

Cole Parker

Civic Engagement

January 22, 2020

The Shepard

My stomach turned over and I felt the familiar roller coaster swoon when I caught a glimpse of the sickening grease pooled on top of the Costco pizza, a staple for all my school's fundraisers. I felt so bad for the kids in my class, waiting in line for a disgusting sliced, bread meal, with dripping dead animal fat soaking through the bottom of the paper plate. I was endlessly perplexed by the diet of my fellow 1st grade classmates. The week before, I sat still and silent, watching my best friends, Jasper and Joseph, devour my own slice of birthday cake. My teacher caused irreparably damage to my slice by covering it with the thick, white, foamy, cow's milk, known as whipped cream. More than anything, however, I remember how much trust I had in my mother's desire to keep me pure, away from the evils of meat and dairy. My mother would dutifully bring me my own piece of homemade birthday cake when attending friend's parties and slyly rip off the cheese topping of my pizza, as she glided past me, depositing it into the trash. The other kid's sideways glances and questions never bothered me. In fact, I struggled to understand why anyone would be content being the same as everyone else.

I was raised a vegan, not an easy diet for anyone, least of all a young child. In the eyes of my peers, this dietary choice seemed an absurdity, but to me, it was simply the right way to live. Why would people eat a dead piglet when vegetables were so good? Or drink a cow's milk, meant for a baby cow, when almond milk was better for you, having natural vitamin D and similar amounts of protein? Views like this and my willingness to express them, led me to be

somewhat of a social outcast during my formative years. However, my unwavering faith in my mother's decision caused me to feel special and even superior to my classmates, as I was unable to understand how their parents could be so negligent in regards to their own children's health and wellbeing.

As I grew older, my grandparents could take it no more. One day, my grandmother slipped me a piece of vegetarian pizza with cheese. I ate it and loved it. Vegan cheese was not even close to the real thing. From that day forward, I stood true to my mother's vegetarian standards, but I was no longer a vegan. However, in my middle school years, my trust waned, as my desire to fit in with my peers grew exponentially. Thoughts of, "could it really be so bad to eat animals if everyone else is doing it?" permeated my mind as an internal conflict between parental trust and a desire to conform simmered inside of me. I began subconsciously attributing all my failures and shortcomings to my diet. If only I ate meat, maybe I would be able to make that shot from the three-point line, study longer hours and maybe even grow taller. When I was fourteen, this internal conflict boiled over into action. Where once my diet brought me feelings of superiority and conviction, now there was only bitterness and frustration. So many of the dietary decisions my mother made seemed nonsensical and I was sick and tired of falling short athletically, academically and socially due to my mother's inexplicable desire to impose her beliefs. Being a student athlete, intent on earning a basketball scholarship, I felt as though a deficit in animal flesh was ruining my future. I decided I would no longer let my mother's ridiculous decisions hold me back; it was time to confront her once and for all.

Hands shaking, I approached my mother and firmly told her that I felt vegetarianism was ruining my life. I explained to her that my diet left me a social outcast, academically and athletically inferior to the rest. I used examples such as "Kobe eats meat and he is the best player

in the world” and “Tofu has estrogen and that’s why I am not as strong as everyone else in 8th grade. It’s probably why I have dainty, girl hands, too.” Rather than explaining the flaws in my poorly reasoned argument, my mother simply nodded, listening to every complaint and accusation I threw her way. When I had finished she said, "You are old enough to make your own decisions. All I ask is that you do the research before you decide." I was taken aback by her response. I had expected staunch resistance, and possibly even a yelling match, but never calm understanding. Her respectful response left me speechless. Going in, I was ready to defy her wishes, regardless of the consequences. However, given the openness of her request, I felt obligated to take the time and actually do the research before deciding.

I spent months reading and investigating, slowly beginning to understand the reasons behind my mother’s decision to raise me the way she did. I read about the antibiotics that are pumped into animals throughout the American meat industry’s factory farming. I devoured numerous studies, which documented health code misconduct, poor treatment of animals and suspicious lobbying efforts targeted at promoting the consumption of unhealthy animal products across the country. This was big business. Slowly, my resentment turned to appreciation as I realized the gift I had been given. Although I still felt frustrated with the feelings of otherness experienced as a child, I agreed with my mother’s decision. I was raised in a way she thought would give me the best chance to be healthy and now that I was old enough to understand the reasoning, I had the ability to make an educated choice for myself. I took ownership of the decision to eat the way my mother believed I should, content with the social consequences, because it was my decision.

The way I was raised helped instill in me the ability to rise above social pressure and be confident making choices for myself. My mother always said that she was raising independent

thinkers, not sheep. The internal conflict I went through, regarding my diet, taught me the importance of looking beyond face value and reaping the benefits of doing my own research before making a decision. In this spirit, I am never satisfied with groupthink reasoning, and take an eclectic approach to life, working to learn and understand before making any decision.

Although still not a vegan, to this day I have never eaten any form of meat. This is my own decision derived strictly from my research and desire for a healthy life for myself and for the planet. I am a person who promotes divergent thought and is inspired to get others to think about their options and decisions rather than simply accepting what they are told is right or true. This passion has led me pursue an entrepreneurial career. My desire to be a self-starter has resulted in the formation of my own company in college and I have used my success to help inspire and mentor other students who wish to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors. Focused on improving research in the local community, my business provides paid research opportunities to individuals, thereby benefitting participants monetarily and research advancements as a whole. In the future, I want to continue to explore improving my community through entrepreneurship, working to inspire others to explore their interests and not settle for a career just because it feels safe or because someone else has suggested it. I believe that individuals have choice in all areas of their lives and I intend to work to be an example of how one can be successful following their own path, rather than conforming to someone else's.