

Where does Hamburger come from?

If the modern media with its video cameras and on-the-spot reporting had been at Gettysburg, the South would have won the Civil War. Had citizens of the Union been able to see with their eyes the carnage that resulted from the clash of the two armies, they would have let the Union die, rather than face the prospect of even more slaughter. Without the camera wielding zealots of today's blog-o-sphere, the Union survived. I think things are better because of it.

But this isn't a column about war and media. It's about the fact that images have replaced words as a means of conveying concepts.

A few months ago, a clandestine camera-wielding PETA fanatic got into a west coast slaughterhouse, and took some pictures of lame cattle being moved with a forklift. For people who have never cleaned the cow flop of a barnyard from their shoes, these were apparently traumatic and disturbing images. So much so, that the Federal Government, mustered its resources and ordered the recall of 72,000 tons of hamburger. It was the largest recall of meat in the history of the US, because of the "remote possibility that .. the beef would cause adverse health effects". The recall went back almost 2 years. So traumatized were some folks by these pictures, that a new wave of vegetarianism washed over the region.

All of that in spite of the fact that not one single person reported any sickness or ill effects from eating any of the meat that was supposedly put into the food chain by this "rouge" meat packing plant. I wonder how many people have meat they purchased 24 months ago still in their freezer.

Growing up on a farmstead in Clover Valley, Thanksgiving time each year included an annual task: the butchering of the cows we had raised that year for that purpose. By Thanksgiving, it was cool enough to butcher the animals outside, and then hang the meat for a week or so before cutting it up and putting it into the freezer. Usually some neighbors would come over to give a hand with the annual chore, and be paid in beef for their assistance.

I don't recall even one of the numerous steers destined for the table go willingly into the area built for the butchering process – each had to be roped, and pulled or dragged into the area, where they were dispatched with either a shot from a pistol or a blow with a sledge hammer. It wasn't a pretty sight, and one that did generate a moment of sadness in me each time I saw it. But I also knew it was part of life on the farm, and life in general. We raised the cows so we could eat them. Butchering was just a part of the process.

With each passing year, fewer and fewer people grow up the way I did, seeing first hand how our lives come from the land. Our society is the worse for that. I learned that the land and its produce, from the truck garden to the pork and beef we harvested, needed to be respected. Respected. But not venerated. Certainly not Deified.

Without a comprehension of ideas and concepts behind issues, a few pictures shown without a broader context become powerful motivators. Certainly a picture is worth a thousand words, but a picture with no words can mislead and misguide a certainly as the greatest propagandists using words. The visual images we are bombarded with each day via electronic media are both a blessing and a curse. But without the intellect ruling over the imagination, we can fall for wrong ideas and causes.

The impact on our society of the use of images to convey ideas and values rather than discourse goes beyond meat recalls. On our farmstead we had not only beef cattle, but the typical menagerie of dogs and cats. We fed them, provided some shelter for them, and even gave them endearing names. But we didn't keep them in the house, dress them in special sweaters, or put bows in their hair. We didn't take them to the store with us to ride around in grocery carts, and include their antics and "thoughts" in the annual Christmas letters. When the dogs got into porcupines, the quills were removed with pliers, sans benefit of anesthetics. Veterinarians were called for high value animals, like bulls and breeder cattle, not dogs and cats. It never would have occurred to me to elaborate on what one of our farm dogs was "thinking" at any given time. People think. Cows and horses didn't. We adopted children, not animals.

The real tragedy of course, is that good men died at Gettysburg, and innumerable fields and jungles since then, to defend ideas and values that are far grander than a simple picture or video can convey. While our imaginations are an essential part of our humanity, the imagination by itself can never be an arbiter of truth. Or justice. Because I can imagine my dog thinking certain thoughts, doesn't mean it does. Animals have their place – but not at a level of equality with humans. A kicking cow being moved into a slaughterhouse is not the moral equivalent of herding prisoners into gas chambers.

Maybe more folks need to raise their own hamburger.

Greg Hull is a self-employed sawyer and philosopher at large, and does not let the family dog into the house.