



The Ethics and Morals of Raising Animals for Meat

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“A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant, and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements in that sentence are connected by an *and* and not by a *but*.”

--John Berger, 1980, *About Looking*, New York, Pantheon Books

As a livestock farmer I am commonly asked how it is that I am able to butcher and sell the animals I have so lovingly raised for weeks, months, or even years. This is particularly directed to me since I am so obviously smitten with my stock and concerned with their care. How can the cow named Desdemona, raised under my watchful eye for nearly two years, be cut and wrapped in the freezer? How can the beautiful red hogs, born into my hands, be trucked away to be dispatched by another’s hand? This is a profound dichotomy in agriculture, which can be difficult for those on the outside, on the consumption side, to understand. I have been on the outside looking in and I have myself scoffed at the farmer’s insensitivity and obvious disrespect for life. I spent my early years as not only a strict vegan, but also a dedicated PETA activist. I have always had a strong attachment to animals of all kinds and as a young person was enraged beyond reason by the ways animals were mistreated in agriculture. I still am.



Now as a farmer I am no less sensitive to the general disrespect shown livestock in conventional agriculture. However, as a farmer, I am also far more aware and in tune with the lives of animals than I ever was when I was so vehemently defending them from the outside. No matter how passionately I protested their confinement and abuse, I had no connection. I had no connection until I held their very lives in my hands. I made a profound leaps in understanding when I stayed up all night to help a tired sow deliver piglets into the world; when I dried off a newly born calf; when raised my first 100 balls of chick fluff into huge, robust fowl; when I selected out the first hogs to go to the butcher; and when I killed my first chicken, by *my* hand, for *my* food. There is no life without death. The plant feeds the insect, which feeds the chicken, which feeds me.



“Nobody should (kill everyday), that’s why in the bible the priests drew lots to determine who would conduct the ritual slaughter, and they rotated the job every month. Slaughter is dehumanizing work if your have to do it every day. Processing but a few days a month means we can actually think about what we’re doing and be as careful and humane as possible.”

--Joel Salatin, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Michael Pollan



So for those of us who choose to be the caretakers and /or consumers of animals we must continue to share this intimacy of life with livestock in a conscious way. I don't ever want to become complacent with the process or numb to the emotional needs of the animals under my care. If culling a sick hen or sending a steer to the butcher becomes too easy and without emotion, I don't believe I should do it anymore. When you stop thinking about the livestock as living beings with needs like your own, you start losing your connection to them. This is when abuse happens, when animals enter and leave this world without purpose and compassion, and when we become the senseless brutes.

The Five Freedoms

1. Freedom to express normal behavior
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from fear and distress
4. Freedom from hunger and thirst
5. Freedom from pain, injury and disease

--*Compendium of Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Farming*, Organic Livestock Research Group, The University of Reading, UK



“Who does not know that the chicken is used for food? This creature almost alone is our chief resource when friends or guests arrive suddenly and unexpectedly; we owe to the chicken all the splendor displayed by a rich table or by one that is modestly supplied or by that which is slenderly laden.”

--Ulisse Aldrovandi, *Concerning Domestic Fowl That Bathe in the Dust—The Chicken, Male and Female*, 1598

