

8



Rescuing the Ox from the Well

I care not for a man's religion if his dog and cat are not the better for it.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

ONCE YOU MOVE TO a farm you need farm animals. So thought our friend Bob, now affectionately known as Bob the Cow Guy. A horticulturist and owner of one of the first native plant nurseries in the Vancouver area, he stopped in about a week after we arrived to check out the place. After a lap around the property he said, “You need some animals.”

Markku laughed off the comment, saying that A Rocha didn't even own the property yet and that conservation and education *not* animal husbandry were our first concerns. That said, yes, someday, perhaps, we might get a cow or a sheep or at least a rabbit.

Rescuing the Ox from the Well

Bob shook his head in an I-know-something-you-don't-know kind of way and said no more—for the moment. He called a week later.

“I’ve got your cows,” were the first words out of his mouth.

“Our cows?” replied Markku.

“Six or seven, maybe a couple more,” said Bob.

Now Markku was worried. He emphasized again that A Rocha didn’t own the property. We were still trying to drum up the \$250,000 for the down payment. Besides that, we only had four acres of pasture which were extremely soggy in the winter. Two, or at most four, cows would be the eventual max. Finally, we didn’t know the first thing about raising cows.

“Well,” said Bob. “My friend is going through a divorce and needs to get rid of them. He’s feeling really desperate and, well, I’ve already paid for them.” Cue the violins.

“And,” he added. “They’re Highland Cows. You know, those cute Scottish ones.”

Markku’s resistance crumbled. He told Bob we’d ask the Leitzes about it. They turned out to have a penchant for interesting animals, having kept a menagerie of exotic creatures, including emus and llamas, on the property over their thirty-year ownership. I can’t recall if they or we had any plan for what we’d do with these shaggy ruminants should the deal with A Rocha fall through. Take them to our house in White Rock with the postage stamp yard? Advertise them on Craigslist? Without a thought to contingency plans, Markku told Bob we would take four. He’d just have to find homes for the others.

“Right,” said Bob. “No problem.”

He arrived a few days later towing a horse trailer behind his diesel truck. Six shaggy cows emerged from the trailer. He was right, they were very cute, but there were two too many. We had agreed on four.

We protested.

He countered. What was he going to do, take the extras to the SPCA? (Actually, he could have, but none of us realized this at the time.)

Planted

So we said, oh alright, gave the cows some hay, and tried to wrap our minds around animal husbandry.

Two days later we got a call from Bob.

“Where are you?” asked Markku.

“In your driveway,” said Bob.

Markku rushed out. Two more cows stood timidly in the field. (Or was that Bob who stood so timidly?)

“That’s it,” said Markku. “No more cows!”

Bob looked thoroughly chastened. “Of course, of course,” he mumbled.

Another two days passed. We were eating breakfast when we heard the unmistakable rumble of a diesel engine.

“That sounds like Bob’s truck,” said Markku, looking at me in alarm. He threw down his spoon and dashed from the kitchen. Bob was just leaving, having snuck two more cows into the pasture.

FACTORY FARMING WILBUR

Thus began a small-scale adventure in cattle rearing and eating. Eating these cows and their offspring—which Bob and the A Rocha community have, one by one, over the span of seven years—got us thinking about the myriad issues surrounding meat farming: issues ranging from the well-being of the animals themselves to the well-being of those who eat them to the well-being of the planet that supports them. The issue of human health has become headline news in recent years, with outbreaks E. coli in factory farms resulting in illness and even deaths among consumers. This in turn has opened the door for a more critical look at the inhumane conditions of many factory farms and feedlots. Bestselling books like *Fast Food Nation* and *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, as well as undercover videos taken by the Humane Society and other animal rights groups at farms as well as slaughter facilities, have gone a long way in bringing the plight of factory farm animals to light.

The biggest contributor to ill-treatment, of course, is overcrowding, which gives rise to all sorts of neurotic behaviors in the animals. Take pigs, for example. Normally sociable and intelligent

Rescuing the Ox from the Well

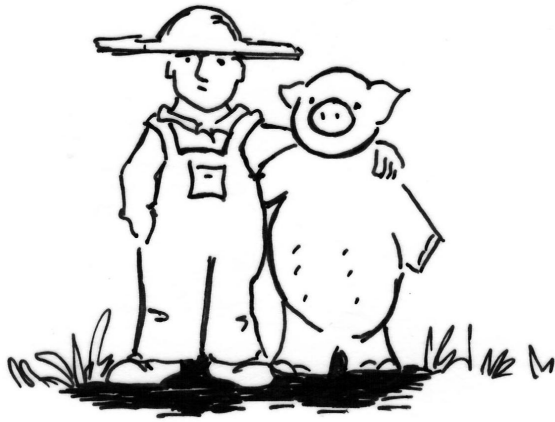
creatures, in more wild settings they live in complex matriarchal family groups and even care for one another's young. Pigs are also, despite the fact that their name has become synonymous with slovenliness, clean animals, building their nests on hillsides so that their own waste runs down and away from their living quarters. But wean them at just three weeks of age, pack them by the thousands in musty, dimly lit barns, and all their sociability flies out the window. They become stressed out and aggressive and take to tail biting (not their own, of course, but the pig's nearest them). The solution: cut off their tails. The benefit of a tailless pig is primarily for the farmer, however, because his real problem is not the tail biting, but his pigs' general state of lethargy. Evidently, as Michael Pollan discovered on his visit to a factory pig farm, a depressed pig will do nothing to defend its *derrière*, which when bit repeatedly will become infected, resulting in a sick pig. But a docked tail is a sensitive tail, and when bit, the pig in question will yelp and scamper out of harm's way. Problem solved.

Chickens don't have it much better. Ninety-five percent of all eggs bought in the U.S. come from caged hens. Confining chickens to small quarters allows farmers to produce eggs at a staggering rate. A single "farm" can produce over two million eggs a day from three million hens. These hens live in wire battery cages (now banned in the EU) with just sixty-seven square inches of "personal space" per bird—not enough to even flap their wings. If left to themselves in such conditions the chickens would peck each other to death and so are de-beaked. To add insult to injury, toes are also removed to ensure that their feet don't grow into the mesh of the cages.

How did these animals come to be treated so abysmally? The answer is scale. Care for fifty pigs or two hundred chickens on the family farm, and you're in the field of animal husbandry. Care for 5,000 pigs or 200,000 chickens, and you're in the field of industry. And industry plays by a whole different set of rules, because the industrial playbook is written with an eye toward efficiency and profit rather than the thoughtful care of individual animals.

Planted

Bernard Rollin, professor of Philosophy, Physiology, and Animal Sciences at Colorado State University, unpacks this shift from husbandry to industry. Because in most husbandry models farmers worked on a small scale, they couldn't afford to lose animals to disease or ill-treatment, nor could they afford a battery of antibiotics or vitamin supplements. Furthermore, because animals in distress are not as reproductive and robust as well-cared-for animals, a symbiosis developed whereby the animal and farmer both benefited—the animal with a happy life and the farmer with a healthy “product.” And because in the olden days consumers knew where their meat came from, they were sure to buy from those farmers with the reputation for the best beef or pork or poultry.



CHECKING WITH SCRIPTURE

Where does the Bible land on the issue of animal welfare? Well, if the biblical ethic toward creation is one of *caring* and *keeping*, such ill-treatment of animals found in much of industrialized meat production warrants our consideration. Not only do both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures provide a theological foundation for earthkeeping in general, they are also full of specific commands about treating animals well. Here's a short sampling of paraphrased verses:

Rescuing the Ox from the Well

- A righteous person cares for the needs of his animals. (Prov 12:10)
- Help raise to its feet an animal that is down even if it belongs to your enemy. (Exod 23:12 and Deut 22:4)
- Rescue a son *or an ox* that has fallen into a well, even on the Sabbath. (Luke 14:5)
- Don't muzzle an ox while it's threshing (because doing so would prohibit the animal from enjoying a reward while working). (Deut 25:4)
- Don't yoke an ox and ass together (because of the hardship it would cause for the weaker animal). (Deut 22:10)

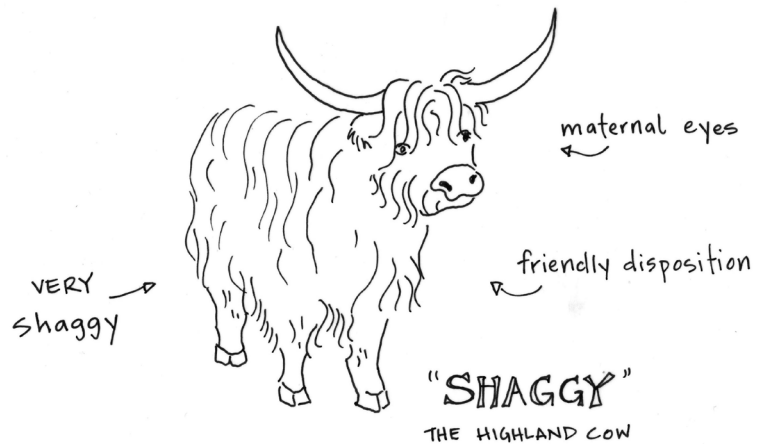
True, you won't find any verses saying, "Thou shalt not let thy cows stand knee-deep in manure at thy cattle feedlot," but that's only because the biblical writers couldn't imagine or predict such a thing. What they could imagine and what they advocated for was shalom—a state of well-being characterized by harmony, not only between humanity and God, but also between humanity and the rest of creation. Shalom occurs when people treat each other and the whole earth with thoughtfulness.

ANIMAL HUSBANDRY 101

Thus we chose to avoid industrially farmed meat at the A Rocha Center. We've learned a fair bit about the issues, but there's always more to learn about the animals themselves. The cow learning curve was certainly steep, illustrated by a simple little mistake we made with one of our Highlands back in those early days.

Her name was Shaggy, and she was big and blond. After a few weeks on the farm we noticed that she walked with a pronounced swagger that all of us previously pregnant types immediately recognized. In consideration of her condition we put her in a special corral to keep an eye on her while she gestated. Soon school kids on field trips were peering at her from across the fence as we said, proud as grandparents, "Look at our pregnant cow!"

Planted



Then a neighbor who runs a cattle feedlot (a very small-scale, friendly sort of feedlot) stopped by. After inspecting our herd with the bemused air of an expert dealing with amateurs, he asked about the cow quarantined to the corral.

"She's pregnant," explained Markku.

"Pregnant, eh?" said Vern, the feedlot man, scratching his chin.

"Yeah, do you have any advice? Anything we should know?"

Vern scratched his chin some more and bent down to inspect the under regions of Shaggy. He stood slowly like he had a sore back. A wry smile spread across his face.

"First thing you should know," he said. "That ain't no cow."

Lesson one in animal husbandry: get your genders right. Turns out the swagger was due to a sore foot.

Lesson two: get your gates right. We learned this lesson one morning as I stumbled bleary-eyed from bed towards the bathroom and happened to glance out the window. I stood paralyzed for a good ten seconds, then rubbed my eyes just like they do in the comic books. There in the field opposite our house stood our ten cows, facing due west toward the adjacent field. There in the adjacent field, facing due east toward our ten cows, were *fifty* large and meaty looking bovines, strangers all.

I yelled for Markku, who was still asleep. I didn't go get him because I didn't trust the mirage of visitor cows to still be there

Rescuing the Ox from the Well

when I got back. I called again with more urgency. The two herds continued their silent cross-fence contemplation, serene and steaming in the morning sun. Finally Markku emerged, and I pointed out the window.

One encounters such purely surreal moments only a few times in one's life and this one was magnificent. Time slowed and wonder reigned as we both stood transfixed in our bewilderment. And a profound communion, born out of a shared encounter with mystery, settled upon us. Never mind that this mystery was merely the banal question, "Where in the world did all those cows come from!?" It's hardly a metaphysical conundrum, and yet we savored every incongruous and sublime second of it.

Of course, the mystery faded pretty quickly as we surmised that our new borders could have come from only one place—the feedlot down the street. Now it was Markku's turn to play the know-it-all. He called Vern and asked if he was missing anything. Nope, he didn't think so. Markku told him to go check his barns and then call back. The phone rang and a sheepish voice confessed that the previous night's truckload of cattle had escaped. Evidently they had meandered down 172nd Street into suburbia, saw our cows in a pleasant pasture, and herded in for an autumnal tête à tête. Actually, a few never made it into our field. One ended up a couple of kilometers away on the shores of the Pacific Ocean, providing more than one beach-goer with a sublime moment of incongruity as they contemplated the Black Angus ambling through the intertidal zone.

EATING SHAGGY

They say you should never name an animal you plan on eating. Perhaps, but I'll say one thing: when you know it's Shaggy on your plate, it sure adds authenticity to your pre-meal prayer. Firsthand knowledge of your dinner's name brings you face to face with the fact that everything that feeds us—from a beef steak to a beefsteak tomato—has to die to give us life. As Gary Synder so ably puts it, "If we do eat meat, it is the life, the bounce, the swish, of a great

Planted

alert being with keen ears and lovely eyes, with four square feet and a huge beating heart that we eat, let us not deceive ourselves.”

Rick Faw taught us a lot in this regard. Rick, who serves as A Rocha’s Education Director, came with his family to live at the Field Study Center the spring after we arrived. One of the first tasks we bequeathed to him was the care of the cows, a task he gladly accepted, being a closet cow whisperer and all-around animal lover. The image that stays with me from those early days is of Rick, baby Jared on his back and a farm cat at his heels, pushing a wheelbarrow towering with hay through the sodden grass to the pasture. He’d deftly launch the bales over the fence and into the cows’ troughs, pet their foreheads while they munched, and then go on with his other farm chores. This was his morning routine.

In the late afternoons, while Jared napped, Rick returned to the fields to brush the cows. I think he really wanted a dog, or any more sentient sort of pet, but since he had cows, he poured all his pent-up pet affection into them. He’d stand out there, in the cold, in his 1980s bright blue ski jacket, and brush those cows down as if they were Thoroughbreds and tomorrow was the Kentucky Derby. Markku and I watched all this from our kitchen window and, I must admit, wondered if Rick was making the best use of his time. Surely he could be writing a fundraising letter or planning a talk or following up with potential interns. There was just so much to be done.

Our attitude just goes to show our lack of groundedness. Brushing the cows, by Rick’s own admission, served no practical function. Highland cattle on the moors of Scotland never get their coats brushed and they survive just fine. A few burrs and tangles in no way mitigates their enjoyment of sun, grass, and stars. But then Rick wasn’t really concerned with burrs and tangles; the brushing was a way of de-stressing for Rick (and probably for the cows as well). In this way it was both an act of contemplation and even, dare I say, of fellowship. Given his bonding with these beasts you’d think Rick would have been the first of us to go vegetarian (I alone of all the A Rocha staff hold that distinction). But no, he ate the stews and roasts just like everyone else. He did admit, however,

Rescuing the Ox from the Well

that he felt a measure of sadness when eating our cows, but for him this was a good thing, for in his sadness lay the seeds of gratitude.

My personal litmus test for what meat my family eats turns on two questions. First: did the animal in question live a happy and normal life? Did it eat grass if it was naturally a grass eater, flap its wings if it was naturally a wing flapper, and so on. Second: would I be okay with raising and then killing said animal myself? Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying I have actually killed any of the meat (what little meat there is) on my family's table. What I am saying is that it's really important to acknowledge that that nugget on my plate was once a clucking, roosting chicken and that hot dog in its bun was once a grunting, snuffling pig. Making these sorts of connections helps me live more thankfully and *carefully*. Making these connections helps me to make food choices within the rubric of my moral convictions. If we concede the "animality" of the meat we eat, then we need to be reconciled to the fact that eating meat, by necessity, involves killing, blood, death.

This only-eat-it-if-you're-willing-to-kill-it position is also the stance taken by Loren and Mary Ruth Wilkinson, professors at Regent College in Vancouver and teachers of a class on food and theology. Their week-long food course, held on their cooperative sheep farm on Galiano Island, is full of theological readings, discussion, and lots of very good food. The high point of the week is a meal—a Supper of the Lamb—which encapsulates all the learning of the class. The main course and lamb in question is as local as local gets, having frolicked in the fields outside the Wilkinson's window all its short life. The meal is held on a Friday evening and on the Wednesday previous, everyone gathers outside the sheep barn. A professional lamb slaughterer from Saturna Island is in attendance and does the actual killing, very humanely, with a bolt gun. Everyone, including the vegetarians, is encouraged to participate in the rest of the process of skinning and gutting. Often, ironically, it is a vegetarian who takes a lead role in the whole drama.

When I asked about the lamb's slaughter, Mary Ruth reflected on her own experience: "It is actually a reverent honoring—a bringing together of the ecological reality and the biblical principle

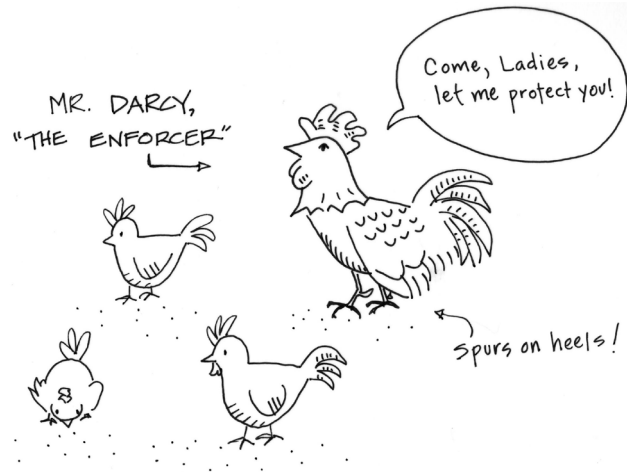
Planted

of how we live. For me the lamb's whole body is so startling a revelation of my own body, of my own innards, that I feel a great kinship and thankfulness not only for the lamb, but, by extension, for the life of creation that is given to and for me."

Of course, the Christian symbolism inherent in a "Supper of the Lamb" was not lost on anyone. Having met the innocent, short-lived lamb for themselves, and then participated in its slaughter, the connotations of sacrifice were forefront in everyone's mind.

MR. DARCY MEETS HIS MAKER

I readily admit a city squeamishness towards the slaughter of animals—hence my leaning toward vegetarianism. I can handle meat neatly cut and shrink-wrapped in plastic, but the transition from frolicking in the field to fried on the plate makes my queasy, even if the animal in question seems deserving of his fried fate. In this regard I'm thinking of one animal in particular—one rooster in particular: Mr. Darcy. Named after the guy who bequeathed him to us, he displayed the supremely superior air of the *Pride and Prejudice* character and thus got saddled with the "Mr." prefix.



But it wasn't his haughtiness that made him so deserving of death. Such an attribute is to be expected in one possessing such

Rescuing the Ox from the Well

splendid plumage. Rather, it was his viciousness that sent him to death row—his viciousness toward *my* child. You see, Maya, like all farm-raised four-year-olds, had a fascination with collecting eggs. She'd trot into the coop and fill her basket with brown, green, and white eggs, heedless of the proud roosters who strutted along the fence behind her. But all that changed one spring day. On that particular morning I handed Maya her little egg basket and blithely sent her into the chicken coop, right into Mr. Darcy's domain. As she made her way to the back of the coop, he came charging—wings flapping, talons outstretched in his most savage cockfighting impersonation. Maya screamed bloody murder; Mr. Darcy flapped and scratched (Maya's face!) and I stood paralyzed in horror. Fortunately, not for long. Arms flailing, I rushed at the offending bird and booted him across the coop with a swift soccer kick (he was surprisingly solid), snatched Maya off the ground, and made a dash for safety.

After Mr. Darcy had shown his true colors, only brave Brian, our philosopher-cook, collected the eggs, armed with a garbage can lid, which he used as a shield. Brian was also the one who scheduled Mr. Darcy's slaughter a few weeks later. Tiina, our office manager, had a farm savvy friend from church who agreed to come and kill the bully rooster and a few of his brothers. The slaughtering, plucking, and cooking took a good part of the day. Suburban wimp that I am, I used the excuse of not wanting to traumatize the children and whisked them off to a playdate during the actual execution. By the accounts of Brian and Tiina all the birds did the traditional headless chicken dance as their life's electricity exited their nervous systems. Then came the scalding and the plucking.

I finally joined everyone in the kitchen for the gutting and dressing. Brian plunked a big-breasted, puckered-skinned bird on the counter in front of me. I swallowed hard and decided the best way to attack my meat queasiness was to really go on the attack. I stabbed at the bird's abdomen and with a swift slice upward opened its innards to plain view.

"This one's a meaty one," I quipped to Brian over my shoulder, feigning a butcher's ease with the entrails that presented themselves so readily.

Planted

“Yeah, thought we should get at least one good roaster from the day,” said Brian.

“Roaster?” I queried. “You mean rooster, right?”

“Nope,” he said, nonchalantly. “That one’s a hen. That one is Susie.”

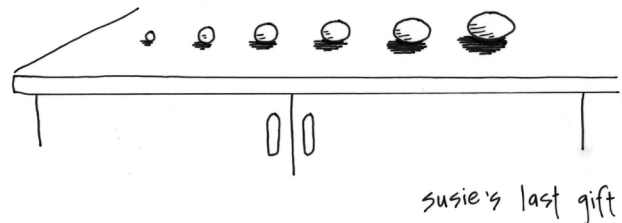
I froze. *Susie, this bird was Susie?*

My daughters and I had bought Susie as a two-day-old chick the previous Easter and had raised her, first in our living room, then in the playhouse, until she was four months old and finally graduated to the chicken coop. Glossy black, with a speckled brown head, she was a beautiful bird. Evidently, she had been a last-minute addition to the slaughter roster.

I fought back feelings of betrayal and the wave of nausea that suddenly washed over me as I mentally composed a Center memo concerning the protocol for future meat harvesting so that would-be pets might escape beloved Susie’s fate.

Gritting my teeth and refusing to be undone by the harsh realities of farm life, I began to pull out Susie’s intestines and toss them in the garbage. Then my fingers clamped onto something hard. I pulled it out and discovered it was an egg—a beautiful brown egg. I reached in again and pulled out another egg. This one smaller and paler. Again my hand went in and again out came an egg, still smaller and a bit paler.

A crowd of four A Rocha butchers gathered around me. No one spoke, everyone stared. I felt like a magician pulling miracles out of a hat. In all I pulled out seven eggs that varied in size from a tiny soft white ball to a fully formed, hard, elliptical egg.



Rescuing the Ox from the Well

We were, each one of us, hushed. There before us, spread across the kitchen counter, we beheld the miracle of life itself—and, by extension, the somberness of death. We had killed the goose that laid the golden egg without realizing she was full of golden eggs.

HERITAGE HENS

We no longer eat our layers. And because we let some of them brood and hatch their eggs, we built up quite a flock. Following in the footsteps of the A Rocha chicken wranglers who preceded him, Matt Humphrey, our Center Life Coordinator, chose a heritage breed rather than the factory favorite Rhode Island Reds out of principle for A Rocha's flock. Matt has nothing against Rhode Island Reds, *per se*, but he does believe that just as biodiversity is important for ecosystems to thrive, genetic diversity is critical for food systems to thrive. This position is supported by a number of agrarian thinkers as well as an important study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, which shows that commercial chicken flocks contain about 50 percent of the genetic diversity of their backyard cousins. This lack of genetic diversity is a concern in that it increases the commercial birds' susceptibility to disease. Inbreeding for desirable traits like big breasts or super layers might make economic sense on the industrial scale, but it's tantamount to putting all your eggs in one basket should a new and deadly virus hit the chicken world without the proper genetic umph to resist it. With assistance from Brian the Chicken Guy (not to be confused with Bob the Cow Guy or Brian the Philosopher Cook), Matt developed a humbly impressive flock of over fifty Black Australorpes, a breed developed in the late 1800s in Austria with an eye toward intelligence (which in any chicken is feeble at best), egg laying ability, heartiness, and docility. Back in the early 1900s this breed produced a hen that laid 364 eggs in 365 days, earning it the world record in egg production. Yet because this breed never caught on with industrialized egg farms, their numbers dwindled, qualifying them for "heritage" status—a quaint way of labeling a domestic breed as threatened.

Planted

To house our heritage flock Matt and Sean, an uber-able volunteer, built the swankiest chicken coop this side of the Rockies. Based loosely on Joel Saletin's "egg mobile" design, it looks like a little red barn on wheels. The wheels are the key to its ingenuity and practicality, as they enable you to move the coop from one place to another—along with the fact that its floor is made of wire mesh, so that the chickens' waste falls onto the field. This clever little coop provides shelter for the chickens, fertilizer and pest management for the fields, and an aesthetic pleasure for the eye.

DEMONSTRATION EATING

At this point you might be thinking, "Okay, so you've had fun playing farmers and you've figured out how to be really thankful for your food, but, get real, we can't all raise chickens and cows in our backyards! Feedlots are a way of life." True. I'm not naive enough to think that McDonald's is going to go out of business anytime soon. But the question put before us as we started the Center was not, "Should feedlots and fast food restaurants exist?" but rather, "How should we treat *our* cows and what should *we* eat?" We are most certainly concerned with national eating habits, but we are primarily concerned with our own eating habits. We've come to see that if we are brave enough to make the connection between our values and our stomachs, then we must agree with Wendell Berry that eating is an agrarian act that links us directly to plants, animals, and land.

Therefore, we have decided to eat only those animals we have known by name or at least by sight. We realize that this is hardly practical for the common city dweller, but we do it as a sort of best-case scenario for interns and visitors to experience. You've heard of Demonstration Gardens? Well, this is Demonstration Eating! Our hope is that we might gently encourage our guests to be more mindful about where their meat comes from.

HUNTING AND GATHERING

Finally, if meat is on your menu but you can't afford the grass-fed, free-range variety, you might want to consider wild game. By way of a chapter closing, allow me to depart from the farm animal theme to bring you the story of Tashi and his hunter-gatherer exploits.

Tashi is a dear Tibetan man who came to stay with us for two weeks one fall. A conservationist who once kept a snow leopard as a pet (this bit of trivia he offered in response to my girls' question: "Have you ever seen a snow leopard?"), he was delighted in the flora and fauna of British Columbia. Though we didn't have anything as thrilling as snow leopards to show him, Markku and I did take pride in the big and beautiful salmon splashing up the Little Campbell River. Tashi seemed impressed as well. Quite impressed.

A week into Tashi's stay Markku and I left for a two-day conference. We arranged for his activities and his meals, which would all happen within the larger A Rocha community during our absence. There was one meal, however, for which Tashi would have to fend for himself. For that one solitary meal, I left a potato and cheese casserole in the fridge for him to warm up. We returned from the weekend conference to discover the casserole whole and Saran-wrapped in the refrigerator, which we found curious since Tashi seemed to have had a hearty appetite the week previous.

In fact, he did have a very hearty appetite, evidenced by what he ate instead of the meager casserole. We learned later that night that Tashi had waded into the Little Campbell and caught a fifteen-pound Chinook salmon with his bare hands. He killed it by knocking it over the head with a rock and ate it for supper. This was startling news—not because we A Rocha types are opposed to eating salmon, but because this particular salmon was contraband. You see, the stretch of river from which Tashi's salmon was taken lies upstream from a fish hatchery—and in an effort to preserve a vibrant breeding stock, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada has made it illegal to catch any fish that has made it past the hatchery milepost. Given that this salmon was still very much alive when Tashi pulled it from the

Planted

water, it probably hadn't spawned yet. With only a one in five thousand chance of making it from egg to adult spawner, this Chinook had been taken out of the race within sight of the finish line by an opportunistic Tibetan. Ah, the heartache!

Before Tashi left, the Coho had started their run and were struggling up the river in their own race against time. We stood at the bank, with the water rushing before us, and I told Tashi that these fish were a different species from the one he'd caught. He grew quiet and then looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and asked, "Are they good for eating?"