

animals in our circle of compassion, if we permit them to be treated with any degree of cruelty simply because it lowers the price per pound, we are, ourselves, less human in the bargain.

Isn't it odd that we admire star athletes who get paid \$20 million to endorse shoes, while other people get paid 20 cents an hour to make them? Isn't it refreshing when celebrities use their name recognition not for financial gain but to promote the greater good of our world?

I applaud Alicia Silverstone, as I applaud James Cromwell and the many other celebrities who put themselves on the line for compassion. We need more people like that, at every level of notoriety.

I am grateful to each of us who stands up to create a more caring and loving world.

## chapter 12 Eating with Conscience



It's never easy to awaken from the spell that industries weave to shield themselves from public accountability. It's especially hard when it would require us to question our own actions. I never thought much of it when I saw McDonald's TV ads in which the clown Ronald McDonald tells kids that hamburgers grow in hamburger patches.

As if they were flowers.

When I first saw these ads, some years ago, I more or less assumed they were an innocent fantasy, like Santa Claus. I didn't realize they were a sophisticated marketing strategy that managed to obscure the reality that hamburgers are, in fact, ground-up cows.

At Baskin-Robbins, when I was there, there were murals in most stores depicting dairy cows grazing contentedly in beautiful pastures. These murals were huge, extending most of the length of the stores. As I made milkshakes and banana splits for people, I never would have dreamed that the lives of dairy cows were anything but idyllic. So bring on the Rocky Road.

I wish that were true.

But today, there are 10 million dairy cows in the United States, and half are housed in some type of factory system.<sup>1</sup> What's worse, increasing numbers of U.S. dairy cows, particularly in the Midwest and Northeast, are being placed in tie stalls where they are tied in one place, unable to move, for long periods of time.<sup>2</sup>

All this stands in dramatic contrast to the situation in Sweden, by the way, where legislation aimed at respecting the rights of animals has granted cows the right to graze in perpetuity.<sup>3</sup>

Dairy cows in the United States today do not have it easy. The natural lifespan for dairy cows is 20 to 25 years. But under modern conditions, these animals are lucky to make it to age four.

In a natural situation, cows produce enough milk to feed one or two calves. But in today's dairy factories, they actually produce 20 times that amount.<sup>4</sup>

Not that long ago, it took four months for a dairy cow to produce her own weight in milk. Now, some dairy cows produce their own weight in milk in three weeks. And cows who have been injected with bovine growth hormone can produce their own weight in milk in as little as 10 days.

As a result of this, half of the dairy cows in the United States have mastitis (painful udder infections).<sup>5</sup>

A few years ago, *World Farming Newsletter* printed a short article that tells us something of the special relationship between a cow and her calf.

"Blackie, a two-year-old heifer, broke away from the farm she had been sold to, and, walking seven miles through strange country, homed in on the new farm that her calf had been taken to. The story started when the heifer and her calf were sold separately in Hatherleigh market in Devon. The mother was sent to Bob Woolacott's farm near Okchampton where she was bedded down for the night with a supply of hay and water. But her maternal instinct led her to break out of the farmyard, and over a hedge into a country lane. Next morning she was found seven miles away reunited and suckling her calf at Arthur Sleeman's farm at Sampford Courtenay. Mr. Sleeman was able to identify Blackie as the mother by the auction-labels still stuck on their rumps."<sup>6</sup>

I wouldn't have thought that a cow could manage such a feat. But Dr. Rupert Sheldrake, an eminent natural scientist, checked the details of this story by interviewing the people involved, and what he found corroborated the story.<sup>7</sup>

A similar report was published in *Soviet Weekly*:

"Caucasian farmer Magomed Ramazhanov was a little surprised when one of his cows went in search of her calf, sold earlier to a farmer in a neighboring district. Originally fearing that the creature had been killed by wild predators, Magomed eventually found his mild-mannered milker reunited with her offspring—30 miles from home."<sup>8</sup>

The bonds of the connection between mammalian mothers and their offspring are profound. This is true of all mammals, not just humans.

For many people, it is heartwarming to see how strong are the bonds that exist between a mother cow and her calves. But this beauty is shadowed for me with sadness. For I also see the heartache that ensues when this bond is ruptured, as it is every day in modern dairies. Separating calves from their mothers at or very near birth is traumatic for both. If a cow were allowed to nurse her calves, there would be enough left for us to take some.

This is how milk has been obtained throughout history. But today, the dairy industry has a better way. They take it all. They don't share it with the calves for whom it is intended. And they make money off the otherwise "useless" male calves by selling them for veal. This way, they say, we get cheap milk.

Sometimes the price of cheap is very, very high.

## What We Feed the Animals We Eat

The issue of what the animals who are destined for America's dinner plates are fed is a touchy one within the animal products industry. It is widely accepted that the kinds of diets provided to livestock have dramatic implications for human health. Accordingly, the industry wants you to feel very good about what their animals eat.

## IS THAT SO?

"The average U.S. farm animal, from the standpoint of nutrition, eats better than the average U.S. citizen. . . . The farmer who owns the livestock or poultry has an economic incentive to provide animals with exactly the indicated amount of necessary nutrients for animal health. The result is a healthier animal."

—Animal Industry Foundation<sup>8</sup>

"Current FDA regulations allow dead pigs and dead horses to be rendered into cattle feed, along with dead poultry. The regulations not only allow cattle to be fed dead poultry, they allow poultry to be fed dead cattle. Americans who spent more than six months in the United Kingdom during the 1980s are now forbidden to donate blood, in order to prevent the spread of BSE [Mad Cow Disease]'s human variant. But cattle blood is still put into the feed given to American cattle."

—Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, 2001<sup>10</sup>

The meat, dairy, and egg industries in the United States are remarkably creative in what they feed livestock today. Always looking to save money, they've come up with some ingenious ideas to supplement the grain and soybeans the animals are fed.

Recycled chicken manure, for example, is routinely incorporated into the diets of U.S. chickens. (Is it a coincidence that 90 percent of U.S. chickens are now infected with leukosis—chicken cancer—at the time of slaughter?) By the same token, raw poultry and pig manure are routinely fed to U.S. pigs. And the water they are given is often only the liquid wastes draining from manure pits. (Three-quarters of U.S. pigs are infected with pneumonia at the time of slaughter.)<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, dried poultry waste and sewage sludge are routinely fed to U.S. cattle (supplementing the basic diet of grain and soybeans).<sup>12</sup> In 1997, in the wake of the British epidemic of Mad Cow disease, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) finally banned the practice of feeding cow meat and bone meal back to cows. But pigs and chickens are still routinely fed the bones, brains, meat scraps, feathers, and feces of their own species.

There are many people who love their pets, and would be appalled at the idea of eating cats and dogs. They are glad these animals are not part

of the human food chain in our culture. But is that confidence warranted? Tens of millions of unclaimed cats and dogs are euthanized every year by shelters and veterinarians, who then must dispose of these bodies, many of which are picked up by rendering plants. Much of the livestock feed in the United States today is made with rendered ingredients. Thus commercial meat, dairy, and egg products often come from animals whose diet included the ground-up remains of cats and dogs, including the euthanasia drugs injected into their bodies.

It's enough to make you understand why Oprah Winfrey said she would never eat another burger.

## Just Ma, Pa, and a Few Animals?

You might be getting the impression by now that the U.S. meat industry is dominated by agribusiness operations whose level of concern for animals is just about nonexistent. The industry, however, would like you to believe otherwise. . . .

"It's a myth that farming in the U.S. is controlled by large corporations which care about profits and not about animal welfare." (Animal Industry Foundation)<sup>13</sup>

## WHAT WE KNOW

U.S. poultry production controlled by the eight largest chicken processors in 1978: 25.3 percent<sup>14</sup>

In 1998: 61.5 percent<sup>15</sup>

Net worth of chicken producer Donald Tyson: \$1.2 billion<sup>16</sup>

Average hourly wage of Tyson poultry processing plant worker: \$5.27<sup>17</sup>

Only entities producing more chicken than Tyson Foods: The countries of China and Brazil<sup>18</sup>

U.S. turkey market controlled by the six largest processors: 50 percent<sup>19</sup>

U.S. beef market controlled by the four largest beef-packers: 81 percent<sup>20</sup>

U.S. hog slaughter controlled by four corporations: 50 percent<sup>21</sup>

In North Carolina there is a particular hog producer whose net worth in 1997 was more than \$1 billion.<sup>22</sup> His name is Wendell Murphy.

Wendell Murphy accumulated much of his fortune while serving three terms in the North Carolina State House and two in the Senate. During that time, he was responsible for dozens of laws benefiting hog agribusiness, including bills that exempted the industry from sales tax, inspection fees, property taxes on feed, and zoning laws.<sup>23</sup>

Donella Meadows was a systems analyst, author, director of the Sustainability Institute, and professor of environmental studies at Dartmouth College. Writing in 2000, she described the impact Wendell Murphy had in his home state:

"While Wendell Murphy served ten years in North Carolina's General Assembly, regulatory control of large pig farms was taken from counties and relegated to the state. The state then exempted them from liability for environmental or health damage. Then it decided they needn't pay gas, sales or property tax, either. As the number of hogs in North Carolina rose from 2 million to 13 million, surpassing the human population, the number of hog farms dropped from 21,000 to 7,000."<sup>24</sup>

One of the most noticeable ways in which family farming differs from factory farming is that in the former, animals are often given names—such as Bessie the Cow or Babe the Pig—that recognize the animals as the unique individuals they are. Large-scale agribusiness, on the other hand, has sought to obscure as much as possible the reality that animals are even involved in the process. Hence the names routinely used for animals in U.S. food production—"food-producing units," "protein harvesters," "converting machines," "crops," "grain-consuming animal units," "bio-machines," and "egg machines."

## World's Largest Meat Packer Caught Red-Handed

In the end, of course, however they've been raised and whatever they've been called, the animals are killed. Most of us consider that an unfortunate but necessary reality if we are going to eat meat, and are willing to

the bargain. But nearly all of us would want the slaughter to be done humanely. This would seem to be the bare minimum of compassion needed for the creatures whose flesh we consume.

And this is the intent of the Federal Humane Slaughter Act—to see to it that animals are stunned before being slaughtered, so that they are not conscious while being killed. Unfortunately, though, the Federal Humane Slaughter Act is so full of loopholes that it doesn't apply to over 90 percent of U.S. animals (including all poultry) destined for human consumption.<sup>25</sup>

In 2000, the San Francisco-based Humane Farming Association, long in the forefront of the effort to end the cruelty of factory farming, set in motion events that were unprecedented in the history of animal protection in the United States.<sup>26</sup> As a result of the group's efforts, IBP, the world's largest meat packing company, faced potential criminal and civil charges for violations of state and federal law. As well, the scandal brought widespread attention to the way in which billions of farm animals are slaughtered.

The Humane Farming Association had captured on videotape what the group called "some of the most heartbreaking and outrageous evidence of animal abuse imaginable." And the group had sworn affidavits from seventeen of IBP's own workers that provided further documentation, confirming that at the IBP plant in Wallula, Washington, animals had long been systematically treated with almost unimaginable cruelty.

The videotapes, which were aired in spring 2000 by KING-5 TV in Seattle, an NBC affiliate, and in early 2001 by *NBC News/Dateline*, were difficult to watch, but they accurately portrayed the reality. The tapes showed struggling cows hoisted upside down and butchered while still alive. Fully conscious cows were shown being skinned alive, their legs cut off while struggling for freedom. Cows were shown being hit repeatedly with stunning devices that didn't work. Other cows were tormented and repeatedly shocked with electric prods. And workers were shown showing an electric prod into a cow's mouth.

How could something this awful happen? And not in some small-time plant, but in a major plant owned and operated by the nation's and the world's largest meat packer?

Most people believe that the law requires animals to be dead before being cut into pieces, but this is not the case. According to the Humane Slaughter Act, animals who are covered by the Act must be "insensible to pain" before being chained and cut up. This, in theory, is accomplished through use of an electric shock, called "stunning." The Humane Farming Association tapes showed, however, that often the stunning was not successful.

How often? In one signed affidavit, a slaughterhouse employee said, "I estimate that 30 percent of the cows are not properly knocked (stunned with the electric prod). . . . I can tell that these cows are alive because they're holding their heads up and a lot of times they make noise."<sup>27</sup>

He was one of the seventeen IBP plant employees who risked their jobs and their families' security by signing affidavits reporting cruel conditions at the plant. One stated, "Cows can get ten minutes down the line and still be alive. All the hide is stripped out down to the neck (by then)."<sup>28</sup> Another added, "Workers can open the legs, the stomach, the neck, cut off the feet while the cow is still breathing. . . . I would estimate that one out of ten cows is still alive when it's bled and skimmed."<sup>29</sup>

"I've seen thousands and thousands of cows go through the slaughter process alive," said one plant worker. "If I see a live animal," said another, "I cannot stop the line. Because the supervisor has told us that you have to work on [cut up] a cow that's alive."<sup>30</sup>

As a result of the public outcry generated by the widespread media coverage, Governor Gary Locke of Washington initiated a full-scale investigation. When the NBC News affiliate showed the videotape, the station noted, "This is the first time in U.S. history that a Governor anywhere has called for a full investigation of slaughterhouse practices."<sup>31</sup>

This was also the first time thousands of federal meat inspectors had ever joined with an animal protection organization in calling for a criminal investigation of a meat company. The National Joint Council of Food Inspection Locals, the union representing the more than 6,000 USDA inspectors, joined with the Humane Farming Association in seeking charges against IBP.

A week after the videotape was shown by Seattle's NBC affiliate, a team from the Washington State Department of Agriculture conducted

a spot check of the IBP plant, and reported they found no abuses. They were, however, detained outside the plant for more than an hour while IBP officials "checked the credentials" of the inspectors. This would, of course, have given plant officials plenty of time to "prepare the plant" for the inspection.

IBP strongly denied the accusations made by the Humane Farming Association. How, then, did the corporation explain the videotaped footage? By implying that disgruntled employees may have intentionally hoisted live cattle to make the company look bad. IBP officials said they intended to investigate the possibility that the workers may have "mis-handled the cattle for the camera's benefit."<sup>32</sup>

Joining IBP in the counterattack was Rosemary Mucklow, Executive Director of the National Meat Association. "I seriously doubt," she said, "that what was alleged actually happened."<sup>33</sup>

Dr. Temple Grandin, widely considered the nation's foremost authority on the handling of livestock in slaughterhouses, was flown in by IBP on a corporate jet. But her comments did not exactly exonerate the company. "There's definitely some bad stuff on that tape," she said. "I'm not defending IBP. There was a live cow hung upside down from the chain and another on the ground in the stunning box. These are definitely bad things."<sup>34</sup>

In a written response, IBP sought to downplay the significance of the videotape. "It is a known biological fact that an animal can continue to make involuntary movements after it has died. The untrained observer may misinterpret this as a sign of life."<sup>35</sup>

Workers, on the other hand, testified that they had been "kicked by frantic animals moving along the conveyor."

One IBP executive said it was unfair to blame the company, because the problems shown in the videotape and confirmed in the workers' affidavits were industrywide. In this, unfortunately, he was accurate. Ed Van Winkle is a former slaughterhouse manager for John Morrell & Company, another of the largest meat packers in the United States. Speaking of how slaughterhouses handle animals who are too injured to walk (and those who are unwilling to cooperate), he used words that are painfully graphic:

"The preferred method of handling a cripple is to beat him to death with a lead pipe. . . . If you get a hog in a chute that's had the shit prodded out of him, and has a heart attack or refuses to move, you take a meat hook and hook it into his bunghole [anus] . . . and a lot of times the meat hook rips out of the bunghole. I've seen thighs completely ripped open."<sup>16</sup>

It is very difficult to hear such a description, because the amount of pain is so great. It's easier to think that slaughterhouses are simply efficient factories that turn dumb livestock into sterile, cellophane-wrapped food in the meat display case.

That's what the industry would like you to think.

If you've been to Los Angeles, you may have driven by the high walls of Farmer John's Slaughterhouse and Meatpacking Plant. They are adorned by enormous paintings of beautiful countryside scenes. You see blue skies, fluffy clouds, rivers, trees, picturesque meadows and fields—and lots of very happy farm animals. The facility's windows are painted over with these scenes, so you can't see what actually goes on inside.

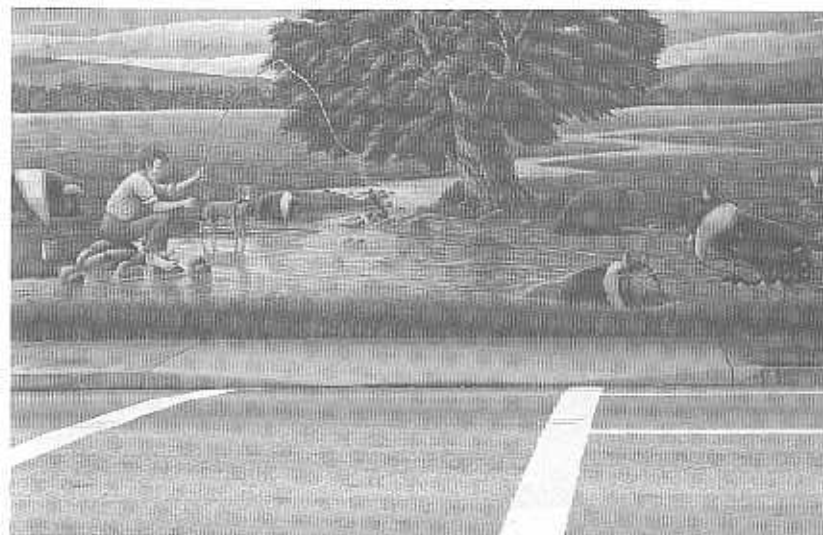
## WHAT WE KNOW

Number of cows and calves slaughtered every 24 hours in the United States: 90,000<sup>17</sup>

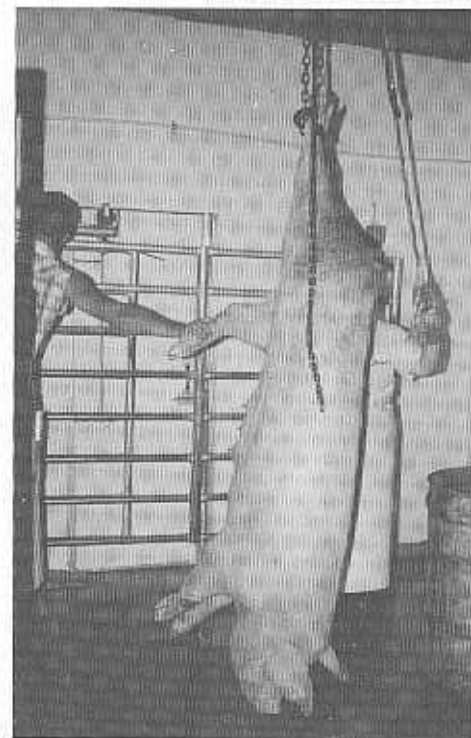
Number of chickens slaughtered every minute in the United States: 14,000<sup>18</sup>

Food animals (not counting fish and other aquatic creatures) slaughtered per year in the United States: 10 billion

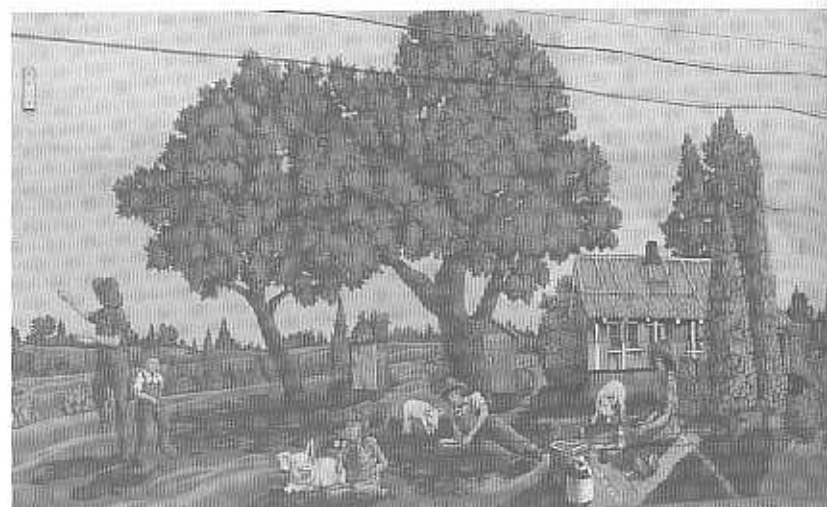
Bernard Rollin, the Colorado State University expert on animal farming, says it is not only consumers who don't really know what goes on inside slaughterhouses. The same is true, he says, for cattle ranchers, most of whom ship their animals to slaughterhouses but have never actually been inside one. "Few ranchers have ever seen their animals slaughtered," he says. "Even fewer wish to."<sup>19</sup>



This is one of many paintings on the outside walls of Farmer John's slaughterhouse and Meatpacking Plant in Los Angeles. It all looks so happy for the animals.



Inside, however, it's a little different. In some U.S. slaughterhouses today, animals are actually skinned and cut up while still alive.



This is another of the many immense paintings on the walls of the Farmer John slaughterhouse in Los Angeles portraying farm animals that are happy as can be. The telephone and power lines that are visible give some sense of the painting's size. Some of these paintings are as tall as airplane hangars. Collectively, they cover more than 35,000 square feet.



Unfortunately, they could hardly be more misrepresentative of what really goes on inside.

## The Battle Continues

The industry might prefer it otherwise, but with each passing day more and more Americans are realizing the extent of animal suffering involved in modern meat production. In 1987, when I published *Diet for a New America*, hardly anyone had any idea what "factory farming" meant, much less had an opinion on the subject. But in 1995, a poll conducted by Opinion Research Corporation found that 95 percent of Americans disapproved of confinement methods used in the production of eggs, veal, and pork.

The U.S. animal agriculture industry has not been pleased to see the public's growing resistance to inhumane farming practices. In response, it has increased its advertising budgets and its propaganda campaigns. And in an act that gives new meaning to the word *sickening*, it has also sought to strip legal protection from farm animals.

Prior to 1990, twelve states had laws that exempted farm animals from legislation protecting animals from cruelty. In these states, sadly, farm animals could legally be subjected to any manner of cruelty, as long as the practices were considered "normal," "accepted," "common," or "customary" farming practices. During the 1990s, bowing to pressure from the animal industries, 18 more states enacted such laws.<sup>9</sup> As a result of these statutes, farm animals in more than half the states now have no legal protection from institutionalized cruelty.

The rationale behind these laws, which exempt farm animals from even the most rudimentary form of legal protection, is that any practice that is the prevailing norm in modern farming or slaughter practices should be deemed acceptable and should not be criticized or banned. It would be hard to construct a system better designed to protect the status quo or to ensure that no progress could ever be made on behalf of animal protection.

It was this very approach that McDonald's attorneys presented in the McLibel trial. They argued that the company should not be considered cruel because what it did was the industry norm. The judge, however, did not agree. He ruled, "I cannot accept this approach. . . . To do so would be to hand the decision as to what is cruel to the food industry completely, moved as it must be by economic . . . considerations."<sup>10</sup>

David J. Wolfson is an attorney in New York City, and the author of *Beyond the Law*, an in-depth discussion of how the laws enacted to protect farm animals from cruelty and abuse have been weakened. He writes,

"The bizarre result of this trend is that farm animals have been placed in a legal time machine and transported to a time prior to the enactment of anti-cruelty statutes. . . . The delegation of power to the farming industry is breathtaking. It's difficult to imagine another non-governmental group possessing such influence over a criminal legal definition; for example, chemical corporations determining that they did not pollute (and, consequently, violate criminal law) so long as they released pollutants in amounts 'accepted,' or vested as 'customary,' by the chemical industry."<sup>6</sup>

What we are seeing are two simultaneous trends. On the one hand, ever more people are becoming increasingly appalled by factory farm methods and outraged that such methods should be allowed to continue. And on the other, the industries that profit from the exploitation of livestock are managing to obtain legislation exempting their practices from any laws that restrict cruelty to animals.

It is frightening to see the increasing divergence between the will of the people and the laws of an increasing number of states. Fortunately, there is another direction that we might follow, and we in the United States have a model for how we might begin, just across the Atlantic Ocean.

## Hope in Europe

As 18 states in the United States were passing laws during the 1990s exempting farm animals from the statutes that prevent cruelty to animals, many European nations were doing just the opposite—passing legislation banning inhumane farming practices.<sup>7</sup>

It began in 1987, when Sweden passed an animal protection law granting all farm animals the right to a favorable environment where their natural behavior is safeguarded, virtually banning all factory farming.<sup>8</sup>

The European Parliament eventually followed suit, passing a recommendation to ban veal crates, phase out chicken cages, discontinue con-

finement of sows, and ban routine tail-docking and castration of pigs. By 1999, nations throughout the European community, including Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Ireland, Finland, Belgium, and the Netherlands, had enacted almost complete bans on veal crates.<sup>9</sup>

As well, in 1999, agriculture ministers from the European Union agreed to end all caged egg production in Europe by 2012, replacing it completely with free-range farming.<sup>10</sup> In 2000, scientists from the United Kingdom called for an end to *all* factory farming in Europe as the only sure way to halt Mad Cow disease.<sup>11</sup> And in 2001, the European Union proposed new animal welfare rules for pigs.<sup>12</sup>

Attorney David Wolfson commented, "The contrast is stark: the United States alters the law to allow cruel farming practices while Western European countries are banning cruel farming practices."<sup>13</sup>

Seeing such a dramatic contrast, I am reminded of the words of one of our world's great moral leaders, Mahatma Gandhi, who said, "The greatness of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

Fortunately, there are voices within the U.S. meat industry who understand the wisdom of the direction the Europeans are taking. Rather than resisting the public's growing awareness, they say, it would be good business to take animal protection issues seriously.

In 1999, the journal *Feedstuffs* carried a remarkably insightful piece titled, "Agribusiness Wise to Consider Animal Welfare," which stated,

"The United States has lagged far behind other civilized countries in regard to farm animal welfare. Ironically, as other countries have passed laws to outlaw intensive confinement systems such as veal crates, battery cages, and sow gestation crates, many states in the United States have actually moved in the opposite direction, amending their anti-cruelty laws to exclude agricultural practices. When Americans learn about the disparity between farm animal protection laws in the United States compared with other countries, they are embarrassed and outraged. Public opinion polls have found more than 90 percent of U.S. citizens oppose intensive confinement systems commonly used in the United States, and this puts animal agriculture in a difficult position. It markets to a consuming public which is strongly opposed to practices it employs."<sup>14</sup>

Strongly opposed, yes, and getting stronger by the day.



## Now What?

As I've learned what's done to farm animals in modern meat production, there have been times that I've not known how to live with the pain I felt. It can be overwhelming to think of each of these billions of creatures as individual beings with personalities and feelings, yet forced to endure such deprivation. I've wondered how I could stay in touch with the pain in a positive way, how I could avoid succumbing to abhorrence and outrage at what is being done to these creatures. I've sought to find a way to be around people in this society, and keep my heart open to all of us, without turning my back on the animals.

What I've learned is this: My complaint is not with the people who eat animal products. My problem is with the industry that treats the animals, each of them a sentient being, with no more respect than if they were garbage.

I don't want to demonize the farmers, many of whom went into the business out of a desire to work with nature and be close to the land, and don't like what's going on any more than you or me. But something has happened to the way animals are treated in modern meat production that is a disgrace to the human spirit, and a violation of the ancient human-animal bond.

My problem is not with people who are bombarded by misinformation and are doing what they have come to believe is best for themselves and their children. My complaint is not even with those who suspect what's being done to the animals and sometimes look away, unable to bear the pain. My criticism is with the industries that on the one hand tell the public that they treat farm animals like members of their own families, and on the other fight to get legislation passed exempting farm animals from any protection from cruel treatment.

The process of rearing farm animals in the United States has changed dramatically from the family farms of yesteryear. This reality, coupled with the exemption of farm animals from laws that forbid cruelty to animals, has produced a heartbreaking situation. More animals are being subjected to more torturous conditions in the United States today than has ever occurred anywhere in world history.

This is painful. It can be shattering to see that in our ignorance we have, perhaps for many years, unknowingly eaten the products of such a system. But this pain may serve a healing purpose. It may be the breaking of the shell that encloses our understanding. It may enable us to hear the call of our own humanity. It may be what we need to bring our lives and our society out of collusion and into compassion.

Seeing what we as a society do to animals so that we can mass produce their flesh has made me, at times, ashamed of my species. But when I see the results of polls that say more than 90 percent of Americans deplore such treatment of animals, I am filled again with hope. The more of us who know, the sooner we can put a stop to this crime against the animals, against nature, and against our own humanity.

It takes courage to lift the veil, and to see what animals in today's factory farms must endure. In the face of such tragedy, it's not easy to keep our eyes and our hearts open. In a culture where there is so much indifference and denial, we may fear that our pain at what is being done to animals is a failure on our part, evidence that we can't cope, a signal that we are the ones with the problem. But the feelings of grief and outrage and helplessness that arise when we see what is being done to today's animals are not signs of weakness. They are signs that our hearts are thawing from our previous collective apathy, and that feeling is returning where there has been numbness. Our distress at what is being done is real, and it is healthy. It speaks of our commitment to stopping this cruelty. It's a measure of our humanity.

The pain we feel at what is being done to our fellow creatures is not ours alone. It arises from our kinship with life. We hurt because we are not separate from the animals, nor from the people who are the perpetrators of such suffering. We hurt because these animals are our fellow mortals, part of the greater Earth community, and because the people administering such cruelty are our fellow human beings. We hurt because we are all connected, because we all are part of the great web of life.

In the heart of our grief we can find our connection to each other, and our ability to act. Our strength lies in our kinship with life. Our power lies in our deepest human responses. Our power does not lie in looking the other way.

Through history there have always been people who have chosen to be vegetarians because they did not feel it was right to kill animals for food when it was not necessary, when there was other nourishing food available. People like Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, and countless others have been ethical vegetarians for just such reasons. But today, because of the way animals are raised for market, the question of whether or not it's ethical to eat meat has a whole new meaning and a whole new urgency. Never before have animals been treated like this. Never before has such deep, unrelenting, and systematic cruelty been mass produced.

Never before have the choices of each individual been so important.

## A Letter

The industries that are profiting from the misery of billions of pigs, cows, chickens, and other farm animals every year don't want PETA to campaign against McDonald's cruelty and force the giant corporation to change. They don't want the Humane Farming Association to expose the horrendous abuses in IBP's slaughterhouses, opening the world's largest meat packer to possible criminal and civil charges. They don't want people like the pig farmer to wake up to what they are doing.

But most of all, they don't want you to stop buying their products.

Among the many letters I have received since I wrote *Diet for a New America*, there is one that I would like to share with you. I received it in the mid-1990s, from a man in San Francisco, California. It represents, for me at least, a statement of hope for us all.

Dear Mr. Robbins,

Your book *Diet for a New America* has had quite an influence on my family. About two years ago, I would have liked to have killed you for it. Let me explain.

I am an extremely successful man. I am used to getting my way. When my daughter, Julie, was a teenager, she announced that she wanted to become a vegetarian. She had read your book. I thought this was ridiculous, and insisted that she stop this nonsense. When she did

not obey, I became angry. "I am your father," I told her, "and I know better than you."

"I am your daughter," she replied, "and it's my life."

We had many fights over this. We weren't getting along very well, and there were tensions between us, but they seemed always to come to a head over the never-ending vegetarian debates. It drove me crazy. As far as I saw it, she was being disrespectful and willful, and just wanted to get her way. She said the same about me.

At first, my wife and I forced her to eat meat, but she made such a stink about it that meal times were completely ruined. So eventually, resenting it, we caved in and allowed her to eat her vegetarian meals. But I let her know how I felt about it. It's okay to be an idealist, I told her, but you've got to keep your feet on the ground. It's okay to be a lawyer, she told me, but you've got to keep your heart open. It was terribly aggravating.

For my birthday, one year, she made me breakfast in bed. But there was no bacon, no sausage, not even any eggs. It just turned into another bad situation.

I reminded her that it was my birthday, not hers. She set about telling me about how the pigs and chickens were treated, quoting chapter and verse from your book. This was not what I wanted to hear, first thing in the morning, on my birthday.

After she graduated from high school, Julie moved out. I was glad, actually, because I was sick and tired of it. Every meal it was an issue. I wanted her to eat meat, and she wouldn't. She wanted me to stop eating meat, and I wouldn't. There was no peace. But after she left, I missed her. Not the arguments, I didn't miss them, but I missed her a lot more than I thought I would.

Several years later, Julie found herself a husband, and a short while after that she became pregnant. When our grandchild was born, I was on top of the world. But of course it didn't last. Sure enough, Julie wanted to raise her son, our grandson, as a vegetarian. This time, I put my foot down. "You can ruin your own life if you want to," I told her, "but you cannot ruin the health of this innocent boy." As far as I was concerned, what she was doing was child abuse. I even considered calling the Department of Children's Services. I believed they would either force her to

feed our grandson properly, or remove him from her clutches. It was only because my wife prevented me that I didn't take that step.

While I had found I could (barely) tolerate Julie being a vegetarian, I simply could not accept her doing this to our grandson. Eventually, it got so bad that she stopped seeing me entirely. Not only had this stupid vegetarian obsession of hers cost me my relationship with my daughter, it had also cost me my relationship with my grandson, because now she wouldn't bring him by, nor would she let me visit. I was completely cut off.

I thought I should at least try to keep the door open, though, so through my wife (Julie wouldn't even speak to me by then) I asked her what she wanted for her next birthday. She said what she most wanted was for me to read your book, *Diet for a New America*. I told her this would be impossible, because it would be too time consuming. She told me that if I would actually read it, for every hour it took me, she would let me see my grandson for an equal number of hours. She's a smart one. She knows where my soft spots are.

So, Mr. Robbins, I read your book. I read the whole thing, every word. What impacted me the most was your description of how animals are raised nowadays. I had no idea it was so severe. It's guttally, and I totally agree with you that it must not be allowed to continue. I know cruelty when I see it, and this is extreme.

I'm sure you've heard this all before, but no book I have ever read has impacted me in this manner. I was overwhelmed.

I called her, when I was done reading. "I told you not to call me," she said as soon as she knew it was me. "Yes," I said, "but I've read the book, and I want you to come over for dinner and bring the boy."

Mr. Robbins, I am a proud man, and what I said next did not come easily to me. But I knew what I must do, and so I did it. "Dearest Julie," I said, "please forgive me. There won't be a fight if you come over. I have made a terrible mistake, and I understand that, now. If you come, there will be no meat served, to anyone."

There was silence on the other end of the phone. I learned later that she was crying, but I didn't know it at the time. I only knew there was something else I had to say. "And there won't be any meat served ever again in this house," I told her, "that comes from factory farms."

"Are you joking?" she asked in disbelief.

"I'm not joking," I said. "I mean it."

"We're coming," she said.

And I did mean it. There has been no meat served here since then. We simply don't buy it. Julie is teaching us how to eat vegetable burgers, tofu, and a variety of other things I used to mock. I don't mind a bit. I look upon it as a kind of adventure.

Since then, they have come over for many happy dinners, and many other happy times, too. Mr. Robbins, can you understand what this means to me? I've got my daughter back, and my grandson, too. My daughter is a wonderful human being. And our grandson has not yet had a single cold or ear infection or any of the other ailments children often have. She says it's because he eats so well. I say it's because he's got the best mother in the world.

What's being done to these animals is wrong, terribly and horribly wrong. You are right. Animals should never be treated like that. Never. Never. Never. Never.

I pledge to you what I have pledged to Julie. I will never again let a bite of flesh cross my lips that comes from an animal that has been treated like that.

Now, when Julie says that animals are her friends, and she doesn't eat her friends, I don't argue, as I used to. I just smile, happy to know that I am no longer at odds with such a special person. And glad that I can look my grandson in the eye, and know I am helping to make the world a better place for him.

Yours with great respect,  
(Name withheld by request)

## The Journey

The lawyer who wrote the letter you have just read, and the pig farmer who opened up to his true feelings and changed his life, have something in common. They have each found a way to bring their lives into accord with their compassion.

We need people like that, people who have heard the call of their humanity and responded, people who stand for the integrity and kinship of life. They remind us that in both our suffering and our joy, we are connected to one another, and to all others who live.

Some say there's no need to extend our compassion to animals, because it says in the Bible that we are given dominion over them. But what does *dominion* really mean? Let's say you have two sons, and you go out for the evening, and as you do, you say to the elder one, "While I'm gone, you're in charge," and you say to the younger one, "While I'm gone, you've got to do what your older brother says." You are giving the older boy dominion over the younger one for the time you're gone, are you not?

But how would you feel if you came home later that night to find that the older boy had subjected the younger one to relentless cruelty?

*Dominion* means stewardship and respect. It means taking care of other beings, not abusing them.

In our time, there is an awakening sense of compassion toward animals. We can run from it. We can deny it. We can mock those who stand for it. But when we choose to eat with conscience, I truly believe that our world becomes a kinder and safer place for us all.

My biggest complaint, honestly, with the thousands of diet books that direct you toward animal products is not that they may increase your likelihood of heart disease, cancer, and other diseases, though we now know this to be true. My larger difficulty with them is that they never even mention the plight of the animals whose flesh they advise you to eat. They evidently consider it irrelevant that the meat they tout likely comes from an animal whose life has been one long sustained cry of agony.

I do not believe that anyone's true health can be sustained by eating products produced through systems that depend on the relentless and systematic suffering of billions of our fellow creatures.

We are bigger than that. We are not just physical beings with a need for so many grams of iron a day. I believe we are also spiritual beings, with a need for respect and compassion, with a need to make our caring visible, with a need to love and to honor life.

There are forces at work in our culture that tell us we are separate from life. But there are forces at work in our hearts that are helping us to awaken, and take our place on this Earth in harmony with the other beings who draw breath from the same source as we do.

We are not here to abuse and exploit other creatures. We are here to live and help live.

Every meal is part of the journey.