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Meat for Missoula:
Educating Our Youth on Sustainable Meat Production Practices
Analysis of the Context, Research, and Project



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Between the ages of three and six, my family lived on and operated a small farm in the Willamette Valley of Oregon. My dad took care of most the operations of this farm, which hosted dozens of chickens, an uppity goose, raspberry bushes, some rows of vegetables, two draft horses, and around ten head of cows and calves. One spring day when I was about five, a truck and a trailer came and parked on the packed dirt next to the main barn. Even though it was a bright day, I was told to stay inside. My younger sister and I had no trouble amusing ourselves with games and toys, running around the house. Then we noticed that the family dog had vomited a great red pool in the kitchen. Mom was upset and disgusted. Soon after, I got a chance to look outside. The dirt around the trailer was also a great red pool, with white salt scattered around. An odd occurrence, but I let it slip by without much question. I didn't yet need answers for everything. I am still this way, sometimes. Some time later, a year or maybe two, I asked my mother where the brown steer had gone. I had named him Chocolate Milk. I didn't take care of the herd, never really looked too closely, but it must have been that I was at an age that learns to ask for answers. I am still learning to be this way. My mother explained that he was for eating, and that after the butcher came, we ate him. I think I might have had a brief moment of sympathy for Chocolate Milk, but I was not disturbed by the information. I have continued to eat meat all of my life, while at the same time curating an adoration for all kinds of farm animals.

My family lived the farming life for only three years, but these years were highly formational for me. When I came to the University of Montana I enrolled in Environmental Studies and enthusiastically spent a total of one year at the PEAS Farm. Last fall, I took a Practicum in Sustainable Agriculture Education, during which I had the chance to engage a new generation of five year olds in the joys of farming, food, and animals. Standing at the pig pen, after each child had excitedly tossed a remnant of vegetables over the fence, I explained to the

group that pork products come from these animals. We would feel our ribs, our belly, and our buttocks to indicate where each cut comes from. Not a single child was upset by this information. It is just fact; there is no emotional attachment when we engage with the pigs. Perhaps some of the children would leave the farm and become vegetarian later, but I felt good about sharing the experience and the knowledge with each and every child.

In the same months that I was giving tours to excitable elementary children, an animal-rights student group at the University of Montana took up a campaign against the PEAS Farm's three pigs. These pigs have an organic and diverse diet, an enormous space to run, root, and bathe, and are humanely cared for by the PEAS Farm staff and interns. This student group acknowledged the pigs' fair conditions, but believed their eventual slaughter to be cruelly inhumane, even though some of the meat would go to the Missoula Food Bank (Erickson 2016). They held multiple demonstrations outside of the Environmental Studies building, and eventually got national support from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Threats were made to Garden City Harvest, the non-profit that fosters the PEAS Farm. In the fall, the three pigs were slaughtered as planned, and soon after an unclaimed act of vandalism struck Garden City Harvest headquarters.

Regardless of who committed the vandalism, I was shocked that adults could be so close-minded about meat production, to the point of intolerance for any domestic animal slaughter. I wholeheartedly agree with animal-rights advocates that factory farming and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) are extremely harmful ethically and environmentally. But these adults failed to realize that they singled out one of the most kind and sustainable pig operations in the country, in a state that strongly identifies with meat eating. Not only are the PEAS Farm pigs a sustainable source of pork for Missoulians, but they also serve as a model of balanced

agriculture while alive. The PEAS Farm first and foremost aims to educate the public about sustainable agriculture – particularly in terms of organic cultivation and as a model of balance between vegetable and meat production. Most of the PEAS Farm is dedicated to growing thousands of pounds of vegetables, but the pigs and chickens help cycle unwanted resources into desirable products for humans while living healthy lives. In addition, they provide healthy meat and eggs, respectively.

This controversy over the killing of three pigs is what made me interested in pursuing sustainable agriculture education beyond that practicum class. For my Honors Thesis project I have written and begun illustrating a children's book that delves into the matter of sustainable meat production. First, I conducted research of children's literature that has to do with food and farming, then I critiqued what I found so that my book could be as effective as possible. Next I wrote the story, and now I have begun illustrating.

The books that I researched are diverse in format, style, and publication date. One of the books, *Food and Life* by Gerald Ames and Rose Wyler was published by the Creative Educational Society in 1966. It reads like a textbook, as opposed to a story, and contains sections on a diverse ray of topics including nutrition, the history of domestication, cultural farming practices from around the world, and modern mechanized agriculture. Some of the information is outdated of course, or portrayed in an outdated way (for instance using male pronouns to refer to a hypothetical individual). This book also touts modern agriculture's chemical fertilizers and pesticides as the most productive means of growing food: a position that can no longer be honestly supported. In spite of these drawbacks, *Food and Life* was the only book in my research that adequately explained that domesticated livestock are bred and born for meat consumption.

Another book, published in 2013, explores the source and production of each item in an average western lunch. *Lunchbox: The Story of Your Food*, is a more typical children's book with colorful, racially diverse illustrations and simple modern language. This book provides excellent explanations of how bread and cheese are made, as well as descriptions of how tangerines and apples are grown, picked, juiced, and packaged. I was surprised to find such accuracy in a book with fanciful cartoon illustrations. However, this book didn't take the environment into account. While it did have a drawing of a combine harvesting wheat, it did not bring up the use of pesticides or fertilizers, or how food that travels long distances, like chocolate and tangerines, has a negative effect on the environment. There were intriguing illustrations of plant parts, particularly of how flowers become fruits, but nothing about pollination or what plants need from their environment. I was discouraged to not find any information in this book about meat or animals at all.

The most disappointing book that I found in my research is titled *Before We Eat: From Farm to Table*, by Pat Brisson (2014). In my environmental studies education at the University of Montana, I have heard the phrase "farm-to-table" or "farm-to-cafeteria" many times. The University of Montana is home to a successful farm-to-college program that is responsible for fostering mutually beneficial partnerships between the University and farmers/ranchers of the region. So I opened this book with certain expectations that it would be informative and comprehensive. The book is clearly intended for a very young audience, offering very little information on each page. The focus of the book is to put faces of people into the unseen process of food production, packing, and transportation for mainstream food items. There is one two-page spread each for cattle- and pig-raising, with just a stanza of the rhyming scheme as a caption. To paraphrase: ranchers graze the cattle and feed the hogs (Brisson 2014). Probably

since this book is intended for ages 3-6, the animals are not connected to any human food product. I know from my experience teaching at the PEAS farm that this is not productive. Children are quite aware that farm animals exist, even if they have never been to a farm. Our role as farm educators is to provide the information about why farm animals exist, openly and matter-of-factly, and on-site when possible. But if children in cities do not have access to a place like the PEAS farm, then children's literature will have to serve as a substitute. That is why it is essential that children's literature serves their need for an accurate, comprehensive, and engaging source of education.

I began writing the story by reflecting on my own memories of being eight years old, the age I selected for my protagonist and expected audience. Once I felt comfortable revisiting that mindset creatively, I began writing. I imagined what my life might have been like if my family had remained on our little farm for just a few years more, and if the farm had been modeled off the PEAS Farm. What resulted is a fresh perspective on the principles of organic farming and education that I learned through my internships at the PEAS Farm. Below is an excerpt from the story that demonstrates how I convey information about humane and sustainable production of meat:

“Animals serve many purposes on a farm, jelly bean,” Dad explains. “The chickens make eggs, but they also eat a lot of the insects that are bad for our crops. Chicken poop is also very good for our fields, so we add it to the compost. Chickens do these things for us just by being alive. In return, we make sure they have a happy life here at our farm. We give them clean water, room to run and scratch, and we protect them from weasels and foxes.

“The pigs serve many purposes too. They love to eat things we don't want, just like the earth worms in the compost pile – mushy tomatoes, apples with holes... When we feed these to the worms, we get healthy soil. When we feed these to the pigs, we get healthy

meat. We will eat this meat all winter and spring, and sell a lot of it to other families so that they can eat healthy meat too.”

So far I have received feedback from parents and pre-school teachers saying that this book would be an appropriate choice for teaching their children and students about raising animals for meat. This feedback encourages me to continue working on this project beyond the span of my college education. I plan to finish the illustrations and pursue publication for my book currently titled, *We Are Happy Here*.

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Thank you to Garden City Harvest, the University of Montana, and the Missoula community for the creation, operation, and support of the PEAS Farm. The PEAS Farm not only generates food, but also essential hands-on organic farming education, as well as hope for our generation that the future will be more sustainable, delicious, and community-centered. I am always impressed by the level of involvement and care that this community expresses for its members and citizens.

Thank you for allowing me to feel at home here.

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