

The rabbit becomes “it”

I lived in Chisinau, the capital of Moldova, for 16 years. I used to live in an apartment with my mother, close to the center of the city. Every fall, I visited my grandmother in Chiperceni, a village located an hour away from where I lived. These visits were always a pleasant change of pace. My grandmother lived in an old house that her parents-in-law built by hand, far from any car noises and the hectic city life. Together with my family, I helped her pick grapes and make wine. It is a beautiful tradition and almost every household in the countryside still does it. A few years ago, I had an encounter which I still remember vividly. We were in the vineyard picking grapes and it was getting cold as the sun was setting down. We had to get back to the house and make dinner. I had been cold for the past hour and I really wanted a warm cup of tea. The vineyard was a short walk from my grandmother’s house. With dried grape juice on my hands, muddy shoes and cold feet, I walked back to my grandmother’s house. As I entered the gate, I saw a few people gathered around my cousin, who was studying to become a doctor at that time. From afar, I saw a few people gathered around him and as I got closer I noticed him inflating and deflating a pair of small pink lungs with white spots on them. He respectfully commented about how clean they were, saying that the human lungs he got to examine usually had more brown spots and looked unhealthier. The entire scene took place in the area where my grandmother used to cook during the summer, an area sheltered with gray asbestos sheets that had an outdoor fireplace as well as a few chairs and a wooden table. I inspected the surroundings and saw the body of a rabbit hanging upside down on a wooden bar, with a few inches of fur left on its limbs but with the rest of its skin exposed. Its flesh was bright pink, a paler color than its lungs, and it contrasted almost beautifully with the black fur that was left on its body. I thought back to how cold I was and I wondered if the rabbit was cold too, but then I remembered it was

dead. I forgot about my cup of tea for a while as I watched my cousin play with the lungs and tell us interesting facts that compared these lungs with the lungs of a human. He blew air into them and we all watched them inflate and deflate, almost hypnotized by the movement. Shortly after, one of my aunts came outside with a butcher knife, separated the limbs, and cut the body into smaller pieces so that we could cook it. This rabbit was once a “he,” yet after his death I found myself thinking about this rabbit as an “it.” I am sure that any person who grew up in a Western society would think we are monsters. I disagree.

Knowing the rabbit when he was alive and then suddenly realizing he was going to become a stew was rather unpleasant, yet his life conditions were great and he had a rabbit life worth living. He lived in a quite voluminous wooden cage with three other rabbits, so he had companions to socialize with. Temple Grandin, an American professor of animal science, uses the concept of blue-ribbon emotions to explain how to take care of an animal. She advises avoiding to activate the FEAR system and making sure to stimulate the SEEKING part of an animal’s brain.¹ Without being aware of this concept, my family took great care of the rabbit. They didn’t know how the brain functions or what blue-ribbon emotions are, but they could not imagine any other way of raising animals. Ensuring the well-being of a living creature, regardless of its species, came naturally to them. The rabbit was fed *Medicago Sativa*, commonly named alfalfa, every day, and sometimes he had children take him out of the cage and play with him. We would usually take him out of the cage, feed him alfalfa from our hands, pet him, and sometimes bring him onto our outdoor bed under an apple tree and watch him explore our cushions. I was one of the children who did this and although I am not sure whether this

¹Grandin, Temple, and Catherine Johnson. *Animals Make Us Human: Creating the Best Life for Animals*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (2009): 5-13.

activated his FEAR or his SEEKING system, I enjoyed immensely playing with the rabbit during my previous visits. All in all, we only wished the best for him.

I now believe it is cruel to take a life and I don't see myself participating in similar activities in the future, but I want to compare our rabbit's life with the life of other rabbits in the country I live in right now, the United States. Comparison is usually not an objective way to look at two situations because there is always something better or worse that can be said about a situation, but in this case comparison helps me outline the difference between what I think is right and wrong. Rabbits in the United States are raised for their meat, laboratory use, breeding stock and Angora wool, as well as for their skins.² Something that especially bothers me is knowing rabbits in the United States are used for the Draize test, an acute toxicity test devised in 1944 by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that consists of applying 0.5mL or 0.5g of a test substance to the eye or skin of a restrained rabbit and then leaving the substance for a set amount of time before rinsing it out and recording its effects.³ It is mostly housecleaning products and cosmetics that are tested this way. Animals are either euthanized after the test or they are reused after a "wash-out" period during which all traces of the tested product are allowed to disperse from the rabbit's skin.⁴ The FDA supports the test saying that "to date, no single test or battery of tests has been accepted by the scientific community as a replacement [for]... the Draize test."⁵ Worse than taking the life of an animal simply because it tastes good is refusing to offer that animal a life worth living and overall refusing to acknowledge this animal

²"Rabbits." National Agricultural Library. Accessed October 15, 2016. <https://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic/rabbits>.

³Research Defence Society (RDS). "Eye irritancy". Accessed October 14, 2016.

https://web.archive.org/web/20070928111042/http://www.rds-online.org.uk/pages/page.asp?i_ToolbarID=4&i_PageID=149

⁴Ibid.

⁵"Validation of In Vitro Methods: Regulatory Issues", Animal Welfare Information Center Newsletter, Summer 1994, Vol. 5, no. 2.

as a living, sentient being. I think viewing an animal as nothing more than a step in the process of producing meat⁶ or cosmetics⁷ is worse than humanely raising an animal, killing it in the intimacy of your own property, and then making a stew out of it.

The rabbit my family killed ended up becoming a rather tasty stew and it felt wonderful to have everyone gathered at the table inside the house, listening to the fire crackling and spreading warmth across the room. Everyone was talking cheerfully, being proud of the hard work we did that day, and everyone was just enjoying each other's presence. I still think, almost a decade later, that my choice to eat a rabbit leg for dinner that evening was not unethical. I am well aware, however, that that evening could have been equally cheerful and warm if we had mashed potatoes or something else to eat. We could have very well replenished our energy supply by eating beans and a salad. During the fall in the Eastern European countryside there is an abundance of vegetables and fruits, so we were not eating meat out of necessity.

I asked my mother why we ate so much meat at family reunions and she said: "it's what our great-grandparents used to do." I took the liberty to read deeper into her words and I realized she was talking about cultural preservation. She felt that by following our great-grandparents' traditions, we were keeping their memory alive and preserving the identity of who we are as a family, as people who come from Chiperceni, and as people who come from Moldova. I asked her if I misinterpreted her words and she said no. This desire of keeping our traditions alive is well-intended, yet the consequences of it are questionable. Many rabbits, hens, cows, and pigs have been slaughtered by my family in order to cook meals and I question the morality and

⁶ Zamir, Tzachi. *Ethics and the Beast* (2007): 57-60.

⁷ Draize J.H.; Woodard G.; Calvery H.O. (1944). "Methods for the study of irritation and toxicity of substances applied topically to the skin and mucous membranes". *J. Pharmacol. And Exp. Therapeutics*. 82: 377–390.

necessity of their deaths. At the same time, I feel that it is somewhat necessary in order to maintain our traditions and identity. It is difficult to come up with a definite answer, because there are so many factors to be considered.

Our traditions are slowly disappearing and it would make me feel partially empty if they disappeared completely, for I would feel directly responsible for it. More and more Moldovan citizens, myself included, choose to live abroad – where it is difficult to continue our traditions – and they rarely return. What worries me is that at one point in the future, our country is going to disappear and most of us will have embraced Western traditions, completely forgetting about our childhoods spent in the countryside. Our common identity will be either very diluted or simply nonexistent. I think about my family's traditions the way a mother of a sick child thinks about her child's treatment; the mother is ready to do anything, and in her desperation she may choose the wrong things to do. I am desperately trying to make sure some Moldovan identity stays alive within me and maybe I am blinded by the intensity of my own desperation. In this desperation, I find myself prioritizing our traditions above animals' lives, and it may not be the best thing to do. I do not need to eat meat in order to feel like I belong to my culture. As I learn more about animals, I find myself thinking back at that evening and I realize that I was more excited about the people who were sitting at the dinner table and less about the food we had on it.

In my attempt to conserve my culture and Moldovan identity, I find that the easiest way to remind myself about it is to look through my memories and find pleasant things to think about, remembering what life in Moldova was like. The problem is that fewer and fewer things remind me of home; I think I somehow taught my brain to think less about home and more about the reality I am currently living in. However, I find that certain tastes and certain food smells trigger

strong memories of home, and most of the dishes I end up remembering contain meat because that is the tradition of preparing them. I am fully capable, however, to remember my life in Moldova without thinking about food, for there was more to my life there than just food. I am merely choosing the easiest way to remember things and the easiest way is not always the best way.

Someone who questions Moldovan traditions may be concerned about having children live so closely with animals, getting attached to them, and then seeing them butchered and transformed into food. Contrary to Western beliefs, children seeing death so closely does not turn them into criminals or cruel beings. If anything, growing in such proximity with animals increases the knowledge a child has about the world. It was surely the case for me. My grandmother had beehives and although I did not enjoy getting stung by bees, I learned to respect them and I grew up wondering about their communication methods. I never thought of purposely hurting one. I am certain that this correlation does not equal with causality, and I am sure this standard does not apply to everyone, but I find it difficult coming up with negative things that are a result of one's growing and living so closely with animals. One positive thing that comes from this is that a child who sees an adult butchering an animal learns quickly that it is important to know where the meat he/she eats comes from. Most meat-eaters in the United States do not know where their meat comes from or how the animals were treated before they became their meals. What I find most disturbing is not knowing where the meat on one's table comes from and accepting this fact without even trying to come up with an answer. Drowning in such deep ignorance is something I have trouble understanding because it is usually lack of knowledge that leads to deeper problems. In this case, the consumers' ignorance enables American factory farms to continue their mistreatment of animals and it really is not acceptable.

Lastly, I question how I will teach younger people about my culture and traditions. I know the generation of my mother and her siblings will not change their views and will continue to eat meat, because of the rigidity of their beliefs. I think it is acceptable, for most of them still live at home and raise their animals humanely. I know this will not be the case for me because I plan to either continue living in the United States or to move to another equally economically developed country, where eating meat will be equally morally questionable. I have to come up with a solution, and I have to carefully weigh my desire to cook the kinds of dishes my mother cooked against how comfortable I am not knowing where the meat for that dish is coming from.

I want people younger than me to know what Moldovan dishes taste like, but I am also aware that the taste of a dish is not the only factor that makes one belong to a culture. I will keep this dilemma in mind as I am doing further readings and learning more about animals because at this moment I am not able to come up with a definite conclusion. It is a personal and complex matter and I know it is me who should find the answer. I do not expect a book or a person to suddenly answer this question for me, but I expect that the information I will process from these sources will help me shape a better answer to this dilemma. I think it is possible to do both things – eat meat and advocate for animal rights, but I find myself having trouble incorporating both in my life and being content with my decision. It is the idea of renouncing doing things the way my great-grandparents did them that bothers me and that I find myself unable to adhere to as of now. I am sure that more education about the consequences of my actions will help me come to a conclusion, so I will keep reading, searching for information, and hopefully I will be able to create an answer.