

FOOD FROM THOUGHT

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When I was a teenager I participated in a group of friends who were enthusiastic about our outdoor adventures. Fishing, hunting, hiking, and camping, we immersed ourselves in natural experience. Like many of our kind, during summer we would seek deep cool water to recharge our spirits. One favorite swimming hole was in an abandoned copper mine on the side of a mountain, several miles from town. A jeep trail led there through challenging terrain, enhancing the adventure.

During mining operations copper ore had been blasted out of the bedrock, leaving long narrow ravine-like shafts. Once abandoned, they had become filled with water. The steep rock ledges were burnt-orange, almost red in color. The water was bright aqua-blue, and milky with suspended sediment. The contrast between green forest, red earth, and brilliant blue water created an exotic visual effect.

Upon arrival we would race over the barren ground to the edge of the cliffs, and plunge one behind the other into the cold blue water. Once we calmed down from the initial rush, we would engage in the main purpose for our coming, cliff jumping. There was an increasing gradient along one side of the mine where we could jump from spots ranging in height from ten, to as high as sixty feet. We would freely charge out into the air from the lower cliffs, demonstrating different styles of cannon balls and dives. The approach at the highest place was more subdued. The cliff walls of the ravine were only thirty feet apart, and from a height of sixty feet, an aggressive jump could end dangerously close to the opposite side.

I never found it easy to jump from the high cliff. I knew that I didn't have to make the jump, but something inside me encouraged me to try. I would take my time ascending, and once on the rock platform, I would adjust to the challenge in front of me. From above, the chasm seemed deceptively narrow, and as I looked down I would lose my depth perception. I could not see beyond the surface of the milky-blue water, so the view took on a two-dimensional appearance. Light reflecting from ripples would shimmer hypnotically, making the water level seem to rise and fall, like ocean swells.

Finally, I would be compelled to step off into thin air. The step was my last conscious act. The descent was so rapid that there was no time to think. I was completely dependent upon my instincts to keep upright and prepared for submersion. I can still remember the sound of the air ripping past my ears, and the sensation of my body tearing through the water. Gradually slowing down, then regaining buoyancy, I had a sense of exhilaration as my mind caught up with my body, mentally absorbing the experience.

I found myself recalling these memories as I stood outside the pen where I raised my first pigs for slaughter. I had decided to move ahead with a challenge that had been rising within me for years. I felt the need to raise and slaughter animals for my own meat consumption. My parents had insisted that as a young hunter I eat everything I killed. This helped in part to shape the current motivation, but it had also tempered my desire to kill things. A bird on the wing, or a white-tail deer at fifty yards, is quite different than a pig at hand, and I needed to adjust to the challenge in front of me.

As I readied myself to enter the pigs' pen, I could see the shimmering in their eyes, too close, too far, too narrow. I was standing at the cliff's-edge of a set of experiences, the depth and breadth of which I would not fathom. Even though I knew that I didn't need to make the choice to kill my pigs, I was compelled to. To this day, I have no idea why I trusted myself to take that step, but I entered the pen and did what needed to be done.

I had started this endeavor because I firmly believed that if I was going to enjoy animal flesh for food, then I had to take responsibility for the killing. The act of killing became complicated when I realized how important the pigs' lives were to me. These two distinctly different feelings were difficult for me to wrap my mind around. I faced an intellectual chasm, and I could sense

the uncertainty that eddied there. After sixteen years I am still in awe of the world that opened up around me as I tumbled over that precipice.

Killing animals requires skill and commitment. I started out with some skill, but more commitment. There are many aspects of slaughtering and butchering that can only be learned through experience, and after several years slaughtering chickens, cows, and pigs, I started to feel comfortable with the process. I felt myself regaining buoyancy, and I began to realize how fast my life had been changing. I had been acting more from instinct than from conscious thought, and I had become submerged in experiences that my mind was only beginning to absorb.

There are many emotional issues surrounding the care and consumption of animals. Because they move, and breathe, and make noise, we can relate to all animals on a most basic level. Whether cat, or deer, chipmunk, draft horse, or milk-cow, we can empathize with their life experience. It is enjoyable to husband farm animals because we can create relationships with them which enhance our own emotional lives. The recognition of the value of these relationships to my life is what compelled me to start raising a diversity of animals on my small farm.

Beyond feeding and cleaning pens, I involve myself in the lives of my animals. I spend time with them, scratching their itches, encouraging them to play, looking into their eyes, and touching them compassionately with friendship. They respond positively, becoming enjoyable engaging creatures. When they are alive, it is important to me that they are relaxed and comfortable, and that I have taken time to have relationships with these living beings.

I know many people who would rather not know the animals whose meat they may eat. It is common for them to acknowledge that they would become too emotionally attached. Often the result is that the meat they do eat comes from animals raised in confinement and ignored by humans until their meat is processed. This choice is right for a lot of families because it is convenient, and many people don't have the space to raise animals, but I am concerned about the loss of the value of the relationship.

To me food is more than calories or culinary preference. Food is the energy of life, and life is about relationships. Life is the flow of energy from the Earth through all things. It is the relationships between all things that keep the energy flowing. Like everything else, humans gather energy, then expend it, and eventually we return in totality to the source. Along the way, it is the relationships that we make that define our participation.

Once I recognized the significance of my need to have relationships with the animals whose flesh I eat, I began to truly feel my connection to Life energy. I feel the same relationship to the trees in the forest where I work, to the soil that I cultivate, and to the plants in my garden. It is clear to me now that energy does not leave an animal when it dies, nor does it leave a bean picked from a vine. The energy is always there. By involving myself physically and emotionally in the production of my food, I can strengthen my relationship to that energy. I also believe that my involvement can help these animals to have vital lives, enhancing the value that the food, in turn, brings to my life.

The food that we raise on our small farm recharges my body and my spirit. I am proud of the loving relationships we have with our animals. Being the person responsible for taking their lives is part of demonstrating my commitment to them. Acknowledging emotional investment substantiates the value that I place on their existence. The relationships to my family, to our community, and to the Earth, are strengthened every day through this connection to food. These animals and plants that we raise fuel our efforts to deepen our involvement in the energy of Life from one season to the next.

While I write this, I am overwhelmed by emotion, and I feel exhilarated as I float in the realization of personal experiences, absorbing the meaning. There are many people who, for one reason or another, cannot engage in these experiences, but I encourage those who think that they can, to try. It is the fear of uncertainty that causes discomfort, not uncertainty itself. I have found that I can be afraid or I can trust myself, but uncertainty will always exist. Uncertainty is what fills the gap where relationships grow. By diving into that abyss I have found a pool of significant reward, and I feel recharged as I watch the ripples form from my wake and spread across the life around me.