

Who's That *on your* Plate?

BY HOLLY STEWART



Image courtesy of Farm Sanctuary.

There are many reasons why people adopt a vegetarian diet, but perhaps the most compelling is that by doing so we acknowledge that the creatures once slaughtered to satisfy our taste buds are beings as sentient as ourselves.

For many people growing up in the city, there is no connection made between the hamburger on their plate (or the milk in their glass) and the animals at the other end of the production line. If any connection is made, it is supplied by the advertising companies who fill billboards and television screens with caricatures of cows, chickens and pigs wholeheartedly encouraging us to consume their milk or flesh. Even though we may laugh, subconsciously these messages have shaped our society – to consume the products of the meat industry, without ever considering the fate of the living, breathing animals involved.

Before we consider the horrific conditions in today's factory farms, let's first address the assumption that allows us to turn a blind eye to it all.

The medieval philosopher Descartes paved the way for the wholesale exploitation and killing of animals when he dreamed up the unscientific statement that animals are no more than mere machines, incapable of intelligence and feeling pain.

How wrong was he?

Animals are sentient beings like ourselves, capable of feeling joy, affection, pain and suffering. The senses of animals actually make ours look inferior in comparison. For example, the cells essential for smelling are ethmoidal cells. We have about 5 million of these in our noses. A German shepherd, by way of contrast, has about 200 million. And when it comes to hearing, once again we pale in comparison. The German shepherd can hear sounds clearly at 200 yards that we cannot detect at a mere 20. More than "mere machines," animals share the same physiological and emotional systems as humans, and in many ways surpass us.

I grew up on a farm in the Cariboo region of B.C. where my family raised horses, sheep, dairy goats, dogs and cats. I remember that, as a child, I found our animals to be intelligent and playful companions, and often more compassionate than most other children! The goats especially would amaze our family by unlocking "goat-proof" gates, playing pranks on us, pretending to be innocent but obviously enjoying their mischievousness.

The idyllic family farm has now fallen by the wayside, replaced by today's agribusiness with huge animal factories where animals are kept in cramped, unnatural conditions and often never see the light of day.

Factory farms can only be compared to “animal Auschwitzes,” all the more compelling for those who have seen the recent film, *Schindler’s List*.

Hidden from the public eye, the horrific conditions of animals in factory farms and slaughterhouses are never considered when the disassembled animal parts arrive on one’s plate, disguised with misleading names like “steak,” “veal” and “chops.”

Pigs are friendly, intelligent animals with an I.Q. higher than even dogs. Yet confinement in concrete or metal-slat stalls, often stacked one atop another, result in many crippling injuries. Their excrement drops on those below and collects in pits below their stalls, where the resulting toxic fumes produce pneumonia in 80 percent of all pigs slaughtered.

Chickens’ conditions are so cramped—four to six into cages 18 x 24 inches—that they peck furiously at each other and often resort to cannibalism. The industry’s response is not to improve conditions, but to “de-beak” them (cutting off the highly sensitive part of the beak—comparable to the sensitive flesh under human fingernails). Death by starvation often results from irregular growths in de-beaked birds and their talons growing around the wire mesh floor, making it impossible to reach the water or feed troughs.

Dairy and beef cows are now fed growth hormones and antibiotics from birth to slaughter. A diet designed to fatten them up as cheaply as possible includes such delicacies as sawdust laced with ammonia and feathers, shredded newspaper, “plastic hay,” processed sewage, inedible tallow and grease, poultry litter, cement dust, and cardboard scraps.

Beef and dairy cows are often fed ground-up meat remains from the slaughter industry (yes, we’ve turned cows into cannibals) and when this meat is contaminated it is the recognized cause of “Mad Cow Disease.”

Veal calves, a product of the dairy industry, are

transported within hours of birth to be chained at the neck in “bedless” wooden crates. Antibiotics are added to their diet of iron-deficient milk replacer and growth-promoting drugs, and they are kept in this condition for their entire 16-week life.

For over 1.5 million food animals slaughtered in Canada every working day, the slaughterhouse brings a welcome end to the unceasing deprivation, crowding, manhandling and mutilation that characterizes life on today’s factory farms. But even the journey to the slaughterhouse is painful. Shocked by electric prods and blows while negotiating steep, slippery ramps, transported in extreme heat or cold with little or no food and water, the animals finally arrive at the slaughterhouse. Those injured during transport are dragged by the legs with ropes and chains to the killing floor. Sledgehammers, captive-bolt pistols, brine-filled electrified troughs, and electric callipers are among the shockingly unreliable methods of stunning animals before slaughter.

A meat-based diet not only contributes to the suffering of animals, environmental pollution, half our water consumption and chemical-laced food, but ironically contributes to our own diseases. Heart disease, strokes, cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis are just a few diseases directly related to meat and even dairy consumption. Given all these considerations, and the fact that it is possible to have a much healthier diet and lifestyle by reducing or eliminating animal products, the only reason that people are often left with for the abuse and slaughter of animals is simply that they “like their meat.” Surely the time has come for everyone to weigh their personal preferences against the larger environmental and ethical picture, and make the educated decision.

For those who choose life over death, the rewards of better health and a compassionate way of life are remarkable and inspiring. Animals give so much to our lives. It’s the least we can do to let them share the air, sunshine, earth and freedom we value ourselves. ■