

"Afflicting the Comfortable"
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World Vegan Day!

A Reflection Delivered to Westside Unitarian Universalist Church, Fort Worth, Texas
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Please keep in mind this reflection was written to be heard rather than read.

Good morning! It is wonderful to see you all on the bright and beautiful day. I'm very glad you have chosen to be here on this first day of November!

Well, there is a story about a Unitarian Universalist minister who was on her way to church one Sunday morning, when she spotted a young child in the parking lot of the nearby Catholic church, with a box and a sign that read "Free kittens, from a good Catholic family!" The minister smiled to herself, mentally wished the child good luck, and went on her way.

About the middle of the week, she saw the same child, with the same box, outside the Methodist church, this time with a sign that said, "Good Methodist kittens! Absolutely free!" Impressed with the child's tenacity, she went on into her board meeting.

Finally, the next Sunday, the child was in her church's parking lot, with a new sign reading: "Unitarian Universalist kittens! Free to a good home!" This time she stopped to chat.

"Weren't you outside the Catholic church last Sunday?" "Yes," the girl said. "And on Wednesday, weren't these Methodist kittens?" "They sure were," said the girl.

"Well, how come they're Unitarian Universalist kittens now," asked the minister? The girl replied, "Well, because today their eyes are open!"

It's an old joke, and I sincerely apologize to my Roman Catholic and United Methodist friends. This sort of story can leave us Unitarian Universalists feeling pretty smug. It says that when compared to other religious traditions even this little girl knew that UUs are open to seeing things, to looking at things from a new perspective. That's what we believe about ourselves, right?

And I believe that too. We certainly do look at religion differently than most. Society encourages us to be religious in a certain way, particularly around here. But we Unitarian Universalists have chosen a different path. Despite all that society says, perhaps despite what many of our friends believe, despite what we read and were told growing up, we decided to look elsewhere, to go in a unusual religious direction when we opened our eyes to something different.

We may have had doubts about this or that theological concept and we found one other person or one other author or one other scholar who perhaps nudged us to continue our search, who said, You know, I've been wondering about that too, or said, You are not crazy to think differently despite all you've been told.

And all of that searching and reading and thinking led you to see religion, in fact, probably see the world in a different way. So you find yourself sitting with other Unitarian Universalists today who have been on similar searches for truth; truth searches that may go in differing directions and come up with differing answers...and yet we appreciate and admire how we and others got here...

Now those searches can be uncomfortable at times. Our search for truth can lead us into places where others are afraid to go, where **we** might even go with great trepidation. But there are times when the search, no matter the level of discomfort, must be followed despite the consequences. Sometimes it seems that when we get that first taste of our truth there is no turning back, even when we might want to.

Ministers are aware of this. In fact we sometimes believe ourselves to be a part of that journey for those in community with us. And there is a saying most clergy are aware of that says ministers are supposed to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

It makes sense, doesn't it? Ministers are supposed to be by our side when we are hurting, when things go wrong, during those times when we have our doubts. But on the other hand, there are also those times when we perhaps feel a bit smug, when we believe our eyes are more open than others, that ministers are called to check reality, maybe even play devil's advocate...

I think there are probably three ways we can react when we are confronted with information that makes us uncomfortable. And if you think about it, you and I have probably reacted in each of these three ways during our search for truth. And people have probably reacted to you in these ways as you have attempted to tell the religious truth you have found.

When we are uncomfortable we can react with aggression. We get angry. When I was young I remember challenging a Sunday School teacher saying that I wasn't sure Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. Do you think she congratulated me on my search for truth? No, she got angry with me.

We can also react evasively when confronted and are uncomfortable with how others see the world. We can beat around the bush or try to change the subject or make jokes about the issues when we are uncomfortable. So people will often make fun of other people's views when they are challenged.

And we can also react defensively when afflicted with uncomfortable information. We might leave the room, argue vociferously whether we make sense or not, plug our fingers in our ears so as not to be subjected to another's balderdash, we might just shut down and refuse to listen when we are challenged in ways we do not like.

We may do a number of things like this when we are uncomfortable. And all of these things are quite natural. And I assume you have reacted in these ways with various religious and political and social issues, just like I undoubtedly have.

So with that in mind, I'm going to tell you of an uncomfortable journey. A journey that I never thought I would have, but one that was brought on by my personal views and my own trek within Unitarian Universalism. For those of you who may not know it, today is World Vegun Day, and I thought I'd take this opportunity to explain why I became vegun a few years ago, and how the transformation was exclusively due to my comfort being afflicted.

You see I had been vegetarian for a number of years. But when I was diagnosed with colorectal cancer in 2004 I was sent to see a nutritionist before my surgery in order to keep up my weight and strength. She didn't really seem to know what to do with me. It seemed important for her to spend more energy trying to convince me to eat meat than in trying to create any useful nutritional guidelines for me.

So, like many of us do when we are not getting the answers we need, I began to read on my own. And here are some of the things I found and what led me to different set of beliefs than the vast majority of people in the United States.

My own reading from my cancer ordeal led me to believe eating animals or their byproducts is not healthy for human beings. In fact, I now believe that when eating the Standard American Diet where meat is the centerpiece of the meal, increases our chances of diabetes, breast cancer, prostate and colorectal cancer, and heart disease several times over.

There are many studies that show how cultures which eat very little meat have far less incidence of the cancers and diseases of the heart that are the number one killers of us in the United States. Yet, if people from those cultures move here and began eating like we do, they quickly began to die like we do.

You rarely hear that you need to increase your consumption of meat. Instead we hear that we should eat more fruits and vegetables. In a strange and ironic twist of fate I've come to believe the animals we killed for our meals wind up killing us. And I became uncomfortable because if I was going to do my best to take care of this one body that was losing parts due to cancer, how could I go on eating the flesh of animals...

I also began to better understand the environmental impact of an industry that slaughtered 8.5 BILLION animals last year according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture; a number that doesn't include the 6.5 billion fish. These industrial farms are putting huge numbers of animals in small areas and the methane and fertilizer produced in these places are killing our ozone and water supply. In fact the Gulf of Mexico has a huge dead zone where all the oxygen has been depleted and virtually nothing is able to survive.

There has been little argument, other than from the Meat Industry as best I can tell, with the United Nations study titled "Livestock's Long Shadow" that explains how this vast Agricultural Industrial Complex is degrading our land, affecting our temperature and climate, is using far too much of our diminishing water supply, and contributes to the thinning of our planet's biodiversity.

And I began to be even more uncomfortable. Because if I believed myself to be someone who cared for the earth, our planet; how could I continue eating meat.

And then, at least for me, there is the most uncomfortable issue of all, the animals themselves. Sentient beings who suffer and feel pain and are treated inhumanely. I am convinced there are no happy cows in California or elsewhere who are willingly giving us their bodies to eat or their milk to drink. They do not bravely or unwittingly head to slaughter but do so with fear and trembling. In fact, if there is anything I believe more than any other dealing with this issue, it is that each of these animals has a strong desire to live; just like I do, just like you do. We were all, all of us, made by nature to strive towards life, not to be sacrificed for anybody's dinner plate; no matter how much

stronger one species is, no matter how much more intelligent one species is, no matter how technologically advanced one species is; we are all meant to strive towards life.

So, how could I say that this animal is worthy to sleep in my bed, and for some reason, this animal was designed solely to the slaughterhouse. This animal I would leave out food for on my back porch, but this animal I would allow to be put in a crate too small to turn around like veal calves or on top of other crates where the excrement just trickled down like the lives of pigs and chickens. Who was I to say this kind of animal lived and this other one died for my palate or these should be protected by animal cruelty laws but not those?

So, sometimes instead of opening our eyes, we avert them. We do not want to look at what we have created. We do not want to see where the meat comes that may very well eventually kill us too; so we cover our ears, we close our eyes, and like no other area in life that I'm aware of, we choose to be ignorant. Our very own Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity."

So people go to the grocery store and pick up something that is far removed from the slaughterhouse. It does not look like the animal it came from, and we distance ourselves from the discomfort that would come had we made the acquaintance of the animal we are about to consume or if we had to personally slaughter the animal ourselves.

And this made me very uncomfortable. Because if I believed myself to be an animal lover, how in the world could I justify eating them.

Let me just make a couple of other quick points. The first is, after much reading, I am convinced we were not designed to eat much meat at all. Let's think about the beginning of the human animal and look at our closest relatives. When you compare those animals who eat other animals you are struck by a few things.

Those who eat other animals have teeth that are much denser, much stronger, than ours. Their teeth are not only made to puncture and tear but their jaws have the strength to break bones. Carnivores jaws only move up and down, they cannot move side to side like ours do. And their claws can do much more damage when compared to our finger nails.

And human animals could likely not catch much meat to eat. In comparison to carnivorous animals we are not very fast, we are not very strong. And you'll not convince me that what became human beings started out with the tools necessary to catch, trap, or pierce the flesh of other animals. Tool making came later down the evolutionary road.

Even the American Dietetics Association has said that throughout most of human history, we have eaten a vegetarian or near-vegetarian diet. I believe we were and are much more like our closest genetic relatives, the chimpanzees and gorillas who forage for their meals rather than hunt for food.

And our digestive system does not closely resemble those of a carnivore. Meat tends to putrefy in our digestive tract. So, animals meant to eat meat only have a short tract of about three times the length of their body. Ours resembles herbivores and is 10 to 12 times the length of our body and the acid in our stomachs used for digestion is about 20 times weaker than what is found in a meat eating animal. This decaying meat may be the cause of some of our health problems...

And finally, let me just say a couple of words about milk. As best I can tell, there is only one natural use for the milk of a mother, and that is to make her child grow with needed nutrients for a safer life. Milk is designed by nature as the best fit for that mother's offspring. So, how much sense does it make that we drink another animal's milk? Specifically, how much sense does it make to drink milk that is made to turn a 50 pound baby calf into a 500 pound adolescent?

We are the only animal that drinks another mammal's milk and the only one who continues to do so after having been weaned from our mother's breast. Most of the world is lactose intolerant but this is a natural phenomenon after weaning. I believe there is only one reason we continue to drink milk and that is because the dairy industry has convinced us to do so.

The cow's milk wasn't made for us, It was made for baby cows and it contributes to the pain and suffering and slaughter of more cattle. Male dairy calves cannot produce milk. So they are turned into veal or fattened for slaughter. The females must repeatedly be inseminated to continue producing milk until she is spent and sent to slaughter after about four years. That is about 21 years earlier than when she would have died naturally...

Now I am well aware there are differing perspectives on these issues. You can find books and papers that tell you that a high cholesterol level is really nothing to worry about, that there is nothing to worry about with regard to global warming, that we have evolved to be meat eaters. I know that.

But my head and my heart have led me to different conclusions; conclusions that lead me to believe that every time I eat a meal I am taking a stand. Every time I pick up a spoon is a healthy act, one that gives me some control over my cholesterol and arteries and blood pressure. Taking up my fork is a political act, that says I need not wait for politicians to sign clean air acts, I can make a difference on my own. And every time I pick up a knife is a religious and compassionate act that say I've have contributed to the lessening of pain and suffering of other sentient beings.

You might believe that changing to eat the way I do is difficult. But it is much less so when you believe you are eating like your life depended on it, when you believe you are eating like the planet depends on it, when you eat in a way that you believe is compassionate and even spiritual...

For some, these things I've mentioned this morning is old news. For others this is new information. And because, like religion and politics, what we eat is so personal, you may feel anger, you may want to evade the issue entirely, you may feel defensive. You may feel uncomfortable, afflicted; I understand.

But all of us in this room are thoughtful people and yet we choose what we will think about. And just like there are plenty of books and articles that tell us what religion is true, or what political party has the best answers, or what eating meat does to our health and environment and animals, we each have to make our own decisions.

On this Word Vegan Day, I invite you to examine your dining choices. I will still love you no matter what you eat, and I trust you'll love me no matter what I refuse to eat. Our search for truth may lead us in different directions; our search will often afflict us with discomfort; but I think we'll all agree, we all need to search with our eyes wide open.

As we wise in body or spirit to join together in singing our closing hymn, number 86, Blessed Spirit of My Life."

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