How a Lenten fast strengthened my interfaith marriage

By J. Dana Trent

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On Shrove Tuesday 2010, I ate my last piece of golden, delicious sausage while listening to “When the Saints Go Marching In.” A Lenten practice of consuming no meat unfolded, followed by a turkey-less Thanksgiving, and an Advent with rice and beans.

There were two reasons for my going cold turkey as a vegetarian: survival in an interfaith marriage to a devout Hindu, and a spiritual exploration of what it might mean to practice nonviolence and environmental sustainability as a Christian vegetarian.

By sheer numbers, vegetarianism is neither sexy among the general population, nor is it considered doctrine among Christians. Jesus kept a locavore diet, mostly eating plants as others around him would have, but there are no biblical rules for eliminating all forms of meat.

Yet that first Lent, I dove in, committed to being completely meat-free—and I struggled. I wasn’t living with my then-fiancé, benefitting from his cooking and nutritional lessons as I later did. I resented this newfound spiritual practice, despite its ethical and environmental friendliness, as the smell of cheeseburgers wafted from my favorite restaurants. I was never a good cook to begin with, and I was now hungry all of the time and uncertain of what to eat. Adrift in the fledgling vegetarian starter diet of macaroni and cheese, my poor planning usually resulted in sugary vending-machine lunches gobbled in between project meetings and job responsibilities.

If we consider Jesus’ teachings on peace along with Paul’s urging of the early church to consider the physical body “a temple of the Holy Spirit which comes from God,” then we’d do well to heed the message of Galatians 5:16 and “not gratify the desires of the flesh.” Factory farming is violent; massive amounts of antibiotics used on livestock have created a public health emergency. All this makes a strong case

for a Christian plant-based diet, or a diet that includes only ethically raised meat.

I saw that option modeled by a Duke Divinity School colleague who ate a predominately meat-free diet, save for the pork, beef, and chicken that she and her husband purchased when they were certain the animals it came from had lived locally under humane conditions. Animals were still slaughtered for their dinner, but because they had strict stipulations for their meat, it was harder to get and more expensive. That meant that they consumed such meals in moderation and with intention.

While I respect their choices, for me, what began as my Lenten compromise to the practices of my husband's Hindu religion became incorporated into my own theology. I began to see rejecting mass meat production and the poor conditions of animals and workers as a testimony to Christ's life. Beyond that first Lenten promise, I remain in solidarity with my husband's Hindu vows to not consume animals, eggs, or gelatin—and it has strengthened my interfaith marriage.

When people ask me "Why are you a vegetarian?" I'm offered the chance to state my case, a rare but sacred break from the constant reinforcement of American's obsession with meat and the exploitation of God's creation in pursuit of sense indulgence. I explain that Fred's Hinduism has had an overwhelmingly positive influence on my Christian practice. It has shaped my theology of food with a spiritual mindfulness of where my meals come from and the effect they have on my body, community, and the environment.