Can a Carnivore Be Compassionate?

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HUMANS ARE OMNIVORES, meaning we eat both plants and animals. Not to be insensitive to the lives of carrots, but I'm just not that concerned with the plant part of my diet. I don't feel guilty eating a carrot. What concerns me is the meat, or animal, part of my diet, which is why I use the word *carnivore* to describe myself. I also just like the word better because it gives me a bit of a jolt. It brings to mind lions and tigers and alligators. We humans aren't the only carnivores on the planet; we're just the ones who use forks or chopsticks.

When I mentioned the phrase "compassionate carnivore" to an outspoken vegetarian acquaintance of mine, she snorted and said, "Now *there's* an oxymoron." In her world, the only way to show compassion for an animal is not to eat it. If that's the only definition of *compassionate* allowed, then the discussion ends and nothing changes.

But in my world, a mixed bag of farm economics and loving animals and loving meat, I believe it's possible to show compassion for animals yet still eat them. For me, this means paying

attention. It means learning more about the animals I eat and taking some responsibility for their quality of life. It means becoming a more aware, more *awake* carnivore who tries to alter her meat purchases to support her personal philosophies.

That said, as my pork-chop-on-a-stick debacle illustrates, I often fail miserably to do any of the above. What is wrong with me?

As an adult, I'm worried about tsunami victims and poverty in Africa and those people in New Orleans who still don't have any libraries. The polar ice caps are melting, so I must cut my fossil fuel use even more than I already have. The environment is constantly under attack, so I do my best to reduce, reuse, recycle. Politics is such a mess that sometimes I wonder if anything I do, including vote, will make any difference whatsoever. I haven't had my daily servings of fruits and vegetables for weeks, and I desperately wish there was a company that could inject all of my daily nutritional requirements into a bag of Cheetos. And that's on a good day.

Perhaps that's why making better choices in how I eat meat—how much, and from where—is so difficult for me. I'm overworked, overwhelmed, and, if truth be told, a tad lazy. If something's too hard, or takes too much time, I'm likely to give up. My path to becoming a compassionate carnivore has been paved with good intentions, but littered with the bones of pork-chop-on-a-stick.

After my state fair screw-up, I tried to figure out why change was such a challenge for me, and at first had more questions than answers. What did I need to become a more compassionate carnivore? What were the pitfalls to avoid? If I really paid more attention to meat animals—how they're raised, their habits, their emotional lives—could I still eat them? Would my food choices help animals, since they'd already been killed for meat?

I wish there were a neat and tidy way to corral each of these issues into its own chapter, but as fat runs through meat, these

issues are marbled throughout the entire experience of eating meat. Making better choices, facing where our meat comes from, and understanding the impact of our purchases are all fibers of the same muscle.

I have learned that animal lovers who want to pay more attention to how meat animals are raised face two obstacles. The first is our tendency to view animals as a faceless group. Until I started farming, I honestly hadn't known that livestock animals had individual personalities, and that they had definite likes and dislikes. I tended to lump animals all together and rely on the anonymity that comes from talking about "sheep" and "beef cattle" and "hogs." It's hard to care about some faceless group of cattle or hogs. But as Jonathan Balcombe writes in *Pleasurable Kingdom*, "pleasures and pains are felt by individuals, not populations."[3]

As I became more comfortable with myself as a farmer, I began seeing animals as individuals, and therefore started caring deeply about the well-being of each of them. "Cattle" was an anonymous group, but "cow" had a face. Lamb #203 was a playful guy; #279 ran away if I even looked at him. Ewe #85 learned to jump fences and taught her twin lambs to do the same. We have a white hen who knows there are sunflower seeds in the shed, so whenever I head for the shed, she's right behind me, insistently stalking me until I give in and sprinkle some seeds on the ground.

A flock of sheep might contain one ewe who's cranky, one that'll do anything for a grain of corn, and another with wool dreadlocks dangling provocatively in her eyes. Living and working on a small farm forces me to see animals as individuals. There's no running away from the truth, no sticking my cute little ostrich head back into the sand. I now know that every piece of meat I eat comes from an animal with an ear tag number, a face, a history, a personality, a life. But when I race through the grocery store, already late for a meeting, or plan a day's meals

when I'm facing a writing deadline, it can be very difficult to remember that meat used to be an animal and to buy accordingly. A 2004 Ohio State University survey found that 81 percent of respondents felt that the well-being of livestock is as important as that of pets.[4] If that's true, why do so few people actually pay *attention* to this well-being?

The answer might be found in the second obstacle to being more compassionate, which is compassion itself. It turns out there is a limit to human compassion, which makes me uncomfortable. Journalist Nicholas Kristof wrote about a phenomenon psychologists have discovered: that good, conscientious people often aren't moved by genocide or famines.[5] The idea of so many people in distress is hard for humans to get their minds around, so the horrible events fail to spark emotions that would lead to action. Samantha Power, author of *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide,* says that when this happens, bystanders to genocides or other large disasters are able to "retreat to the 'twilight between knowing and not knowing.'"[6] A sort of numbing results from our inability to appreciate losses as they become larger.

Research scientist Paul Slovic wrote: "Confronted with knowledge of dozens of apparently random disasters each day, what can a human heart do but slam its doors? No mortal can grieve that much. We didn't evolve to cope with tragedy on a global scale. Our defense is to pretend there's no thread of event that connects us, and that those lives are somehow not precious and real like our own. It's a practical strategy . . . but the loss of empathy is also the loss of humanity, and that's no small tradeoff."[7]

Studies show that people tend to react more strongly to the distress of one individual: people would contribute more money to one child in Mali than to 21 million starving Africans. The same is true of animals. After a severe outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in Great Britain, standard policy was to destroy all the healthy animals within a certain distance from the diseased animals. As a

result, millions of animals were slaughtered—600,000 cattle, 3.2 million sheep, and thousands of pigs, goats, and other animals—and they continued to be slaughtered even as the disease waned.[8]

Yet the plight of one animal touched the public more than the plight of all the thousands already killed. Just after a white calf had been born in Devon, England, an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease on a neighboring farm required that all the animals on the calf's farm be killed, even if healthy. Employees of the Ministry of Agriculture showed up and administered lethal injections to fifteen cows and thirty sheep, then closed the doors of the barn. Five days later more ministry employees returned to disinfect the carcasses. They opened up the barn to find the white calf very much alive, standing next to its dead mother.

The farmers, delighted the animal was alive but horrified they hadn't known this so that they could have cared for it, quickly fed the animal, named her Phoenix, and called the press. The ministry still insisted the white calf be killed. But as the story circulated, public outcry was deafening, and the slaughter policy was quickly changed so that healthy animals on neighboring farms would no longer automatically be killed.[9]

I don't consider the deaths of livestock animals tragedies like famines or earthquakes or violent civil wars, because these animals are being raised for the purpose of feeding us. But because factory farms have grown so large and have become the predominant source of meat in this country, to think about the millions of animals living in this system every day creates, in me, such emotional numbing I find it almost impossible to care.

The irony, of course, is that most of us care deeply about wildlife animals. We care about the lives of wolves and deer and spotted owls and African elephants and panda bears. For some reason, Mother Nature in her wild state is noble and to be protected, but when it comes to Mother Nature's creatures that we enjoy eating, we have looked away.

As a result of looking away, I have allowed myself to become a baby barn swallow.

Barn swallows are considered good luck, so we happily let them build their mud nests in the rafters of our small barn. Every spring five or six baby birds peek over the sides of the nest to watch us work, looking clownish with their impossibly wide beaks and goofy tufts of feathers sticking up like baby Mohawks.

We watch when the babies are being fed. It's both hilarious and a little gross. The baby chirps impatiently until a parent returns to the nest, then the baby throws back its head, opens its mouth wide, and lets the parent stuff it full of regurgitated food, food that has been, well, processed.

When it comes to my food, meat or otherwise, for most of my life I've been a baby bird, tossing my head back, opening wide, and letting corporate agriculture—Cargill and ADM (Archer Daniels Midland) and ConAgra—feed me whatever they want. The baby bird doesn't know what Papa Bird is jamming down its throat, and it doesn't care. It just wants to be fed and will accept any level of processing for the convenience. Because I've paid corporations to feed me, I've sent the constant signal that whatever they put in the food and however they raise the animals is okay with me.

It's not okay anymore. Becoming a farmer has ruined my ability to ignore the impact modern agriculture has on animals, the environment, and me. I can no longer just throw back my head and let Papa Bird feed me.

In the 1930s and 1940s my grandmother on her Montana sheep ranch waited until the temperatures dropped below freezing in the fall and then butchered a sheep, gutted it, skinned it, and hung it out in the shed for the winter. Whenever she needed meat, she trudged out through the snow with a meat cleaver, hacked off enough frozen meat to feed her husband and

three daughters, then, huddled against the bitter cold, returned to the house. I think of this whenever I resent standing in line at the grocery store.

To resist the whole Papa Bird thing, to change how I eat, means to take more responsibility for feeding myself. It doesn't mean I want to return to my grandmother's life. It doesn't mean I want to raise all of my own food. It just means I'm going to open my eyes and be more critical of what Papa Bird is stuffing in my mouth, and where it came from.

That's probably the first step anyone can take toward eating meat: pay more attention. To what? To everything: farms—how they work and don't work, and farm animals—how they live and how they die.