

Food for Thought: Practical Advice for Peaceful Eating

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Compassionate living toward animals has far reaching implications for the flourishing of human beings, animals, and the environment. But in a culture where this urgent moral issue is largely off the radar (even in our churches), the journey from *knowing* about the moral implications of eating to *living in mindful observance* of them can seem very daunting.

Here is some humble advice from a fellow traveler on how to take the initial strides toward cultivating more compassionate habits.

1. Remember the stakes!

Compassionate eating has implications for the flourishing of the whole of creation: (1) the bodily integrity and dignity of billions of animals; (2) environmental sustainability; (3) human dignity for employees in industrial farms, slaughterhouses, and transport companies; (4) world hunger and the viability of global agriculture and commerce; (5) the viability of agriculture and commerce in the rural U.S. and the dignity of our farmers; (6) personal health; (7) public health.

2. Find spiritual disciplines to help you remember the stakes

Like any challenging life goal, compassionate living doesn't happen without proper training and rigorous, repeated exercises that help to mold lasting commitments. You'll need to find practices and cultivate habits that keep the issues of animal compassion and its many implications for ourselves and the world on the front burner of your conscience.

Some ideas:

- Commit to reading a new book on the issue every few months or to starting a book discussion group.
- Commit to watching [Peaceable Kingdom](#) several times a year to remind yourself of what's really going on behind the scenes.
- Raise a vegetable garden in your backyard or start a community garden project.
- Host regular potlucks and recipe swaps.
- Found a club or join a student organization that advocates on behalf of animals.

3. Practice compassionate common sense in your eating and consumer habits

Like any transition into a new way of looking at things, becoming a more compassionate eater requires one to reboot one's "common sense." For people who aren't aware of the importance of these matters, common sense usually leads them to products that are *cheap and/or convenient*. As we have seen, however, "cheap and convenient for me" rarely if ever translates to "cheap and convenient for the flourishing of the whole."

Thus, one of the biggest challenges awaiting people who wish to live more compassionately toward animals is that of readjusting our consumer attitudes so that our "common sense" doesn't

just rush for the cheap and the convenient, but forces us to ask instead, “What are the hidden costs of this product for the flourishing of the whole?”

4. Community, community, community!

Reorienting one's common sense is something that is very difficult to do without the support of a like-minded community. Luckily, [Calvin College](#) and other academic institutions are becoming the sorts of places where it is increasingly easy to find people who care about the plight of non-human animals. If you want your new outlook to remain an important part of your pursuit of authenticity, then you will do yourself a favor to befriend some people who share your vision and work together with them to keep one another on track.

5. Learn to cook

One of the best ways to cultivate community and bring new people into an awareness of the cause at the same time is to host dinners and potlucks at which friends and newcomers can taste how delicious more compassionately prepared food can be! The idea that vegetarians and vegans eat nothing but steamed cauliflower is one of the biggest hurdles to the widespread popularity of compassionate eating, so help to deconstruct the stereotype by exposing friends and family to mind-blowing compassionate cuisine. Check out [chooseveg.com](#), [veganyummy.com](#), or [Plant Based on a Budget](#).

6. Learn to read labels

One particularly valuable skill to have as a compassionate cook is discernment in label-reading. Familiarize yourself with the many animal and animal-derived products that are often hidden in processed foods (check out <http://www.vnv.org.au/AnimalProducts.htm>), and when you're shopping for hygiene and cleaning products, always look for the "no animal testing" label. When purchasing shoes and clothing, choose products that do not include leather, fur or fur trim, "down" (goose feathers), or wool. When possible, choose sustainably grown organic cotton or hemp garments.

7. Get to know your farmer

One of the most exciting aspects of building more compassionate food communities is reconnecting with wonderful people and beautiful places from which many of us have been alienated for a very long time. The only way really to know that the food you are buying was produced in a healthy, humane, and sustainable fashion is to develop a relationship of trust with the people who grow your food.

So strike up conversations at the farmers market; ask questions about your farmers' methods; request a farm visit and go to see what life is like on the farms you patronize.

Expect an invigorating break from the anesthetizing effects of the fluorescent lights and endless columns of processed foods to which we've grown so accustomed as shoppers at warehouse supermarkets.

8. Educate your church family

The Christian Church strives to be a witness to the need for peace, mercy, reconciliation, and social justice in God's world. But we cannot be an effective witness on these issues until our pastors and congregations are aware of the intimate connections between our daily food choices and the social justice issues we have traditionally sought to address.

So, put together an education kit for your church library; teach a Sunday school class; host a Saturday afternoon workshop and invite your congregation.

Challenge your pastor and lay leadership teams to envision a more intentional church community and invite them to be mindful of these concerns when writing sermons, planning Sunday school curriculum, establishing church policies, purchasing supplies, stocking the food pantry, engaging neighbors, planning youth fundraisers and activities.

9. Lead by example

After learning about injustices of this magnitude, the first impulse, at least for some of us, is to become zealots (which can make us tone deaf to the importance of knowing our audience, and can make life very difficult for friends and family who have not had the experience with these issues that we have had). Remember that shame, blame, exclusion, and judgment rarely change people's hearts.

If you want to open people's eyes to the injustices suffered by non-human animals, lead by example and people will notice and ask you what it is all about.

10. Be able to defend your choices (without judging those who disagree)

A crucial part of leading by example is being able to explain to others in clear and accessible language why you live your life the way you do. When people notice that your principles and practices are out of the mainstream on these issues, they will naturally want to know more about why you are making different choices. The very best thing you can do for the compassionate living movement is to offer clear explanations of your reasons as patiently and respectfully as you can.

11. Maintain an animal-friendly library

Being able to explain and defend your choices means keeping up with the literature and having good books and media to share with inquiring friends and family members. Scientists, theologians, legal experts, philosophers, physicians, health professionals, and activists continue to discover new and ever more compelling evidence in favor of the importance of compassionate eating.

Those of us who wish to make a difference have an obligation to know what we are talking about and to be able to refer others to the best, most recent resources. For some topic-specific recommendations, see the [Peaceful Eating 101](#) [PDF] handout.

12. Be open and honest (but still good-humored) about your commitments

Sometimes, your choices will upset others or cause them to become defensive even when you're doing your best to be considerate of their differences. In situations with close friends or family members (when it is possible to have a heart-to-heart conversation), don't be afraid to tell them the truth.

For instance: “Mom, you’ve raised me to be the sort of person who stands up for what I believe and who speaks up for the rights of those who can’t help themselves; my new eating habits are grounded in those values, and I hope you can respect that even if you decide to make different choices.”

In situations where you don’t know people as well or where there isn’t time or opportunity for a more in depth conversation, self-deprecating humor can be a very effective tool for diffusing tension. (For example: “Don’t worry; I’ve left my soapbox at home.”)

13. Know your audience and be sensitive to cultural and socio-economic differences

Promoting a “one-size-fits-all” legalism is a sure-fire way to achieve irrelevance. The most successful peacemakers are the ones who have intimate knowledge of and respect for the people with whom they are communicating and the cultures of which they are a part.

Thus, the ways in which one presents peaceful eating as a moral issue and practices it in one’s daily affairs may differ in accord with the cultural and socio-economic contexts in which one is living and working.

14. Moral perfectionism is the enemy of moral progress

Setting reasonable and achievable goals is a very important part of making headway on moral issues. When we set our sites too high (as we are often inclined to do), we end up spending most of our time either in fear that we will fail or in shame that we have failed (or both). This cycle of fear and shame leads more often to the abandonment of our moral goals than to their fulfillment.

An excellent way to break this cycle is to set modest, incremental, concrete goals that it is possible to achieve without great moral strain. Once one sees that one can actually make headway, the momentum of that success may lead to commitments that might have seemed unduly burdensome at the beginning, but that now seem entirely manageable in light of past successes.

Finally, focus on what you are gaining rather than on what you are giving up. The goal is liberation, not deprivation!

15. Be the change you want to see in the world

God has given you unique gifts and talents that can gear into kingdom work in crucial and sometimes unexpected ways that few others may be suited to contribute. Discern how these unique features of your personality and your vocation have suited you to live toward Shalom in your spheres of influence and then let your light shine for others who are similarly situated.

Are you a college student who can sensitize your professors and fellow students to the importance of these issues by choosing to write papers on the topic, to ask questions about it in class, and to model respect for and solidarity with others who are doing the same?

Are you a server at a restaurant who could make your boss aware of opportunities to bring in new clientele with plant-based options?

Are you a friend, son or daughter who could be salt and light on these matters with friends and family members who haven't had a chance to consider these concerns?

How do your vocational aspirations gear into this work? How might sensitivity to these issues enable you to be a better teacher, custodian, doctor, missionary, service-provider, social worker, business person, scientist?

How can YOU be the change you want to see in the world?