

CHAPTER ONE

FOOD'S POWER



“The world is his who can see through its pretensions. What deafness, what stone-blind custom, what overgrown error you behold, is there only by sufferance—your sufferance. See it to be a lie, and you have already dealt it a mortal blow.”

—EMERSON

“The most violent weapon on earth is the table fork.”

—MAHATMA GANDHI

Food as Metaphor

Since time immemorial—going back at least two and a half millennia to Pythagoras in Greece, the Old Testament prophets in the ancient Levant, and Mahavira and Gautama Buddha in India, as well as later luminaries such as Plato, Plotinus, and the early Christian fathers—social reformers and spiritual teachers have emphasized the importance of attending to our attitudes and practices surrounding food. The fact that these teachings have been aggressively ignored, discounted, and covered up over the centuries is of paramount significance, and if we look deeply into the wounds and attitudes responsible for this cover-up, we will discover liberating truths about our culture and ourselves, and

about the way to positive personal and planetary transformation. What gives food such power, and why is this power still so unrecognized today? Answering this question requires us to pay attention in new ways and make connections we have been taught not to make.

Food is not only a fundamental necessity; it is also a primary symbol in the shared inner life of every human culture, including our own. It is not hard to see that food is a source and metaphor of life, love, generosity, celebration, pleasure, reassurance, acquisition, and consumption. And yet it is also, ironically, a source and metaphor of control, domination, cruelty, and death, for we often kill to eat. Every day, from the cradle to the grave, we all make food choices, or they are made for us. The quality of awareness from which these inevitable food choices arise—and whether we are making them ourselves or they are being made for us—greatly influences our ability to make connections. This ability to make meaningful connections determines whether we are and become lovers and protectors of life or unwitting perpetrators of cruelty and death.

I believe that at the deepest levels of our consciousness we all yearn to achieve authentic spiritual union with the source of being, to experience directly our true nature. It is this longing to experience wholeness, truth, and freedom from the painful illusion of fundamental separateness that urges us to explore and inquire into the mysteries surrounding us every day. We realize that looking deeply connects us with our spiritual roots and resources. Looking deeply into food, into what and how we eat, and into the attitudes, actions, and beliefs surrounding food, is an adventure of looking into the very heart of our culture and ourselves. As surprising as it may seem, as we shine the light of awareness onto this most ordinary and necessary aspect of our lives, we shine light onto unperceived chains of bondage attached to our bodies, minds, and hearts, onto the bars of cages we never could quite see, and onto a sparkling path that leads to transformation and the possibility of true love, freedom, and joy in our lives. We may want to laugh at such strong claims. Food? Our old friend, food? We have bigger projects and more pressing issues. Food is so pedestrian. We eat and run, or we eat to be comforted and sustained in our quests, or as background to fellowship or television. Food is just food, we might well protest. It's no big deal!

Sacred Feasts

As we look more deeply, we can see that food is a universal metaphor for intimacy. Many of us know the feeling of loving something or someone so deeply that we would like to become one with, and bring into ourselves, this apparent other. Perhaps it is a glorious sunrise that we drink in with our eyes, a melody that somehow opens our heart and melts something within us, or our beloved with whom we long to merge and become one. All the arts are conduits for the expression of this deep human longing for unity, but it is only in the art of food preparation and eating that this oneness is actually physically achieved. This is part of what makes eating such a powerful experience and metaphor: food art is eaten and *becomes* us. It enters as object and *becomes* subject; what is “not-me” is transformed into “me.” What an alchemical miracle! It is the same as the miracle of spiritual illumination, and of forgiveness, and of love. What is not-me, the other, or even the potential enemy is somehow transmuted, by opening and embracing, into me, us. A healing occurs, an awakening to the larger wholeness in which the formerly separate “me” and “not-me” are united as co-elements, co-operators.

Partaking of food is thus a comprehensive metaphor for healing, spiritual transformation, forgiveness, and transcendent love. At a deep level, we all know this. Food preparation is the only art that allows us literally to incorporate what we create, and it is also the only art that fully involves all five senses. It also relies heavily on what is referred to in Buddhist teachings as the sixth sense: mentation, the mental activity that contextualizes what we perceive through our senses. We have incredibly intricate and complex layers of thinking and feeling attached to food that are an important part of our experience of eating. Our family and culture contribute enormously to these thoughts and feelings, and these memories and identifications give meaning to our meals.

Eating is thus the most intimate of all activities in which we actually accomplish the complex and longed-for union of self and other, subject and world. And so it has always been seen, cross-culturally, as the most sacred human activity, and the most culturally binding as well. We cannot become more intimate with someone or something than by eating them. They then literally become us. Such an intimate act must cer-

tainly be attended to with the greatest awareness, love, discrimination, and reverence. If it is not, then it is a clear indication that something is seriously awry.

Once we realize that preparing and eating food is humanity's fundamental symbol of intimacy and spiritual transformation, we can begin to understand why sacred feasts are essential to every culture's religious and social life. The metaphor of eating is central to spiritual communion with the divine presence. It is universally recognized that eating food is both a literally and symbolically sacred action: it is directly partaking of the infinite order that transcends our finite lives.

Though it appears that we are mere finite beings eating food, from another perspective we can see the infinite eternally feeding itself with itself. Through this act of partaking, we open, embrace, and actually embody the infinite order as a unique expression of itself, which is us, these human beings who are eating. This is an expression of the profoundest love. When we eat, we are loved by the eternal and mysterious force that births all life, that makes present all who ever preceded us, that manifests itself ceaselessly as us and experiences life through us, with a love that thoroughly gives of itself to us, to we who *are* this force. It is a love that our intuitive heart can sense and respond to and deeply, ecstatically appreciate, but that our rational mind can barely begin to comprehend.

Food, Life, and Death

What is so simple as eating an apple? And yet, what could be more sacred or profound? When we eat an apple we are not just eating an apple as a separate thing. The apple enters us, dissolves within us, contributes to us, and becomes us. And each apple is a manifestation of so much more! We are eating of the rain and the clouds and of all the trees that have gone before to bring this tree into manifestation, and of the tears, sweat, bodies, and breaths of countless generations of animals, plants, and people that have become the rain and soil and wind that feed the apple tree.

When we look into one apple, we see the entire universe. All the planets and stars, our sun and moon, the oceans, rivers, forests, fields,

and creatures are in this apple. The apple tree is a manifestation of an infinite web of life, and for the tree to exist, every component of the web is vital. The apple is the gift of the tree and of the infinite universe propagating and celebrating itself through the apple. The seeds fall, in the apple, to become new trees, or are eaten by humans or bears or birds and thus distributed more widely, spreading and benefiting the tree and the whole system, unfolding in utter vastness, complexity, and perfection.

If we become aware of this when we eat an apple, we will know we are loved and nourished, and that we are part of something greater, a mystery so immense and benevolent and exciting that we can only be touched by the sense of sacredness. In virtually all societies, the times when we pause to remember the source of our life and to consciously connect with the great mystery are at death, with funerals, and at meals, with grace and prayers. Eating an apple with awareness can be a sacred feast, and yet it is usually done casually while we are preoccupied with something else.

We humans, eating apples, are in a true sense apples eating apples. The whole universe is not only in every apple but in every one of us. In eating, we see that there are no fundamentally separate things at all, but only processes. All things partake of each other, ever changing, and are eventually eaten by the process and by time, the great devourer. Food is the source and metaphor of the flow of life into death and of death into life.

We can see that the mythic and spiritual significance of eating food is profound and has been woven into the underlying mythos and religious traditions of many cultures, including our own. Besides the ongoing symbolic appeal of eating the sacramental Christian communion meal, transforming Jesus' death, there is the birth story. Jesus was born in a manger! What a potent symbol, to be born in someone's food bowl. He was born to be spiritual food for others, and the profound connections between the symbolism of the manger and of the Last Supper point to food's enduring power as a primary metaphor of the spiritual mystery that both embraces and transcends life and death.

As we evolve spiritually and awaken our potential, we can be food for others every day, sharing our love and understanding, our time and

energy, nourishing others and ourselves in the process. It is not just our personal love, energy, or time that we share, for, like the apple, when we give of ourselves we are giving of the gifts we've received from our families, teachers, and friends, from the earth and her creatures, from the sun, moon, and stars, and from all our experiences. Ultimately, we are life itself giving to itself—feeding itself, exploring, satisfying, and rejuvenating itself. If we live well, we feed many with the most nourishing food: the fruits of compassion and wisdom. In the end, more than needing food for the journey, we can discover that we are the food for each other's journey, and that our deepest need and joy is not merely to consume but to be this nourishing food for others. We are all born in a symbolic manger, to be spiritual food for others, and we are called to discover our unique way of contributing.

Is it so surprising that something so mundane as eating appears to be could yet occupy the central place of power in our cultural and spiritual lives? In exploring this further, we must examine what we choose to eat. What lies behind our food choices?

The Origin of Our Food: Either Plants or Animals

In our culture, the distinction between food items that come from animals and those that come from plants is sometimes deliberately blurred and overlooked. In explicitly recognizing the obvious, though, we empower ourselves to understand more deeply.

Food of plant origin is most often the fruits and seeds that are freely released from certain plants. For example, grains such as wheat, oats, rice, corn, barley, quinoa, rye, and millet are the seeds and fruits of cereal grasses. Legumes such as soybeans, chickpeas, lentils, peas, beans, and peanuts are the seeds of leguminous plants. Fruit-vegetables like tomatoes, squashes, peppers, pumpkins, okra, eggplants, and cucumbers are the fruits and seeds of herbaceous plants. Fruits and seeds released from trees and other plants make up many of the other plant foods we eat, such as apples, oranges, bananas, papayas, avocados, breadfruit, melons, grapes, lemons, plums, peaches, cherries, apricots, olives, figs, dates, and other fruits; blackberries, strawberries, blueberries, cranberries, raspberries, and other berries; pecans, walnuts, hazel-

nuts, macadamias, cashews, almonds, coconuts, and other nuts; and sunflower seeds, sesame seeds, pumpkin seeds, cocoa, flax seeds, pine nuts, and other seeds. Some foods are seed-bearing flowers, like broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts, and artichokes, or spore-bearing fruits of underground fungi, like mushrooms, or starchy tubers like potatoes and yams. A few are roots, like carrots and beets, or leaves, like chard, cabbage, and lettuce, or stalks, like asparagus, celery, and sugarcane.

Behind the plant foods on our plates, we see orchards and gardens, fields, forests, and seasons, and people nurturing and tending plants. If they are organically grown with sustainable and small-scale methods, we see the beauty and abundance of the earth yielding delicious and healthy foods to hands that practice caring and work in harmony with nature's rhythms.

Looking deeply, we see that there is very little suffering caused by eating these foods; most plant foods are fruits and seeds released from grasses, herbs, trees, vines, and other plants. In addition, unlike animals, which are mobile and thus need a nervous system with pain receptors to help them avoid self-damaging behaviors, plants have nothing analogous to a physical nervous system or pain receptors. Since they are rooted and stationary, there is no reason for nature to grant or evolve mechanisms that would help them by allowing them to feel pain.*

Food of animal origin is either the actual flesh and organs of dead animals, or animal excretions appropriated for food. In the former class of foods is the muscle flesh of a variety of animals who are killed to produce the foods that are the centerpieces of most of our culture's meals. The flesh of fish and shellfish is typically referred to by the animal's species, such as tuna, catfish, salmon, lobster, crab, and shrimp. Though amphibians and reptiles are less commonly eaten in the U.S. than in some countries, frogs, turtles, and alligators are nevertheless raised here to produce frog's legs and turtle and alligator meat for human consump-

* While some may argue that plants are nevertheless capable of suffering, this would be all the more reason not to consume animal-based foods, because it requires enormous amounts of grain to produce meat, eggs, dairy products, and farmed fish. It also requires the devastation of forests, prairies, and wildlife habitat for pasture and to grow these grains, and the destruction of marine ecosystems. See Chapter 11 for further details.

tion. The flesh of birds is also referred to by the animal's species, as when we eat chicken, turkey, duck, emu, and pheasant, and differentiation is often made between different types and colors of flesh, such as breast and leg, white meat and dark meat. In contrast to the above, the flesh of other mammals is rarely named by species but as a particular "cut" of flesh, such as loin, sirloin, flank, rump roast, shoulder roast, rib roast, T-bone, brisket, or as pork, bacon, ribs, veal, lamb chops, venison, mutton, ground beef, hamburger, hot dog, baloney, sausage, and ham. Certain internal organs are also eaten, particularly the kidneys and livers of young mammals, the fattened livers of ducks and geese (foie gras), and, less often, the stomach tissue (tripe) and the heart, tongue, brains, and feet of certain animals (sometimes referred to as head cheese). The milk of lactating mother cows, sheep, and goats is drunk and eaten as butter, yogurt, cream, and a variety of cheeses. The latter are formed using rennet, the stomach lining of slaughtered calves, to coagulate the milk. Birds' eggs are also appropriated for food, as is the honey excreted from the bodies of bees.

In contrast to plants, which naturally produce healthy and nourishing foods that involve little if any suffering, animals are routinely dominated and attacked in order to obtain the flesh, milk, and eggs we humans eat. This clearly involves suffering, for we all know with utter certainty that taking a knife and cutting into the skin of a dog, cow, cat, chicken, rabbit, or human is totally different from cutting into the skin of a tomato or grapefruit, that biting into the leg of a pig cannot be compared to biting into a fresh apple. The renowned ethologist Konrad Lorenz once remarked that anyone who couldn't see the difference between chopping up a dog and chopping up a lettuce should commit suicide for the benefit of society. We know today that all vertebrate animals are endowed with central nervous systems with proprioceptors that are sensitive to a variety of painful stimuli, including being cut, burned, crushed, confined, electrically shocked, and subjected to cold and heat, noxious smells, bruising, and chafing, and that they feel psychological pain as we would when they are physically confined, their babies are stolen from them, or their innate drives are systematically thwarted.

The Culture of Denial

The more forcefully we ignore something, the more power it has over us and the more strongly it influences us. Looking undistractedly into the animal-derived foods produced by modern methods, we inescapably find misery, cruelty, and exploitation. We therefore avoid looking deeply at our food if it is of animal origin, and this practice of avoidance and denial, applied to eating, our most basic activity and vital ritual, carries over automatically into our entire public and private life. We know, deep down, that we cannot look deeply anywhere, for if we do, we will have to look deeply into the enormous suffering our food choices directly cause. So we learn to stay shallow and to be willingly blind to the connections we could see. Otherwise, our remorse and guilt would be too painful to bear. The acknowledged truth would also conflict too strongly with our self-image, causing serious cognitive dissonance and emotional disturbance. We choose to ignore, and thus choose to be ignorant and inattentive.

Being unwilling and unable to see, confront, and take responsibility for the hidden ocean of horror that our most basic activity causes to those who are as sentient and vulnerable as we are, we have split ourselves into a schizophrenia of politeness and civility that lives uneasily with the remorseless cruelty that surfaces whenever we obtain or eat animal foods. I believe this split is *the* fundamental unrecognized wound we modern humans suffer, and from it many other wounds and divisions naturally and inevitably follow. It is so deep and terrible that it is taboo to discuss it publicly.

Choosing to be blind to what we are actually doing when we shop for, prepare, and eat food, we blind ourselves not only to the horror and suffering we are instigating and eating, but also to the beauty of the world around us. This acquired inability to actually see and appreciate the overwhelming loveliness of this earth allows us to ravage forests and oceans and systematically destroy the natural world. Becoming insensitive to the pain we cause daily to defenseless animals, we also become insensitive to the beauty and luminosity of the creation that we oppress and from which we disconnect at every meal.

The desensitizing of millions of children and adults—on the massive

scale that consuming millions of tortured animals daily requires—sows countless seeds of human violence, war, poverty, and despair. These outcomes are unavoidable, for we can never reap joy, peace, and freedom for ourselves while sowing the seeds of harming and enslaving others. We may speak of love, kindness, freedom, and a gentler world, yet it is our actions, especially those that are habitually practiced, that determine what future outcomes we and others will experience. The cycles of violence that have terrorized people both historically and today are rooted in the violence of our daily meals. Though animals cannot retaliate like other people can, our violence toward them retaliates against us.

Inheriting Cruelty

By confining and killing animals for food, we have brought violence into our bodies and minds and disturbed the physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual dimensions of our selves in deep and intractable ways. Our meals require us to eat like predators and thus to see ourselves as such, cultivating and justifying predatory behaviors and institutions that are the antithesis of the inclusiveness and kindness that accompany spiritual growth. Because cruelty is inescapable in confining, mutilating, and slaughtering animals for food, we have been forced from childhood to be distracted and inattentive perpetrators of cruelty.

None of us ever consciously and freely chose to eat animals. We have all inherited this from our culture and upbringing. Going into the baby food department of any grocery store today, we see it immediately: beef-flavored baby food, chicken, veal, and lamb baby food, and even cheese lasagna baby food. Well-meaning parents, grandparents, friends, and neighbors have forced the flesh and secretions of animals upon us from before we can remember. As infants, we have no idea what “veal,” “turkey,” “egg,” or “beef” actually are, or where they come from. We don’t know what horror is visited upon helpless creatures in order to create the easily available concoctions being spooned into our little teething mouths. We find out slowly, and by the time we do, the cruelty and perversity involved seem natural and normal to us. We are never told that we humans are not designed to eat the large quantities of animal foods typical of our culture. We are never told of

the extreme confinement, the routine unanesthetized castrations and other mutilations, and the brutal and often botched killings that stare up at us every day from our bowls and plates, and that we unthinkingly chew while watching television, reading, or conversing.

Thus, our deepest and most blessed connection with the earth and with the mystery of infinite spiritual consciousness—our daily meals—have become rituals of distraction and repressed sensitivity and guilt rather than rituals of heart-opening gratitude, connectedness, blessedness, and love. The price we pay for this is incalculable and includes, among other things, the dulling of our innate intelligence and compassion and a consequent loss of peace, freedom, and joy.

The Withering of Intelligence

Intelligence is the ability to make meaningful connections, and this is true for all living systems, such as humans, animals, communities, and societies. Participating in daily rituals that repress our ability to make connections severely impedes our intelligence, even amid our current glut of so-called information, and destroys our ability to deal effectively with the serious problems we generate. Because we are adept at disconnecting from the suffering we impose on animals, we naturally and inevitably become adept at disconnecting from the suffering we impose on hungry people, living biosystems, war-ravaged communities, and future generations. Our skills in forcefully blocking feedback also make us easily distracted and manipulated by corporate interests whose profits depend on our inability to make significant connections.

Compassion is ethical intelligence: it is the capacity to make connections and the consequent urge to act to relieve the suffering of others. Like cognitive intelligence, it is suppressed by the practice of eating animals. The ability to disconnect, practiced at every mealtime, is seen in perhaps more chilling guise in the modern scientist slowly freezing dogs to death to learn about human physiology, in modern soldiers looking straight into the eyes of helpless civilians and killing them, in hunters deceiving and chasing defenseless animals and killing them for sport, and in countless other legal and approved cultural activities.

As long as we remain, at core, a culture that sees animals merely as

commodities and food, there is little hope for our survival. The systematic practice of ignoring, oppressing, and excluding that is fundamental to our daily meals disconnects us from our inner wisdom and from our sense of belonging to a benevolent and blessed universe. By actively ignoring the truth of our connectedness, we inescapably commit geocide and suicide, and forsake the innate intelligence and compassion that would guide us.

I-Thou vs. I-It

In the 1920s the philosopher Martin Buber introduced and articulated an essential distinction in our relations with others and in our consequent sense of self that is increasingly recognized for its importance. Proposing that we do not develop our sense of “I” in isolation, but rather through relationship with others, he went on to say that when we relate to others as being conscious, and as having feelings, experiences, desires, and purposes, we develop an “I-Thou” sense of self. When we relate to others as objects, as having no significant desires, purposes, or consciousness of their own, we develop an “I-It” sense of ourselves. Cultivating an I-Thou sense of self, we cultivate respect and sensitivity towards others and ourselves. Cultivating an I-It sense of self, we tend to relate to others as instruments to be used. This I-It sense of self leads to an increasingly deadened and depersonalized view of nature, animals, and other people, and to an inner hardening that shields us from feeling the pain of whomever and whatever we are using, consuming, and exploiting. According to Buber, the I-It sense of self requires and fosters an inner insensitivity that leads to an ever-increasing craving to consume more things. This ironic and impossible quest for happiness and fulfillment by an objectified, separate, anxious self that reduces others to instruments to be used for pleasure and gain is a primary driving force behind consumerism and the runaway industrialization, corporate capitalism, and environmental and social devastation that this mentality inevitably manifests.

While Buber’s insights are certainly provocative and illuminating, it seems he failed to recognize the deeper dynamic responsible for the I-It sense of self: the food choices we learn from birth, in which mysterious,

sensitive, and intelligent beings are continually and unquestioningly reduced to mere food objects to be used, killed, and eaten.

It's remarkable, we might think, that Buber couldn't make this rather obvious connection in over forty years of meditating and writing on the I-Thou and I-It mentalities. Yet what is far more remarkable is that out of the thousands of leading writers and researchers in the physical sciences, human sciences, and humanities over the last hundred years, virtually no one has produced a sentence on the subject! These great minds were among the most innovative and courageous of their time, willing to risk controversy and daring to offer the world many new ideas in sociology and social theory, psychology, philosophy, systems theory, science, economics, history, government, anthropology, theology, comparative religion, and spirituality.¹ How could something so central and obvious to our lives and thinking—our treatment of animals for food—go ignored by—and invisible to—so many for so long? It's eerie to contemplate the mountains of books, articles, essays, lectures, and documentaries produced by and about the great minds of modernity—and to realize how unmentionable this subject is. The idea that our routine violence against animals for food could be a primary driving force behind human suffering and war has managed to remain virtually completely unthinkable to this day.

Even the more radical and contemporary voices have been unwilling or unable to seriously address this subject, as have virtually all the current writers and leaders in the human potential, spiritual, environmental, social justice, holistic health, and peace movements.² This is not meant in any way as a criticism of any of these fine people and their contributions and ideas, but is intended rather to emphasize the amazing resistance our entire culture has to confronting its defining behavior, which is as pervasively obvious as cheeseburger ads and fried chicken but at the same time as invisible as air and uncannily unapproachable.

That is because we have all agreed that, at all costs, this truth *must* be ignored. One of Carl Jung's notable contributions was to articulate the character of the shadow archetype: it is what the self is and includes, but denies and represses. Though it is repressed, the shadow *will* be heard and is invariably projected in harmful and perhaps insidious

ways. Our mistreatment of animals for food is far and away our greatest cultural shadow. Our collective guilt drives us not only to hide the violence we eat but also to act it out: in our aggressive lifestyle, in movies, books, games, and other media, and in the violence we inflict both directly and indirectly on each other.

We Are All Mysteries

Our ongoing practice of commodifying animals for food, besides violating the natural order in profound ways that cause enormous unrecognized suffering to us and to the other animals, also blinds us to what we and the other animals actually are.* We err if we reduce ourselves to the status of mere material entities that are born, live awhile, and die. Like other animals, we are not fundamentally physical beings; we are essentially consciousness. We are all expressions of the infinite creative mystery force that births and sustains the universes of manifestation, and our bodies and minds are sacred, as are the bodies and minds of all creatures. Like us, animals have feelings and yearnings; they nest, mate, hunger, and are the conscious subjects of their lives. They make every effort, as we do, to avoid pain and death and to do what brings them happiness and fulfillment.

What we human beings are fundamentally is an enormous mystery. The institutions of science, religion, education, and government have done very little, ultimately, to reveal to us in any profound or transformational way what we humans essentially *are*. We remain perhaps as mysterious to ourselves as we were in the days of Moses, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus. Some may argue that we know more and have certainly evolved more; others may argue that we know less of what is truly vital, and are more distracted and benighted than in earlier times. No one, though, can argue that we are not mysteries to ourselves, for all our scientific and theological investigations. And, just as we do not actually know what a man or woman is, neither do we know what a

*It's important to say "other animals" here, because to set them apart from us is a tactic of exclusion used to perpetuate exploitation and cruelty toward these beings. It also reinforces the absurd notion that humans are not animals—mammals with bodies, brains, glands, reproductive systems, drives, and nervous systems. We feel pain and pleasure like other animals, and we feel, dream, and relate socially to our species members as other animals do.

mare or stallion is, or a dog, an elephant, an eagle, a dolphin, a chicken, a swordfish, a lobster, an alligator, a mouse, a butterfly, an earthworm, a honeybee, or a housefly. They are all utterly mysterious to us, perhaps even more mysterious than we are to ourselves. They are truly *others*, and this essential understanding should create in us a sense of humility, wonder, and respect.

Unfortunately, though, we invent mental categories for the infinitely mysterious beings we encounter, such as “blacks,” “slaves,” and “pagans,” or “food animals,” “game,” “pests,” and “laboratory animals.” These categories, and the violence with which we treat the magnificent beings thus categorized, do not fundamentally change or cheapen that sacred and enigmatic nature. They only cloud and enslave our minds with the distorted thinking born of our exclusionary and self-serving attitude. The light of the infinite spiritual source of all life shines in all creatures. By seeing and recognizing this light in others, we free both them and ourselves. This is love. Failing to see it, often because we never experienced others seeing it in us, we imprison ourselves, mistaking the confines of the shallows for the deep and free.

By seeing other animals merely as objects to be exploited for food, we have torn the fabric of essential harmony so deeply that we have created a culture that enslaves itself, often without realizing it. The domination of humans by humans is a necessary outgrowth of dominating other animals for food. As Jim Mason has demonstrated in *An Unnatural Order*, there is a strong historical link between the human enslavement of other humans and the human enslavement of animals for food. This enslaving mentality of domination and exclusion lies at the core of the spiritual malaise that allows us to wage war upon the earth and upon each other.

Love Is Understanding

When I was young, I often wondered if our culture really had to be like this. I've discovered that it does not. We can all make a most profound contribution to cultural transformation and world peace with our meals, which are our most vital connection to our culture and to the natural world.

Making the effort to cultivate our awareness and see beyond the powerful acculturation we endured brings understanding. Healing, grace and freedom come from understanding. Love understands. From understanding, we can embrace our responsibility and become a force for blessing the world with our lives, rather than perpetuating disconnectedness and cruelty by proxy. With awareness, our behavior naturally changes, and individual changes in behavior, rippling through the web of relationships, can lead to social transformation and bring new dimensions of freedom, joy, and creativity to everyone. It all begins with our most intimate and far-reaching connection with the natural order, our most primary spiritual symbol, and our most fundamental social ritual: eating.