cost of food—it is the percentage of people's income that must be spent for food. Nigerian people spend 73% of their budget on food, and the Vietnamese 65%, Indonesians half. They are in trouble. Imagine if we had to spend half our income for food! The president of the World Bank said 33 nations are at risk of social unrest because of the rising prices of food. Now poor Americans spend 16%, and that's not bad compared to the world's other people, but it's getting

worse. Right here, right now, in Portland O-R, the Food Bank has had to pay more for food and as a result, buy less, even as more people come for help.

The food shortage has multiple causes. The country of Australia usually exports grain but has had a drought for seven years. As you probably know, the Chinese and east Indians are now wealthy enough to start eating like Westerners. As you know, the price of oil affects the price of fertilizer as well as the cost of transportation. As you may recall, the invasion of Iraq was thought to result in cheaper oil but has instead reduced the amount of oil. As you know, Hurricane Ike will also slow down the production of oil. By the way, the UN report was written three years ago before anyone ever thought to name a hurricane Ike, and it says, "...and the world will face heightened threats of flooding, severe storms, and the erosion of coastlines." Ouch.

I first learned about the implications of vegetarianism from the teenagers in the Unitarian church youth groups when they held state-wide weekend rallies and all the food was vegetarian. I thought maybe it was too expensive to feed teenagers meat, but no, they educated me to a lot of these issues years ago. Together they could support each other to be

vegetarian for one weekend together even though most of them were not vegetarian at home.

Now if you already know all the things I am telling you, why am I telling you all over again? I'm looking for missionaries! I was encouraged by what happened at West Hills. I told the people that I thought they might try meatless meals every time they eat together--and a month later they voted 65 to 55 to go for it! Some of the people who voted against it thought it wasn't significant enough to do anything. It educates people; it heightens consciousness; and as someone here often says, Ifg this is the only vegan meal you ea this month, it's a great beginning. It's one evening when however many people are here did not eat a quarterpounder, and if there are 40 people here that's ten pounds of beef that did not have to be raised to feed us.

So then I got the idea to tell you the whole story, to ask you to tell your friends the way I told mine, starting out saying, "I thought this might be a natural for you because you already have green values." This is a green issue, although it is more than that in the eyes of many of us: it is a moral issue as well. But it is a matter of helping the people of the world—that's us, folks!--and helping the planet. And it means moving into a sustainable future. The City of Portland and Multnomah County

are writing a Climate Protection Plan which paints this vision for our corner of the world in the year 2050: “residents will consume primarily whole foods, eat more vegetables and fruit, and reduce meat and dairy in their meals; meat consumption is reduced to two servings a week. We will reduce the consumption of carbon-intensive food like meat and dairy by engaging the community in an education campaign.” That’s the future—let’s help the people we care about prepare to reach it.

As your kids get older you can teach them about speciesism, a concept developed by Peter Singer, an ethicist whose thought we are studying in this room on Tuesday nights at 7 p.m. Peter Singer has written about animals and our prejudice against animals and our arrogance toward them, as species-ism. He points out that the arguments in favor of eating flesh do not hold up. To the argument that they are not human, he builds on the work of an 19th century English philosopher named Jeremy Bentham who wrote, “The question is not Can they reason? Nor, can they talk? But, Can they suffer?” And to this Peter Singer says “We share with them a capacity to suffer, and this means that they, like us, have interests.” There are human beings who are not as intelligent as some other animals, but we would never consider eating or abusing them. Nor would we abuse or slaughter our pets. And to this the astronomer Carl

Sagan added, “How smart do animals have to be before killing them constitutes murder?”

You cannot be a meat eating environmentalist—it’s a contradiction in terms. You can no longer call yourself an environmentalist without being a vegetarian. Once again: that’s because it took seven pounds of grain to produce one pound of meat; the people of Planet Earth are thereby shorted six pounds of food. But you know all this!

As one American writer, Flannery O’Connor, wrote, “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.” Whether we like it or not, we are formed by a combination of factors—intelligence, sensitivity, and the people we met who taught us what we know. We are social pioneers and that’s hard. But others will follow, and so we must lead a little bit more.

Some of the people you know might do it the way I did: *very* gradually! Thirty years ago I gave up beef to improve cholesterol; later I was glad I did because of the hormones injected into cattle. I gave up veal because I do not want any calf abused that way so I can have dinner; I gave up bacon and sausage because of nitrites; fifteen years ago I gave up chicken because of crowded factory conditions and the antibiotics that are administered preventatively, and almost surely are responsible for

Superbugs, the bacteria that resist antibiotics. The seas are being overfished and the fish contain PCBs and mercury. When the government warns pregnant women not to eat fish more than twice a week, baby, you know we've got a problem because our government doesn't like to warn anybody about anything! The future of the salmon is precarious. But you already know these things from last month's talk by Charlie Korns.

Now take it out of here; take it to your friends and your acquaintances; take it to every group you know no matter how peripheral food might seem to, say, your band of musicians, your artists collective, your men's group, your peace group—just suggest that we be sensitive to the rest of the world by being vegetarian when we are together. Tell the story of the West Hills church that isn't vegetarian except when they get together for meals! Tell your own story. Use the values that bring you to that group—such as creativity, or health, or compassion, or personal growth. No more signs for the food that say “Regular” and “Vegetarian,”—c'mon, vegetables are regular!--but a vegetarian soup, say minestrone, served without apology! Vegetable lasagna served to carnivores, omnivores and vegans and served without apology! Together, in the groups we already belong to, we could do this supportively, and the world could improve.

Three reasons: Your physical health; your spiritual health in being determined to be compassionate; and your planet's health. Yes, I know that in the cosmos, in the Milky Way, Earth is a small insignificant planet but so far it's the only one we've got!

I find hope in this story. Abraham Maslow, the psychologist, quoted a biologist who did research in evolutionary development, as saying, "I have discovered the missing link between the anthropoid apes and civilized human beings. It's us." Yeah! That's right—you can see it can't you? We the Human Race are not yet that which we could be. But we're on the path!

Each meal without meat that we can eat helps the planet, the human race, and all the other animals. Never despair that the problem seems too great. A 19th century writer, Edward Everett Hale, wrote, "I am only one, but still, I am one. I cannot do everything, but still, I can do something. And because I cannot do everything I will not refuse to do the some thing that I can do."

Take a brochure, read it and pass it along!

Thank you for your attentiveness. If you have any questions my dear friends Peter and Charlie will answer them!