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THE FOOD ISSUE

Against Meat

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THE FRUITS OF FAMILY TREES

When I was young, I would often spend the weekend at my grandmother's house. On my way in, Friday night, she would lift me from the ground in one of her fire-smothering hugs. And on the way out, Sunday afternoon, I was again taken into the air. It wasn't until years later that I realized she was weighing me.

My grandmother survived World War II barefoot, scavenging Eastern Europe for other people's inedibles: rotting potatoes, discarded scraps of meat, skins and the bits that clung to bones and pits. So she never cared if I colored outside the lines, as long as I cut coupons along the dashes. I remember hotel buffets: while the rest of us erected Golden Calves of breakfast, she would make sandwich upon sandwich to swaddle in napkins and stash in her bag for lunch. It was my grandmother who taught me that one tea bag makes as many cups of tea as you're serving, and that every part of the apple is edible.

Her obsession with food wasn't an obsession with money. (Many of those coupons I clipped were for foods she would never buy.)

Her obsession wasn't with health. (She would beg me to drink Coke.)

My grandmother never set a place for herself at family dinners. Even when there was nothing more to be done — no soup bowls to be topped off, no pots to be stirred or ovens checked — she stayed in the kitchen, like a vigilant guard (or prisoner) in a tower. As far as I could tell, the sustenance she got from the food she made didn't require her to eat it.

We thought she was the greatest chef who ever lived. My brothers and I would tell her as much several times a meal. And yet we were worldly enough kids to know that the greatest chef who ever lived would probably have more than one recipe (chicken with carrots), and that most great recipes involved more than two ingredients.

And why didn't we question her when she told us that dark food is inherently more healthful than light food, or that the bulk of the nutrients are found in the peel or crust? (The sandwiches of those weekend stays were made with the saved ends of pumpernickel loaves.) She taught us that animals that are bigger than you are very good for you, animals that are smaller than you are good for you, fish (which aren't animals) are fine for you, then tuna (which aren't fish), then vegetables, fruits, cakes, cookies and sodas. No foods are bad for you. Sugars are great. Fats are tremendous. The fatter a child is, the fitter it is — especially if it's a boy. Lunch is not one meal, but three, to be eaten at 11, 12:30 and 3. You are always starving.

In fact, her chicken with carrots probably was the most delicious thing I've ever eaten. But that had little to do with how it was prepared, or even how it tasted. Her food was delicious because we believed it was delicious. We believed in our grandmother's cooking more fervently than we believed in God.

More stories could be told about my grandmother than about anyone else I've ever met — her otherworldly childhood, the hairline margin of her survival, the totality of her loss, her immigration and further loss, the triumph and tragedy of her assimilation — and while I will one day try to tell them to my children, we almost never told them to one another. Nor did we call her by any of the obvious and earned titles. We called her the Greatest Chef.

The story of her relationship to food holds all of the other stories that could be told about her. Food, for her, is not food. It is terror, dignity, gratitude, vengeance, joy, humiliation, religion, history and, of course, love. It was as if the fruits she always offered us were picked from the destroyed branches of our family tree.

POSSIBLE AGAIN

When I was 2, the heroes of all my bedtime books were animals. The first thing I can remember learning in school was how to pet a guinea pig without accidentally killing it. One summer my family fostered a cousin's dog. I kicked it. My father told me we don't kick animals. When I was 7, I mourned the death of a goldfish I'd won the previous weekend. I discovered that my father had flushed it down the toilet. I told my father — using other, less familial language — we don't flush animals down the toilet. When I was 9, I had a baby sitter who didn't want to hurt anything. She put it just like that when I asked her why she wasn't having chicken with my older brother and me.

"Hurt anything?" I asked.

"You know that chicken is chicken, right?"

Frank shot me a look: Mom and Dad entrusted this stupid woman with their precious babies?

Her intention might or might not have been to convert us, but being a kid herself, she lacked whatever restraint it is that so often prevents a full telling of this particular story. Without drama or rhetoric, skipping over or euphemizing, she shared what she knew.

My brother and I looked at each other, our mouths full of hurt chickens, and had simultaneous how-in-the-world-could-I-have-never-thought-of-that-before-and-why-on-earth-didn't-someone-tell-me? moments. I put down my fork. Frank finished the meal and is probably eating a chicken as I type these words.

What our baby sitter said made sense to me, not only because it seemed so self-evidently true, but also because it was the extension to food of everything my parents had taught me. We don't hurt family members. We don't hurt friends or strangers. We don't even hurt upholstered furniture. My not having thought to include farmed animals in that list didn't make them the exceptions to it. It just made me a child, ignorant of the world's workings. Until I wasn't. At which point I had to change my life.

Until I didn't. My [vegetarianism](#), so bombastic and unyielding in the beginning, lasted a few years, sputtered and quietly died. I never thought of a response to our baby sitter's code but found ways to smudge, diminish and ignore it. Generally speaking, I didn't cause hurt. Generally speaking, I strove to do the right thing. Generally speaking, my conscience was clear enough. Pass the chicken, I'm starving.

[Mark Twain](#) said that quitting smoking is among the easiest things you can do; he did it all the time. I would add vegetarianism to the list of easy things. In high school I became vegetarian more times than I can now remember, most often as an effort to claim a bit of identity in a world of people whose identities seemed to come effortlessly. I wanted a slogan to distinguish my mom's Volvo's bumper, a bake-sale cause to fill the self-conscious half-hour of school break, an occasion to get closer to the breasts of activist women. (And I continued to think it was wrong to hurt animals.) Which isn't to say that I refrained from eating meat. Only that I refrained in public. Many dinners of those years began with my father asking, "Any dietary restrictions I need to know about tonight?"

When I went to college, I started eating meat more earnestly. Not "believing in it" — whatever that would mean — but willfully pushing the questions out of my mind. It might well have been the prevalence of vegetarianism on campus that discouraged my own — I find myself less likely to give money to a street musician whose case is overflowing with bills.

But when, at the end of my sophomore year, I became a philosophy major and started doing my first seriously pretentious thinking, I became a vegetarian again. The kind of active forgetting that I was sure meat eating required felt too paradoxical to the intellectual life I was trying to shape. I didn't know the details of [factory farming](#), but like most everyone, I knew the gist: it is miserable for animals, the environment, farmers, public health, biodiversity, rural communities, global poverty and so on. I thought life could, should and must conform to the mold of reason, period. You can imagine how annoying this made me.

When I graduated, I ate meat — lots of every kind of meat — for about two years. Why? Because it tasted good. And because more important than reason in shaping habits are the stories we tell ourselves and one another. And I told a forgiving story about myself to myself: I was only human.

Then I was set up on a blind date with the woman who would become my wife. And only a few weeks later we found ourselves talking about two surprising topics: marriage and vegetarianism.

Her history with meat was remarkably similar to mine: there were things she believed while lying in bed at night, and there were choices made at the breakfast table the next morning. There was a gnawing (if only occasional and short-lived) dread that she was participating in something deeply wrong, and there was the acceptance of complexity and fallibility. Like me, she had intuitions that were very strong, but apparently not strong enough.

People marry for many different reasons, but one that animated our decision to take that step was the prospect of explicitly marking a new beginning. Jewish ritual and symbolism strongly encourage this notion of demarcating a sharp division with what came before — the most well-known example being the smashing of the glass at the end of the wedding ceremony. Things were as they were, but they will be different now. Things will be better. We will be better.

Sounds and feels great, but better how? I could think of endless ways to make myself better (I could learn foreign languages, be more patient, work harder), but I'd already made too many such vows to trust them anymore. I could also think of ways to make "us" better, but the meaningful things we can agree on and change in a relationship are few.

Eating animals, a concern we'd both had and had both forgotten, seemed like a place to start. So much intersects there, and so much could flow from it. In the same week, we became engaged and vegetarian.

Of course our wedding wasn't vegetarian, because we persuaded ourselves that it was only fair to offer animal protein to our guests, some of whom traveled from great distances to share our joy. (Find that logic hard to follow?) And we ate fish on our honeymoon, but we were in Japan, and when in Japan. . . . And back in our new home, we did occasionally eat burgers and chicken soup and smoked salmon and tuna steaks. But only whenever we felt like it.

And that, I thought, was that. And I thought that was just fine. I assumed we'd maintain a diet of conscientious inconsistency. Why should eating be different from any of the other ethical realms of our lives? We were honest people who occasionally told lies, careful friends who sometimes acted clumsily. We were vegetarians who from time to time ate meat.

But then we decided to have a child, and that was a different story that would necessitate a different story.

About half an hour after my son was born, I went into the waiting room to tell the gathered family the good news.

"You said 'he'! So it's a boy?"

“What’s his name?”

“Who does he look like?”

“Tell us everything!”

I answered their questions as quickly as I could, then went to the corner and turned on my cellphone.

“Grandma,” I said. “We have a baby.”

Her only phone is in the kitchen. She picked up halfway into the first ring. It was just after midnight. Had she been clipping coupons? Preparing chicken with carrots to freeze for someone else to eat at some future meal? I’d never once seen or heard her cry, but tears pushed through her words as she asked, “How much does it weigh?”

A few days after we came home from the hospital, I sent a letter to a friend, including a photo of my son and some first impressions of fatherhood. He responded, simply, “Everything is possible again.” It was the perfect thing to write, because that was exactly how it felt. The world itself had another chance.

EATING ANIMALS

Seconds after being born, my son was breast-feeding. I watched him with an awe that had no precedent in my life. Without explanation or experience, he knew what to do. Millions of years of evolution had wound the knowledge into him, as it had encoded beating into his tiny heart and expansion and contraction into his newly dry lungs.

Almost four years later, he is a big brother and a remarkably sophisticated little conversationalist. Increasingly the food he eats is digested together with stories we tell. Feeding my children is not like feeding myself: it matters more. It matters because food matters (their physical health matters, the pleasure they take in eating matters), and because the stories that are served with food matter.

Some of my happiest childhood memories are of sushi “lunch dates” with my mom, and eating my dad’s turkey burgers with mustard and grilled onions at backyard celebrations, and of course my grandmother’s chicken with carrots. Those occasions simply wouldn’t have been the same without those foods — and that is important. To give up the taste of sushi, turkey or chicken is a loss that extends beyond giving up a pleasurable eating experience. Changing what we eat and letting tastes fade from memory create a kind of cultural loss, a forgetting. But perhaps this kind of forgetfulness is worth accepting — even worth cultivating (forgetting, too, can be cultivated). To remember my values, I need to lose certain tastes and find other handles for the memories that they once helped me carry.

My wife and I have chosen to bring up our children as vegetarians. In another time or place, we might have made a different decision. But the realities of our present moment compelled us to make that choice. According to an analysis of U.S.D.A. data by the advocacy group Farm Forward, factory farms now produce more than 99 percent of the animals eaten in this country. And despite labels that suggest otherwise, genuine alternatives — which do exist, and make many of the ethical questions about meat moot — are very difficult for even an educated eater to find. I don’t have the ability to do so with regularity and confidence. (“Free range,” “cage free,” “natural” and “organic” are nearly meaningless when it comes to animal welfare.)

According to reports by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the [U.N.](#) and others, factory farming has made animal agriculture the No. 1 contributor to [global warming](#) (it is significantly more destructive than transportation alone), and one of the Top 2 or 3 causes of all of the most serious environmental problems, both global and local: air and water pollution, deforestation, loss of biodiversity. . . . Eating factory-farmed animals — which is to say virtually every piece of meat sold in supermarkets and prepared in restaurants — is almost certainly the single worst thing that humans do to the environment.

Every factory-farmed animal is, as a practice, treated in ways that would be illegal if it were a dog or a cat. Turkeys have been so genetically modified they are incapable of natural reproduction. To acknowledge that these things matter is not sentimental. It is a confrontation with the facts about animals and ourselves. We know these things matter.

Meat and seafood are in no way necessary for my family — unlike some in the world, we have easy access to a wide variety of other foods. And we are healthier without it. So our choices aren’t constrained.

While the cultural uses of meat can be replaced — my mother and I now eat Italian, my father grills veggie burgers, my grandmother invented her own “vegetarian chopped liver” — there is still the question of pleasure. A vegetarian diet can be rich and fully enjoyable, but I couldn’t honestly argue, as many vegetarians try to, that it is as rich as a diet that includes meat. (Those who eat chimpanzee look at the Western diet as sadly deficient of a great pleasure.) I love calamari, I love roasted chicken, I love a good steak. But I don’t love them without limit.

This isn’t animal experimentation, where you can imagine some proportionate good at the other end of the suffering. This is what we feel like eating. Yet taste, the crudest of our senses, has been exempted from the ethical rules that govern our other senses. Why? Why doesn’t a horny person have as strong a claim to raping an animal as a hungry one does to confining, killing and eating it? It’s easy to dismiss that question but hard to respond to it. Try to imagine any end other than taste for which it would be justifiable to do what we do to farmed animals.

Children confront us with our paradoxes and dishonesty, and we are exposed. You need to find an answer for every why — Why do we do this? Why don’t we do that? — and often there isn’t a good one. So you say, simply, because. Or you tell a story that you know isn’t true. And whether or not your face reddens, you blush. The shame of parenthood — which is a good shame — is that we want our children to be more whole than we are, to have satisfactory

answers. My children not only inspired me to reconsider what kind of eating animal I would be, but also shamed me into reconsideration.

And then, one day, they will choose for themselves. I don't know what my reaction will be if they decide to eat meat. (I don't know what my reaction will be if they decide to renounce their Judaism, root for the Red Sox or register Republican.) I'm not as worried about what they will choose as much as my ability to make them conscious of the choices before them. I won't measure my success as a parent by whether my children share my values, but by whether they act according to their own.

In the meantime, my choice on their behalf means they will never eat their great-grandmother's singular dish. They will never receive that unique and most direct expression of her love, will perhaps never think of her as the greatest chef who ever lived. Her primal story, our family's primal story, will have to change.

Or will it? It wasn't until I became a parent that I understood my grandmother's cooking. The greatest chef who ever lived wasn't preparing food, but humans. I'm thinking of those Saturday afternoons at her kitchen table, just the two of us — black bread in the glowing toaster, a humming refrigerator that couldn't be seen through its veil of family photographs. Over pumpernickel ends and Coke, she would tell me about her escape from Europe, the foods she had to eat and those she wouldn't. It was the story of her life — “Listen to me,” she would plead — and I knew a vital lesson was being transmitted, even if I didn't know, as a child, what that lesson was. I know, now, what it was.

LISTEN TO ME

“We weren't rich, but we always had enough. Thursday we baked bread, and challah and rolls, and they lasted the whole week. Friday we had pancakes. Shabbat we always had a chicken, and soup with noodles. You would go to the butcher and ask for a little more fat. The fattiest piece was the best piece. It wasn't like now. We didn't have refrigerators, but we had milk and cheese. We didn't have every kind of vegetable, but we had enough. The things that you have here and take for granted. . . . But we were happy. We didn't know any better. And we took what we had for granted, too.

“Then it all changed. During the war it was hell on earth, and I had nothing. I left my family, you know. I was always running, day and night, because the Germans were always right behind me. If you stopped, you died. There was never enough food. I became sicker and sicker from not eating, and I'm not just talking about being skin and bones. I had sores all over my body. It became difficult to move. I wasn't too good to eat from a garbage can. I ate the parts others wouldn't eat. If you helped yourself, you could survive. I took whatever I could find. I ate things I wouldn't tell you about.

“Even at the worst times, there were good people, too. Someone taught me to tie the ends of my pants so I could fill the legs with any potatoes I was able to steal. I walked miles and miles like that, because you never knew when you would be lucky again. Someone gave me a little rice, once, and I traveled two days to a market and traded it for some soap, and then traveled to another market and traded the soap for some beans. You had to have luck and intuition.

“The worst it got was near the end. A lot of people died right at the end, and I didn't know if I could make it another day. A farmer, a Russian, God bless him, he saw my condition, and he went into his house and came out with a piece of meat for me.”

“He saved your life.”

“I didn't eat it.”

“You didn't eat it?”

“It was pork. I wouldn't eat pork.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?”

“What, because it wasn't kosher?”

“Of course.”

“But not even to save your life?”

“If nothing matters, there's nothing to save.”

Jonathan Safran Foer is a novelist. This article is adapted from his coming book, “Eating Animals,” which will be published in November.

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