[Assignment: Write an essay explaining how you changed your mind about something. Perhaps you decided not to go out for wrestling your senior year; perhaps some series of incidents revealed something important about yourself or your community you never knew or suspected to be true. Keep in mind that you will want to recount events, incidents, perhaps conversations or things you read that helped change your thinking, so that your reader will understand the change in your thinking process.]

Ever since I can remember, I have loved animals. I used to run home crying when the neighborhood boys would smash lightning bugs on the sidewalk to see the fluorescent green streaks they would leave. Every night before bed, I had to make sure all of my stuffed animals were "comfortable" in their beds, and that each was fully covered up with his or her blanket. Since my dad is allergic to all animals, I was only allowed to have two gerbils and a fish tank. I was always finding stray animals in the neighborhood and taking them home, trying to make my parents feel sorry for them and see how cute they were so that I could keep them. My mom's side of the family owned and lived on a farm, and whenever we would go and visit her parents, I always begged to go to the farm which was located in a nearby town. On the farm there were only cows, since it was a dairy farm. I asked my great-grandpa why they didn't have any other animals besides cows, because on a farm there was supposed to be cows and pigs and chickens and horses. He laughed, and said, "Well, we ust'a have chickens, but we ate 'em all!" Well, I didn't think this was funny at all. I ran and told my mom when we got back from the farm what her grandfather had said, and asked her if she knew what they had done with all their chickens. She explained to me that meat comes from animals, so when we say we are having chicken for dinner, we are really eating chickens. I was horrified, and said I was never going to eat meat again. My mom told me that in our society it was socially acceptable to eat animals, but in some countries like India cows were considered sacred and therefore were not eaten. But in other countries, even dogs and cats were eaten. This horrified me even more.

When I was in eighth grade my science teacher was a vegetarian, and he was always talking about how meat is bad for you and about all the chemicals that are injected into meat for different reasons. One day he read aloud excerpts from The Jungle by Upton Sinclair. That book is enough to make anyone queasy at the thought of eating meat. It is about how meat is processed before there were U.S. standards and inspections made on processing plants. The conditions were unclean, and anyone or anything that happened to fall in the bins became someone's dinner. It was then that I started to think rationally about meat. I talked it over with my mom and told her I didn't want to eat it anymore. She said I could eliminate it from my diet; however, I had to at least eat chicken. I settled for this for a while, until I chose vegetarianism as a subject for a high school English
speech. It was then that I found out how an animal that is being raised for meat is treated its whole life.

From their birth, they are treated more inhumanely than most people are aware of. Most animals that are raised for meat do not live on a typical farm with an open field for grazing or in a barn.

Most live on what is called a "factory farm," which is a place where animals such as cows, pigs, and chickens are kept in the smallest possible surroundings to conserve space. Very seldom do these "farms" have facilities to allow the animals outside. They are often injected with drugs to make them larger without having to feed them a lot, and without gaining too much muscle since that is less pleasing for the consumer to eat. Keeping the animals indoors also will prevent the meat from becoming too dark in color, which in meats like veal is also displeasing to the consumer. A statistic out of a P.E.T.A. (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) magazine that I got from a friend who also does not eat meat says that a lifetime vegetarian will save the lives of over 1,500 animals. This really caught my eye. Also, the magazine said that if animals were not bred for meat, then there would be fewer of them to feed, and the grain and water that would have been used to feed them could be used to feed the world's hungry. Through my research, I began to see meat for what it really is--the flesh of dead animals.

I decided to cut meat out of my life altogether, and it's really not that hard. The question that I get asked the most is "Well, what do you eat then?" (As if there's no other food to eat except meat in the world!) I usually just shrug and say, "Anything that's not meat!" If I'm at someone's house for dinner, and their main dish is meat, then I just eat the side dishes or a salad. I hate when people make a big fuss over it and say things like "Oh, I forgot you don't eat meat." Or while deciding where to go for dinner--someone will often say, "Well, ask Heather where she wants to go since she doesn't eat anything." Or, my favorite: "Is there something that you can eat here?" Like I don't eat real food or something! Most restaurants have a salad, if nothing else, which I don't mind eating at all. At home, my mom usually tries to prepare one of the substitutes available at the grocery store, such as meatless hamburgers and hotdogs. I have also gotten several vegetarian cookbooks as gifts from people who insist that it is absolutely necessary to eat meat and that I'll get sick from not eating it. Another response I often get is disbelief--someone will say, "How could you eat NO meat at all--I don't believe it." Then there's the person who says they've seen me eat meat before, they can't name what it was or when, just that they have seen me eat it. Then, the ever popular "I'll catch you some day!" from the people that for some odd reason insist that I do eat meat--I just say that I don't. Others think it's just plain weird. While they don't see any reason not to eat meat, I see no reason to eat it. Members of the feline family are the only animals that actually need meat to survive, because they need a certain acid that is only produced by other animals.

Until eighth grade, I had never really given a serious thought to vegetarianism as a lifestyle because it is not the norm in our society. Once I did give it up, I never went back to it, and I never will--it's just something I don't do. I think that if more people were aware of how
animals are treated and see their living conditions before their dinner reaches the table, they also might take a second look.