

“Confessions of a Carnivore”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

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I can't tell you how many times as a child I heard one of my parents say, "Finish what you have on your plate. There are starving children in..." I don't recall where the starving children were. I do remember though that there was always a disapproving tone of voice and a certain look that conveyed more than the words that were said. I wonder if any of you heard something similar when you were young. While I'm not exactly sure of their words, the message was clear. I was to eat what was on my plate. Usually that meant some type of vegetable I didn't care for. While I don't recall all of the words I do recall how I felt. Back then I would have simply said, "I feel bad." Today I realize the "bad" feeling included fear, guilt and shame. The fear and guilt arose in response to my parent's disapproval toward not eating everything on my plate. The shame came from my childhood idea that if something I did was wrong or bad, then I must somehow be wrong or bad.

I am certain my parents' intent was not to have me feel fearful, guilty or shameful. Their intent was to get me to eat my vegetables, to teach me not to be wasteful, and to have me consider how my actions impact others. I appreciate that they wanted me to learn these lessons; lessons they considered to be important. Today I eat many more vegetables than I did as a child and some of them I can now even say I like. I almost always eat the food I take and do my best not to waste the food I have. More importantly, I attempt to consider how my actions may impact others. It is clear to me now that the words that came after "There are starving children in..." didn't really matter. What mattered was that I develop a set of values. I didn't just take on the values my parents had. I integrated what they were seeking to teach me and developed values of my own. I have taken the value of considering how my actions may impact others to a level they could not have imagined. Their intention in mentioning starving children was to get me not to be wasteful of food. But I now go much farther than that. Eating everything on my plate is no longer the measure of whether or not I am living out my value of consideration for the welfare of others. Today I also consider the type of food that is on my plate and how it may play a part in people going hungry. The result is that I find myself dealing with conflicting values and having to find a way to negotiate my way through what the conflict revolves around.

If you noticed the title of my sermon today, you already know where I am headed. My values conflict involves eating meat. I am a carnivore. Before moving away from my home town in central Michigan the phrase "confessions of a carnivore" would have seemed nonsensical to me. Eating meat, as far as I knew, was something everyone did. As the store clerk said to Ma in today's reading "Ever'body wants meat-needs meat." That's how it seemed in the rural farming community I grew up in. Some of what we heard in our reading from Genesis would have been considered indisputable truth in my home town. As human beings we are to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, and to have dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth. From that perspective I took for granted that meat was an essential part of a person's diet. I was really surprised when I went off to college and first met people who claimed they were able to survive without eating meat. That was when I learned there were people who were vegetarians. I was amazed by these folks. They not only ate vegetables, they enjoyed eating them. Since then I have developed friendships with many vegetarians. I even married one. Yet even though I now realize that not everyone needs to eat meat to survive and thrive, I continue to include meat as a regular part of my diet.

It would seem appropriate here to ask, "So what if a person eats meat, what difference does it make?" From the framework contained in the Genesis reading eating meat wouldn't seem to be an issue. But this is no longer the framework from which I perceive the world. My way of viewing and relating to the world corresponds with the seventh of our UU Principles. "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." With an attitude of respect for the interdependent web of all existence, eating meat is an issue.

It isn't possible to consider the many ways that including meat in one's diet is significant in a single sermon. Therefore, instead of addressing the matter with broad brush strokes I will focus on a portion of the issue with an eye towards depth. I want to share with you one of the reasons that eating meat sets up a values conflict

within me. I realize that because each of us have our own values it is likely that what I am about to share may not seem relevant to all of you. The issue, however, is not just whether meat is part of a person's diet. What each of us eats has an impact on others and on our world. The issue of what we choose to eat is so important that the delegates at the 2011 UU General Assembly voted to approve the Statement of Conscience titled "Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice." You can find information and resources related to this Statement of Conscience by going to the UUA website. As a delegate at that General Assembly, I experienced the concerns and disagreements this Statement of Consciousness evoked.

So whether you are a meat eater or not, whether or not my values are similar to the ones you hold, I ask that you hear me out. I think you will find something to relate to in what I have to share. I appreciate your willingness to be present for my confession.

Here is one aspect of my conflict. Because I eat meat there is less food available for others. An early draft of the Ethical Eating Statement of Conscience explains it this way;

More food calories are available worldwide the lower on a food chain food is harvested. Food chains usually start with plants, which are eaten by herbivores, which are then eaten by carnivores. Large amounts of energy are lost going up each level of a food chain. Eating lower on a food chain will leave more calories for the human population.

Each time I eat meat I am eating high on the food chain. I am using up more resources than if I ate only plant based foods. It would seem then that living out my value of considering how my actions impact others could easily be accomplished by not eating meat. I could eat only plants. Then I could live happily ever after sharing vegetarian meals with my spouse. That would be wonderful, but there is a problem. While it may not be apparent, I have a very high metabolism rate. You see if my body was a car it wouldn't be one of the, high mileage, hybrid versions or even an all electric one. It would be one of those gas guzzling, muscle cars of the sixties and seventies. To function adequately I need lots of fuel, and high octane fuel at that. In order for me to work even reasonably well I require meat in my diet. Without a regular intake of meat my ability to think and act become significantly impaired.

There is a second element of the conflict. For most of my life the type of work I have chosen has involved being of service to others. This feels like a calling for me. Not only do I consider others in regards to what I eat, I work to serve others in my professional life. Further, I believe that if something is worth doing, it is worth doing well. In order to be of service to others at the level I am capable of, I need to provide my body what it needs to function optimally. The question I struggle to answer then is - How do I serve others at the level I am capable of and at the same time be considerate of those who may go hungry because I consume meat?

There are many possible answers to the question. Reduce meat intake to the lowest level possible. Only eat meat that comes from animals that are free range raised and fed. Buy meat that is certified to be locally grown and organic. Decide which days I need to function at my best and only eat meat on those days and not on others. It would be easy to go on and on with options. Every option has advantages and disadvantages. None of the options I have explored adequately and fully resolves my conflict. While I can find ways to reduce the level of values conflict I experience, I have not been able to eliminate the conflict entirely. Eating meat leaves me unable to live up to other values. Some people are deprived of the food they need because I consume meat.

As I mentioned earlier, I realize probably none of you share the exact conflict in values that I have just described. It is possible those of you who are vegetarians may be wondering if there is anything meaningful you can take away from this sermon. I would assert that the real meat of my message here isn't about whether or not I am a carnivore, or for that matter what I eat or what you eat. It's not just about the diet we choose or the particular values we may have in conflict. The issue is larger than that. I have stood up here and confessed to you one particular values conflict I am struggling with. I am certain however that I am not the only person in the room who has values that are incongruent. Each of us has times when some value we hold doesn't coincide well with another of our values. And there are times when a value we hold is in conflict with a value held by another person. The question then is what attempts we make to address the conflict? Do I try to ignore the conflict and

hope that it will go away? Do I keep the conflict private and strive to resolve it alone? Do I share with someone what I am struggling with and seek assistance or support in my efforts to find resolution? Questions such as these matter greatly when conflict arises. The answers to such questions can be very important. Sometimes the answers are connected to the feelings the conflict generates.

Remember when I talked about how I felt bad when my parents would say “There are starving children somewhere in the world?” The feelings that I could then only identify as bad I can now identify as fear, guilt and shame. Each one of these feelings can be quite powerful; each can have a significant impact on a person’s behavior. My sense about fear, guilt and shame are similar to how I felt as a child about most vegetables. I didn’t like how they tasted, I didn’t want them on my plate and I certainly didn’t want to have them inside me. Typically when such feelings arise I want to stop feeling bad. I want to stop thinking about what the feelings are connected with. Maybe I’m unusual but I generally have a hard time sharing that I feel fearful in a situation where I don’t feel safe. I am not likely to tell another of my guilty feelings when I perceive the person will judge my behavior. And I tend to keep my feelings of shame hidden when I sense that my worth will not be acknowledged or honored.

Yet today I have come before you to confess that I am a carnivore. Doing so creates conflict within me and possibly between some of you and me as well. I confess that I am not able to live up to the values I hold. I share with you even though I feel fear in exposing this vulnerable piece of me. I share with you even though I feel guilt about the harm my behavior may be causing others. I share with you even though I sometimes don’t acknowledge and honor my own worth. I share because I trust that when we can respond to one another with love and compassion we can find solutions to conflicts where previously none seemed possible. I share because even though it appears we are all separate and isolated beings, I know that we are all connected. I recognize I cannot resolve my conflict all by myself. I recognize conflicts do and will arise within us and between us. The emotions of fear, guilt or shame may create distance between us, distance that can leave us feeling isolated and alone.

My hope is that as a result of my sharing someone may recognize that a conflict they are dealing with by themselves can be shared with another. My hope is that through my sharing someone will find a way to be more compassionate with themselves or with someone they are in conflict with. A fundamental aspect of our faith is that it is not based on a creed. Ours is a covenantal faith. As Francis David, a European Unitarian leader in the sixteenth century asserted, “We don’t have to think alike to love alike.” It is the covenants we make and live out that make this faith what it is. May we continue to live in covenant together and commit ourselves to the values that underpin our liberal faith. And may we support and encourage one another even as we struggle to live up to the values we hold dear.

May it be so.