

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 84 – Howard Slutzky – Psychology Today

The Way of the Jain

And now a personal word,

Howard Slutzky and I have worked beside each other for a dozen years. We have shared what professors at a university share: stories about students, what just happened in the classroom, and the strange behaviors of administrators. We have had this running refrain of loving our work while wondering what else we might be doing.

There is a topic Howard and I frequently talk about. He and I share this dream that sometime in the not-too-distant future, humans will stop eating animal meat and flesh. We will stop eating the bodies of cows, pigs, chickens, and fish. We will stop raising animals in unnatural and inhumane conditions for slaughter. The days of killing billions of sentient animals to feed humans would end. Factories that turn intelligent beings into meat, milk, and egg-producing machines would be stain of the past. All humans would thrive on plant-based diets. The planet and animal ecosystems would heal. I don't know if we will ever get there, but I hope one day we will look back at the enslavement of animals with the same horror as we look back at the enslavement of people.

Howard is a model of compassion. He visits animal sanctuaries. He donates to organizations devoted to reducing the suffering of animals. He takes care of injured birds. He leads discussions in class about what we eat. He inspires people around him to reexamine their choices.

I became a vegetarian in the spring of 2010. It happened after nearly a month of eating wonderful dinners at home that my wife Laura had prepared. Laura is an exceptional cook that makes every meal remarkable. "You realize," she said, "that everything you've been eating this month has been vegetarian." I said, "Wow. I guess so." She nodded and said, "Well, this is what I'm going to eat and not eat from now on." I paused, calculating future scenarios of life at home quickly, and responded, "I want to be a vegetarian too." Joining Laura has always been the right answer. And that's been it.

Well, not entirely it. From that moment to now, I've learned about our food system, our treatment of farm animals, impacts on the environment, and what we see and do not see when it comes to what is on our plate. All sorts of issues arise in our relationship to animals, not the least of which is the extraordinary suffering slaughtering animals for

our pleasure inflicts on conscious life. What was once a simple dietary decision at home has become for me a profound ethical concern.

Have I been perfectly compliant as a vegetarian over the last nine years? No. I've had bouillabaisse on pasta. I drove through Wendy's once. I had a couple of bacon quiches at a reception after a panel discussion. If I stood before St. Peter, his list might be longer than mine. And I'm not vegan. But over many years, I take comfort in a diet that nourishes me and reduces some suffering in the world.

In the March 2019 issue of the *Atlantic*, in an article entitled "What the Crow Knows," senior editor Ross Andersen wrote about animal consciousness and Jainism, an ancient religion whose highest commandment forbids violence against all living beings. Andersen wrote:

Jains move through the world in this gentle way because they believe animals are conscious beings that experience, in varying degrees, emotions analogous to human desire, fear, pain, sorrow, and joy. This idea that animals are conscious was long unpopular in the West, but it has lately found favor among scientists who study animal cognition. And not just the obvious cases—primates, dogs, elephants, whales, and others. ... For many scientists, the resonant mystery is no longer which animals are conscious, but which are not.

Spend any time with any animal, and the qualities they share with humans are clear: they are individuals with distinct personalities with an instinct to live. If consciousness connects life in any quantum way, then we are just as connected to the nonhuman animals in our midst as we are to each other.

Howard Slutzky is a Jain. Well, he isn't, but he might as well be as he similarly moves through the world in a gentle way.

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