Chiefly Sentimental

Usually when someone asks me why I am a vegetarian, I don’t really tell them. I don’t admit that when I began I was an idealistic teenager intent on making a point, nor do I explain that the weird new foods I discovered more than compensated for the sad little carcasses I gave up, nor do I declare that my research has convinced me that a full understanding of the political and social repercussions of the global meat industry would drive every humane person into the vegetarian’s camp. And I certainly don’t give what remains to me the most compelling reason for my eccentric abstinence, that I cannot eat my fellow creatures without feeling I am violating a tie of kinship. Instead of explaining all of this, I usually just shrug apologetically and say that I am sentimental about animals. This explanation satisfies most people, as it is not self-righteous or confrontational. It characterizes me as a harmless eccentric and saves both me and the questioner the trouble of justifying our different dietary choices. But sometimes someone who really seems interested asks me why, and then I tell them.

First I explain about Peter Singer’s book *Animal Liberation,* which I read when I was fifteen. The moral arguments it presented were compelling, but the horror I felt at the descriptions of the miserable animals caged in factory farms is probably what really made me say, with a shudder, “No turkey for me, Mom.” (It was Thanksgiving when I finished the book.) And it was probably my mother’s indignant insistence that I would darn well eat what everyone else was eating that cemented my determination. I became as adamant as Antigone before Creon. I was defying convention for the sake of a moral principle, and it was exhilarating. With the zeal of a new convert, I expounded on the horrors of the carnivorous habit to my parents, my sisters, my high school rhetoric class—to anyone who would listen. For about a week. I quickly learned that I had no skill at persuasion and was only making myself ridiculous and obnoxious, so I ceased proselytizing. But personally I renounced the carnivorous diet forever.

Of course, I had to learn to cook for myself. My family was willing to humor my eccentricity to a point, but they had no interest in tasting my tofu burgers, tahini sandwiches, alfalfa sprout omelets or chili sans carne. I made some wonderful discoveries that took me far beyond the Jello fruit salad and grilled-Velveta-cheese sandwiches of my tame, suburban childhood. I experimented with vegetarian curries from India, tempeh stir-fry concoctions from Thailand, ratatouille from France, and a spicy lentil stew from Spain. Not all of these experiments were successes, but I was intrigued by the exotic spices and bizarre flavor combinations (peanut -garlic soup?) I explored cookbooks with names like “The Vegetarian Epicure,” “Recipes for a Small Planet,” and “The Peaceable Kingdom Cookbook.” These cookbooks fascinated me, and their prefaces were often filled with new arguments for vegetarianism that Peter Singer had not developed.

I moved from cookbooks to political treatises. I talked to people in health food stores, at the farmers’ market, at the food co-op, and I began to realize that I was part of a political movement, not just a food fad. As I learned about the political and social implications of the global meat industry, I became horrified anew and entered another zealot phase. This time it was my Alternatives in Agriculture class that got an impassioned lecture. I quoted Frances Moore Lappe’s book *Food First*, demonstrating with her statistics how livestock animals consume more protein than they produce, thereby contributing to world hunger. I reported how the land-use patterns in most Third World countries reserve the richest farm land for fattening livestock for export, while the largest and poorest segment of the population is herded onto the most marginal farm land where their struggle to feed their families impoverishes the soil still further. I explained how this pattern of land use perpetuates world hunger, reinforces political oppression, and accelerates environmental destruction. The injustice and cruelty of the whole system, both in human and animal terms, filled me with outrage, yet the enormity of the problem filled me with despair. After a brief period of political activism, I once again fell silent and abandoned the good fight.

Yet in the ten years since I first read Peter Singer’s book, I have never considered resuming the carnivorous diet. My adolescent yen to defy the conventions of my parents has waned, my zeal to drag other converts to the vegetarian cause has cooled, my determination to change the world has weakened, yet the one inexorable fact that keeps me from eating animals remains: it would feel like cannibalism. I don’t know why the connection didn’t occur to me when I was a little girl reading about Dr. Doolittle (who was a vegetarian), or about Mowgli’s benevolent and wise animal protectors, who taught him the animals’ law of the jungle: “We be of one blood, ye and I.” The concept is extremely difficult to explain to someone who has not seen animals in this light, but once you have felt this spiritual kinship with all forms of sentient life, it is impossible to see in a Thanksgiving turkey anything but the corpse of a murdered creature.

King Esarhaddon in Tolstoy’s fable could not explain his vision either, but when he saw the mystic unity between himself and the foreign king who had declared himself to be Esarhaddon’s enemy, he had to renounce warfare, kingship, and all the trappings of his former power to wander the world, trying to share his one great insight. It is hard to try to live by an eccentric spiritual view without seeming to be a dangerous lunatic. So I just shrug apologetically and say that I’m sentimental about animals.

Note: This student was willing to have her essay used for class discussion but only if her real name weren’t used. For convenience, we’ll call her Grace. She wrote this originally for a class in advanced composition taught by another professor. The chief goal of the assignment was to organize an essay into clear segments that worked together.

Questions for Discussion:

1. This was written for a class, and thus shaped for an English professor. How does the writer tailor her essay for that audience? (consider word choice, for instance, and the literary references.)
2. If it were written for “the real world,” what audience would it work best for? Note: I later learned that this essay helped the student get a job working for a non-profit organization of Quakers who worked to influence legislators on social justice issues. What in this might have appealed to that group?
3. Considering that this *was* written with a concern for its structure, what seems to be its principle of organization? What is the focus of each paragraph? Where is the overall structure forecast? How does the introduction work with the conclusion?
4. Ethos is crucial in this kind of writing. How does the writer establish her credibility? What value system does she exhibit?
5. There is also a logos element. Where are facts and reasoning used?
6. This is a narrative but also an evaluation of a practice (not eating meat). What kind of criteria are considered (the choices being pragmatics, aesthetics, and ethics)?
7. Summarize her ideas into a thesis with reasons (the because clauses).