

From vegetarianism to fasting

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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I found [this incident at Vermont College](#) very sad. The sustainable-farming-oriented school planned to slaughter two oxen it's had for years and serve them at the dining hall. Faced with protests from animal rights activists—who successfully prevented the college from finding a willing slaughterhouse—the college ended up having to euthanize one of the animals, who had a bad injury and declining quality of life.

As planned, the ox was killed. But nobody got to eat him.

The story highlights the basic divide between veganism-oriented animal rights activists and sustainable-farming foodie types. I used to have a lot of sympathy for the former; now I'm fairly entrenched in the latter.

[I've talked before](#) about why I stopped being a vegetarian after many years. In part it's because yes, pork is incredibly delicious. But it's also because I've come to believe that the cultural goal I favor—much lower meat consumption, which would improve public health and reduce the incentive for cruel and ecologically destructive factory-farming methods—finds more effective ambassadors in flexitarians than in strict vegetarians. (That bean soup is an easier sell with a little bit of uncommonly good bacon.) And in part it's because I've gotten over the identity-marker element that was so important to me when I was younger.

On the last point, I really liked [this recent post](#) by friend-of-this-blog Katherine Willis Pershey, another former vegetarian who has recently felt pulled back toward a meatless diet:

I'm finding myself resisting the urge to label myself a vegetarian or vegan or even to adopt a hard line set of food rules. It's that all-or-nothing - you either are a vegetarian or you aren't - isn't actually all that helpful, really. I do have every intention of dramatically changing my regular diet. But I think what I want and need is a fast. I want to fast from meat and cheese and milk and half-and-

half... See, vegetarianism is not something that is meant to be broken. If I say I'm a vegetarian and sneak off to eat a hamburger (which is, I admit, something I used to do as a vegetarian), I have made a liar of myself.

But a fast is something that is kept, and broken.

That's a helpful thought—Protestant that I am, I hadn't thought to put the meat thing in terms of fasting before. Why not eschew the virtuous identity labels in favor of a *practice* that is important but not permanent or absolute?

After all, I've long been convinced that when it comes to consumer ethics, the way to make a positive difference isn't to insist on a rarefied and consistently virtuous lifestyle, one that keeps your hands forever clean of all the harm we consumers collectively do (until you cave and then rechannel your energy from self-congratulation to guilt).

It's to replace bad habits with good ones, to make ethical eating (or traveling, or laundering) the rule rather than the exception—to not let the high bar of utter consistency make you simply stop trying. It's about fasting and feasting in a culture that feasts so often that it hardly notices anymore.