Vegetarian Verity

Many people are familiar with vegetarianism. You may have a friend or a friend of a friend, or perhaps you call yourself a vegetarian. But what is a vegetarian exactly? Many people use terms without knowing their definition or sometimes with only a vague idea. They also have different ideas of what meat is. Some may say that meat is the flesh of any animal. Some people define meat more narrowly as only that from pigs, cows, and sheep, basically mammals with four legs. I want to try and clear it up, even though I think it should be obvious. I meet people and they tell me that they are vegetarian, and I become disappointed to find out that they eat seafood! It may be misinformation or simply the allure of being part of a movement, some new age or trendy group. But whatever the reason people need correct information.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a vegetarian as, "one that believes in or practices living on a diet of vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts and sometimes animal products". The Vegetarian Times magazine and many other publications speak of vegetarianism and veganism. The definitions themselves do not seem to be adequate. Because by the above definition anyone can call themselves such as long as they believe in it. A vegan is a person who excludes all animal products (i.e. milk, cheese, even honey). I've actually had someone tell me that fish are not animals. As to the definitions of meat, they are numerous, but mainly a better and more accurate description of vegetarianism would be to describe it as not eating the flesh of any animal or anything which cannot be obtained without the animal's slaughter. An example of this would be caviar. Caviar is not like chicken's eggs where you can just go and pick them from a under a hen. The fish must be gutted and the eggs extracted from inside. So then as a vegetarian I cannot consume caviar. In Science class we were taught to identify something using the identifiers of asking ourselves whether something was animal, mineral, or vegetable. It's simple to see that a vegetarian primarily eats the 3rd choice, with products of the 1st. I determine whether to eat an animal product based on if the product can be obtained without the loss of the animal's life. But some may have a problem with that if they eat jello or marshmallows. These two tasty treats are made from gelatin. Gelatin is made from animal bones, marrow, and hooves. I am personally disgusted by the notion of eating ground-up bones.

If you are looking for an alternative to this, health food stores offer alternatives made from a plant source called agar.

The problem I'm trying to address is mainly misrepresentation. With the many forms of media out there containing information on veggie life, not to mention the World Wide Web, it is appalling that anyone could be confused about what to call themselves. I address this as a problem because it simply adds confusion. I have had several hospital stays in the past several years and it is always a battle and a struggle to get vegetarian meals, but first and foremost to get them to even understand what a vegetarian meal is. It is extremely frustrating to ask for a veg meal only to receive a tray at dinner with a dead fish on it. I have encountered this time and time again. It is time someone addressed this issue with hospitals and the AMA. The subject of adequate vegetarian meals in hospitals is an entirely different discussion for another time. There is just not enough space here to adequately express my anger and frustration over this issue. But I digress. I don't want to agitate, offend, or be confrontational to those of you who are mostly vegetarian. I don't judge anyone, but just call something what it is. People who only eat seafood are pescatarian which isn't actually a vegetarian, but there *is* a word for it. Everyone's reasons for their particular diets are different, but misrepresentation is misleading and confusing to many people.

The reasons and benefits for someone choosing a vegetarian diet vary greatly between individuals and cultures. Some people feel better, healthier, and have more energy. Some may improve their health and/or lose weight. Many people feel that an animal shouldn't suffer and die for us to eat. I first became a vegetarian to improve my health and to lose weight. Now my drive and reasons for remaining one are much more profound. For one I see consuming animal flesh as contributing to murder. I believe that all creatures have a soul and my spiritual beliefs are very Earth-centered focusing on nature and our closeness to it. I have developed sensitivity to the slaughter that animals go through. I can't even stand the smell of meat raw or cooked and/or cooking. I don't ever want to see, touch, or taste any animal flesh ever again. It disgusts me. I see no difference between killing and eating a goat and eating a cat or dog. There were definitely not many diet options in our sordid history. However in this day and age I

believe it is wasteful, frivolous, cruel, and barbarically primitive to support and indulge in the consumption of animal flesh.

I don't care to debate the issue of humankind's diet in the age before recorded history. It is a moot point. I assume that humans are omnivores; however our ability to choose is one of the many things that sets us apart from the rest of the animal kingdom. Since we discovered fire we have eaten flesh. But in today's modern times people are so detached from their meat and where it comes from. This is one of the problems with society: mass production. Sometimes I think if you want to eat chicken you should go out and catch one and kill it yourself. Believe it or not I have a great respect for someone who hunts and eats what they catch. Many people, if asked would admit to being too squeamish to kill their own meat. I believe if that's the case, they simply shouldn't eat it. I realize that this is only an expression of my ideology and that most people in modern society have neither the time nor the resources to kill their own meat. Many meat-eaters would defensively say that vegetarians should also grow their own vegetables. This issue could be discussed ad nauseum. However there is a big difference between the cultivation of plant life and the slaughter of animal life. Again this is all a reflection of my personal ideology and philosophy. Furthermore, I don't intend for anyone to take my opinions as medical advice. But as a human being who recognizes the importance of our role as caregivers on this planet, I would urge everyone to try and rise to what our fully-civilized potential can and should be.

The consumption and preparation of meat in our modern society is too primitive and is reminiscent of a prehistoric essence within us that we should strive to overcome. I am pointing to a moral obligation by which I believe we as modern, supposedly civilized human beings should measure ourselves. It should be our goal to better ourselves, intellectually, spiritually and socially; we should strive to evolve and do everything we can to aid that advancement in our evolution. Of course I am an idealist, but by no means am I naive enough to think that everyone reading this will run out and stock their fridges with tofu and veggie burgers in the quest to become a better person. It is a long process of learning, growing, and experiencing. One day I hope that we look back in astonishment at the notion of our races consumption of

any kind of flesh. Albeit a long way off, it couldn't happen 'cold turkey'. Businesses whose primary income is supported by the meat industry would have to have a complete overhaul. I couldn't reasonably expect businesses in operation for hundreds of years to just turn around in one day. But it is the idea and the effort that counts.

I have been a vegetarian for over 10 years and am completely revolted by animal flesh of any kind, even the smell of it cooking. Although I was that way even when I was younger. I can remember my mother frying chicken and in the summer I would go outside because of the smell. Of course I realize everyone is not as sensitive as I but I have encountered others who experience this same sense. It has taken years for me to come to this place in my life. I also refrain from the preparation of meat in my apartment. I couldn't bear it. Most of my friends are accepting of this. I do compromise in some ways however. Ideally I would prefer not to have animal flesh in my house at all. But it is not too reprehensible to order friends a pizza with pepperoni or buy a deli sandwich with turkey etc. I am on a very limited budget and have very specific dietary requirements which don't allow for me to buy something for everyone's taste. I realize that realistically I can't expect everyone to adapt to my ways completely, however my friends also respect me enough to understand and adapt a little out of respect for my beliefs.

Many people ask me why I became a vegetarian. And in the beginning it was health, but now I do it for all the reasons that there are: global, environmental, moral, and spiritual. And I am sure I will be a vegetarian for the remainder of my life barring some unforeseen disaster. I can only state what is right for me. I don't fault others for consuming meat. It is a journey and a difficult commitment to reach. Although I don't miss eating or preparing animal flesh, I can appreciate the challenges and difficulties that this choice presents. I hope one day vegetarianism will be the norm rather than the exception and that the reader will take something from this and gain some insight into the mind of a vegetarian. I also hope that some people will have a new perspective on their moral obligation and the impact that all their choices have on life, the Earth, and themselves.

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