“You know that’s a cow you’re eating, right?”

My 6-year-old mouth went dry. I stopped chewing my MacDonald’s hamburger and stared wide-eyed at my older sister. A cow?

Meat was never quite the same after that. For a while, I avoided it without defining my purpose, but soon the intent grew to be part of who I was. At age 8, I officially adopted the vegetarian label, and I haven’t had a bite of meat since. My sister still jokes about it being her “fault,” but I assure her that someone else would have spilled the beans about meat if she didn’t.

Speaking of beans, I fell in love with them. They satisfied me in a way that 4 Eggo waffles slathered in butter and syrup never quite did. (And yes, that was my daily breakfast choice.) My parents began to buy me veggie burgers and tofu. I learned to eat healthier and to love cooking. I began experimenting with recipes, substituting alternative proteins for meat. I was often asked how I was able to stick with my diet. Actually, that was easy. I simply didn’t miss meat. Furthermore, as I grew older, I began to learn things about meat production that made me thankful for my natural dislike of animal protein. I cringed at the thought of inhumane slaughter houses, antibiotic use, and the huge environmental impact of raising all that meat in one place. I realized that if I wasn’t already a vegetarian, I would become one.

At times, I began to think that all of society would be better off giving up, or at least eating less, meat. However, I knew that everyone was different, possessing their own values and health needs, so despite my thoughts on the subject, I never judged the food choices of my friends and family; I never preached about my meat-less diet. Yet, three of my best friends have become vegetarian, and my parents and sister now eat only the occasional serving of meat. Acquaintances who want to “try out” vegetarianism often ask me for my favorite recipes. The people I surround myself with quickly learn that avoiding meat is not so hard; in fact, if done right, it is fun, healthy, sustainable, and delicious! So I believe in the power of leading by example. And I believe in vegetarianism.

By Kelsey Baumgarten