

Thanksgiving Reflections

Moving away from the turkey

Ah, tradition. Like the sturdy railing along the edge of the vast Grand Canyon, we cling to it with a sense of security and reassurance. Traditions are the threads that weave the fabric of society, shaping our identity and connecting us to our past. However, as each generation passes recipe cards to the next, it is imperative that we pause to examine our traditions with an eye toward ethics, sustainability and morality.

One such tradition that is currently under the microscope is the practice of confining and slaughtering billions of farmed animals, and particularly poignant this month, the Thanksgiving turkey.

The iconic image of a family gathered around a table with a massive bird carcass as the centerpiece has been etched into our collective consciousness as the quintessential scene of the fourth Thursday in November. But what was traditionally seen simply as “food” by older generations requires deeper reflection as the ethical complications of this traditional holiday meal have become the subject of scrutiny.

For most of us in the U.S., Thanksgiving is a special time for family, football, filling food and a little time off from the daily grind. However, for many vegans, although we enjoy all these things, at no other time of the year do we feel the acute sense of why we are vegan.

The mood of the holiday is about giving thanks, but how can we be grateful for our many blessings while simultaneously turning a blind eye to the suffering of millions of sensitive, sentient birds? For vegans, this paradox is particularly poignant on this holiday, when the mass consumption of turkeys is not only accepted, but expected.

Turkeys bred for the holiday meal are packed into long, windowless buildings by the thousands. Much like chickens bred for

their meat, turkeys are overcrowded and forced to live in their own waste with no ventilation, no sunshine and no semblance of a natural life. Turkeys have been genetically manipulated to become so heavy that their bones are too weak to support their weight and they suffer from leg deformities and joint pain in their first few weeks of life. The birds go to slaughter as young as 12 weeks old, even though their natural lifespan can be a decade or more — they

never see their first birthday.

As people become aware of the miserable conditions birds endure in the poultry industry, companies are attempting to appease customers by describing turkey meat as “humane” or “free-range.”

I have personally gone to both conventional and “free range” turkey farms and unfortunately, these labels are largely insubstantial and unregulated, and animals are still debeaked, detoed, violently handled

and sent to a frightening, painful slaughter — their decapitated and dismembered bodies sold under these “humane” labels.

Another reality that has come into our awareness in recent years is the devastation of the animal agriculture industry and how much more destructive farming animals is for our planet when compared to plant farming.

Research done at Carnegie Mellon University found that a 16-pound dead turkey creates 34.2 pounds of CO₂. You can combine the gravy, mashed potatoes, roasted Brussels sprouts, biscuits, cranberry sauce and apple pie for 14 guests and it would be equal to the impact of just the turkey meat. Further, according to the USDA, it is estimated that families waste around 35 percent of the turkey flesh, increasing the environmental impact by 55 percent.

There are numerous delicious vegan options for holiday centerpieces found in the frozen section of most every grocery store in Eugene and the surrounding area.

A stuffed pumpkin or other large squash can also make a beautiful, more compassionate and more healthful centerpiece. All the traditional side dishes can be easily veganized with non-dairy milks and other plant-based alternatives. I have heard people report that vegan egg nogs taste much better than the old version.

Tradition should uplift and strengthen a community. As long as a tradition causes suffering, it is hindering our entire community’s ability to thrive. Let’s honor the symbol of our holiday, the turkey, by not exploiting and killing her. As we gather around the table this Thanksgiving, let’s celebrate a new tradition of compassion and kindness, for all species on earth.

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