

Home for the Holidays

For the first thirty years of her life, Ellen loved eating meat. However, after learning about the cruelty involved with factory farming, she became vegetarian.

Ellen was happy with her decision until the Christmas holidays approached. Tradition is important in her Italian family: her parents always serve lasagna with meat sauce, made according to her grandmother's recipe, which Ellen knows she doesn't want to eat. To prevent a rift with her parents, Ellen called home a few weeks beforehand, to explain her new diet to her parents, and to ask if they can prepare the sauce without meat.

The conversation didn't go well. Ginny, Ellen's mom, felt personally attacked. Cooking with Ellen had always been one of her favorite mother-daughter activities. She viewed Ellen's decision to become vegetarian as a rejection of her childhood, and as a judgement of her parents' values. Ginny also believed that Ellen's decision was a way of implying that her parents were risking their own health and weren't acting ethically.

When her family gathers for the holiday meal, Ellen immediately sees that the lasagna contains meat. She asks if she can have some pasta and tomato sauce instead. Ginny becomes very upset, accusing Ellen of rejecting an important family tradition and ruining the meal for everyone. Tension floods the room.

Ellen feels terribly guilty. She treasures her family and its traditions—in fact, in past years, she helped her parents prepare the meat sauce. But now she is convinced that eating meat is unethical. Despite her best intentions—the fact that she proactively alerted her family to her new diet and explained her reasons for change—her vegetarianism has become an emotional flashpoint for her family.

Ellen wants to help her parents understand the unethical practices of factory farming, and to live what she considers a more ethical lifestyle. But at the same time, she doesn't want to impose her choices on them or stoke the already high tension.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If Ginny is not vegetarian, is she still obligated to adapt family meals to ensure they align with her daughter's values?
2. What is the value of tradition? How should we balance the value of upholding traditions with the fact that our values might change over time?
3. Is it morally permissible for Ellen to be aware of the damaging effects of the meat and dairy industry on animals and deliberately not share this information with her parents in order to preserve their relationship?
4. How can Ellen preserve her relationship with her mother while remaining vegetarian?

