



Tom Harpur, a retired Anglican priest, is a well-known author and regular columnist for The Toronto Star. I appreciate his honest, direct, informed and concise approach to many contemporary issues.

Sep. 21, 2003.

Western culture floats upon a sea of blood

The media lately have devoted large amounts of ink, sound and film to the issue of meat, the key ingredient in the diet of North Americans and of most people in the richest countries everywhere.

From the implications of mad cow disease out west to the controversy over the dead cattle arriving at an Aylmer, Ontario slaughterhouse, meat and its handling, quality, and potential effects upon human health have been front and centre.

But, have you noticed how the focus is always, obsessively, upon how what happens to cattle or other animals affects their impact on homo sapiens alone?

Our whole Western culture floats upon a veritable sea of blood and gore. The killing of animals and fowl goes on relentlessly day by day in sequestered, foul-smelling buildings in cities, towns, villages, and in rural areas all across the continent.

Only extremely rarely and for a brief moment is the veil ever lifted on how these sacrifices to our palates are being enacted.

More than a decade ago I took the initiative of putting on rubber boots, a gown, and a safety helmet for a close-up look inside several Ontario abattoirs. I described what I saw in a four-part series. But, unless I'm mistaken, there hasn't been another investigative scrutiny



by a journalist of these killing floors since that time.

Yes, we know there are veterinarians and federal meat inspectors on duty at such places and our trust is that the whole unpleasant process is being carefully and humanely overseen. Such is supposed to be the case. In the matter of religious killing, where no stunning or gassing first occurs, we know the butchers are supposed to be the best available — with special mechanical devices to hold the throat of the animal completely open to the slice of the near-decapitating knife.

But, there is a tremendous amount of hidden anguish and suffering going on that the public never sees or knows. We walk through the meat section of our grocery stores filling our carts with antiseptically wrapped steaks, roasts, chops, hamburger and the rest with seldom a thought that living creatures were slaughtered and cut to pieces to provide them.

We eat small amounts of meat only occasionally after my experience of 10 years ago but care a lot about how it is killed. I will honestly never forget the look of fear and betrayal of the cattle I saw being herded and prodded into the killing chute. I can never forget the screaming of pigs being electrically prodded up their ramp of death at a site in downtown Toronto. You could tell they knew their fate was sealed. They died in panic.

All of this came back so vividly to me the other day while reading a Star account of an audit of beef plants in Ontario and Quebec done by one of the leading experts in the field. The headline caught my eye at once: "Slaughter industry standards slip: Audit". Below this, a sub-heading said: "Canada is falling behind the U.S., expert says; Plants in Ontario and Quebec get failing grades".

If the woman who did the inspection, Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science at the Colorado State University, had not just posted her findings on the Internet herself, they might never have come to light at all.

Grandin's audit was commissioned by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) last year and completed in June, about a month after the first case of mad cow disease was discovered. It was delivered to CFIA within weeks, but the agency never made it public.

Here's what she found: Out of five beef plants, two failed because of excessive use of electric prods, cattle falling on slippery floors as they



lined up to be stunned, and three cattle were actually hanging upside down (hung by a chain around one leg) and bellowing as their throats were being slit. The regulations require that cattle be stunned unconscious first. Then they are hung up, have their throats cut, and bleed out over grilles below.

Grandin told Star reporter Stuart Laidlaw by phone that one beef plant used electric prods on 90 per cent of the cattle and that 14 per cent of the animals there slipped and fell in the holding pen. Pigs were excessively prodded by electricity. One chicken plant failed because it had received too many birds with broken wings. One can only imagine the horror of their journey to death.

Here's the kicker for me: The plants Grandin inspected knew she was coming and had voluntarily opened their doors. They are only a small fraction of the abattoirs daily grinding out this grim business.

For the first time, Canada is behind the U.S. on this. It is to be hoped that Laidlaw's story and this column raise awareness about treatment of the animals we eat.

