

## PLEASE, STOP TELLING EVERYONE WHAT TO EAT

Stephen Harrod Buhner

*The most erroneous stories are those we think we know best –  
and therefore never scrutinize or question.* Stephen Jay Gould

A great many social movements in the United States are in reality just modified forms of Protestant Puritanism. In essence, far too many are intended to purify culture (in one way or another) by forcing individuals to adhere to behaviors that outside actors (usually people without a sense of humor) determine to be best for them (or the world). This includes but is not limited to anti-sex movements (of whatever sort – and there are a lot of them); anti-alcohol, -drug, -smoking, -music, -film, -book, -language wars; . . .

*Actually it is **diction, diction**, not language. “Watch your language,” what an incredibly uniformed saying. I am not speaking Russian nor Turkish. “Diction” refers to **words**, hence **diction-ary**. I wonder sometimes if that saying is not one of the better examples of unrecognized irony.*

. . . and of course vegetarianism of the everybody-must-do-it-to-save-the-[*fill in the blank*] sort.

Vegetarianism’s fine, don’t get me wrong, I think it is great . . . for people who choose it for themselves. (I am, after all, a plant person to my core.) What I, and the majority of sensible people, hate is constantly being preached to about it. And of course, few of us like the idea of

laws being passed (which vegetarian political activists always want to do) to make vegetarianism mandatory: to save “the planet,” to protect animals, to enable “the planet” to “support” one hundred billion people (and what kind of life would that be for anyone or the Earth?), because it’s more moral, because it will decrease aggression – more likely all of us will just be too weak to care, because it will make you more healthy which you aren’t because you eat all the wrong things – mostly because of a lack of willpower but probably also because you’re stupid and let me enlighten you, and you are going to eat your vegetables now whether you like it or not.

It’s just really irritating and sometimes, despite my better impulses, it gets to me. All sane people, sooner or later, get tired of their mothers telling them how to eat. The whole thing is just matriarchalism run amok. (And yes there is an estrogenic parallel to the patriarchy – i.e., patriarchy – which is just as unhealthy for human society. Anyone who doesn’t know this doesn’t know much about human beings or maybe never went to high school.) Like many of the fundamentalists within social justice movements vegetarians show little understanding of human nature or the reality of the ecological scenario from which we emerged and in which we are inextricably embedded.

A great many writers (who most likely found their irritations levels getting the better of them) have responded in detail to the majority of the moral vegetarianist claims; they can be easily found (trigger warning) on the internet if you just take a moment to look. I thought, however, I would look at a few things I rarely see mentioned. First: top down pronouncements about what healthy eating is and is not.

I think by now that pretty much everyone knows that nutritionists and dieticians don’t know much about food or nutrition. And of course many of them are not nearly so unbiased as

they pretend to be. (When I was a volunteer lobbyist in Colorado years ago, it wasn't a surprise to me to find that the dietician rep at the state capitol was paid by the cheese and dairy industry.) There really isn't anything scientific about most of the food information that we have come to accept as true.

Salt was good, then it was bad, then it was good again. And so on with red wine, and coffee and tea, and so on and on. Natural fats were good, then bad, then good again. And, of course, if you look more deeply into the whole origin of where the fats-are-bad thing came from, pretty soon you run into Crisco and the invention of hydrogenated cotton seed oil.

(Cotton seeds were waste products from cotton production and suddenly they were worth a lot of money. What is true is that whenever there is money or power to be had, scientific truth becomes incredibly flexible. Rationality is easily deformed to support irrational ends – for it has within it no innate moral structure. It is, in the end, merely dissociated mentation.)

But really, what is true about the food we need to eat to be healthy is this:

A number of years ago some researchers came up with an interesting idea. They took a large group of children, very similar in health and socio-economic status, and separated them into two smaller groups. One group of children could eat whatever they wanted, no exceptions, no time limit, and the other had to eat three meals a day that were formulated from the latest and most scientific information on nutrition. Some of the children in the first group, for instance, ate hot dogs for weeks or ice cream or chips. They ate whatever they wanted – the parents simply trusted them to figure it out on their own. (I can sense you cringing now.) Actually, in reality, there is no such thing as a bad food.

*(Now . . . notice the strength of your emotional reaction. That is an external parental voice you got from somewhere. It isn't you. It has no relation to reality. The important point is . . . why is it so emotional . . . and so strong? What will happen to you if you don't listen to it? If you ignore it? If you eat what you want?)*

*Scary, isn't it?*

The other group of children ate their broccoli and their fish and their fruit. The study went on for years. In the end, the first group of children developed a remarkable sensitivity to what their bodies really did need to eat. They would suddenly become hungry for salad, or meat, or fruit, would gorge on that for awhile, then move on to something else. Some became vegetarians, most omnivores, all of them, as a habit of life, grazed among the foods their bodies wanted. (Just as our ancient ancestors did.) The health of the children in this first group remained high, very few developed eating disorders. And of course the outcome in the second group was quite the opposite.

What proponents of top down forced feeding of “healthy” foods continually miss is that physical organisms (us among them) have developed over millions of years embedded in a very complex ecological scenario. There is such a thing as the wisdom of the body. Our bodies do have the capacity to determine what they need to remain healthy . . . but only if that wisdom is not stunted by outside forces.

Geneen Roth in her book *When Food is Love* talks about her own experience with this and it is a marvelous book. She was once extremely overweight, had tried multiple diets and techniques to lose weight (none of which worked), then finally decided (to the consternation of

her friends) to eat whatever she wanted; there were no restrictions. And yes, at first, she gained weight. But after awhile, as the trust she was giving her body became ingrained, she began to lose weight no matter what she ate. For she found that her body wanted certain things and not others and the things she wanted happened to be what she actually needed to be healthy.

There are a lot of lessons in this about our trained distrust of the natural world and our bodies, our lack of awareness of our innate capacities, but most of all the inescapable truth that rationality just doesn't have much to teach us about becoming a human being, or reinhabiting our interbeing with the world, or really about our own animal nature – for rationality the way it is practiced now is itself a fundamentalist belief system and its underlying premises have little to do with what and who we really are.

Inside the pronouncements of food experts are many beliefs that don't look all that well when brought up into the light of day. Most demeaning of them all is I think the belief that the vast majority of us are incredibly stupid and perhaps that is one of the main reasons so many people have an instinctive dislike of food purists. (And of course when you go deeper into all this, most food purists are terrified of becoming old or ill or dying and as we all know only those that god does not love get old or sick or die earlier than age 150 and well that was sad but she did her best.)

Things begin to get more complicated however when you start to look at what is really true in the natural world about the eating of meat. Turning away from common beliefs about animal diets and actually looking at what they do eat (some of which is obvious when you think about it) reveals that the vast majority of, and perhaps all, herbivores eat meat as a regular part of their diet. It was a chance-read article that first alerted me to this and, as such things often do, it

opened up a world to me that my assumptions had long hidden from my gaze . . . and my thinking.

The article I came across was a journal study written by some bird researchers who had put up catch-nets in a forest. They did this to find out the variety of bird species that lived in that particular forest. Birds would fly into the nets, get entangled, and thus were able to be examined, before being set free the next day.

(That is, the ones who did not die of course – and there are always some who do. This is something that journal studies continually paper over or hide through slight of mouth language. The question that is always most prominent for me about science is this: if the research deleteriously affects the species being studied, as it often does, what does that say about the kind of science we have and those who serve it?).

After a few days the researchers returned to find the nets empty. Each day, same thing. So, they set up cameras to find out what was happening. It turned out that a herd of deer had started moving through that region of forest every night. The camera recorded them stopping at the nets and carefully picking out the birds and eating them. This intrigued me (and them to their credit), so I began doing some searching of my own in journal articles and on the internet. It turns out this sort of thing is not an abnormality.

Soon after I came across historical reports that, after battles, war horses, throughout history, immediately began eating the dead – both dead horses and soldiers killed in the battle. (I was always certain, from a young age, that horses were meat eaters, despite my elders' assurances that they were not. Their teeth always frightened to me, something that was not true with cows or other "herbivores.")

Reports of horses eating meat have been around for at least four thousand years. They hunt, then eat, a large variety of meat including humans (which I was certain of as a child). They have done so throughout their existence and on every continent, including Antarctica oddly enough. They are in fact omnivores who hunt meat (as well as grazing animals who eat innocent plants). They are not in fact gentle equine angels who timidly move through the world doing no harm to other sentient beings. (The Disney corporation really is evil.)

The best overview of the history of meat-eating horses is in CulChullaine O'Reilly's book *Deadly Equines* (The Long Riders Guild Press, 2011) though, of course there are many accounts and studies on the internet as well as a number of videos if you have the stomach for them. O'Reilly gives an account of one such event (originally reported in *The Horse* magazine in 2002).

*The [man] described how he and a friend had witnessed what they called a "bizarre and frightening" episode wherein a horse grabbed a goat, shook it to death, and began devouring it. . . . a few minutes later . . . three other horses approach[ed] the dead goat. They too began consuming its flesh and drinking its blood.*

*"They all grabbed some part of the goat with their teeth and literally tore it into pieces with all the tugging and pulling. The one who had killed the goat had the bigger part of what was left. . . . Soon, two little colts less than three months old came over to what was left of the goat and they took some bites and just stood there chewing and eating."*

Cows, hippos, deer, camels, sheep, goats, squirrels, in fact most if not all herbivores do eat meat (Still, I haven't found anything about rabbits . . . yet). And obviously, "herbivores" also consume numerous insects as they graze and yes, insects are meat. The recognition that "herbivores" eat meat has I think been so long in coming because it conflicts with tremendously strong beliefs we have been trained in since birth.

Many scientists and vegetarianists inevitably make excuses for animals eating meat (since they aren't supposed to – "they were nutritionally deprived and had to" – but there are accounts throughout history that show that the majority of herbivores do in fact hunt and eat meat as a regular part of their diet. They just don't do it as much as pure carnivores such as mountain lions do.

And the final point: are plants what we have been told they are? This is important because one of the reasons that vegetarian fundamentalists put forward as a reason all humans should only eat plants is that animals are sentient (to varying extents) and feel pain, plants are not and do not. These assertions, however, are incorrect.

As I go into in depth in *Plant Intelligence and the Imaginal Realm*, plants do in fact possess a "brain," they just don't have an organ that is easily recognizable as such. This is because what is important is not the brain *per se* but the neural network that the organ we call the brain houses. Plants, as Darwin presciently observed long ago, do have a neural network, it is their root system.

Plant root systems, which look startlingly like the neural network in our brains, perform much like our own – they in fact use the same neurotransmitters we do. They are used to store



memories, analyze inputs and design responses, and plan for the future. And, of course, they do feel pain. All organisms do. It is an essential mechanism for telling an organism that damage has occurred to their physical integrity. Plants experience inflammation in their cellular tissues just as we do, inflammation is pain. It signals the repair mechanisms in the body to respond to and heal the damage.

Plants also have a number of complex languages (one of them being chemical), they care for their offspring, they are strongly involved in community, and helping their fellow ecosystem life forms when they are ill. They are also complex tool creators and users – far more adept than human beings. (The tools they make are primarily complex chemical compounds.) They are also (as red in tooth and claw reductionists like to point out) highly responsive to dangers to their structural integrity. (Yes, they have an ego.)

When attacked by other plants (plants are not from Walt Disney world either) plants create and release sophisticated compounds that inhibit that kind of aggression. If they are *overeaten* by insects or foraging animals (most grow better with around 18% foraging), they immediately analyze the saliva of the organism feeding on them, then craft a chemical response. They may make the foraging organism ill (so it stops feeding), or craft very sophisticated pheromones that tell the insect forager (for instance) that a predator of that insect is on the way (so that it flees), or call the exact predator of that insect to the plant to kill it, or even create chemicals designed to destabilize that organism's reproductive system to reduce species numbers. Affected plants will also send out other signaling molecules to plants in that ecosystem telling them what organism is feeding on them. Those other plants then begin creating and sending out pheromones that also start calling the right predators to them for protection.

It is important to understand that the chemicals the plants create have to be *exact* in order to work, a slight alteration in structure makes them useless. Further, those chemicals have to be released in exactly the right amounts (parts per thousand, million, billion, or trillion) to be effective. Plants are, in actual fact, highly intelligent. They are not insentient salads to be eaten without moral consequence by vegetarians in order to “save” the planet. (BTW, the planet is not in danger, only our civilization is. The only thing we can save is ourselves . . . well, maybe. We are in fact acting much less intelligently than every other life form on Earth.)

Plants are also highly responsive to the needs of their community. As I go into in depth in my book *The Lost Language of Plants* they sense when any member of their ecosystem is ill and begin producing the needed compounds. If other plants are ill, they send those compounds through mycelial networks to reach the plants who need them. If it is any of the multitude of animals in the region, they send out chemical cues through their stomata, letting those animals (who are far more attuned to their body wisdom than we are) know the location of the medicines they need.

Chimpanzees, for example, will leave their group early in the morning before eating, travel through the forest until they find the plant with the strongest production of the compounds they need. In the case of certain intestinal infestations, they will pick a leaf off the plant, fold it like an accordion, and swallow it whole. Please note: *it will only work if taken in exactly this way*. If the animal chews the leaf, it won't cure them. The GI tract acids extract the compounds from the plant which then put the intestinal parasites into a coma. However, the parasites are still attached to the bowel walls by their mouths. The leaf that the chimpanzee has ingested is covered with hundreds of tiny hooks, like velcro. As the leaf unfolds the accordion edges and the velcro

hooks scrape the parasites off the GI tract wall so they can be excreted.

Scores of examples exist that reveal that most if not all animals possess extensive understanding of plant medicinals and the most effective ways to take them.

More confronting to the beliefs of insentient saladarian theorists, some plants possess *more* neurons than human beings. Their “brains” are in fact larger and more complex than our own.

The human brain is limited in size, as is its neural network, by the size of the human skull. But plants have no such limit. Their neural networks can extend indefinitely throughout the soil in which they grow. With extremely long lived plants, the neural networks they form can be very large indeed. One of the oldest aspen groves in the world is over 100,000 years old and covers, at minimum, one hundred acres. Its neural net is orders of magnitude larger than any single human being. If you are going by “brain” size, numbers of neurons, neural connections, storage and computation capacity, there is no contest. We lose.

Plants are extremely intelligent, even by human standards. They are the planet’s chemists, constantly monitoring and maintaining the homeodynamis of the Earth. Without them, none of us would be alive; the human species would not exist.

Continually insisting that plants are stupid, possess no consciousness or soul, that we can grow them in any way we please, and eat them with moral abandon is itself incredibly stupid and I am not sure how much consciousness someone who believes that can have.

The truth is that for any of us to live, something has to die. And that is the truly important point. Knowing that, integrating it into our daily life and awareness, inevitably brings a humility and type of awareness that is crucially necessary to our sustainable habitation of this planet.

Understanding that every life form around us is intelligent, conscious, and aware forces us, as a species, to remember that we are surrounded by kin, that we are merely one life form in the council of life. As we take in life in order for ourselves to live, it forces us to remain humble toward them, to thank the life forms we kill in order to live, to remain respectful. And, as well, to know beyond any shadow of a doubt that eventually they will eat us in turn. After all, everything on this planet is intended to biodegrade, including ourselves. In fact, both of us are biodegrading even now.