

**Nutrition and Health**  
**A Few Thoughts on Becoming a Vegetarian**

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Deveron Long

Happy Anniversary to Me! Three years ago today I realized for the first time that I didn't need to consume animal flesh. It was a rather odd transition in my life—completely unexpected. For whatever reason I decided to give up meat for lent, even though I'm not Catholic. I thought the reason for sacrificing during this period of time sounded admirable, and I was just plain curious to see if this was something I could do (and heavens, no, I wasn't about to give up beer for lent!). I knew only one vegetarian at that time, so I really didn't have much impetus to select meat as the sacrifice—except that I loved it. What is summer without carne asada hot off the barbeque grill? Or Friday nights without carnitas drenched in green sauce and lime? Or tender pot roast smothered in gravy? So I made this vow to myself and a few days later ended up sitting with my husband in our favorite Mexican restaurant. Over beer and chips and salsa we chatted about our week, and when it came time to order, we learned that both of us had given up meat for lent (my husband isn't Catholic, either). It was such a strange coincidence. He seemed to have a much better reason than I—he was disturbed by videos of slaughterhouse cruelty, and decided he didn't wish to be part of it. I commended his rationale, took a deep inhale of the carnitas that were delivered to the next table, and I begrudgingly ordered beans and rice instead.

Over the next few weeks, I learned how to adapt to normal family life with no meat, which proved to be challenging but not terribly difficult. My grown children snickered and gave me the 'she'll be out of this phase after Easter' look when they invited me to dinner, and I squirmed uncomfortably at having to decline the chicken casserole dish they had prepared. Was I being rude? I pushed the carrots around my plate trying to make them last through the meal. The kids felt just as uncomfortable as I did.

The vegetarian diet had physical effects as well as emotional ones. It seemed that I was always hungry, and when I sat down to a meal, I had to load up on carbs—the bad ones—to satisfy the emptiness. The pounds seemed to quickly pack on to my post-menopausal body. I thought I was doing something good for myself! When Easter Sunday finally rolled around, I wasn't sure how I felt about going to my son's house for the BBQ. Lent was over. The sacrifice had been endured. I was proud of myself. I stared at the unappealing hamburger on my plate, wishing it was a bowl of carnitas. I should have celebrated with something much more grand. I took a bite of dry burger, and had to choke it down. I couldn't do it. At that moment, I realized I had somehow become a vegetarian. My husband was thrilled, and the rest of the people in my world seemed to be genuinely dismayed.

Over the next three years my husband and I learned not to speak of our anomalous diet unless we had to. The topic seemed to upset people a great deal. Even when we didn't speak of

our choice not to eat meat, the very presence of our plates with no meat was a threat to those around us. I can understand this because our society places great emphasis on the bonding of family and friends around food and food-related celebrations. These celebrations and holidays always focused on meat, and our families felt that we were shunning family tradition and questioning an integral part of life. As a side note, it was interesting to spend a week in New Mexico with my husband's (Hispanic) relatives during this time. Not one time were leafy green (or any other color) vegetables present at any meal—with the exception of the small bowl of pico de gallo to top the meat. We lived on beans, rice, and tortillas the entire week. They thought we had surely lost our minds. His relatives were raised to offer guests as much meat as they could afford—which was a sign of affluence.

Another thing happened as the meatless years passed. My husband and I became “better” vegetarians. We began researching sources of vegetable protein such as non GMO soybeans and quinoa, and we reduced the intake of breads, pastas, and potatoes. (We're trying to reduce the use of tortillas, but this has been quite difficult since it is a marvelous wrap for so many foods we love.) We now gladly pay extra for vegetarian fed cage-free eggs and fresh organic vegetables. We use only extra light virgin olive oil when sautéing our veggie combinations, and we eat fresh fruits and raw vegetables as often as possible. Our vegetarianism has morphed in a different way as well; we are becoming more alert to *how* foods are prepared and more sensitive to whether or not animal products were used. This requires a lot of label reading and many questions when we order in a restaurant. Another really positive change in our diet is the complete elimination of sodas. Instead we each drink a gallon or more per day of alkaline water (9.5 pH) from our Kangen water machine. And yes, I still drink beer.

Even though I was maintaining what I considered to be excellent nutrition, I was quite frustrated that I wasn't losing any weight. In fact, I was gaining weight, which was such a mystery. Although I blamed menopause for wreaking havoc on my hormones and metabolism, I recently learned that I probably wasn't getting enough protein in my diet. When I shifted to a protein meal-replacement diet, I instantly felt better. I began drinking two protein shakes (non GMO soy) per day mixing the powder with only water and fruit. Now I drink 3 shakes per day and eat a meal only once per day—usually a salad or something reasonable. I am careful to take vitamin supplements while I am on this diet since I'm not getting much variety. Surprisingly, I feel marvelous, and I'm not hungry. I've lost 18 pounds! Perhaps the best result from this diet is that I am content with much smaller serving sizes. Once I transition back to whole foods, a little at a time, I look forward to keeping serving sizes small and releasing the need to finish everything on my plate—a remnant of childhood conditioning.

I believe that eating and optimal health are critically related, but I also believe that we have been conditioned to rely on food for much more than physical nourishment. We use food as emotional nourishment as well. I believe my evolution toward natural foods has helped me to focus on food as physical nourishment, thereby reducing the need to eat when I'm stressed or

when I feel the need for “comfort” foods. This new mindfulness feels very spiritual to me since I am making a choice to align myself with what is in the best interest of the Earth and all creatures. I know that my personal footprint is much smaller than those who rely on mass-produced animal products, but I do not feel the compulsion to preach this lifestyle as my husband does. For me it is a personal decision that each individual should make—the question is whether or not the mind is truly free to see what is outside the confines of one’s culture and tradition.