Editorial
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The Power of Diet to Define Our Destiny

the Editor

On or about October 15th little 8-year-old Lisa Simpson will make a critical decision for her life, one than will impact millions in America. After visiting a zoo and cognizing the relationship of food and fauna, she will face a moral crisis, give up eating meat and become a vegetarian. The fact is, Lisa is an animated character on the American Fox TV channel, sister to the brash Bart Simpson. Still, she is significantly more important than Narasimha Rao or Bill Clinton in the eyes of youth, so her conversion is an important signal--so important that Paul and Linda McCartney, yes the Beatles' Paul, appear in the episode and help Lisa confront her morally indifferent carnivore neighbors. Paul, a confirmed veggie, even wrote original music for the immensely popular cartoon program.

Lisa's conversion may not persuade NRIs to forswear further forays to their favorite fast-food franchise. Unlike eating pork in Judaism or Islam, one can eat meat and still be a good Hindu. Still, her dilemma is more human than she is. Man finds himself in an interesting predicament. The very things that fueled his progressive flight these last two centuries are now fouling his nest, and he has awakened, of late, to the

realization that combustion-driven travel brings acid-death to pristine lakes, that a collector's desire for carved ivory artifacts pushes entire species of elephants and rhinos to the edge of extinction. The strength of ordinary appetites and desires has never been so obvious, nor the consequences so perilous. Consider the power that lies hidden in the simple act of eating. If we chose to consume rice, we set in motion armies of farmers who clear lowland meadows and terrace hillsides to put grain on our table. If we hanker for two-all-beef-patties-pickles-inions-special-sauce-on-a-sesame-seed-bun, we loosen legions of ranchers who set about to slash and burn Amazon basin rain forests so pastures can be planted for herds of cattle. If we prefer seafood, we commission armadas of fishermen to drag the oceans with 300-mile-long nets so we may have fish for dinner, altering forever the ecology of the sea (a Hawaiian fisherman told us that today's Japanese fishing fleet is larger than the US navy!) Seemingly simple desires drive powerful engines of acquisition. Like the tenuous waterway that patiently carves away the Grand Canyon, our combined actions are slowly molding the planet's, and our own, future.

Here is a true tale about food trends. Two of us were pilgrimaging to Hindu holy sites about 15 years ago. On a sweltering Madras afternoon we boarded one of those rare Indian Airlines 727s (it may have been the only one in the fleet at the time), heading southeast to Colombo. My PowerMac 9500 Control Panels map says there are 220 air miles between the two airports. Even though the flight was less than an hour, it was around noon and a light lunch was served. Sari-clad stewardesses plied the aisles with choreographed dexterity and soon we two sat bewildered in front of what had to be the worst looking hamburger created before or since. Its entire

existence was a 3-day-old bun and a 3-ounce beef paddy. No ripe red tomato, no farm-fresh lettuce, not even a colorful dollop of mustard, ketchup or mayo. Not that the accoutrements mattered to us. We were both vegetarians. No problem, we thought, motioning to a flight attendant, "Excuse me, can you bring us the vegetarian snack?" "There is no vegetarian snack, swamiji" came the reply. "You ran out already?" we inquired further. "No," she offered, "there is only hamburger today on the plane. I'm sorry." In disbelief we proceeded with the requisite civilized inquisition, "There must be 150 people on this plane. Except for about three Europeans, they all appear to be Hindus and Buddhists. Surely they are not all eating hamburgers." "They are, swami," came the seasoned reply, "May I get you some crackers?" That was a defining moment in our understanding of the evolution of Indian food. Never before had we confronted the extent to which Hindus have disavowed their vegetarian tradition. Here we were, flying from the center of Tamil Saivism to the center of Hinayana Buddhism, and everyone was eating beef. Of course, it is not so in the villages, nor among the most orthodox.

Most herbivorous Hindus don't know why they are vegetarians. They just are. They might feel vindicated to find that the chemistry of eating meat is not a genial one. The methods used in large modern farms to raise and kill animals causes them immense pain and terror. Ranchers feed them growth hormones and antibiotics. Their natural glandular responses pump adrenaline into the bloodstream as they are slaughtered. Biochemists have confirmed that all this ends up in and influences the body of those who consume meat. In a very real way, we are ingesting the powerful chemical components of fear and rage. It would be naive to hope that

these molecules did not continue their work in the human body. George Bernard Shaw said it rather brutally, "Think of the fierce energy concentrated in an acorn. You bury it in the ground, and it explodes into a giant oak! Bury a sheep, and nothing happens but decay."

The wisdom of vegetarianism is being revealed anew as man delves deeper and deeper into biochemistry and its effect on human behavior and consciousness. The old teachings about ahimsaand vegetarianism, which often have degenerated into habit or unthinking dogma, are gaining validity from unexpected sources. It turns out that Indian vegetarian cuisine is closer to being a perfectly wholesome human diet than any other (if you discount recent trends of too much sugar, white rice and fried dishes). That's right, the menu Indians evolved over 10,000 years proves to be better for us (not to mention being better for animals and the earth) than Parisian entrees, Tokyo tempura, Beijing carry-out or Dallas BBQ.

The medical mind has focused our attention on these matters of health. In 1989 Newsweek reported the largest nutrition study ever undertaken, actually 5,000 independent studies, stressing less meat, more grains, fruits and vegetables. But health consequences are a mere fraction of the equation. What we eat effects a complex matrix of forces that know no national boundaries or ethical restraint. MacDonald's hamburgers consumed in Kuala Lumpur require forests to be destroyed in Brazil and water sources polluted in Europe. Bacon and eggs cooked in Durban or Port Louis exact a heavy price in mechanical, inhumane animal care in other cities and nations. The list is long.

Hindus have much insight to offer to the current debate on these issues, and it is hoped they will share the tradition openly in the international forum. Hope lies in the growing tendency toward socially responsible action. Wanting to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, people are investing in institutions that do not despoil the land. They are buying products that are biodegradable. They are boycotting stores that sell elephant ivory knickknacks or Bengal Tiger throw rugs. They are grazing further down the food chain.

Witness the "Children of the Corn." In its August 28th issue, Newsweek magazine explored the burgeoning trend among American teenagers to turn veggie. They cite a survey done this summer by Teenage Research Unlimited of Northbrook, Ill., which found that a whopping 35% of the girls and 18% of the boys questioned felt that being a vegetarian was the in thing to do. In another survey, 37% of teens declared that they avoid all red meat. Danny Seo, 18, founder of Earth 2000, an advocacy group for teens, told Newsweek that the "defining focus" of his generation will be "no animal cruelty, no meat." It seems likely to conclude from all this that the meat industrial complex (throw in the embattled tobacco companies for good measure) is about to enjoy the kind of special relationship with young adults that nuclear power plants and weapons factories enjoyed twenty years ago.

Hamburgers and hot dogs may have been la cuisine Ãi la modefor adolescents a few decades back, but today it is more likely they are foraging on braised tofu, black beans, Basmati rice and backed corn-on-the-cob. Health is a part of it, as is the retaliatory joy teens get out of righteous rebellion. Newsweek reported that "Whenever Jennifer Hawn, 14, passes the meat

section of her Malibu, California, grocery store, she turns to her mom and asks loudly, 'Can we leave the graveyard?'" It doesn't hurt that teen celebrities are pushing veggie's virtues--including young actresses on TV's "Rosanne" and "Beverly Hills, 90210," Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder and REM's sainted lead guitarist, Michael Stipe, of MTV fame. But there are mature ethical forces at work, too, in these young minds. The environmental movement of the last twenty years has trained them that eating meat means killing animals and hurting the environment. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, a powerful group that also fights against fur coats and laboratory experiments, has targeted teens, showing to crowds at rock concerts graphic footage of the most deplorable slaughterhouses and handing out buttons that exhort: eat your veggies, not your friends. Meat is gross, teens now tell each other, defending a more compassionate approach toward living creatures. Food for thought, that.

There are 5.4 billion people grazing the earth today, so our individual decisions are adding up to something more than monumental. Our collective appetites are changing the face of the earth, and not for the better. Kids seem to intuit that better than their parents. Writer and veggie evangelist John Robbins, himself not much past 30, argues convincingly that we "simply cannot run the global household that way anymore and hope for health, prosperity or happiness." He holds that the very future of life on earth may well rest on our choice of food. Maybe one day humanity will look back and thank little Lisa Simpson for her animated courage, or send her to the city of Puri in India where veggie legislation has been passed recently (see story on page 24). It just might be the thing to turn Indian kids around, seeing that young comrads in the West are choosing to avoid eating other creatures.

Alas, even Lisa Simpson is not perfect. In the October 15th episode, she visits her neighbor, an Indian boy named Apu, who is a strict vegan, one who doesn't even eat milk products. Lisa confesses that she still consumes cheese and confides to friend Apu, "You must think I'm a monster." "Indeed, I do," replies the extravagantly honest Apu. "But I learned long ago to tolerate others rather than forcing my beliefs on them." Proof, perhaps, that even in Toon Town, when it comes to matters that matter, India has a special wisdom to offer.

"When a man realizes that meat is the butchered flesh of another creature, he will abstain from eating it."Saint Tiruvalluvar, 200bce