

Thank you for your letter about animal welfare. It is an issue that continues to bother me as well – sometimes in surprising ways.

One of my most memorable times was when I was on a tour of a chicken-packing factory in one of the small rural towns near here. This plant provided chicken to many of the restaurants around Montréal and they shipped their frozen products to many other places in the northwest USA. We were on a tour as part of my research on small towns and the local people were showing us this site as an instance of the employment that kept them and their town alive.

They started at the unloading dock where truckloads of chickens were brought in. The loading dock and initial processing area was all lit up by blue light so it created a particularly weird context for the noise of the trucks and the clucking and squawking of thousands of chickens. The plant supervisor told us that they used the blue lights because researchers had found it helped to calm the chickens.

As each crate was opened, the chickens inside were hung up by their legs on a moving conveyer belt with multiple hooks. They moved slowly between two hanging rubber sheets and into the area where they were sedated with a gas then their heads were cut off. The rest of the plant – the largest part by far – was full of conveyers, machines, and people in white coats who did the job of gutting the carcasses and packaging the various parts into their appropriate containers – some of them for fresh meat and others to be frozen.

The supervisor explained how humane the slaughtering was – with the use of the calming blue light and the sedating gas – so that the animals suffered very little. He also pointed out how many people are fed with the plant's products – and how many local families are supported by the work. It still left me uneasy – probably for similar reasons that you have expressed.

The other – very different – example comes from your mother's experience in the Dominican Republic. She tells the story of the day her host family (she was living with some local people as part of her time there) decided they wanted to go for a picnic at the beach. They decided to barbecue some chicken to have with their bread, vegetables, and fruit. Daegan points out how shocked she was when they went into their back yard and stuffed one of their chickens into a bag as part of the picnic lunch. Down on the beach, they got out their axe to cut up some wood for the fire, then used it to chop off the head of the chicken for lunch!

I could imagine the scene since I had a similar experience when my grandfather would slaughter a chicken or goose on his small farm near Vancouver. We all laughed when the headless chicken would run around in circles a few times before it finally flopped down. This was the way we got our meat in the days before massive packing plants.

In the midst of these examples, your questions keep coming back: Do they suffer? Is there a humane way to kill them? Should we be killing them in the first place? or What are our alternatives?

They made me think of the ways in which various groups of native peoples understand that the deer they just killed or the beaver they just trapped was choosing to sacrifice itself to them – and therefore deserved their respect. They often had rituals as signs of this respect for the animals they killed. The spirits of the animals and humans co-existed in an inter-dependent way and each of their contributions needed to be recognized and celebrated. I think this is the way they chose to “suffer the question” of eating meat to survive.

Like you, I don't know the answer to this important question, but I am certain that we must continuously ‘suffer the question’ rather than seek a one-sided and sometimes narrow answer to it. Like you point out,

becoming a vegetarian is one option, but it avoids suffering the question since it presumes that the only way we mistreat animals is by eating them. Similarly, those who argue that animals are simply resources for us to eat and we shouldn't get concerned with their welfare are trying to avoid suffering the question.

Like so many important things in life, I find myself more ambivalent than convinced – more satisfied with the position of “I don't know what is the best thing to do.” rather than “Here is the answer.” This means I would be against the beating or mistreatment of animals, but it doesn't mean that I would forbid killing them. In this respect, the use of blue lights and sedation is an improvement in the process, even if the process is somewhat distasteful.

I like how you have seen the similarity of these issues within the aquarium experience. I was amazed at the tricks and abilities of the dolphins, and expect they are well treated, for example, but remain concerned that their 'world' has shrunk from the breadth of the ocean to a small pool in Stanley Park – and instead of swimming with tens and hundreds of other dolphins, they are limited to 2 or 3. Here is another question to suffer: Is the knowledge and entertainment value of these animals worth the limitations we have placed on their lives? Even if we rescued them from death or injury in the wild, does this give us the right to control them in this way?

Maybe one day we will find ways to reduce the negative aspects of these cases – and enhance the positive. Perhaps it will come by finding more exciting non-animal sources of protein and nourishment, or perhaps it will be by improving the way in which we house, feed, and even slaughter them. But whatever these options might be, they will only emerge if we have more people who are suffering these questions the way you are!

Love,
Bill