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Writing 2

Getting Back to The Farm

When you imagine a farm, do you picture a red barn? Do you see cattle grazing on a huge, lush, grassy field surrounded by a white picket fence? Chickens in a pen pecking at the ground to find the remains of the food the farmer sprinkled down for them? That's the image I have. It's one we all know that was conjured up by the countless children's books we read and toys we played with. If you plan to visit a 21st century farm, don't expect to reminisce about your childhood.

A look into the modern farm is enough to make one sick. Cows wade knee-deep in their own feces ("Beef" 1). Chickens live in a dark room in which they can barely move and then are carelessly hurled into cages too small to even turn around while they await their deaths by blade or by drowning (*Food, Inc.*). It sounds like a horror story, but it is the reality of the modern food industry. The practices factory farms use to save money and maximize efficiency make the food industry one of the most powerful forces in harming animals and the environment today.

The number of animal welfare problems these factories create is staggering. United States factory farms raise and kill nearly 10 billion animals each year, most of which are abused on a level most experts agree has never been reached in human history—abuse that would be considered a felony if performed on household pets (Williams 245). To start, let's look at the treatment of the animal that allows McDonald's to display its "Over 29 Billion Served" sign—the cow. From birth, cattle are fed corn in

order to make them fatten faster. Cows are ruminants, which means that their digestive systems are designed for grass rather than grain. Corn makes cattle sick, sometimes to the point of death (“Beef” 1). Giving a creature something other than what is designed to eat is logically absurd if its wellbeing is given any consideration. Of course, corn is also cheaper and inevitably leads to greater profit for the company subsidizing the farm. To keep the cows alive long enough to get them to their utmost fattened potential (and to help them survive the illnesses they get from walking in their own filth), the workers must give them antibiotics. In addition, they give the cows growth hormones because the corn just doesn’t seem to be enough.

And it gets worse. When cows arrive at the slaughterhouse, they are already in tremendous pain, in one case crippled from being tortured by workers (Weiss). Also, factory farms often keep the cattle to be slaughtered inside concrete-floored sheds for about four years. Often they are mutilated by having their horns and tails cut off to perform operations to increase milk yield (Williams 247). If you are starting to rethink that trip to the hamburger joint, I don’t blame you. It is a truly horrifying image. Some cows do not even live long enough to have to face this ordeal. I am referring to veal, the innocently named dish that is a slaughtered five-month-old calf. From the time they are one or two days old, veal calves live in narrow crates that are only slightly bigger than the size of their bodies. They are unable to turn around, lie down comfortably, or interact with their mothers or other calves in any way, until it is time for slaughter when they reach the market age of five months (246). Forcing young calves to spend their lives in confinement in which they can never do anything is the definition of animal cruelty. This kind of injustice to any living thing has no place in a civilized society.

Unfortunately, cattle are not the only animals that must endure the living Hell that is the factory farm. In fact, “living Hell” might be the only way to describe what most chickens go through for their entire lives. In Robert Kenner’s documentary, *Food, Inc.*, a Perdue grower named Carole Morison describes the early life of a chicken on her farm.

“When they grow from a chick and in seven weeks you’ve got a five-and-a-half-pound chicken, their bones and internal organs can’t keep up with the rapid growth. A lot of these chickens here, they can take a few steps and then they plop down. It’s because they can’t keep up with the weight that they’re carrying.”

The comment is followed by the image of a chicken lying on its back, breathing heavily, unable to get up. And this is the case, even in a comparatively tame farm where they are allowed to roam and have sunlight. The chickens are usually ready for slaughter at the age of forty-five days. Williams says, “[they] endure often painful, sometimes fatal metabolic and skeletal disorders that cause a tremendous amount of suffering” (247). Living in tiny, filthy battery cages, the hens are unable to walk or even spread their wings. They are stuffed into file-drawer-sized cages with multiple other birds for their entire one-and-a-half-year life. In addition, “undercover investigations have revealed hens impaled on cage bars, trapped without food and water access, packed into cages with dead and rotting birds, and suffering from a litany of painful health problems” (Miller and Ghiotto).

But alas, this is only the beginning of the chickens’ suffering. When they are ready for slaughter, the birds suffer immense pain, as they are tortured en route to their deaths.

Workers unload them from transport crates and shackle them upside down while they are fully conscious. They are stunned by being moved through electrified water, and then their throats are slit. Many of them miss the blade and are still fully conscious when they're immersed and finally drown in tanks of scalding-hot water used to loosen their feathers (Williams 246).

To say this is an animal welfare problem is a laughable understatement. These farming corporations think that it is okay to treat living beings like they cannot feel. If this were done to a human, or a dog or a cat, imagine how the public would react. Honestly, it seems like an over-the-top movie. Whether you are a vegetarian or an avid meat-eater, you cannot argue that the modern treatment of farm animals is not cruel.

This is not the farm you read about in *Charlotte's Web*. It's not Old McDonald's farm. It is a factory that tortures helpless animals and defaces the environment. Indeed, factory farms are one of the leading causes of environmental destruction. Hormones and antibiotics that are given to cows to keep them from getting sick end up polluting the water supply and the whole world begins to feel the burden these farms put on the Earth. Plus, the corn the factories feed cattle with requires the use of pesticides and fertilizers, which are created using natural gas. Toxic runoff from the feedlots further pollutes land and water ("Beef" 2). In 2006, The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations stated that modern meat production is a greater contributor to global warming than automobiles. The industry produces 65% of the nitrous oxide in the atmosphere, a chemical that is significantly worse for the ozone than carbon dioxide (1). In addition, farm animals now produce around 500 million tons of manure a year. This is a significant

pollutant of our air, soil, and water because of the huge amounts of methane released into the atmosphere. The farms use huge amounts of domestic water and nearly three-fourths of our grain harvest to feed the animals, when they shouldn't be eating it anyway. What's more, meat production requires a vast amount of fossil fuels and natural resources (Williams 248). Clearly, factory farms pose a formidable threat to the environment both in terms of harming living creatures and the land, water, and air we all share.

Giant corporations are powerful opponents to the health of the environment, and they are strongly in favor of keeping costs low and efficiency high. Factory farms take care of both of these things, so we cannot expect the problem to disappear overnight. Luckily, there are things we can do to speed up the process. What's the best way to make an industry understand that you aren't happy with what it is doing? Don't buy its products. We are hugely dependent on farms as a nation—each of us eats on average around 220 pounds of meat, 255 pounds of dairy products, and 260 eggs every year (USDA 245). Not only do our massive consumption habits stuff corporations' pocketbooks, they remove us from the understanding that our planet's resources are finite. When people hunted for their own food, or bought it from small markets, they had to be grateful for what they had. The first step to solving the problem of factory farms must be to eat less meat.

Of course reduction of meat consumption alone will not convert the factory farm back into the classic farm of yesterday. More than simply decreasing the amount of meat we eat, we also need to change the kind of meat we eat. Organic farming is one solution to this dilemma. On an organic farm, animals cannot be given any kind of growth hormone or antibiotic except certain vaccines. The farmer must always treat sick animals,

but if antibiotics are used, the animal cannot be sold on the organic market. The animals' food may not contain plastic, urea, poultry, litter, manure or parts of slaughtered animals. Finally, animals must have outdoor access for fresh air, freedom of movement, and sunlight—and the animals must be treated with minimal pain and stress (Organic 2). Organic farms promote animal welfare in a powerful way. If we can convert our consumption habits toward organic produce, we will be doing our own part while simultaneously showing corporations that negative treatment of animals is unacceptable.

Beyond animals, the organic method promotes treating the environment with respect, more like a living entity in and of itself. Knowing that the current state of the meat industry is harming the environment more than automobile pollution, it is clear that we should give organic food a chance. In fact, a recent study published in the Canadian journal *Sustainability* confirms that organic farms are significantly more energy-efficient than the common factory farm. 50-70% of the average household's carbon footprint from food is composed of farm production and processing, with only 11% coming from transport (Lynch 323). According to the findings of the study, organic farming could reduce “food-chain energy use”, which means the total amount of energy used in the production, transport, and sale of food, by over 7%. Also, the energy used for wholesale and retail is 30% of total food-chain energy usage. With the reduced processing and minimal food waste of organic farming, that number could be lowered significantly (348). Factory farms impact the environment in an irreparable way, and organic farming is one of the best solutions to this problem.

However, the lack of efficiency of the organic food system is something that needs to be taken into consideration. It is the reason that the industry has so much trouble

switching to this more environmentally friendly model of food production. There just isn't as much yield per acre, not to mention the cost of feeding cows grass instead of corn, and packing hundreds of chickens into a crowded room. Plus, it is not easy to shift an industry's standard means of production so drastically overnight. But these things are small when the entire picture is taken into consideration. The UC Berkeley Wellness Letter argues, "...Efficiency must be measured in terms of the long-term environmental damage caused by industrial agriculture and the enormous amount of energy it consumes" ("Organic" 3). The desire for wealth has to be secondary to our desire to survive and to help the planet thrive.

As bleak as the situation is, we can truly look forward optimistically. Several states including California, Oregon, and Florida have passed laws in the last few years criminalizing "the confinement of animals in battery cages, gestation crates, and veal crates" (Williams 249). The initiatives by farm animal rights activists are finally paying off. In addition, "Safeway, Whole Foods, Burger King, Wolfgang Puck, and even animal producers such as Smithfield Foods are beginning to move away from supporting the use of crates and cages on factory farms" (249). Chipotle, a Mexican food chain owned by McDonald's, prides itself on its "Food with Integrity" campaign. The restaurant only gets its meat from farms that treat their animals and the environment respectfully, and whenever possible only use meat not treated with hormones or antibiotics (Chipotle). These corporations are helping to pave the road away from factory farms and toward organic, or at least ethical farming.

The fact that we are moving into the future of technology and business so quickly does not mean that we have to ignore the good things that the past has taught us. We tend

to take for granted the beneficial things different aspects of our society have to offer and eventually let them fade away. Luckily, the green farm with a red barn still exists, it's just much harder to find than it once was. We cannot make the transition back to those days without first making changes in our own lives. Take a break from eating meat—it's really not that hard. And if you really need it, go buy organic or support companies who treat their animals well. We know government and corporations will not take care of the problem for us—we have to tell them that the way animals are being treated is unacceptable and that they need to take our environment into account before their wealth. Our connection with the natural world is fading fast, and factory farms are central to that problem. Let's remember that buying from companies who care very little or not at all about the welfare of their animals and the environment is not our only option. We do not have to be slaves to the people who are harming the Earth.

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