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9-24-2011

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Harold Herzog
Western Carolina University

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Recommended Citation

Herzog, Harold, 2011. Returning to Meat, 'Animals and Us,' Psychology Today, 24 September.
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animals-and-us/201109/returning-meat>

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Returning to Meat

The ex-vegetarian story I could not put in my book.

Posted Sep 24, 2011

I interviewed Jim in my basement office during a mid-July family reunion while my brother-in-law Jerry was outside playing Bobby Flay on the patio grill. Jim had been a vegetarian for eleven years, when, in 1996, he joined the New York City Fire Department. He was drawn to firefighting because the 24-on/48-off schedule gave him the time to pursue his real passion, painting.

His dietary troubles began as soon as he graduated from the Fire Academy and was assigned to a ladder company where most of the firefighters were blue-collar types who lived in Queens and Brooklyn. When he told them he lived in the East Village, they figured he might be gay. When they learned he was an artist, they were pretty sure of it. And when they noticed he was not eating meat, there was no question in their minds – the new guy was a [homosexual](#). Jim did not care whether or not they thought he was gay. (It was not true. I had met his girlfriend; she looked like a supermodel.) He was very concerned, however, about being linked in the firefighters' minds with the station's other vegetarian.

The Vegetarian and the Coward

New York City firefighters famously value food and the ability to cook. But what is vastly more important in the firehouse is courage in the face of flames. One man in Jim's company was a known coward. He avoided entering burning buildings and would hold back just when his crew was ready to charge into the smoke. The firemen hated him. And he was the other vegetarian.

"I realized," Jim told me, "that the guys were comparing me to the one person in the house who was a coward. Because I was an artist living in lower Manhattan, I was an unusual guy to be in the Fire Department. So I was already fighting an uphill battle in terms of gaining their respect."

The firefighters started busting Jim's balls about his [diet](#). "You don't eat meat? You going to be coward too?" So Jim caved. "I did not want them to think I

was a coward because of what I ate," he told me. "Little by little, I began eating meat. It took me a year before I actually started enjoying it."

He did run into occasional problems. For instance, once at a fire in Harlem, he was "on the nob." That's the point man, the first guy in, the guy holding the nozzle of the fire hose. The fire involved "a roast," firefighter slang for a burned corpse. Jim saw the body. He told me it was sitting straight up, eerie, and calm. And for a couple of days afterward he could not eat meat.

Then I asked, hesitantly. "What about 9/11?"

Jim was one of the firefighters who spent weeks searching through the rubble for human remains. "It was sweltering hot and we were picking up body parts. That took the meat out of my diet for a while. You are looking for, you know – the pink bits."

The pink bits... I didn't know what to say.

Just then my wife called from the back deck, "Hal, Jim! It's time to eat. The ribs are done." I turned off my tape recorder and we went upstairs.

Jim Murray with one of his paintings at an opening.

Jim's experience exemplified an aspect of the emotional baggage that comes with our relationships with other species I had never thought about – it is that just like the cows, pigs, and chickens we eat, we too are made of meat.

I decided I wanted to use Jim's story for my chapter on eating animals. After a listless night's sleep, I woke up early the next morning and quickly wrote up a draft so he could check it for accuracy. I included the part about his resumption of eating meat. He was terrific example of a vegetarian who reverted to meat because of social pressure. But I left out the part about 9/11, about the pink bits. It was too much, it was over the top.

I handed Jim the draft and watched him read it. I quickly sensed that he was not happy with it. He told me the section on why he started eating meat again accurate. The problem, he said, was that I left out the important part, about how it affects a person to spend days and weeks searching for traces of flesh, the part about the pink bits.

The Stories People Don't Want To Hear

Then he looked up at me and said, "Don't worry about it. That's how the media treated our experience in 9/11. They wouldn't tell it like it was. People didn't really want to know." I felt lousy, like I had caved. I went back and re-wrote the section, this time including the pink bits. I sent the draft to a friend who lives in New York, warning her that it might be upsetting. She told me the story was too strong, that it overwhelmed the rest of the meat chapter. I agreed and took it out. So, like most of the media, when it came to describing a New York City firefighter's 9/11 experience, I blinked.

I sent Jim an e-mail explaining why I was not going to use his story in my book. But I promised him that one day, I would tell his story.

And now I have.

Postscript:

Jim Murray was one of the many firefighters working in the rubble of the Twin Towers who developed chronic health problems and who had to take early [retirement](#) from the Fire Department. Today he lives in Lower Manhattan where he is a successful artist. He still eats meat....sparingly.