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<b>Text:</b>	<p>It was only dinner. But it presented an interesting dilemma when my Egyptian host reached across the table and began picking out the choicest cuts of meat his wife had prepared. Then, he put them on my plate.</p> <p>I stared at the food, fascinated by the animal flesh, browned and clinging tightly to the slim bones.</p> <p>My dilemma that night lay in cultural and philosophical differences, and what they mean as far as what people will and won't eat. It also lay in the mutual respect that we had - my host wanting to honor me by having me eat with his family, and my wanting to honor him by accepting his hospitality.</p> <p>Although I was a strict vegetarian for about six years, I am no longer one. A year spent in the Boston area in the late '90s meant I was exposed to fresh seafood almost daily. Eventually, I succumbed to its temptations.</p> <p>But last year, when I was invited to eat with the family whose story I'd been following for several months, it had been about 12 years since I'd tasted meat. Beef, chicken, pork - I'd long decided that I could not eat these things.</p> <p>However, now, as I sat with a plate full of meat in front of me - I still have no idea exactly what it was - I faced a difficult decision. The language barrier between my hosts and me was such that there was no way I could begin to explain my philosophical reasons for not eating meat. Besides, even though I hadn't thought very deeply about the reasons behind this, rejecting the dish before me would have deeply offended them.</p>

So, I dug in, feeling the fibrous texture of the meat against my teeth. It was at once familiar and strange. A wave of guilt washed over me: I was betraying my own ideology. How could I ever say again that I don't eat meat because I disagree with the treatment of cattle, chickens, etc., while they're alive? That would be hypocrisy.

Yet, on another level, I knew that at this very moment, sharing a meal with this family was absolutely the right thing for me to do. I just couldn't articulate why.

The answer came to me only recently, at the convention of the International Association of Culinary Professionals in Dallas. I was listening to experts speak about the relationship between our identity and the food we eat.

In a society as diverse as ours, people from different cultures increasingly break bread together, said Amy Bentley, a food historian with New York University. And that can be very stressful, because "we come to these events with multiple identities," she said.

For instance, a person might think simultaneously, "I am a vegan," and "I am a guest in this house," she said. And in this case, that person might eat meat served at a meal because she doesn't want "to be fussed over" or simply because it's important to honor the person who prepared the meal.

That sounded an awful lot like the experience with my Egyptian friends. It brought to mind, too, the ambivalence I felt about a couple of other recent experiences.

Once, I tasted a meat dish at a cooking class by Chicago chef Rick Bayless and his daughter. Another time, I had lunch with New York chef Zarela Martínez. Both times, I felt I could not begin to understand the significance of food in their lives if I didn't share that experience with them.

Then Ms. Bentley tossed out a word I'd never heard before: "flexitarian." Google the term, and you get more than 800 hits, most defining the word as a vegetarian who occasionally eats meat.

A flexitarian has certain philosophical and ethical preferences about food but is flexible in those preferences. In public, flexitarians might eat something they would never prepare or eat in their own home - meat, for instance.

That was my "aha" moment in two ways.

First, I hadn't realized that this lifestyle is so common that someone had coined a name for it. I was not alone.

Secondly, I realized why sometimes it would be an insult to reject a dish offered to me. For me, sharing a meal has a deeper meaning than just eating. It has a spiritual component.

For instance, in December I was in a small town in Veracruz just before the Catholic feast of the Virgen de Guadalupe. The evening before the feast day, residents of several neighborhoods converged to make a pilgrimage to the town cathedral for Mass. Afterward, the faithful returned to their individual communities.

Midnight found a colleague and me at a vigil that would last until dawn. We were welcomed as guests at an altar in the middle of a street where musicians and dancers honored the Virgin with drums and flutes.

When I was invited into a home to eat, I went. Somewhere between the moment I watched a woman ladle a bowl of mole from a tub on the floor and the moment I heard someone say that they had butchered a hog for tonight, I realized I was eating pork.

Perhaps because I had been through this before, I didn't feel so conflicted. Because I was welcomed like an honored guest, it was important for me to share the whole experience - from the pilgrimage to the candles flickering around the altar, from the musicians to the pork mole.

Looking back at these instances in which I've eaten meat, I see that accepting the food offered to me has been about experiencing a communion with others.

Each time, the food was such an important part of that interaction that to reject it would have been to reject the entire experience. In some ways, it would have been a rejection of the very lives of those who fed me and a dismissal of what is important to them.

While I don't intend to add meat to my life permanently, I do plan to remain a flexitarian. Sometimes, that moment of communion with another human being trumps my personal philosophies, no matter how well-intended.

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