

Rabbit Food?

Why I'm choosing to be a "Pesca-Ova-Flexitarian"

By Mike & Danae Yankoski
November 13th, 2006
www.yankoski.com

Recently I met two friends for lunch at a trendy natural food restaurant in Santa Barbara. As the waitress brought out our food, one of my friends laughed out loud at the meal set before me.

“Tofu and wheat bread” He asked, sarcastically. “Why in the world are you eating *that*? You're not becoming a freaking vegetarian are you?”

The next few moments were filled with several rounds of thesis-and-rebuttal type conversation spiced with plenty of defensive sarcasm on both sides. The topic ended with him saying “Say all you want, there's no way I'm ever going to stop eating beef.” We left the conversation there and lunch carried on with each person enjoying his respective entree.

That 30 second debate was the genesis of this article. Many other people have asked about (or made fun of) the way my wife Danae and I are choosing to eat. During the first few years of our marriage we're making certain lifestyle choices: what our careers are going to be, where we live, what we buy, what we eat etc. If I learned nothing else at Westmont it was that decisions can be informed, if you're willing to take the time. Decisions that Danae and I are making together, especially the really important ones, deserve enough of our time so as to be informed and educated. Insofar as these decisions relate to the strength of our relationship, our relationship with others, our health, and potentially even our walk with Christ the more deserving they are of research and reflection. As you read this article, know that my purpose isn't so much to convince you that I'm right or that you should live the way Danae and I are choosing to, but rather that we wanted to be able to articulate the decisions we have made.

What's normal is comfortable; what's abnormal uncomfortable. Thus we make a tiny but substantial leap and “normal” *is* “good” and “abnormal” *is* “bad”. Without intending to, we essentially cut ourselves off from many potentially good things in life because they're “uncomfortable” or “weird”. Whether we admit it or not unless we actually spend time intentionally thinking about new ideas, our reaction to something different than what we call “normal” comes more from base emotional response than a combination of all our faculties (logic, emotion, research, experience etc.). God has given us mental abilities, the ability to read, research, contemplate, consider etc. We do well to “test ourselves” as the Apostle Paul exhorts us. For the next few pages you're welcome to journey with me through the last few months of thought, research, and revelation. In researching this I was trying to discover sufficient information to help me decide whether or not to move toward a vegetarian lifestyle.

There are many aspects I tried to consider within this decision, each of which will be examined in the subsequent sections. Keep in mind, though, that this is a 9 pg. article where I've tried to summarize my research and the decisions it has led me to. That being said, there's lots of additional sources that I'd point you to, so please check out the “Further Reading” section at the end if you're still curious!

To summarize it all, though, through researching and writing this article I've made the decision to become a “Pesca-Ova-Flexitarian.”

What in the world is a “Pesca-ova-Flexitarian”?

“Flexitarian” is a newer term which has been coined to describe the less dietarily rigid populace. By assuming that title I'm basically saying that if you invite me over to your house for dinner and have spent all day preparing a delicious pot roast dinner I won't be horribly offended and make you feel like an immoral jerk. That doesn't mean I'll eat the pot-roast, but rather that with every bit of humility I'll excuse myself from the meat and enjoy whatever else the dinner might include. To me, Flexitarian implies that when the decision *is* mine to make, like when I'm choosing how to spend my money on the food I will eat for the next two weeks, I will try to choose an organic, locally grown, vegetarian selection of foods.

The 'Pesca-Ova' part of that term means I'm OK eating fish and eggs. I rarely buy fish not only because it's pricey but also because some of the later arguments for why I've given up eating red meat also hold for fish. Even so, my freezer is full of halibut and salmon provided by my father-in-law's recent trip to Alaska. Future donations will gladly be accepted! When I'm backpacking and haven't forgotten to bring my fly rod or fishing license, fresh trout is a special treat. And sushi is an all-time favorite. I'm fine eating fresh caught (aka not farmed) fish and preparing it responsibly (no deep-frying).

Now regarding eggs. I didn't realize this, but one egg contains 72% of the daily recommended allowance of cholesterol, the majority of which is contained within the egg yolk. My grandfather has eaten a three egg sandwich for breakfast nearly every morning of his life and is currently 89 years old, so maybe the Yankoski genes I've inherited include a nifty cholesterol shirking ability, but I'm not going to take the chance that it's recessive and has bypassed me. When I buy eggs (organically fed and ranch raised) or get them from the chickens our neighbors keep in their back yard, I remove the yolk before cooking. This leaves the egg white which is predominantly protein, and works perfectly well for scrambled eggs and even omelette's.

Who do we get our information from?

There are lots of information sources today. Some are good, and some not so good. Understanding the sources from which we gather our information is an important first step in a research project. I want to outline the sources from which I've gotten most of the information contained in this article, as well as point out some interesting facts about where the majority of dietary information in America comes from.

There are two primary books that I will be quoting from during the remainder of this article. The first is Becoming Vegetarian: The complete guide to adopting a healthy vegetarian diet. Written by Vesanto Melina, M.Sc., R.D. And Brenda Davis, R.D. Copyright 2003. Published by John Wiley & Sons, Canada. I spent a brief period of time looking into the company. It was founded in 1807 and is currently traded as a publicly held company on the NYSE. In their own words, "Wiley is a global publisher of print and electronic products, specializing in scientific, technical, and medical books and journals; professional and consumer books and subscription services; and textbooks and other educational materials for undergraduate and graduate students as well as lifelong learners."¹ Though Wiley may have large corporate holdings in natural foods companies, it appears to be a broad publishing house that wouldn't necessarily stand to profit through a broadening adoption of vegetarian lifestyle. Vesanto Melina has written several books on vegetarianism and makes a career of traveling and speaking about the vegetarian lifestyle as well as offering personal dietary consultation services.² Brenda Davis has a similar focus in the writing / speaking / consulting world as it relates to the vegetarian / vegan lifestyle.³ Neither of them appear to be intimately involved with any natural food production companies attempting to boost their profits.

The second is Diet for a New America: How your food choices affect your health, happiness and the future of life on earth. Written by John Robbins. Copyright 1987. Published by HJ Cramer Inc., Tiburon, California. Interestingly enough, John is the son of the man who created Baskin Robins Ice Cream. It is, of course, interesting that John is considered one of the foremost authorities on the health risks associated with consuming large amounts of animal products and essentially chose to forgo the opportunity offered him at Baskin Robins to pursue a life writing and speaking about sustainable, healthy lifestyles.⁴

I also spent a fair amount of time on-line looking at various websites, most notably the United States Department of Agriculture. Here are some interesting facts regarding the administration. The USDA was created in 1862 by Abraham Lincoln. The "Food Pyramid" was created by the USDA in 1965 to help disseminate dietary information to the American public. A description of the USDA's purpose can be found on the agency's website and states that it "remains committed to helping America's farmers and ranchers"⁵. To put it mildly, the USDA seems an interesting place to get nutritional information considering that it exists for the economic interests of America's farmers and ranchers. It never had a singular purpose of providing accurate nutritional information to the public.

It's foolish to assume that simple politics doesn't play into the picture here. Consider this: "When the American Heart Association publicly announced its massively documented position condemning saturated fat and cholesterol as agents of heart disease, the dairy industry countered by threatening them with multi-million dollar lawsuits, unless they stopped giving 'misleading' advice to the public."⁶ Because the nutritionally minded public doesn't have nearly the resources to pay lobbyists to exert pressure on the government officials compared to large meat / poultry / dairy businesses, the health motivated voice is often drowned under the money motivated voice. I'm not saying that we need to disregard all that the USDA is and does. But, Marion Nestle says it well: "The food industry [has] often been involved in dietary guidance, and the USDA 'is in the position of being responsible to the agriculture business. That is their job. Nutrition isn't their job.'"⁷

I attended public school in Colorado while growing up, and I distinctly remember seeing the “food pyramid” posters in my lunchroom and on the back of my milk cartons. The four food groups are well imprinted in my memory: 1) fruits & vegetables 2) grains 3) dairy 4) meat. Considering that I got this information in my public school, I find it quite interesting that “the concept of the 'basic four' food groups was promoted by the national Egg Board, the National Dairy Council, and the National Livestock and Meat Board.”⁸ Basically it seems as though my concept of dietary wellness was conveniently given to me by the fine businessmen who were going to sell me 50% of the food within that nutritional “pyramid”, regardless of whether or not my body actually needed those “food groups.”

I just wanted to set the foundation for where the following information is coming from, and shed some light on where most of us have gotten our nutritional information up to this point. Pretty interesting considering what I began to discover next...

Health Argument

Probably the most convincing argument I found regarding vegetarianism centers on health. Death is inevitable, obviously. But I'm not dead yet, and hope to fully savor every moment of this unequivocal gift called existence. Living life to the full (in my mind) will include going hiking with my grandkids (Lord willing) even when I'm 80. It means being able to ride my bike with Danae some early weekend morning just after we turn 60 and not be so exhausted that I can't carry on a conversation with her at the Coffee shop we've ridden to. It means being able to see my toes without having to lean forward and establish line of sight over my belly. Beyond simply maintaining good health there's a lot of evidence that what we eat significantly impacts how long we actually live. “Death rates from chronic diseases in vegetarians are about half that of the general population.”⁹

I know this is way over simplified, but health is sort of like brushing your teeth, just on a much longer scale. If you don't brush your teeth for a good while but then use some Scope right before your dentist's appointment, your dentist's bill is probably going to be a bit high. It would have been easier and a whole lot less painful if you'd simply spent the insignificant time dental-flossing and brushing twice a day.

Heart Disease:

Here's the parallel: if I spent the next 30 years of my life eating high fat high cholesterol foods and exercised rarely the chances will be high that I'll be overweight and will probably have a heart attack, right? So, why not make the decision now to change my diet a little bit, incorporate regular exercise, and have a really good chance of living a healthier and longer life?

Heart disease is a wretched thing. We're talking about heart attacks, high blood pressure, strokes and the like. These conditions come from an overstressed cardiovascular system. Basically this means that there's too much junk lining the walls of your arteries for the blood to easily flow through. Think of your shower drain when you've not cleaned out the hair and soap scum for a good while. The water takes a long time to drain, right? This means your heart works harder, your blood pressure is higher, there's an increased risk of a stroke, aneurysm, *and* a really good chance that the blood vessels in your heart may completely stop allowing blood to pass through to your heart thus causing your heart muscle itself to die. All in all, not a good thing. The statistics are quite shocking. “Heart disease is the #1 killer in North America, accounting for 40% of all deaths.”¹⁰

But what does that have to do with vegetarianism? Quite a bit when you consider that cholesterol is found only in animal based foods (meat, eggs, dairy products etc...). Here's the simplest way I can state it: eating animal based foods means a diet much higher in saturated fats and cholesterol which undoubtedly increases the risk of death by heart disease.

Cancer

Cancer is hellish. My grandmother passed away from lung cancer in 1997. I remember hearing that she'd lost close to 50 pounds (she couldn't have weighed more than 130 pounds at her healthiest) as her body slowly ate itself. Another close friend of mine died in 2003 as his throat cancer slowly grew from his windpipe into his arteries and cut off the flow of blood to his brain. He weighed only about 70 pounds when I last visited him in the hospital about a month before he passed away. His entire esophagus had been removed and he'd been fed

from IV tubes for months. If you've ever seen anyone with cancer you know you don't want to have it. Ever.

Consider this: "Cancer is the #2 killer in the developed world. ½ the male population and 1/3 the female population will develop some form of cancer during their lifetime".¹¹ So chances are good that if you don't die from heart disease you're going to die from cancer. The American Cancer Society has published research which shows that "75% of cancer is due to lifestyle and environment." The decisions we make in our lifestyle and environment significantly impact our odds of getting cancer.

Cancer isn't a "natural" thing that everyone gets in old age. What's odd is that it's become so prevalent that most of us expect it. Looking at the cancer rates between vegetarians and non-vegetarians there's too much evidence to deny a cause-effect relationship. "In the largest U.S. Study conducted to date, non-vegetarians have an 88% higher risk of colon cancer".¹² Beyond that, "The World Cancer Research Fund and the American Institute of Cancer Research estimate that 20% of all cancers could be avoided if people increased their vegetable & fruit intake to at least 5 servings a day with no other dietary changes."¹³ That means that even without other changes in lifestyle, more vegetables and fruit in our diet would decrease the occurrence of cancer by 20% in the general public.

Let me lay this out simply: a) there is a high cancer rate in people who eat animal based products. b) there is a low cancer rate in people who don't eat animal products. c) both the World Cancer Research Fund and the American Institute of Cancer Research saying that eating more fruits and vegetables *alone* will reduce the occurrence of cancer. I'm not a logician by trade, but this seems pretty clear: a diet high in fruits and vegetables and low in animal products means a significantly reduced chance of having and / or dying of cancer.

Dr. Mark Hegstead summarizes it well when he says "I think it is clear that the American diet is indicted as a cause of coronary heart disease. And it is pertinent, I think, to point out the same diet is now found guilty in terms of many forms of cancer: breast cancer, colon cancer, and others."¹⁴ Obviously there are many other carcinogens in the world (smoking, excessive sunlight, etc.) but there are many convincing indicators that diet does play a significant role in helping to cause some of the major societal killers.

The same logic that makes me prefer brushing my teeth every day to adding Fixodent to my weekly shopping list makes me want to eat healthier now and not die at 60 from a something related to a failing cardiovascular system or my body deciding it needs to grow a few malignant tumors.

Strength / Endurance

Before doing the research that lead to the subsequent section called "Will I get enough of what I need if I'm vegetarian?" I was concerned that a vegetarian diet wouldn't supply me with the nutrients that my body required for good health. In some way I'm sure this is connected to misinformation I've been fed in the past by the meat and dairy industries, but I don't need to go into that now.

My fears about the being healthy while eating a vegetarian diet simply weren't reasonable. I'd heard rumors and read a few sports articles about impressive athletes who were vegetarians. As I looked into it further, the number of world class athletes who are vegetarians or vegans is far too high for the diet to be nutritionally faulty.

This research project summarizes what a vegetarian diet does for endurance. "A Danish team of researchers tested a group of men on a variety of diets, using a stationary bicycle to measure their strength and endurance. The men were fed a mixed diet of meat and vegetables for a period of time, and then tested on the bicycle. The average time they could pedal before muscle failure was 114 minutes. The same men at a later date were fed a diet high in meat, milk, and eggs for a similar period and then re-tested on the bicycles. On the high meat diet, their pedaling time before muscle failure dropped dramatically-to an average of only 57 minutes. Later, these same men were switched to a strictly vegetarian diet, composed of grains, vegetables and fruits, and then tested on the bicycles. The lack of animal products didn't seem to hurt their performance. They peddled an average of 167 minutes."¹⁵

That's Just Gross

Profit is the goal of capitalism. Simple economics teaches that increased production decreases cost thereby increasing profit. In the meat / dairy industries this has led to some interesting practices that are quite disgusting. I've spent a lot of time in this article outlining the sound, well-researched, logical arguments that have convinced me to become a pesca-ova flexitarian. As if I needed just one more reason, I found the American Dairy industry. The largest of our nation's dairies use systematized methods to squeeze every bit of profit out of the milk their cows produce. They have to, to stay in business. Capitalism by nature encourages competition, and to survive, the dairies must employ any and every method to make their cows produce as much milk as possible at the lowest cost. Cows in large dairies are milked by machines not humans. The cows are often injected or fed hormones which increase milk production and then are milked more frequently than they normally would have been, say on the family farm in the early 1900s. Often the cow's udder is large and infected, literally pussing with infected blisters directly into the milking machines. Got puss? Yum. But don't worry, the milk today is pasteurized and homogenized to ensure that any bacteria and virus are "dead" before you drink it. So, if you're thirsty, why not go to your refrigerator and pour yourself a nice tall glass of ice cold pasteurized, homogenized, (dead) cow puss.

Inefficiency Argument

Production of meat in America consumes vast amounts of natural resources. The top three are corn, soybeans and water. The amount of resources consumed in the production of beef alone is at the best uncomfortable and at worst damning, especially considering that nearly 29,128 kids will die in the world today (that's one kid every 3 ½ seconds by the way) primarily of malnutrition or unclean water.^{15.5}

How much grain is consumed by the cattle within our country alone? "The livestock population of the United States today consumes enough grain and soybeans to feed over five times the entire human population of the country."¹⁶ The worldwide situation is even more dramatic. "The world's cattle alone, not to mention pigs and chickens, consume a quantity of food equal to the caloric needs of 8.7 billion people."¹⁷ According to the US Census Bureau, the world's population at the time I'm writing this is approximately 6.55 billion¹⁸. That means that the cows, chicken and pigs worldwide consume enough grain to feed the current world population plus an additional 2.3 billion people, a number that the world population won't hit until approximately 2040.

What is so troubling about this fact is the dramatic inefficiencies that are suffered when livestock are fed such large quantities of grain. "By cycling our grain through livestock, we not only waste 90 percent of its protein, but also 96 percent of its calories, 100 percent of its fiber, and 100 % of its carbohydrates."¹⁹ Significant percentages of the nutrients, vitamins and minerals that our bodies actually need are wasted because the animal products we consume simply don't contain these nutrients, even though the livestock eat grain that contains them. To put it simply, the majority of the essential nutrients that our bodies need ingested by livestock ends up in manure piles, landfills, or running into the oceans because of wide scale erosion that most factory farms cause.

Let's look at water for a moment. It takes 11,200 gallons of water to produce a pound of hamburger compared with 150 gallons of water to produce a pound of wheat²⁰. That's right. 11,200 gallons of water are used to grow the cow's grain, keep the cows cool during the hot summer sun, wash down the cow manure, clean the carcass as it is being butchered, etc, just to make one pound of hamburger.

The scenario is this: Land that could be used to grow grains and provide clean water which would help feed and hydrate the 10,646,000 kids that will die this year is instead being used to produce a grossly inefficient luxury item which we in the first world consider a "normal" component of our diet. Obviously my not buying a T-Bone steak for dinner tonight doesn't mean that the water and corn is Fed-Exed to a family in Somalia and now the 30 pound 12 year old girl won't die tonight. Nonetheless, I find it hard to say convincingly that I am at all concerned for the poor as Christ's Scriptures command us to be while eating a steak that pound for pound could have fed a family of 10 for a week straight. It's like driving a Hummer solo in the carpool lane or wearing a T-Shirt bought at Wal-Mart while at an Anti-Sweat Shop Rally. World-view consistency is important. Shifting my diet seems a good first step (albeit of many) in the right direction.

For just one of the many, many warnings against the rich and myopic of Scripture check out the Prophet Ezekiel's comments regarding the rich person's disregard for the poor. Remember, Sodom was the city God

utterly destroyed with fire and sulfur in Genesis 19.

“Behold, this was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy.” (Ezekiel 16:49)

Gluttony Argument

A few years ago I was in Palm Desert with a few friends for a weekend of relaxation during an intense semester at Westmont. While there, we spent an afternoon in an exclusive spa we had access to because of our friend's parents. The place was immaculate, and extravagantly luxurious. One of the options for the afternoon was a “Massage Shower”. “The best in the world” the gentleman at the front informed us. “Quite an experience. You should check it out.” So we did. After disrobing I walked outside onto a private patio that opened skyward to allow ample view of the deep purple sunset sky. The white tiles shone with polish, some 15 shower heads sticking out at various angles. Two large stainless steel handles extended from floor to shoulder height to brace myself against the deluge of water that was to ensue. For 10 minutes my entire body was pelted from every angle by the onslaught of water. The effect was initially wonderful, something like standing under a waterfall in the tropics. But after the second minute or so my skin began to sting from the pressure and I inhaled wrong and started choking a bit. I began thinking about how much water was being wasted when I noticed that water was beginning to pool at my feet despite the drain being 1ft in diameter. When I inquired, I discovered that nearly 500 gallons of water had been used in this “luxurious massage shower.”

500 gallons of clean water in a 10 minute shower. 50 gallons per minute. Wow.

Those ten minutes certainly peeled away the dust caked on my skin (plus a few healthy layers of skin... it could have been advertised as an exfoliant as well). My point is that a normal shower with soap, shampoo, and maybe 20 gallons of water would have left me as clean and refreshed as the 500 gallon shower, and probably would have left a 100 million more skin cells in place. If the end result is the same (ie: I'm clean), why take a route that literally wastes 480 gallons of clean drinking water? Simply because I can?

A Glutton is defined in Websters dictionary as: “A voracious eater; one who gluts himself in any way.”²¹

Will I get enough of what I need if I'm Vegetarian?

From all the research that I've done, it is absolutely possible to get everything vitamin, nutrient, and mineral that your body needs through an intelligent, well researched vegetarian diet. Moreover, it's not only possible to get “enough” but in fact more than your body needs. A “vegetarian” diet needs some definition, though., because if all you ate was carrots and celery, you would be eating a “vegetarian” diet, but certainly wouldn't be getting everything your body needs. I'm not trying to outline a complete vegetarian diet in this section. If you're interested in finding out more about such a diet I highly recommend that you pick up the *Becoming Vegetarian* book I've quoted from. Its research and dietary recommendations are far beyond the scope of this article, and offer great insights in creating an appropriate diet for your age, gender, special needs etc. What I want to do in this section is dispel some of the myths I myself used against vegetarianism prior to sufficient research.

PROTEIN

When I first began considering a vegetarian lifestyle, one of the biggest hurdles was concern about inadequate protein supply. I believed what I had heard since childhood: “eat your meat so you can get your protein.” The meat producers of America have done a wonderful job of propagandizing the American public into believing that meat is the best source of protein, and thus an integral component of a healthy diet. This simply isn't true.

Many vegetables, grains, legumes, nuts and seeds are actually quite high in protein, and thus can more than provide the protein necessary for healthy physiological functioning.

“1 cup of cooked soy beans contains 28g of protein. ¼ pound of hamburger contains 19g of protein.”²²

“It is difficult to obtain a mixed vegetable diet which will produce an appreciable loss of body protein without resorting to high levels of sugar, jams, and jellies, and other essentially protein-free foods.”²³

IRON

Many vegetarians report cravings for meat that have been traced to a lack of iron in their diet. Iron is particularly important for females who lose a significant amount of iron during their monthly menstrual cycle. It is commonly thought that meat provides one of the best sources of iron in the diet. Though meat is a source of iron it is by no means the best or only source. Spinach has 11.3mg of Iron / 100 calories, Sirloin steak has only 1.9mg of Iron / 100 calories.²⁴

CALCIUM

The irony of the mis-information promoted by the dairy industry is that though milk does have a large amount of calcium, the protein in milk inhibits the body's ability to absorb the calcium. It is important to note that calcium is only one of many factors that contribute to the strength of our bones. That being said, it is important, and a healthy vegetarian diet should include several intentional choices of calcium-rich foods. For comparisons sake, 1 cup of milk contains 290mg of calcium. 1 cup of cooked broccoli contains approximately 80 mg. of calcium, 1 cup of cooked kale contains 94-179mg, 1 cup of Chinese mustard greens contains 424mg. Thus, with a little bit of planning a vegetarian diet can provide ample amounts of calcium to any diet, and, more importantly, calcium that can most easily be absorbed by the body for use.

B Vitamins

B vitamins are commonly found in whole grains. "Grains are a treasure trove of B-vitamins, including thiamin, riboflavin, niacin, vitamin B6, panththenic acid, biotin, and folate."²⁵ The only B vitamin which is hard to get in a vegetarian diet is B12. This is easily corrected, though, by adding bee pollen or nutritional yeast to the diet (we add pollen to breakfast cereals and sprinkle nutritional yeast atop cooked vegetables and rice), or by purchasing B-vitamin fortified cereals and other products.

Certainly the human body requires many more nutrients, vitamins, and minerals than the four I have listed above. I chose these because most arguments against vegetarian diets are based on one of the above items. With a bit of research and some planning, a vegetarian diet will provide ample supplies of the nutrients needed to sustain a healthy, active lifestyle. Having been an ova-pesca flexitarian for nearly three months, I've maintained my body weight at a healthy 200 lbs. while increasing my strength and endurance.

Why Eat Organic?

One of the startling facts of today's eating habits is that the long-term effects of what we're digesting won't be fully understood for another 30-50 years. Only then will the chemicals ingested over long periods of time show their true colors. Then, unfortunately, the damage is done. We can look at potential indicators now, and have significant cause for concern. The flow of logic is simple: a) pesticides kill living organisms. b) pesticides are sprayed on crops to prevent crop destruction and maximize profits. c) humans ingest crops treated with pesticide sprays. There is substantial evidence from numerous medical studies showing startlingly high levels of pesticides in human beings. Ironically, "some pesticides were originally developed to kill human beings. Phosgene, used today to produce chemical herbicides and insecticides, was originally developed for use in chemical warfare, and was, in fact, the agent of almost all deaths due to poison gas in World War I."²⁶ Even minuscule concentrations of some pesticides are known to cause cancer. And we wonder why cancer is a top killer in the United States. I'm not saying that eating pesticide treated foods is the only cause of cancer; of course many factors are involved. But it is *a* cause. Considering that I enjoy being cancer free, it's a convincing enough reason for me to pay the additional \$.20 for organic vs. non-organic ingredients.

A similar argument follows concerning the meat industry and the chemicals or growth hormones used therein. Profit, as with any business, is the driving factor. (I'm not reflecting morally on this point here, I'm just stating the underlying motivation of capitalism. Business is driven by profit.) If I'm a rancher and a non-hormone treated steer produces 800 pounds of meat but by spending an additional few dollars per month for growth hormones I can make the cows produce 1200 pounds of meat, simple economics justifies the extra expense for the 50% increase in yield.

Though Danae and I don't feel ready quite yet, we are one day hoping to have children. Given that I want our unborn children to grow as healthy and vivaciously as possible, this statistic was particularly shocking to me. "In 1976 the EPA found significant concentrations of DDT and PCB's in over 99% of mother's milk from every part of the country."²⁷ So, not only do our decisions about what we eat impact our health, but also the health of

our, as of yet, unborn children. There's a bright side here, though. "The highest levels of contamination in the breast milk of the vegetarians was lower than the lowest level of contamination in non-vegetarian women."²⁸ By eating organic, pesticide free foods, we significantly decrease the chances that our children will receive concentrated doses of these known carcinogens. This is an investment in the health and welfare of my children I'm willing to make.

Moral Issue?

During my pre-vegetarian days, a fellow student at Westmont remarked that eating meat was undoubtedly a sin. I promptly protested this bogus philosophy by going over to the sandwich bar and adding two additional slices of turkey to my already four inch thick sandwich. A sin? Eating meat? Ridiculous.

I didn't agree with him about it being a sin to eat meat then, nor do I now. As a Christian I believe the 66 books which make up the Bible provide the moral backbone for human existence. There are concepts both stated and implicit within Scripture regarding how we ought to live. Nowhere in the bible does it say "don't eat meat." Though the 10 commandments don't include this little axiomatic statement the Bible does have a lot to say about what we eat. Leviticus is filled with statements about what can and cannot be eaten by the Israelites. However, the dietary laws' moral authority is negated by Peter's vision found in Acts 10:9-23. "Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial," Paul warns us in 1 Corinthians 6:10.

Biblical statements about diet aside, the general flavor of life desired by Christ in his disciples is clear. Christ's command that we "Love [our] neighbors as ourself" is non-negotiable, but let's be more frank: The attitude best summarized as "I can do what I damn well please" is unacceptable within the Christian life. Philippians chapter 2 encourages us to "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests but also to the interests of others." Paul also speaks to the concern for others in chapter 8 of his 1st letter to the Corinthians. "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." Paul's statements in 1st Corinthians are a natural extension of the attitude he encourages in Philippians 2: We're to be more concerned about others than we are about ourselves.

Though I do not think eating meat is a sin, I can't consistently say that I'm concerned about the welfare of the billions of poor around the world, many of whom are starving and malnourished, while eating meat products that are produced through grossly inefficient methods. Becoming a Pesca-Ova-Flexitarian is one of many steps I'm intentionally making to live a lifestyle in accord with the convictions I feel. Other steps include supporting organizations aiding those who are suffering from undernourishment and unclean water, praying for God's sovereign mercy and provision for their need, and exploring ways to make a more substantial impact.

In sum, though I've come to the conclusion that if my lifestyle is discordant to my theology my lifestyle ought to change, I'm not suggesting that those who do not make a similar decision are "in sin". This is a moral issue insofar as I must live life consistent with what I understand God desires of His followers (lest proclaiming to be a Christian I remain a hypocrite), but not a philosophy which I feel justified in forcing on others.

Closing Thoughts

The funniest argument I've heard yet against a vegetarian diet went something like this:

"Mike, you're a Christian, right?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Well, that means that when you die you go to heaven, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, doesn't that mean that you'd want to die sooner? Why be a vegetarian? It only keeps you from getting to heaven early."

Um... Well... Call me crazy, but I'm fine letting God determine when he's going to call me home. Making the choice to eat things that don't cause heart disease, strokes, and cancer hardly seems like circumventing God's omnipotence. I'd rather go Home while doing something crazy like skydiving, trekking through a rain-forest, skiing some wicked cliffs in Colorado or at 111 years old lying next to my vegetarian wife of 90 years. There's too much life to be lived, too much fun to be had, too many incredible things to be discovered for this journey of

life to be slowed or halted by an ailment I could have easily prevented. Beyond that there's too much need in this world and I have been given far too much to demand the luxuries most people will never experience. I want to be concerned for those who don't have as much as I do, and it seems hypocritical to on the one hand demand the luxuries most people in this world will never experience while touting a "look after the orphans and widows" philosophy only when it suits my ego.

By intentionally eating an organic Pesca-ova-flexitarian diet the following things happen: 1) my body is getting every nutrient it needs for a healthy, vibrant existence 2) I have significantly reduced my chances of death from the top two killers in industrialized countries: heart disease and cancer 3) My lifestyle is more consistent with the faith that I profess and my understanding of God's concern for the poor and those in need. Given those three reasons I foresee remaining a Pesca-ova-flexitarian for a long, long time.

Cheers.

-Mike.

Further Reading:

- 1) *Diet for a New America* by John Robbins
- 2) *Diet for a Small Planet* by Frances Moore Lappe
- 3) *The Good Life* by Scott and Helen Nearing
- 4) *Becoming Vegetarian* by Brenda Davis and Vesanto Melina
- 5) *Living More with Less* by Doris Janzen Longaere
- 6) *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* by Ron Sider
- 7) *Fast Food Nation* by Eric Schlosser
- 8) *Counsels on Diet & Foods* by Ellen G. White

References

- 1) www.wiley.com
- 2) <http://www.nutrispeak.com>
- 3) www.brendadavisrd.com
- 4) www.foodrevolution.org
- 5) www.usda.gov
- 6) Robbins, John. *Diet for a New America*. Tiburon: H J Kramer Inc. 1987. pg 243.
- 7) Nestle, Marion. *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2003. pg. 51.
- 8) John Robbins. *Diet for a New America*. Tiburon: H J Kramer Inc. 1987. pg 171.
- 9) Davis, Brenda and Vesanto Melina. *Becoming Vegetarian*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. 2003. pg. 23.
- 10) Ibid. pg. 24.
- 11) Ibid. pg. 40.
- 12) Ibid. pg. 45.
- 13) Ibid. pg. 47.
- 14) Robbins, John. *Diet for a New America*. Tiburon: H J Kramer Inc. 1987. pg 252.
- 15) Ibid. pg. 158.
- 15.5) UNICEF: The State of the World's Children 2005 http://unicef.org/publications/index_24432.html
- 16) Robbins, John. *Diet for a New America*. Tiburon: H J Kramer Inc. 1987. pg 351.
- 17) Ibid. pg. 353.
- 18) <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html>
- 19) Robbins, John. *Diet for a New America*. Tiburon: H J Kramer Inc. 1987. pg 352
- 20) Ode Magazine, October 2006 Issue.
- 21) www.dictionary.com
- 22) Davis, Brenda and Vesanto Melina. *Becoming Vegetarian*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. 2003.
- 23) Robbins, John. *Diet for a New America*. Tiburon: H J Kramer Inc. 1987. pg 184.
- 24) Ibid. pg. 165.
- 25) Davis, Brenda and Vesanto Melina. *Becoming Vegetarian*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. 2003. pg 154.
- 26) Robbins, John. *Diet for a New America*. Tiburon: H J Kramer Inc. 1987. pg 314.
- 27) Ibid. pg. 344.
- 28) Ibid. pg. 345.