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A way to 'do' grace before meals, not just 'say' it

Rich Heffern | Jan. 22, 2010 NCR Today

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy once said: ?As long as there are slaughterhouses, there will be battlefields.? He was convinced there was a link between a carnivorous diet and peace. He told this story:

?Once, when walking from Moscow, I was offered a lift by some carters who were going to a neighboring forest to fetch wood. I was seated in the first cart with a strong, red, coarse cartman, who evidently drank. On entering a village we saw a naked, pink pig being dragged out of the yard to be slaughtered. It squealed in a dreadful voice, resembling the shriek of a man. Just as we were passing they began to kill it, gashing its throat with a knife.

?The pig squealed still more piercingly, broke away from the men, and ran off covered with blood. I did not see all the details, only the human-looking pink body of the pig and heard its desperate squeal, but the carter watched closely. They caught the pig and finished cutting its throat. When its squeals ceased the carter sighed heavily. ?Do men really not have to answer for such things?? he said.

?So strong is humanity?s aversion to all killing. But by example, by encouraging greediness, by the assertion that God has allowed it, and above all by habit, people entirely lose this natural feeling.?

Tolstoy wrote this over a hundred years ago. Today we live in a world where such sights ? a village pig being slaughtered ? are nonexistent. Such slaughter goes on, of course, but we?re removed from it.

Not long ago, an element of the view on a drive in the country past small farms was a few pigs rooting in the leaf litter behind the barn for fallen acorns. In the last 20 years more than half of the family farms raising pigs have been put out of business. Enabled by drugs, which allow animals to be confined in large numbers, and encouraged by federal tax breaks favoring big-scale farming, industrial pig factory farms now dominate the pork industry.t
Pigs are intelligent, sensitive and clean animals. But those unfortunate enough to be born on a large factory farm face a life of confinement and intense cruelty, according to the Humane Farming Association. After impregnation, a factory farm sow is locked in a metal gestation crate, 24 inches wide and long enough so that she can move forward and backward only a few inches. By conveyer belt, she is fed at one end of the crate and her feces collected at the other.

Deprived of all exercise and opportunity to meet her behavioral needs, she lives in a constant state of distress. A sow locked in a factory farm crate often is found frantically and repeatedly biting the metal bars. ?Hundreds of thousands of sows are held captive in these desolate pig prisons,? said the Humane Farming Association.

Piglets are prematurely separated from the mother, who is again impregnated and sent back to the crate. This cycle is repeated over and over until the sow?s ?productivity? wanes, and she is sent to slaughter.

If a private citizen confined a dog or cat in conditions such as those that prevail at factory farms, that person would be pilloried in the local paper and hauled into court.

Chickens also are birds of the farmyard, accustomed to nesting in community, taking dust baths, laying in the sun, brooding contentedly in coops.
But the more than 9 billion chickens raised on factory farms yearly never have the chance to do anything that is natural to them. They will never even meet their parents, let alone be raised by them. They will never take dust baths, feel the sun, breathe fresh air, or build nests.

Chickens raised for their flesh, called ?broilers? by the chicken industry, spend their lives in filthy sheds with tens of thousands of other birds, where intense crowding and confinement lead to outbreaks of disease. They are drugged with antibiotics and growth hormones that make them grow so large so quickly that their legs and organs can?t keep up, making heart attacks, organ failure, and crippling leg deformities common. Many become crippled under their own weight and eventually die because they can?t reach water nozzles. When they are seven weeks old, they are crammed into cages and trucked to slaughter.

Birds exploited for their eggs, called ?laying hens? by the industry, are crammed together in wire cages where they don?t even have enough room to spread a wing. The cages are stacked on top of each other, and the excrement from chickens in the higher cages constantly falls on those below. Their sensitive beaks are cut off so that they don?t peck each other out of the frustration created by the unnatural confinement. They are often deprived of food for two weeks in order to shock their bodies into producing more eggs, a practice called forced-molting.

After their bodies are exhausted, production drops and they are shipped to slaughter, to be turned into chicken soup or cat food because their flesh is too bruised and battered to be used for much else.

Because the male chicks of egg-laying breeder hens are unable to lay eggs and are not bred to produce excessive flesh for the meat industry, they are killed. Every year, more than 100 million of these young birds are ground up alive or tossed into bags to suffocate.

Avoiding products from factory farms is a way to not only say grace at meals but to do grace. For more information, see the website of the Humane Farming Association.
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