

THE WORLD PEACE DIET Mastery Training Program



“Imagine the world we can create...”

with DR. WILL TUTTLE,
author, The World Peace Diet



Supplemental Readings

Module 3 – Awakening Our Capacities to Know and to Serve

The cost of steak

Factory farms produce cheap meat, until you consider the rivers of sewage, the contaminants and the superbugs.

By Paul Roberts
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If you are searching for signs that today's high food prices won't last, the latest report on the meat industry isn't promising. In May, a distinguished panel of scientists and meat industry officials concluded that the current "factory farm" method for mass-producing meat poses so many threats to public health -- from contaminated water supplies to deadly epidemics of E. coli E. coli -- that the whole system needs to go. The good news: Even meat companies agree that change is unavoidable. The bad news: Replacing factory farms with something "sustainable" likely means an end to 50 years of falling meat prices.

The report, from a Pew Charitable Trusts commission, takes a hard look at "confined animal feeding operations," or CAFOs, which produce most of the U.S. meat supply. These massive facilities house tens of thousands of cattle, hogs and chickens and generate not just huge amounts of meat but rivers of sewage, clouds of contaminated dust and nearly a fifth of all greenhouse gases.

The crowded, often unsanitary conditions promote disease, which has led to the overuse of antibiotics and to a class of superbugs that are resistant to those same antibiotics. Even the modern corn-based livestock diet causes problems. It makes meat fattier and may have helped some strains of the E. coli bacteria evolve from benign microbe to one of the deadliest pathogens in the food supply. And, of course, to grow all the grain we now feed our livestock, we've converted much of the Midwest into a huge corn and soybean plantation.

The only solution, the report concludes, is to replace the giant factory farms with models such as "free-range" operations that give animals more space and use different methods of feeding, sewage disposal and medical treatment. And that's where things get tricky, because most of the practices the industry is being asked to abandon have been pivotal in making meat cheap.

For example, grazing cattle on pasture grass would probably mean less disease and leaner meat, not to mention happier cows. But because the mega-farms confine livestock specifically to restrict animals from moving (and thus burning calories unnecessarily), and because corn is more calorie-dense than grass, CAFO-raised animals fatten faster and thus more cheaply.

Likewise, reducing antibiotics in meat production, though it may improve our health, will deprive the industry of the meat equivalent of Miracle Gro.

Because small, steady doses of antibiotics kill the low-grade infections that normally plague livestock, dosed animals spend fewer calories fighting infection and thus have more calories available for building muscle and bone. When fed antibiotics, livestock can grow 25% faster on the same intake of feed -- a critical point, given that feed is a meat companies' biggest cost.

Of course, we've long known that our meat miracle wasn't quite a free lunch. Yet we were willing to overlook the negatives because CAFOs made meat so abundant and cheap. Since 1960, for example, U.S. poultry output has jumped sevenfold while the price per pound, adjusted for inflation, has fallen by two-thirds. Prices for beef and pork also have fallen precipitously. And as we exported CAFOs to other countries, the entire world began to benefit from falling meat prices and rising dietary standards.

But as the downsides of factory farming have grown too large to ignore, we've had to admit that our meat is cheap only because we don't count all the costs: Taxpayers spend \$4.1 billion cleaning up livestock sewage leaks and \$2.5 billion treating salmonella. All told, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists, CAFOs may be costing taxpayers \$38 billion a year -- costs that aren't reflected in the retail price of meat.

If cheap meat is an illusion, will meat produced under better conditions necessarily be more expensive? Probably, even figuring in the savings in environmental and public health costs.

Today, ground beef from grass-fed cattle -- which would meet the goals in the Pew report -- sells for about a \$1 a pound more than hamburger from a CAFO cow, while grass-fed beefsteaks are \$7 more. Poultry and pork raised "sustainably" are also more expensive than their factory-farmed counterparts.

Some of that price difference will narrow in the future as meat producers refine a post-CAFO production model; even now, a small hog farm, if efficiently managed, can boast lower per-pig costs than the average mega-farm 10 times its size. The Pew commission argues that if taxpayers are willing to support small and medium producers with incentives such as accelerated tax depreciation and tax credits, the cost to consumers might be further reduced.

But don't expect to end CAFOs and keep super-cheap meat. Sustainably fed animals take longer to reach slaughter weight, thus reducing a farmer's annual output. Likewise, shifting from confined operations to a "free-range" model will require more land, at a time when farm acres are already in short supply. All of which means we won't be able to produce nearly as much meat as we used to, and a smaller meat supply means higher prices.

Paying more isn't what consumers want to hear just now. But when it comes to food, we're beginning to learn that cheaper may not always be better.

Paul Roberts' newest book, "The End of Food," was published in June.