



A Harmonious World

Selected blog entries, 2012-2016

By Armen Abalian



©2017 Armen Abalian. This book may be printed/reproduced free of charge, as long as you cite the author

This is a collection of 55 entries from my blog. The topics deal mostly with animal rights, vegetarianism and veganism, and ways to improve our interaction with the animals of the world.

If you're interested, you can find out more at www.effanow.com.

May 28, 2012

Fur, leather, meat, and the pitfalls of an "all-or-nothing" approach

People who oppose the fur industry, but wear leather and/or eat meat are often labeled "hypocrites". This is also often the case with vegetarians who wear leather. I'd like to discuss several points which shed some light on these and other related "dilemmas".

1) While not ideal, being against fur if you eat meat/wear leather is not as hypocritical as some might think. Though imperfect, the ethical argument that by simply consuming the animal we at least provide ourselves with food, is a somewhat valid one. Breeding an animal solely for the purpose of having a cute, furry hat, or a fur coat, and then discarding the rest of the animal, is worse, ethically speaking.

2) The argument that leather is a by-product of the meat industry is, for the most part (though not always), a valid one. For the most part, animals are not killed for their leather. This only becomes an ethical issue for someone who doesn't eat meat, and even then it's important not to fall into the trap of adopting a "you're either a saint or sinner" approach, but to encourage people by educating them.

3) The way animals are trapped and killed for fur is often reprehensible. Unfortunately, with fur, the "coat" is the business, so the preservation of the "coat" often takes precedence over the level of suffering inflicted on the animal. This leads to some very cruel practices both in the way the animals are kept, as well as in the actual processes of killing/fur removal. And again, all for fashion.

4) Sustainability is not an excuse for cruelty. In theory, it preserves a species, but at what cost? In terms of the fur industry, and other such industries based on the darker side of the human soul, all "sustainable" means is that there is an endless cycle of highly cruel behavior. Remember, nature, when not interfered with by us, requires no help in evening out population levels of species.

I personally don't eat any meat, wear no fur or leather, and avoid all animal-based products about 95% of the time. I will not, however, call someone a hypocrite because they haven't gone all the way in their realization of the way we mistreat animals. Progress should be measured step by step. If you still eat meat and wear leather, but you're against fur - good for you! You've taken a good first step in identifying a very cruel phenomenon, one that will hopefully open your eyes to others.

May 31, 2012

The major religions and animal rights

Many people around the world feel that our superior intelligence in relation to other animals gives us the right to dominate them. Basically, they argue, these "lesser beings" should serve us - to be our food, our clothing, our entertainment, our transportation, etc. Some people justify this by claiming that these "beasts" either don't feel pain, or don't feel as much pain, or it is somehow not important that they feel pain, that they were "meant" to suffer. (I realize that there are a lot of quotation marks here, but that's only to underline how ridiculous this way of thinking is.) Too many people in this world believe that not only is the life of an animal not as important as the life of human being, it is really not that important at all. All of these concepts are related to each other, and all betray our arrogance and lack of respect for the life of other sentient beings. While there is no single cause behind this way of thinking, I would like to briefly examine the role the major religions have played (and continue to play) in formulating this viewpoint.

Religion plays an important role in the way we interact with each other as well as with animals. Even in modern times, with their position in many parts of the world fading, the main religions continue to influence the minds and morals of a large percentage of the planet's inhabitants. The animal rights problem begins with the approbation of eating meat. Most religions either overtly state that it is acceptable to eat the meat of some or all animals, or simply say nothing on the subject, which many believers interpret as an unspoken approval. This approval, either overt or unspoken, sets a precedent of violence, regardless of whether this contradicts the other beliefs of the religion. "Thou shall not kill" exists in many belief systems, but very few apply it to all sentient beings. Furthermore, many of the world's main religions still sacrifice animals, or turn a blind eye to people sacrificing animals in their name.

Some major religions (especially Jainism, but also some schools of Hinduism and Buddhism) do encourage vegetarianism. Still, many animals are mistreated in the areas where these religions predominate. This failure to adhere to these particular teachings, the reason why one still sees animal abuse in these areas, can be due to either a lack of familiarity with these teachings or a lack of a true understanding thereof. Sometimes, however, it is because the teachers fail to reiterate certain important points regarding our interaction with the animal world, opting, instead, to focus on other topics.

The above-mentioned lack of interest in vegetarianism is part of a lack of interest in animal rights in general. Many of the major religions' holy books and teachings are silent when it comes to general animal rights issues and the way we treat other animals. If mentioned, it is usually treated as something rather insignificant, almost an afterthought. This is largely due to the fact that many major religions have the wrong idea about why we are different from other

animals, and what it ultimately means to be "intellectually superior". Even when a religion doesn't explicitly state that we should use our intelligence to dominate other sentient beings, it often encourages this by placing other animals on a lower pedestal than humans. The Catholic Church, for example, has historically claimed that animals do not have souls, at least not the same kind that humans have. Many life-long Catholics become depressed to no end when they find out that their religion, in fact, says that their beloved dog or cat will not be in Heaven with them. Whether or not Heaven exists is not the issue here; the issue is the duality created by the Church, one which sets animals on a lower scale than humans, as mere "beasts" unable to perceive God, - which, while not condoning violence per se, still opens up a whole world of opportunity for abuse, mistreatment, abandonment, and killing. The Catholic Church is not alone. Many other belief systems, either through their holy books or through verbal teachings, send a similar message: that we should simply not worry about the fate of animals as much as we worry about the fate of other human beings. Since the major religions have been instilling this belief in people's heads for millennia, this is the way most people function.

Another important issue related to the above topic is the major religions' lack of condemnation of injustices against other animals. Even with the lack of explicit passages in their holy books, one would hope that they would improvise just a bit, that they'd speak out against obvious injustices. Sofia, Bulgaria, and Bucharest, Romania, for example, both have an alarming number of abandoned dogs. Abandoning a pet is obviously a very cruel thing to do, and as a supposed moral force, the Orthodox Church should regularly remind its flock to refrain from doing it. So how many sermons has this problem been mentioned in? From what my sources tell me, hardly any. As I have said above, the suffering of these animals is simply seen as not being as important as other issues. Once again, I'm not trying to single anyone out, but rather to give an example. This lack of involvement in animal rights issues is evident in many different religions, and in most geographic regions, including many regions where Hinduism and Buddhism dominate. Anyone who dismisses this as insignificant is missing the point. The way we treat (and mistreat) other animals is paramount to the kind of world we have (and will have in the future). Every action that leads to the suffering of sentient beings, be they human or otherwise, will have a negative effect. Every action that helps other sentient beings will have a positive effect. Animals are sentient beings, and nothing good will come from either encouraging actions that cause their suffering, or being silent when these actions take place.

Religion, of course, is not the only thing responsible for shaping the way people think. The way to encourage a better interaction with the animal world is by educating people from an early age to respect all sentient beings. A good way to do this is by adding programs in kindergartens and grade-schools that teach children the importance of empathy and respect towards other animals. Still, even though the influence of religion is fading in some parts of the world, many people still listen closely to what their religion tells them. It would be great if all

religious leaders out there were given a reminder of the importance of encouraging a positive interaction with the animal world. Speak out against the mistreatment and abuse of animals. Find empathy for the suffering of all sentient beings and try to use your influence to improve our interaction with other animals. The current way we interact with other animals is partly the cause of the violence and negativity in the world, and the more we do to improve that interaction, the better we'll all be for it.

June 4, 2012

Other animals eat meat, so why shouldn't we?

Detractors of a plant-based diet often use the following argument: Other animals kill each other and eat meat, so why shouldn't we do the same? Isn't it only natural for us, being at the top of the food chain, to eat the meat of other animals?

This is not completely wrong, since many animals do hunt and kill each other for food. The problem with this argument, however, is that it forgets one very important fact: Unlike other animals, who kill because they are instinctually programmed to do so, we have a choice. A lion does not have the ability to go to the supermarket and buy a meat alternative. A lion does not examine the ethics behind his decision to kill and eat a gazelle. A lion would not be able to survive without meat. We, on the other hand, not only can, but should. While we should respect the instincts of other animals, we should not strive to be like them. To say "let's be like the lion", pretending like we didn't have a choice, would be a mistake. The fact that we were given this ability to choose, while other animals were not, is very important. It is what makes being human very special. In the particular case of whether or not to eat meat, our choice should be not to do so, since eating meat is ultimately a negative act which increases the killing and suffering that the world is already so full of. The better, ethical choice is not to eat meat, as this decision minimizes this killing and suffering. We have the power to make this choice. This is something that the lion, or any other animal, cannot do. While we should strive to be the caretakers of other animals, helping them live in their natural habitats, and according to their instinctual nature, we should not negate our own intelligence and our ability to choose, but rather use these to make positive choices that minimize the suffering of all animals.

As for the "top of the food chain" argument, its premise is ultimately flawed. It assumes that we should use our intellectual superiority to exploit animals, instead of finding ways to help them. I do not believe in this argument for the simple reason that it goes against what I just wrote in the previous paragraph. It is a justification of bad habits, an acceptance of the status quo, and a way to make bad decisions seem necessary, when they really aren't. We should be wary

of any arguments which encourage us to accept that the killing of so many animals is justified. The fact that types of arguments are quite prevalent in our society only encourages people to stay on the wrong path.

When I had this discussion with a friend of mine the other day, she brought up the idea that animals can be very cruel to each other, even when they're not just hunting for food. A cat, she reminded me, will play with a dying fly or mouse for hours, causing that poor creature to suffer needlessly. I told her that it didn't really matter whether or not animals did something for food, for fun, or for whatever other instinctual reasons – the main thing is that they are instinctual beings unable to make an ethical decision. We on the other hand not only can, but should always strive to make an ethical decision, to take the high road. To reiterate the point I made in the previous paragraph – we should use our higher intelligence to improve the way we interact with other animals, to adopt an approach based on compassion, empathy, and help. It doesn't matter that a cat can seem cruel; the important thing is to keep our own cruelty in check.

Some people will tell you that eating meat is not unethical, but I will tell you that it is. Eating meat means being part of a system in which millions of innocent animals suffer and die, when, with the availability of more and more meat alternatives, they really don't have to. As long as we accept this as being "necessary", as long as we partake in this cyclical death machine, we are continuing along a path of causing harm. Historically speaking, progress has come as a result of examining certain instincts and deciding that they were, in fact, more harmful than helpful. From slavery, to the exploitation of various groups in society, to even our former treatment of animals we now consider our beloved pets, we have set aside a lot of negative behavior to create a better, fairer, less violent society. It's about time we started to consider the current way we mistreat other animals as unfair, and took steps to start to remedy the situation.

Let's keep things in perspective. In some ways, we are like other animals, especially in our ability to feel happiness, pain, fear, even loneliness. All animals, including ourselves, want to live. This is what we should remember when growing our compassion and empathy. In other ways, we are very different from other animals. We have the ability to choose between right and wrong, to choose an ethical path, whereas other animals have no choice but to act upon their instincts. When it comes to eating meat, we also have a choice. Even our bodies are proof of this. We are built to be omnivorous, so, unlike many animals who would die if they didn't eat meat, we can survive perfectly well without it. Let's get on the right path – one that says "no" to the meat industry's killing millions of animals around the world, and "yes" to progress.

June 15, 2012

We need (to avoid) meat

One of the main reasons that people give for not becoming vegetarian is that we, as humans, "need meat". According to this argument, the sheer act of negating our bodies meat is unnatural, and even if it is sad that so many animals have to die for this, this is the way things have to be.

My response to this type of argument has two parts. The first part of the response is a basic disagreement with the premise itself. I believe that eating meat is more of an addiction than a requirement for survival. It is as natural as smoking cigarettes seems natural to a smoker, or drinking alcohol seems to an alcoholic. Of course, because eating meat provides us with sustenance, it is not frowned upon by society, as the other two above-mentioned activities often are, but, in my opinion, the addiction is the same. Detractors will argue that anything that our body needs can be called an "addiction". According to my reasoning, they'll say, water should not be drunk because we are "addicted" to it. This attempt at a refutation misses the point in that we cannot survive without water, but we can survive without meat. The millions of vegetarians and vegans out there are living proof of that. I am living proof of that. Children who are raised without meat are proof of that. Most vegans (myself included) will tell you that even if you can't imagine living without meat, eggs, or dairy, and that you regularly have cravings for certain types of food that you just can't control, it is indeed possible to live without all this. I used to eat a lot of meat, probably more than most people. Right now, I don't know how much you'd have to pay me to eat it again. I have absolutely no cravings for most kinds of meat. Once in a blue moon I have a minor craving when I smell someone frying chicken, because I used to like eating chicken. I view this as more of a sentimental craving, as my varied vegetarian diet makes up for any nutritional value that the chicken would provide.

This brings us to the second part of the response. Why even fight the cravings? Why fight the so-called addiction, you might ask, if it provides us with sustenance? The reason to not eat meat, the reason to fight the cravings that you have, is to minimize the suffering and death of other living beings on the planet. While there are tons of other good reasons, - health, environmental, etc., - I believe that meat, eggs, and dairy should be avoided primarily because it is simply immoral to have other sentient beings suffer and die to provide sustenance for us when it IS possible to get this sustenance from non-animal based products. So, it becomes a moral issue, and, if you think about it, life is full of these. There are so many things that we do not do, even if we want to, because we know that they are morally wrong. We know that if we do them, others will suffer and die. Many of us have violent tendencies, some stronger, some less so, yet we (hopefully) realize that for the good of the world around us, it is best to keep these tendencies in check. I suggest that we adopt the same

approach when we think about eating meat. While it is something that we have been taught is all right, - by our parents, by society, by the media, - it is not all right. It is based on the suffering and death of innocent beings, and this should not be seen as acceptable. I've said it before and I'll say it again: Nutritionally speaking, you can get pretty much everything from a vegetarian/vegan diet than you can from a diet that includes meat.

June 21, 2012

The complicated side of helping

It isn't always clear when we should actively reach out to help an animal, and when we should leave an animal (or a group of animals) alone. Even people with the best intentions sometimes choose a course of action that has the opposite effect to what they expected. On one side, we, as humans, as an intellectually advanced species, should use our intellect to help animals, to improve their lives, to be caregivers whenever the situation calls for it. We should also be aware of certain situations that might not be completely clear, situations in which it is best to leave an animal alone, or one in which it is debatable whether or not we are, indeed, helping, or whether we are interfering and, in some cases, actually causing more harm than good. If we're walking through a forest, or any other place where a natural ecosystem exists, we should avoid interfering, even if we don't like what we see. Sometimes nature can be cruel, but this is its way of balancing out population levels. In most cases such as this, we will cause more harm than good, and by "helping", we might be actually disrupting the balance, something that could eventually lead to even more suffering and death. Having said that, it is important to remember that this is a guideline, not a hard-set rule. For example, if you see an injured bird while taking a hike in the woods, you shouldn't just leave it. Helping that animal (if possible) would be a positive thing.

In cities and in other places where we share a common habitat with other animals, it is more acceptable (and often necessary) to help them, because they depend on us for help. Stray dogs or cats, for example, while able to survive on the streets, often have miserable lives filled with fear, pain, and hunger. Adopting such an animal and giving him a loving home is, in most cases, a good thing. That said, too much of a good thing can sometimes be a bad thing. Someone who takes in 10 such animals, and lives in a one room apartment, for example, might have a hard time dealing with certain issues of hygiene and health (both the animals' and their own), not to mention financial issues, such as not being able to afford pet food, vet bills, etc. The harder it becomes to keep the above-mentioned elements under control, the worse the quality of life for the animals, which may lead some (if not many) of them to become ill and die. Thus it becomes obvious that there comes a point when one's idea of helping can indeed become hurting. Once again, there are no clear-cut rules as to when that

happens, but you should always make sure you aren't overextending yourself when trying to help. Always make sure that the animals under your care are well fed, healthy, have enough room to live in, and receive the proper amount of attention before taking in any more pets.

Another thing to keep in mind is that you should avoid helping one type of animal at the expense of another. You may, for example, love birds and take steps to ensure a healthy, safe environment for them, but you shouldn't poison the neighborhood cats in order to make this happen. This would more than negate the good that you're doing for the birds. In this particular case, if you feel that the cats should be prevented from attacking the birds, the "preventative measures" you take should be to ensure that the cats don't have access to the birds by building barriers, etc., not by hurting the cats.

What about killing fleas, ticks, and other insects? Isn't that helping one type of animal at the expense of another? Yes and no. The thing to remember here is that fleas, ticks, and other such creatures are parasites, and the nature of their existence is to live off other creatures, often weakening them, - if not eliminated, their presence on your dog or cat may very well lead your animal becoming ill and dying. Infestation can be dangerous, and sometimes these cases can only be dealt with by killing the parasites. If faced with such a case, you should ask yourself whether or not there is a real threat to your or your animals' health (or home). You should also do your best to find out if you can first resolve the problem without killing before pursuing that course of action.

Two other issues relating to whether or not we should let the "natural way of things" prevail deal with the sterilization and euthanasia of animals, especially pets. Despite some critics calling the method unnatural, spaying and neutering our cats and dogs is the way to go. This is one of those things where, in fact, humans do know best, and should not allow our pets' instincts to prevail. Apart from being healthier for our pets both physically and mentally, sterilization ensures that there are less unwanted pregnancies, less overpopulation, less strays on the street, and hence less suffering and death. When it comes to euthanasia, it should be done as a last resort, to ensure that a sick animal does not suffer. This is a very difficult decision, especially for someone who loves a particular animal, but sometimes it is a better option than allowing that animal to suffer. Euthanasia should never be used as a method of population control, or a method of keeping numbers in shelters down. While this is common practice in some parts of the world, shelters where animals are killed should be replaced with no-kill shelters, where healthy animals are allowed to live out their lives if they are not adopted.

These are just some of the complicated issues dealing with helping animals. There are many more, involving countless hypothetical scenarios that may or may not be easy to deal with. It's not always easy to tell if we're doing the right thing, and we all end up making mistakes sometimes. If you're truly committed to helping animals and your heart is in the right place, dealing with most issues

in an intuitive way will be fairly easy. Still, by being mindful of whether or not we're actually helping or whether we're interfering in a harmful way, we might avoid some of the pitfalls described above.

June 28, 2012

Bullfighting, a tradition of torture

Any sport that involves using animals, whether they are killed or not, is best avoided. It is, once again, our arrogant side, our side that doesn't really care for or respect other animals, that makes us feel that since we are able to make them participate in sporting events for our pleasure, we should. Bullfighting and other blood sports which involve animals being hurt or killed are highly unethical activities that should be relegated to the past.

Defenders of this tradition give many reasons why it is acceptable. Some believe that we are humanizing the bull too much, that it's just an animal and that we, as humans, have the right to impose our will on animals. This is an archaic belief, based on a lack of compassion for the evident suffering that an animal feels in situations such as this. The fact that an animal is not as intelligent as we are does not give us the right to exploit and abuse it. We should strive to be caregivers of animals such as these, not their executioners. A bull is a sentient being, one that feels pain and suffering. Acknowledging and respecting this is the correct approach.

Another reason that defenders give is that bullfighting represents a fair fight between the bull and the matador. The matador has as much of a chance to win as the bull. This is not true. The "contest" is organized according to our rules, in our arenas, with humans controlling all the elements of the fight. The bulls are often drugged, parts of their horns are sawed or chiseled off, and other modifications to their bodies are made in order to make them less dangerous. Thus, the fight is far from fair.

Supporters of bullfighting often say that if it were not for the sport, the beautiful bulls used in bullfighting, the "toros de lidia", would die off. Ethically speaking, this logic is obviously flawed. If one truly respects and admires an animal, one does not encourage its torture and killing in the name of sport. This is just common sense. The bull in question exists in greater numbers because of the existence of bullfighting, true, but the majority of these bulls face the prospect of being slowly tortured to death in the arenas of Spain, France, and parts of Latin America. There is no reason for these animals to "die off completely" without bullfighting. The only thing that would die off is the prospect of torture and death. When bullfighting is relegated to the past, as it has been in several places around the world, the beautiful creatures can be raised in controlled areas, on a much smaller scale, and can truly be admired for the majestic animals that they are.

Bullfighting is a long-standing tradition in many parts of the world. In Spain, southern France, and some other countries, one of the main arguments in favor of bullfighting is that it is an important part of the local culture and that, subsequently, getting rid of it would mean losing a big part of this culture. Bullfighting is, indeed, a big part of Spanish culture, and, on a lesser scale, a part of other cultures as well. The important thing to remember here is that a tradition that's based on cruelty is not a tradition worth keeping, no matter how long it has been around. Historically speaking, there have been many traditions that have encouraged violence, suffering, and death, that are no longer with us because the culture where they occurred progressed to a level where it was no longer seen as acceptable. It's time that countries like Spain recognize that the cruel violence present in bullfighting has no place in our modern times, and take steps to ban this blood sport. Besides, the countries where bullfighting occurs have so many other strong, cruelty-free traditions on which to focus (football, anyone?), that it wouldn't be missed.

July 5, 2012

The case against hunting

Since I believe that one should avoid any activities which promote the suffering and death of other sentient beings, I am against hunting animals for sport. When it comes to hunting animals for food, I believe that this is best avoided as well, whenever possible. Hypothetically speaking, there might be situations when one has to kill another animal to survive, but chances are you will never truly

be in that sort of situation, and can, instead, choose not to partake in this negative activity.

In the past several decades, defenders of hunting have begun to use more socially acceptable reasons to justify this activity. One of their favorite justifications is that hunting is necessary to correct certain imbalances of nature. We must kill off a certain percentage of deer, they say for example, in order to control their population, and to prevent overpopulation. This approach is both unethical and unnecessary; unethical because it promotes killing, and unnecessary because it ignores the fact that when left alone, an ecosystem controls population levels naturally. It is important to remember that it is we who are responsible for unnatural population levels through our destruction of natural habitats, our killing off of predators, and other intrusive behavior. Nature always finds a way to even things out. It requires no help from us. More killing is not the answer. Controlling population through the taking of lives is not the answer. If we truly want to maintain proper population levels in a certain ecosystem, there are several ways to do this: One way is to set up spay and neuter programs, which is what some communities are doing already with deer. Second, we can reintroduce species (such as wolves) into a habitat to naturally balance out

population numbers. Third, we must work to ensure is that there are nature reserves that are large enough to naturally maintain correct population levels of species. This is not an easy thing to establish, especially considering the historical tendency to ignore natural habitats, to impose our will on other species, and to opt for the easy way out. It is, however, part of the ethical solution to the problem. We must also learn to better coexist with other species in our own areas, cities, and homes, instead of considering them nuisances. What we often believe to be "unbearable" circumstances that "need to be remedied", is nothing more than our inability to see beyond our selfishness, to the fact that other animals want to live as well.

Defenders of hunting often state that other animals hunt each other all the time, and that since we are animals as well, it is natural for us to do the same. The main thing to remember is that we, unlike other animals, have the ability to choose. The reason we have this ability, among other things, is to be able to choose between doing good and doing bad, between positive actions and negative actions. Causing harm and killing other innocent beings are negative actions. Animals don't have this ability to choose, so they hunt each other. They don't know any better. We do, or at least we should. Pretending that you don't have a choice is simply a justification of a bad choice. We should use our brains, and say no to activities like hunting which promote the suffering and death of other animals. There are many sports out there which don't involve animals. If you really want to shoot something, get together with a bunch of friends and play a game of paintball.

July 15, 2012

Do we love animals more than humans?

A friend of a friend recently told me that he doesn't trust vegetarians and vegans because, in his words, "they like animals more than humans". I'm not sure what the exact statistics would be for this type of thing, but I agree that there are some vegetarians, vegans, and animal rights activists who do view humanity rather bleakly. This phenomenon often occurs in those who have woken up to animal suffering (a very positive thing) but have not yet realized the negative weight that violence, hate, and anger carry.

First off, it is important to realize how unfair our current treatment of other animals is. Some people understand this from a theoretical point of view, while others really begin to empathize with the suffering of animals. In the latter case, the more one begins to empathize with the suffering, the more painful it becomes to witness it. The pain often turns to anger, - anger at the people who are too cruel, too uncaring, and too ignorant to stop killing animals and making them suffer. This is an understandable reaction. Most of us, when we see a bully beating up on a weaker child will do something to stop the bully. No one likes

bullies. No one likes tyrants. No one likes those who impose their will on the weak and the innocent. This is how people who have reached a higher level of empathy feel about the animals that are being abused in the world today. Many people, due to their belief that we somehow have a right to use and abuse other animals, will not understand this, and will view this type of empathy as "extreme". The truth of the matter is that there is nothing extreme about empathizing with the needless suffering of innocent beings, and nothing strange about becoming disillusioned with humanity after being exposed to case upon case upon case of cruelty and abuse of animals by humans.

Having said all that, while I understand the above-mentioned phenomenon, I always remind people not to go down the path of hatred and violence. I believe in cause and effect, and that negative actions (and emotions) will have negative consequences. Hatred is a negative emotion, so whenever we spew out hatred, there will be negative consequences. It is important to act to affect change, but to do this in the most positive way possible, - to help animals without creating more negativity. I believe in animal rights, but I also believe that by improving how we interact with animals, we improve our own lives as well. By helping animals, we are also helping ourselves. After all, by not causing, encouraging, or partaking in the suffering of animals (this includes eating meat), we minimize the negative consequences of this suffering, thereby creating a better world for all of us.

August 12, 2012

Nothing wrong with veggie dogs

The choices that we vegetarians and vegans have made are often questioned by individuals who eat meat. Issues are often raised to try to undermine the validity of our choices, to expose them as either "hypocritical" or just plain wrong. Some of these are typical, others less so. Sitting firmly in the second category is one I've heard several times in the past year or so: That eating soy-based (and other) meat alternatives proves that we need meat. How? Because (according to the argument) the very existence of these substitutes means that we obviously have a craving for meat, a craving that has to be fulfilled. The same people have gone on to say that they just don't understand how someone who has given up meat would want to be reminded of the flavor in the first place.

I don't really see what the big deal is. Part of the reason that these products exist is to provide us with the nutritional value of meat, albeit without the nasty side effects of animal fats, and without the ethical fallout related to making millions of sentient beings suffer and die. So is it strange for vegetarians to continue eating hot dogs, even if they are veggie hot dogs? At this point it's important to ask oneself why people consume meat alternatives. If it's only

because they hate the taste of meat, then yes, eating veggie dogs could be viewed as somewhat paradoxical. If, however, they stopped eating meat for ethical or health reasons, then buying these products should not be viewed as strange. Many of us in North and South America, Europe, and many other parts of the world, have grown up eating certain meat-based dishes. I, like many vegans, only started to have a problem with the taste of meat when I began (rightfully) associating it with what it represents - the suffering and murder of innocent beings. These days, when I buy meat substitutes, it's because I want to be reminded of some of the food I grew up with, without having to partake in the actual death cycle of the meat industry. There is nothing wrong with that.

In fact, the way I see it, the more plant-based versions of traditionally meat-based dishes there are, the better. It's not easy to get people to switch over to a completely meat-free diet. The addiction to meat is often a powerful one, but the addiction to one's traditions (of which food is a big part) can be even more powerful. The more cruelty-free versions of traditional food there are, the better the chances of a smooth transition for someone who wants to leave all the negativity of the meat industry behind.

August 20, 2012

Learning from animals without exploiting them

One of my core beliefs is that we, as humans, should do our best not to exploit or abuse other animals. This is why I am against sports and entertainment events in which animals are used, whether they be relatively harmless (such as horse racing) or much more so (such as bullfighting, dog fighting, etc.) This is also why I don't support the use of horse-drawn carriages, or any other such mode of transportation that exploits animals. This is why I'm against experimenting on animals, whatever the reason. Some people will tell you that it's OK to experiment on animals to improve our health and lengthen our lives, but this is unethical. I don't consider progress that is a result of the suffering and death of other animals to be real progress. I do not want to extend my life at the expense of the lives of other living beings.

This does not mean, however, that we can't learn from other animals in an ethical way. Animals have a lot to teach us, and we can, indeed, learn without subjecting them to experimentation, and without causing them harm. Historically, there are a lot of precedents for this type of thing, and this is especially true when it comes to incorporating animal movement into the human realm. Examples of this include studying bird flight patterns to learn about aerodynamics, using animal-based moves in certain martial arts, developing technology that mimics the movement of snakes or other animals to get into hard-to-reach places. The truth is, there are many more ways we can mimic the movement of animals to improve our technology, to study them in a non-

exploitative way. This is the ethical way to learn from other animals, one that improves our lives without worsening theirs.

August 31, 2012

Veganism is progress

Growing up in a society where we are bombarded with advertisements about hot dogs, hamburgers, and steaks, where we are constantly told by our parents and relatives that eating meat is "necessary" and that vegetarianism and veganism are unhealthy, where people who don't eat meat are often ridiculed and marginalized, it's hard to come to the realization that not eating meat is the way to go. I, however, believe that it is. From both a personal and societal point of view, vegetarianism and veganism are products of a higher level of consciousness, a higher level of ethics, and, as such, are the next step in the evolution of humankind. The majority of people are still being held back from this realization due to the strong meat-centric way of life that they have been taught from an early age. Still, it's worth finding the inner strength to break free from your conditioning and to embrace a fairer approach to other animals.

The reason I feel so strongly about the need to minimize or eliminate meat consumption is that I believe that there is a direct connection between eating meat and the general level of suffering in the world. Millions of animals suffer and die daily to feed our meat cravings. By negating this, by dismissing it as insignificant or necessary, we are, whether or not we like to admit it, validating the violence that is inherent in the present system. By saying no to meat, we are making a conscious choice to no longer partake in that violence. We are saying that we don't approve of the enormous amounts of suffering and killing that goes on daily. Progress occurs any time a person does something to distance him or herself from violent behavior, or from something that causes mass suffering and death. Thus, by distancing ourselves from the above-mentioned cycle of death, we are, in fact, progressing.

When we think of the gladiators of ancient Rome fighting lions, other animals, and each other, most of us would rightfully label this behavior "barbaric". Most of us would agree that it's good that this no longer happens, that such a glorification of death has no place in our society. Even more modern traditions such as bullfighting are either banned outright or shunned by more and more people, even in countries where they are/were tied in to the local culture. Why? Because as people evolve, they begin to realize that extreme violence, especially when it is tied in to the exploitation, torture, and killing of other sentient beings, has no place in the modern world. This is progress; a step away from activities and traditions that cause suffering and death. Thankfully for humankind, many historic injustices have already fallen by the wayside. One hundred and fifty years ago, slavery was a common occurrence in the world. In many countries, it

was deemed normal and natural to own slaves. Slaves were actually considered by many to be "lesser beings", usually because of their nationality or the color of their skin. Children and women were (and in some cases still are) exploited because they are physically weaker and couldn't protest. All this too has ended, in most parts of the world, because more and more people began to question the morality of these actions, and eventually decided to evolve, to progress to a more fair society.

The next step on the evolutionary path is to realize that the way we currently interact with other animals is wrong. It is not OK to abuse, imprison, torture, or kill other sentient beings, human or otherwise. There are millions upon millions of healthy vegetarians and vegans that are living proof that this is possible. The quicker we wake up to the truth that this is, in fact, a better path than the current one, the quicker we will reach the next step in our evolution.

September 7, 2012

The case against selfishness

The way we treat other animals is based on a variety of factors: upbringing, cultural and societal norms, and education, to name a few. Whatever the reasons, people who mistreat animals often don't care enough about them to behave any differently. More often than not, this is tied in to a self-centered view of life, where our own goals and aspirations take precedence over everything else. We've been taught to "look out for number one" our whole lives, so it's natural that we turn a blind eye to the suffering around us. While there is nothing wrong with focusing on ourselves to an extent, we should also strive to be more conscious of the suffering around us, and take concrete steps to alleviate it. A self-centered way of life might seem fine, but it is ultimately pointless in that it is a wasted life that could have been used to improve the world in which we live.

I have always stressed the importance of helping. The reason that I stress the importance of helping animals, in particular, is that I believe that our current relationship with them is an enormous ongoing problem for the world that we live in. This (mis)treatment, whether it be killing millions of them daily for our food or clothes, abusing them for our sports and entertainment, or simply ignoring their suffering on the streets of our cities, is leading the world in the wrong direction. Negativity causes more negativity. It's a simple case of cause and effect. The current treatment of other animals can be remedied by taking a step back from our selfish behavior and thinking about all the suffering we are causing. It starts with the realization that no sentient being, human or otherwise, wants to suffer and die. Animals were not put on this earth to serve us. Thinking that they were is the epitome of selfish (and faulty) thinking. They were put here to see if we

could all coexist peacefully, and as long as we don't change the current way of doing things, we will not be able to.

Realizing that it's not OK to hurt and kill other living beings is the first step. Thinking about this, really meditating on it, should ideally lead you to empathize more with the other animals suffering around you. You should then act on this realization, and do whatever you can to help these animals. You should help even if you don't feel this empathy. Active helping is the best way to broaden our focus, and to start making a difference in the world. The actual act of helping innocent beings is so positive it is almost therapeutic. It is the antithesis of the popular (and misguided) hedonistic approach in which we see the world as something that we can use and abuse. The more we move away from this hedonism and selfishness, the better our chances to truly improve the world we live in.

September 14, 2012

Why are vegans so serious?

Vegans are sometimes accused of not having a sense of humor. Far from being a "general truth", what this really refers to is that many vegans don't find jokes involving cruelty to animals and eating meat funny. I myself can think back to certain times when I would laugh at such jokes, ones that these days I wouldn't find the least bit amusing. So what changed?

To understand why people like me don't laugh at those types of jokes, even though we completely understand that they're just jokes and don't necessarily mean that the person actually harbors these feelings, one has to understand our beliefs. Namely, one has to understand the depth, intensity, and personal connection to how we view our relationship with animals. When one reaches a higher level of understanding about how unfair our treatment of animals is, one begins to empathize with their suffering, and becomes very sensitive to the injustices around him/her. It's important to remember that for someone who has connected to this higher level of consciousness, the empathy one feels is of a deeper variety, and a personal chord is struck every time one witnesses an act of cruelty, sees animals confined in cages waiting to be slaughtered, or sees an abandoned dog roaming the street. Someone who has not attained this level of empathy may also feel "sorry" for these animals, but this feeling will not be as deep. Someone who has not attained this level of empathy may simply not understand some of our reactions, as is the case here.

Once we get to that level, where the injustices of how we treat other animals begin to strike a personal chord within us, we no longer find jokes about this funny. If you can't understand this based on the human-animal relationship example, try thinking about other analogies. Many people who have a personal

connection to injustices and violence do not find jokes about these topics funny. Most rape victims do not find rape jokes funny, nor do the family members of these victims. Most victims of torture do not find jokes about torture funny, nor do the family members of these victims. Family members of someone who was killed by a drunk driver will most likely not laugh at jokes about drinking and driving. Many people who truly love animals are as aware and as sensitive to the injustices that animals face as the above-mentioned people are about their issues. Hopefully, after reading this, people will start to question the jokes themselves, and not our reaction to them.

October 5, 2012

Why it's silly to argue over the taste of meat substitutes

Last month I wrote an entry about meat substitutes, and why there is nothing wrong with consuming them. Today I'd like to look at another issue that's often discussed regarding these products – their taste.

I've heard many times that veggie hot dogs and hamburgers taste nothing like the real thing, and that, generally speaking, their taste is inferior to that of real meat products. While a carnivore may (or may not) complain about the taste of a veggie hamburger or hot dog, I, for example, would pick the taste of a veggie-burger any day over that of a real burger. Part of me wants to convince carnivores that this is because there are more and more veggie-based meat substitutes that do taste fantastic. These days, these products are not only bought by vegetarians and vegans, but by an increasing number of meat eaters. I've had many veggie burgers in many restaurants around the world and most of them have been very tasty.

Still, I feel a little torn making this argument. While I don't want to sound like I'm agreeing that meat substitutes taste "worse" (I think I've made it pretty clear that this is not the case), I also feel the need to remind people that taste is not the key element here. When all's said and done, this shouldn't be a taste contest. To put it bluntly, real burgers are made from the flesh of murdered animals, while meat substitutes are not. Real burgers are a product of the meat industry, which is responsible for killing millions of innocent animals daily, while meat substitutes are not. Avoiding meat represents progress for humanity, while eating it does not. Ultimately, these are much more important considerations than taste. True progress comes when we realize that the unmistakable taste of dead flesh actually represents an immense amount of animal suffering, and is therefore best left behind. What's more, any person who really cares about animals will gladly sacrifice even more taste than he or she has to in order to progress to a more ethical life. This is the right approach, and the reason why, ultimately, it is pointless to argue about the taste of meat substitutes.

October 12, 2012

Why it's important to act instead of complaining

I was talking to a woman yesterday about some stray cats in our neighborhood and she mentioned that she had seen someone trying to poison them. I asked her if she had called the police, to which she replied that she had not. "They don't care about things like that", she said.

On one level, I completely understand her. The police in many countries, including this one, have often proved themselves less than stellar defenders of animals. Yes, there is a growing consciousness out there about the plight of animals, and the need to protect them against abuse and mistreatment, and new animal protection laws are being created. These laws, however, are often not enforced, since the police are seldom as advanced in their compassion as the lawmakers who created the laws. One way to remedy this is by making sure that the people who create these laws follow up on them, ensuring that the people who later enforce them are briefed on their importance. They shouldn't just be created and then forgotten.

The most important thing to remember here is that a better society, one in which animal protection laws are both created and properly implemented, starts with us. As always, we can either accept the injustices around us, or take concrete steps to change them. The woman who I mentioned above is obviously a kind person, one who cares about animals. Still, I can't help but think that she could benefit these animals a lot more if she would take even the tiniest step to try to change the way the police treat these types of cases, instead of just complaining about this. Whether we're talking about the government, legislators, the police force, etc., things only change when people get vocal and get active about the injustices that bother them. Every voice counts, and the more voices speak up, the more likely they will be heard. If this woman, and 20 individuals like her, for instance, call the local police station and voice their concern over people poisoning animals, there is a better chance that this injustice will register on the police's radar as something that has to be dealt with. If not, the police might not be aware of this, or, as is often the case, not aware of how important it is to people. This type of ignorance should be challenged, not smugly frowned upon. This is especially important when dealing with animal protection issues, as there is a lot more ignorance (and lack of interest) in these types of matters than with matters where people or physical property are concerned.

Whenever we feel helpless, we should remember that everyone who has undertaken a seemingly impossible task has felt the same. History is full of such cases, many of which have made the impossible possible. There were times when people thought that children would never stop working in factories, where women would never vote, where slavery would never end, where violence would never dissipate, where animals would never get laws of any kind. All of these presuppositions have been proven wrong, but not because people quietly

complained about how unfair the world was, but because they didn't give up and took concrete steps to remedy the situation. If it wasn't for this type of attitude, nothing would have changed.

The longer we let things stagnate, the more stagnant they will become. If we see an injustice, we should report it – to the police, to our local government, to our representatives, to animal protection societies. If we live in a society where these channels are ineffective, we should get together with other like-minded individuals and try to change the channels. This is the path to progress. As conscious individuals, we should assume an active role in showing people a better way to interact with other animals, one based on empathy and respect. It's up to us to be vigilant, and to try to incorporate the fair treatment of other animals into our society.

October 19, 2012

I used to be a vegetarian/vegan

Back in September, I met a couple of people who "used to be a vegetarian", but no longer were. Generally speaking, there are many reasons someone becomes vegetarian/vegan, and many reasons one stops being one. I would argue that any vegetarian/vegan who goes back to eating meat never fully connected to a true and deep-seated empathy for other animals. People who become meat-free because it's fashionable, to impress someone, or for other similar reasons, obviously often fall out of the lifestyle as quickly as they fell into it. Even those who become a vegetarian/vegan for health or environmental reasons (both very valid concerns) risk being knocked off their path if their foundation is not strong enough. They might read a new report on the "health benefits of eating meat", or buy into the idea that sticking to free-range products is "good enough", etc.

People who have achieved a deeper level of empathy do not get knocked off their path. A true realization of the unfairness of our current treatment of other animals and the resulting empathy this generates in us are not temporary phenomena. They last a lifetime. Furthermore, they produce an incredibly strong, almost unshakable conviction, one that bypasses temporary trends. This conviction is unwavering. For people who feel this true, permanent empathy, questions such as "are you still vegetarian/vegan?" seem as ridiculous as asking if their heart is still beating, or if their brain is still working. The compassion we feel flows through our blood. We are part of it and it is part of us. Much like enlightenment, this phenomenon is hard to explain to people who have not attained it. What is important is that we try to take steps to attain this level of empathy, even small ones, and even if it seems "unreal" or unconvincing at first. Why? Because compassion is progress, and a truly compassionate way of life leads to a better, fairer world for all.

November 9, 2012

Pescetarianism

Pescetarians (also spelled "Pescatarians") avoid every type of meat except for fish and seafood. Many people all over the world (especially in many Asian countries) mistakenly believe that people who eat fish and seafood are actually vegetarians, when in fact they are not. Before getting into why I think one should not eat fish, I would like to state that I, too, was a pescetarian for about a year before I switched over to vegetarianism, and later, veganism.

There are two main reasons why people choose to become pescetarians. Some decide on this type of diet because they don't have the same amount of empathy for fish and other marine animals as they do for cows, pigs, sheep, etc. They feel that fish either don't have feelings, or somehow don't deserve as much respect as other animals do. Others feel that fish, unlike other meat, is too healthy for us to give up. In their view, without fish, we would not be providing our body with the nutrients we require.

The first reason, the lack of empathy for fish, is a common one. When I gave up other types of meat, I didn't give up fish because I just didn't feel as sorry for them as I did for other animals. Now, having developed a deeper empathy, I realize that this way of thinking was wrong. First of all, there is quite a lot of scientific evidence that suggests that fish are, in fact, more intelligent than many of us had previously thought. The fact that they are marine animals and function in a different way than the land animals that we are familiar with should not mislead us. Fish are sentient beings, just like humans, cows, deer, and other animals. This, on an ethical level, should be enough for us to respect them (even if we can't yet empathize with them) and to stop eating them. Besides, this respect can sometimes eventually give rise to empathy, as was the case with me. When I stopped eating fish, I didn't really feel much compassion for them, but with time I started to feel this compassion more, especially when I thought about how so many people who are very conscious about the suffering of other animals seem to disregard the suffering of our marine friends. Another ethical paradox is the fact that many of the same people who would never eat the meat of a dolphin, or a whale, would have no problem eating the meat of a trout, or that of a red snapper. I ask myself, is this a question of size or intelligence? Neither argument is satisfactory, in my opinion, as both are trumped by the respect for sentient life in and of itself.

As far as healthy eating is concerned, the case against consuming fish can be argued quite effectively as well. First of all, most of the fish and seafood that is sold in supermarkets is generally not very healthy. Farm raised fish, which accounts for a big percentage of supermarket fish, often has high levels of mercury, and since many fish are given antibiotics (and their environment treated with pesticides) to ensure they don't get sick, any nutrients that you get from them will most likely be offset by the negative side effects of these

practices. The truth of the matter is that you can find all the nutrients that you normally get from fish and seafood in a vegetarian or vegan diet. Let's take something that most people think they can only get from fish: Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids. In fact, flax seeds combined with a couple of other simple ingredients will provide you with a great meat-free source of these important nutrients. Anyone concerned about losing the positive nutrients provided by fish only has to do a simple Google search in order to find non-meat alternatives to each of these.

Hopefully, after reading this, you'll consider cutting down on fish and seafood, if not eliminating them completely from your diet. While not as cute and cuddly as baby mammals, as sentient beings, they deserve the right to live as much as any other animal.

November 16, 2012

Using our love for our pets to learn to empathize with other animals

People all over the world have pets that they love very much. In some countries, pets are treated as family members, while in other countries, less so. Still, in both cases, there is enough respect for these particular animals to make the idea of eating them seem cruel. After all, someone might say, these are pets, and while other types of animals are meant to be eaten, pets are not. This, of course, is not true per se, and depends on your perspective. If you look at eating habits around the world, what is acceptable in one culture is often deemed unacceptable in another. Cows are sacred in India, while they are slaughtered by the million in Texas. Cats and dogs are beloved by people in many parts of the world, but both are eaten in parts of Asia, among other places. The easiest way to break the cycle, to stop eating the meat of an animal, is to have a personal connection to that animal. This is why people who have cats or dogs will, generally, never even think about eating them; or why rat owners are sickened at the thought of animal experimentation; or why bird watchers sometimes get so attached to birds, they would never want to see one harmed.

I believe that every step we take to stop eating animals is a good step. Every instance when a species is taken off the "list of animals to be eaten" constitutes progress. Whenever we start to feel that personal connection to a certain animal, we should be happy. We should be grateful that we are lucky enough to love our cat, dog, guinea pig, turtle, hamster, etc., but should also use this opportunity to expand this love to include other animals. Why? Because a connection to one animal is like a seed that can eventually grow into a beautiful tree of compassion for all animals. We must remember that no animal wants to feel pain or suffering, whether it be our dog or cat, or a pig, cow, or sheep. No animal wants to be hoarded and confined in a small, crowded area. We hate the thought of our

pets being in this situation, but chickens, and many other farm animals often live their whole lives in dark, confined spaces, only to be killed at the end. When we see reports of dogs and cats crammed into cages, we feel horrified, and justifiably so. We should try to grow our empathy for other animals, so that we have the same sort of reaction when we see them in such situations. They deserve our sympathy and our help as well. Again, don't be afraid to make the connection. We should remember that these animals have the same emotions as the animals we call pets, and are often as smart, if not smarter, than our pets are. The only reason that we sometimes feel that there is a difference, is that we have been conditioned to make this distinction.

By spreading some of the love and respect to other animals, we can eventually begin to fully understand the injustices of our current relationship with the rest of the animal world, and to take concrete steps to eradicate these injustices. While we will never eliminate every inconsistency in what we do, we should at least take steps to eliminate obvious double standards such as the one described above.

November 23, 2012

Why animals? (revisited, yet again)

Despite having written about this before, I still sometimes get asked why I choose to focus on helping animals when there is so much else wrong with the world. It's funny that, in most cases, this question is asked by people who do absolutely nothing to help anyone beyond their immediate family, if that. I'm pretty sure that anyone who truly helps to make the world a better place will not ask silly questions about my priorities. This is because they will realize the importance of helping in and of itself, and will most likely be too busy trying to make a positive change to ask these types of questions. Still, here are some things to keep in mind if the "why animals?" question does perplex you:

The first thing is that when it comes to how we mistreat other animals, the scale of the problem is enormous. Millions upon millions of animals suffer and die daily because of us. Anyone who truly respects the life of other animals will realize the magnitude of the problem, and will not need to be convinced. The people who are befuddled by people helping animals are those that simply haven't yet realized the importance of respecting animals' right to live and not suffer. To put things in perspective, let's pretend for a second that it's human beings that are in the position of these animals. Imagine slaughterhouses full of humans, humans chained up on short chains, forced to perform and be killed for sport and entertainment, hunted, humans abandoned when they are no longer cute. Yes, of course some of these things still do happen to us, but, for the most part they happen a lot less than they do to animals, and there isn't as much blatant exploitation mixed with a total lack of respect involved.

The second thing is that animals are innocent beings. Animals, much like small children, cannot defend themselves, and even if they could, they would be no match for our technology and our intelligence. Unfortunately, instead of using our intelligence to create a better world for everyone, we've been using it to exploit, abuse, and bully other species for our benefit. What about children, one might say, or sweatshop workers? Aren't they innocent victims as well? Of course they are. This is a serious problem, and every conscious individual should be concerned about it. What is true, however, is that more and more countries are taking steps to remedy the problems of child exploitation and workplace injustices, and there are many more people in the world who at least recognize that these things are a problem. This is often not the case with issues of animal abuse. Most people unfortunately still cling to the idea that we are somehow justified in causing all this suffering and death, and that we have a right, as a higher form of life, to do whatever we want to other animals.

I believe animal rights issues to be pretty important, and I devote a lot of time to trying to improve the way we interact with the other species with whom we share the planet. Having said that, I also recognize the importance of helping in and of itself, and I will not question someone's choices if they happen to feel passionate about something different from what I'm passionate about. Judging someone on the basis of whom they choose to help is just plain silly. There are many injustices out there, and plenty of room for all of us to chip in and help. I focus on our relationship with other animals because I truly believe that the current one is dragging the world down and causing a lot of negative consequences for us all. Others will choose to get involved in other issues, important issues they are equally passionate about or feel a personal connection to. So let's not waste our energy on silly questions, but rather do our best to try to improve the world that we live in. This will benefit all of us much more in the long run.

November 30, 2012

The cruelty behind the wool industry

Apart from one jacket made from recycled wool, I have no clothes that that are made from any animal products. The only reason I have this jacket is that several years ago, when I made the decision to stop wearing leather, I didn't know that wool also had its dark side. More and more people realize the horrors behind the fur industry, and most vegans (and some vegetarians) realize that leather is, at best, a by-product of the meat industry and, consequently, is also a by-product of animal suffering and death. Still, a lot of people who come to the above realizations do not realize that wool involves a lot of cruelty as well.

Here are some things to keep in mind:

Shearing sheep is big business, and many suppliers try to speed up the process as much as they can in order to sell more wool. This means that shearing sheep becomes a mechanical (and often rushed) process, one that often causes painful lacerations and other damage to a sheep's skin. While most types of shearing operations treat sheep as mere objects, causing them to suffer, the common process of "mulesing" is particularly cruel, and routinely involves cutting off chunks of a sheep's skin and flesh along with its wool. To make matters even worse, this is often done without any anesthesia. Apart from the skin damage and the negative consequences thereof, there are other issues that make wool an unethical choice. One of these involves the way that these animals are transported. Many of the same sheep that are used for wool are later transported across continents, often in filthy, cramped conditions, only to be slaughtered for food. This is only one of several negative practices associated with the wool industry. Moreover, the production of other types of wool, such as mohair, cashmere, pashmina, etc. involves as much if not more suffering as the production of "generic" wool.

All of the above things should lead us to reconsider buying wool in the future. While it is important to try to minimize our involvement in the death cycles of the meat and fur industries, we must also be conscious of the needless suffering of animals in other industries (such as the dairy, egg, and wool industries) and do our best to avoid these products as well. Wearing wool is not necessary, as we have progressed to a level where synthetic fibers, such as polar fleece, are, in fact, much warmer than animal products such as wool and fur. This is why clothing made from these synthetic fibers is what you see on polar and mountain climbing expeditions, or any other such trips in extremely cold weather conditions.

December 14, 2012

Why the intelligence of animals is important, and why it isn't

Many of us have come across videos on YouTube that depict the intelligence of certain animals (or a collection of different animals) in a positive way. Many of these videos are meant to surprise us by showing how ingenious a pig, crow, etc. can be. These videos often state that the animal being portrayed is even "smarter than a dog", or "as smart as a human".

First let's discuss why it's important to raise awareness of animal intelligence. The majority of the world still views most animals as nothing more than beasts with little or no emotions, intelligence, etc. Videos such as these show that animals do, in fact, possess intelligence, and that they are capable of doing

things that we might not have thought they were able to do. This, consequently, will lead some people who might not have respected these animals before, to start respecting them. Will this lead to a complete turnaround in the way they treat other animals? Probably not. But it might lead to subtle changes in their perception thereof, which, in turn, might lead to a more compassionate approach to other animals. After all, it's arguably a little harder to mistreat and/or eat something that is both sentient and intelligent. In countries that have a strong pet culture, where people have learned to love their domestic animals, these videos are important in that they draw parallels to our pets, showing us for example, that a pig can be as smart as a dog. This may get someone to at least consider showing a bit more respect for the lives of these animals, as they do for that of their beloved pooch.

Every coin has a flip-side, and this issue does too. The phenomenon described in the first paragraph really refers to the initial phases of learning to respect animals. As I said above, for people who have little or no respect for animals, these types of videos may lead to somewhat of an awakening. As we move deeper into improving our relationship with other animals, however, and start developing true empathy towards them, we begin to realize that the intelligence of an animal is not as important as the life of that animal. This is why we should be careful not to be too divisive when we discuss the intelligence of other animals – dividing them between "smart" and "dumb". Although it is true that some animals are smarter than others, we must remember that all sentient beings have a right to live. This is really the card that trumps the rest. Placing too much importance on intelligence will inevitably lead us to conclude that it is OK to kill certain animals because they're simply "stupid". We don't kill people because one is smarter than the other, or because they might have mental deficiencies, so we shouldn't do this with other animals either.

December 31, 2012

A resolution of sacrifice, taking a step back from our selfishness

The word "sacrifice" has different connotations (both positive and negative) for different people. Sacrifice, in my understanding, is an antidote to selfishness, a way to spread our love and compassion to other beings around us; a way to stop focusing only on our own needs, desires, and whims, and to help others to live a better life.

We often avoid helping others that are suffering because it is not convenient for us. We do not want to adopt a dog from a shelter because that would mean we would have to actually give up some of our free time to walk this dog; or

because it would make traveling more difficult; or because it would require us to spend some of our precious money on someone else. We abandon our pets because we feel it is too much of a hassle to keep them. We do not want to give up eating meat because we enjoy the taste. We don't want to worry about giving money to shelters because it would mean that we don't have enough money for our own needs (though these "needs" might just mean a couple of extra beers at the bar). All of these things represent a selfish approach to life. A person who realizes the importance of helping will sacrifice his/her time to help a stray dog. This person will never abandon his pet. This person will cut down on, or avoid meat and animal products, because s/he will realize that the meat and dairy industry are responsible for the death and suffering of innocent animals. This person will donate a percentage of his/her disposable income to a charity that helps the less fortunate of the world, whether they be humans or animals.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with taking a step back from a self-centered existence to help other sentient beings. In fact, I think it is necessary, in order to improve the world, to sacrifice a little bit of our own comfort to provide comfort to someone else. Giving, helping, sharing – these things will not only alleviate the pain of others around us, they will alleviate our own pain, both by making us focus a little less on our own little world, and by instilling us with a feeling of fulfillment from the positive impact we have on the lives of others. You are often told that it's OK to just worry about yourself and your immediate family. I would argue that it's even better to open our hearts up to the greater suffering in the world. Our relationship with the rest of the animal world is one of the biggest problems in the world today, one that causes an immense amount of suffering daily. The suffering that we cause other animals has negative consequences both for ourselves and for the world around us. I write about this a lot, hoping that some of you will understand, and make appropriate changes in your life to remedy the situation. Any direct action that one takes to improve the lives of the innocents of the world is positive, and I encourage you to make 2013 the year when you act to affect positive change.

January 11, 2013

Vegetarianism/veganism vs. freedom of choice

In many parts of the world, there are more and more vegetarians and vegans, and most people, even when they don't really know much about our diet, do accept the fact that someone can choose to live meat-free. The problem, I find, arises when someone like myself tries to spread the word about the benefits of a plant-based diet. Why, some would say, would I want to impose my beliefs on other people? Isn't vegetarianism/veganism just a choice, just like eating meat is a choice? Since the freedom to choose one's lifestyle is a very important one for

most people, they often get very defensive whenever they feel someone tries to take that freedom away from them.

The first thing to consider here is why someone chooses to go meat-free. If one chooses a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle for dietary reasons alone (and there are indeed health benefits to doing so), and we ignore all other aspects of the issue, then yes, this becomes a question of a simple lifestyle choice. Another popular reason why people go meat-free is the whole negative environmental impact of the meat and dairy industry on the planet, namely the misallocation of resources and land, the pollution tied in to various factory farms, etc. This is a valid concern, so encouraging people to become vegetarian/vegan for this reason is no different than encouraging people to recycle, to not buy clothes made in sweatshops, etc. As with any environmental issue, one is still free to choose a path that causes more damage to the environment, though most of us would agree that a path that ensures a sustainable existence for future generations is the better way to go. The third reason why people go meat-free is because of respect for the life of other animals. Those of us who truly care about other animals do our best to respect the life of other sentient animals as much as we do human life. While we consider human life to be very precious, we would never equate being human with the right to exploit and kill other species for our benefit. When someone begins to value all life, then it becomes as important to raise consciousness about our injustices towards other animals, as it is to raise consciousness about our injustices towards each other. While someone who has not progressed to the same level of compassion might not understand this, for someone who has opened their minds and hearts to the suffering of all creatures, this becomes perfectly clear.

Having said all this, eating meat, ultimately, is still a choice. We are all free to choose to act in a way that either encourages or minimizes violence in the world. Still, injustices do have to be exposed and discussed. This is how societies progress. While we, as a society, have come to the realization that other forms of violence are wrong, and will punish murderers, rapists, child-abusers, hooligans, etc., we, more often than not, still stop short of including our abuse and killing of animals in the equation. I think it's important to challenge and change the belief that humans have some sort of inherent right to exploit other animals. This can help create a world where there is less violence, one in which all of us, humans and animals alike, suffer less, and live together in a more harmonious way. As long as this is done in a respectful, informed way, I believe there is nothing wrong with encouraging people to take steps towards a fairer relationship with other sentient beings.

January 31, 2013

Cause and effect, karma, etc.

The belief that positive actions produce positive results and that negative actions produce negative results is a concept that spans religions and cultures. Examples of this can be found in the Jainist, Buddhist and Hindu concept of karma (which, incidentally, is now a common word in English and many other languages), in the Christian concept of "you will reap what you sow", and in many other belief systems. Even religions that don't have a concrete word/description for this concept, still often believe that doing positive things (such as charity, helping other people, praising God, etc.) will lead to some kind of reward, whether it be in this life or the next, and that doing negative things will lead to some kind of punishment.

I believe that this this concept is equally valid in relation to the way we treat animals, and that the killing, hurting, or mistreating of animals are all negative actions that will have negative consequences. I believe that eating animals should be avoided because the killing of an animal should be no more acceptable than the killing of another human; that using the fur, skin, and other parts of animals should be avoided for the same reason; that we should not abuse or exploit animals any more than we should another human being. I believe that we should use the moral foundation that many of us already have relating to the treatment of other humans, and expand this to include as many animals as possible; that the only reason people don't do this is because they have been conditioned to think that they have the right to mistreat and kill animals, conditioned to be blind to the fact that animals, just like us humans, have feelings, albeit maybe simpler ones, and should be respected. The belief that we, as humans, have some kind of "right" to abuse animals is, for me, a big lie, one that's keeping us on the wrong path, both as individuals and as a society. Having said all that, the opposite is also true: Every action that involves helping animals have a healthier, less stressful life, any action that saves an animal from death or suffering, will have positive consequences. This is why the act of helping is so important.

It's hard to break free from a way of thinking that our families and culture have told us is correct our whole lives. It's much easier to just stick with the way things are instead of going through some major upheaval. Still, in order to progress as human beings, we have to question any kind of action that causes the suffering and death of innocent sentient beings. This realization is an important one, the implementation of which should lead to positive actions and, subsequently, to positive consequences.

February 8, 2013

Taking a step back from our selfishness (part 2)

Driving long distances through the U.S. recently, I noticed a lot of roadkill. For those of you unfamiliar with this word, it refers to animals that are run over by cars on roads. Seeing all these dead animals made me think of the selfishness of human beings in general, and our selfishness with respect to how we relate to other animals, in specific. I have written about this concept several times already, but would like to touch on this subject again.

It's important to put ourselves in the position of others that are suffering, especially those whose suffering is ignored by most people. Most people would downplay the whole roadkill thing, and consider it a side-effect of better roads, of faster cars, etc. In other words, they have no problem with increasing their convenience at the expense of other living beings. They buy into the whole concept that's fed to them from birth: That it doesn't matter how many animals suffer and die, as long as they get to live a convenient life.

A truly empathetic individual would never agree with this line of thinking. I believe that whenever we decide to construct something, we have to do our best to ensure the well-being of the animal residents of that area. If there is a concern about this well-being, if there is a danger that a certain ecosystem might suffer because of our intrusion, we should not build. With regards to minimizing the number of animals killed on our roads, there are steps we can take, both as individuals and collectively. As individuals we can simply be more careful when we drive. We should not trivialize the lives of wild animals, or think their lives are worthless. Collectively, we should strive to implement the construction of roads that minimize the possibility of contact between wild animals and drivers. In Norway and other countries, for example, there are special bridges over highways where moose (and other animals) can cross. This not only helps the moose, it also minimizes the risk of injury and death for drivers. In other parts of the world, the implementation of various types of barriers along highways has lowered the number of unnecessary deaths. Like any developments which minimize the harm we do while interacting with other creatures, these examples represent true progress.

February 15, 2013

The roach incident

I was in my friend's bathroom the other day, and I saw a roach. It was a fairly big roach, one that most people would find fairly disgusting. I grew up in an old

house in Los Angeles, one with an unfinished basement, so we always had problems with roaches, no matter how hard my parents tried to get rid of them. This is why I still get bothered by the sight of them, and even though my compassion for other animals is very strong, roaches are something I have very little compassion for. To be fair, I usually don't kill roaches, or mosquitoes, but try to find a way to get them outside instead.

Anyway, this roach noticed me and, like most animals who perceive a threat, started to run away. He tried to hide under the door. I couldn't see where he went, but I closed the door to prevent him from going into the living room, not really caring if I squished him or not. Once I opened the door again, I noticed that I had, indeed, partially squished him. He was staggering, badly injured, with a liquid dripping from the part of his body that was caught between the door and the wall. This made me feel horrible. For the first time in my life, I felt true compassion and sadness for the suffering of a roach. I ended up putting him out of his misery.

The whole experience left a strong impression on me. It reminded me that it's important to grow our compassion to include as many animals as possible. It is important to try to widen the range of animals for whom we feel empathy. It is easy to feel compassion for our loved ones, and, for many of us, for our pets as well. The true test of our compassion, is in expanding it to include other possibly less obvious animals. This particular incident served as a reminder for me that even an animal that is generally considered to be a pest, and is often exterminated, is a living being that suffers. This is not to say that no pests should ever be killed. Parasites, and other such creatures that feed and destroy our homes, should indeed be stopped in order to prevent disease and destruction. Most people, however, misinterpret the term "pest", and include way too many animals in this category. Even when we're dealing with harmful pests, we should always think about the most humane way possible to get rid of them. My whole experience with the roach was negative, but it led to a positive realization which will hopefully prevent more such negativity in the future.

March 29, 2013

An Easter thought - Christianity and vegetarianism

Many Christians (and especially ex-Christians) who have embraced vegetarianism and veganism for ethical reasons, are disillusioned with what they perceive to be Christianity's negative or, at best, ambiguous take on our interaction with the rest of the animal world. After all, we are always told that "even Christ ate fish", that nowhere in the Bible is the eating of meat prohibited,

and that, on the contrary, passages thereof clearly demonstrate that the consumption of meat is seen as OK.

While there has been quite a bit written about this (Google, for example "Christianity and a vegan diet"), I wanted to list some personal reasons why it is, in fact, possible, and even preferable, to be a vegetarian/vegan Christian. First of all, it is OK not to take everything in the Bible literally. There are, in fact, a lot of things that are in there, details, that would be seen as more than a little strange (or violent) if taken at face value. The second point, related to the first, is that we should avoid "not seeing the forest for the trees", but, instead, try to get to the heart of the teaching, to what the main message is. I see the teachings of Jesus Christ as being full of love, compassion, and forgiveness. Sure, he was prone to outbursts of anger and did sometimes sound vengeful (though many scholars attribute some of the latter to the personalities of some of his disciples coming through, as opposed to that of Christ himself). Still, taken as a whole, this was a kind man, a man who forgave sins, and man who took care of those around him, a helper and a healer. With all of this, I ask myself: What would this compassionate man think of our modern cruel factory farming methods responsible for the death and suffering of millions of animals daily? Would he approve? I am pretty sure he would not. In fact, I'm pretty sure he would be appalled by the lack of empathy that we have for the creatures with whom we share the world. I believe that had he seen the way we currently abuse and kill other animals en masse, he likely would have said more about our relationship with the rest of the animal world.

I think that Jesus' message is ultimately a positive one: To love and help one another, to forgive, and to try to live a righteous life. This Easter, when we remember the man and his teachings, my hope is that we will try to incorporate these into our interaction with animals as well as into our interaction with other people.

May 22, 2013

Meat industry workers' transition to more ethical jobs

In defense of the meat industry, some people bring up the inevitable job losses if and when we were ever to move to a more plant-based way of life. They argue that many farmers and others working in various meat, fish, and dairy industries would become unemployed, and that the welfare and ability of these individuals to earn an income should take precedence over animal rights issues.

It is never good for people who work in a certain industry when that industry declines. The first thing to remember, however is that this phenomenon is nothing new, historically speaking. Industries lose their importance, and

sometimes completely fall by the wayside for a variety of reasons: The development of more efficient ways to provide goods or services, environmental concerns, ethical concerns, etc. This has always happened, and will continue to happen. While not always representative of progress, in some cases it is. One only need to look at how an increasing number of businesses are embracing more environmentally friendly methods of energy production (wind, solar, etc.), causing traditional industries such as the coal industry to decline. The possible decline of the meat industry and the subsequent growth of non-meat alternative industries would be a very positive thing, as it would mean a decline in the death and suffering of millions of innocent beings. I would welcome this sort of thing, since I believe that the killing of these innocent animals is responsible for many of the problems we face in the world today. While we should indeed worry about the ability of farmers and other individuals working in the above-mentioned industries to make a living, we should take steps to ensure that they do so as ethically as possible.

People will always need to eat, so farmers will not become obsolete. When other industries decline, the jobs that are lost are sometimes replaced with completely different jobs requiring completely different skills, so those working in the original industry can't easily switch over. In food production, this can be a bit easier to do. Simply put, it would be easier for a farmer to go from raising livestock to, say, soy production, than it would for a coal miner to start working in the solar energy industry. The same can be said for people working in meat-production plants, etc. They would simply find work in a non-meat food production plant/factory. In the long run, once people adapt to working in the new industries, there would be as many people involved in the food production process as before. The only difference will be that these people will no longer be contributing to the death and suffering of innocent beings.

On a side note, another important point to remember is that working in and around so much death can and does affect our minds and our moods. Some people can simply brush it off as "just a job", but the negative effects of working in such an environment should not be underestimated.

Once again, I don't mean to oversimplify the process of altering the current food-production infrastructure or to underestimate the challenges of retraining the people employed in the meat industry, but because of all the moral and ethical problems associated with meat production, this has to be done. Remember the importance of actively trying to affect change, and encourage your member of parliament, congressman, local representative, or any other appropriate member of government, to develop and invest in meat and dairy alternative food industries.

May 28, 2013

The consequences of eating meat, revisited

I sometimes get asked how we can be so sure that there are negative consequences to eating meat, and what exactly these consequences entail.

I believe that there are negative consequences to abusing and killing animals, and, by extension, to eating the meat of these dead animals. I believe that killing any sentient being, whether it's another human, a cow, pig, fish, etc. is unethical because I see all sentient life as important. The same person that asked the question above would likely not have asked the same question about the consequences of killing other humans. Why? Because most of us already know that the killing of other humans is wrong. Religious individuals would most likely see this action as a "sin" for which there would be negative consequences. Even (most) non-religious individuals would agree that the killing of other human beings is not ethical. Even if we don't specify the exact consequences of killing someone, we kind of inherently feel that this is the wrong thing to do. For most of us, being responsible for a lost life would weight very heavily on our conscience.

I believe that this same level of respect for life should be extended to include as many animals as possible. When one develops compassion and empathy for animals, one begins to see that their suffering is as unacceptable as ours. One begins to respect all life, not just human life. There are ways in which we differ from animals, especially in our intelligence and our ability to make decisions. There are also ways in which we are very much alike: Our desire to live, our ability to feel pain, our emotions, including but not limited to happiness, sadness, depression, and fear. We should use to the things that set us apart (our intelligence and ability to make good decisions) to remind ourselves and others around us that we should be the caretakers of animals, not their executioners or abusers.

Whether you're religious or not, you can hopefully agree that violence and murder contribute to the deterioration of society, and make the world a much worse place to live. I believe that our treatment of animals also contributes to this. When we try to become "better people", we should keep in mind that respecting the life of animals is an important part of that equation, an important stepping stone on the path to true progress.

June 18, 2013

Stray dogs, a measuring stick of a society's empathy

I've recently been traveling though several countries with a large number of stray/street dogs. In my opinion, all sentient life is precious, and the life of a cow

is as important as the life of a dog or a cat or a chicken. By picking and choosing whose life is more important, we open ourselves to the conclusion that it's OK to kill a certain animal because they're "not as intelligent", "meant to be killed", etc. This type of thinking is a stumbling block on the road to true progress, and I have already written several blog entries about the need to expand our horizon to start respecting the life of as many animals as possible.

Having said all that (to keep things in perspective), the way a society treats dogs does indeed reflect certain values, or sometimes lack thereof, prevalent in that society. Dogs are arguably our most loyal and true companions out of all animals. They are intelligent. They become attached to us immensely and become our true and faithful friends soon after coming into our lives. They rely on us, wait for us, and love us. They do all this in a very obvious way. There is no mystery in a way a dog loves the person that takes care of it. There is no mystery in the affection that dogs require, and that many stray dogs beg for food while walking the streets after being abandoned. There is no mystery in the pain in a dog's eyes when s/he is missing his/her owner. For most people, considering all of the things I have just described, this would be the easiest animal to empathize with. A dog would be the easiest example of how we should take care of our animal friends, and to help them lead lives free of fear, pain, loneliness, and depression. So, when I see a society where dogs are easily abandoned, and when an animal that is so obviously loving and faithful, is discarded like some kind of toy that is no longer amusing, I question the compassion of that society. When stray dogs roam the streets, begging for food, and most people just pass by, not feeding them, not giving them water, not showing any kind of love for an animal that would have done anything for them had the situation been reversed, I question the priorities of that society. When instead of taking concrete steps to improve the lives of these dogs, a society chooses to exterminate them, to demonize them by treating them as a supposedly "dangerous" nuisance, I question the heart of that society.

Some people will point out that many places where there is a problem with stray dogs are poor, and that there simply isn't enough money to spend on this type of thing. While it is true that sometimes these societies are relatively poor, this is not the only reason that this problem exists. Ignorance and prevalent norms play an equal if not greater part in perpetuating the problem, or making it worse. They are what give the welfare of homeless animals a very low priority. Instead of spending money on programs to spay and neuter strays, building no-kill animal shelters or supporting existing ones, educating the population, especially children, about the good treatment of pets, etc., municipalities with a large population of stray dogs often spend money on other things, things such as stadiums, government buildings, etc., that are ultimately less important in terms of improving life for its human residents, dogs, and other animals. All true animal lovers in these cities should constantly take action to pressure their local government to adopt humane methods of dealing with the problem (the most accepted of which is the catch and release type spay/neuter program), to create

programs to educate the population not to abandon pets, and to create stricter laws and penalties relating to this type of abandonment. Many European cities (and some Mexican ones that I know of) have already seen a great decrease in the number of stray animals due to the above methods.

June 28, 2013

Excuses carnivores use: anemia, wrong blood types, etc.

Being a vegetarian, one hears many excuses from people as to why they continue eating meat. Two such excuses come up quite often. The first is that they are/were anemic, and need meat to ensure healthy levels of iron in the blood. The second is that they belong to a blood group for whom it is unhealthy to become vegetarians, so, alas, they must continue eating meat. Although it is understandable that sometimes people who have bad habits (which is how I and others like me view eating meat) find relief in "scientific" proof that enables them to think that what they're doing is actually good, many nutrition experts, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian, believe that the above-mentioned theories are flawed, if not completely wrong.

First let's take the anemia theory. The idea that you can't get enough iron from a vegetarian or vegan diet is about as faulty as the one that you can't get enough protein from that diet. (By the way, if you still believe that whole protein=meat myth, check out veganbodybuilding.com and you'll see that it's perfectly easy to get great results from plant based proteins.) There are indeed many great sources of iron for vegetarians and vegans, - a quick Google search will result in informative articles, which outline exactly which foods to eat (and how to combine them) in order to ensure normal levels of iron. Anemia can be fought with a plant-based diet as effectively as it can be with a meat-based diet. In fact, I have a couple of friends who actually improved their iron levels AFTER becoming vegan, by following the advice given on the above websites. Unfortunately, many people don't search for this info themselves, but just rely on what their doctors tell them. Vegetarians and vegans should remember that when it comes to nutrition, your doctor's word is not gospel. Many doctors have been taught very conservative (sometimes archaic) solutions to nutritional problems. To ensure that you're not following some outdated advice, always inform yourself by doing an online search on something before making a decision.

Another famous theory is the blood type theory, made famous by the book "Eat Right 4 Your Type" (Putnam Adult) by Peter D'Adamo, which puts people in three categories related to their blood type. In brief, according to this belief, type A people function best as vegetarians, type O people have the hardest time being vegetarians (hence the excuse, "I have to eat meat, I'm type O."), and type B individuals are somewhere in between. After doing some research on this theory,

I found that many if not most nutritionists actually see very little scientific merit in it. One Chicago Tribune article quotes prominent nutritionists stating that the conclusions are "based largely on anecdotes", and that "there have been no peer-reviewed studies published showing that different blood types perform better on certain foods". But even if one believes this theory, one has to remember that even the author himself has stated that it's not that type Os are "prohibited" from being vegetarians, it's just that they "may want to explore a more high-protein, lower-carbohydrate lifestyle". As I have stated above, it is possible to ensure high levels of protein without eating any meat or animal products, so it turns out that the infamous blood-type excuse is not much of an excuse at all.

I have always stated that whether you eat meat or not, a balanced diet is key. You have to ensure that you're getting all the nutrients that your body requires. Vegetarian and vegan diets are not unhealthy. In fact, as even a little research will show, a diversified plant-based diet is a lot healthier for you than its meat-based counterpart. There is a ton of information online about which foods are good sources of plant-based protein, iron, and more. Hopefully this information will help you take steps to minimize your meat intake, and to eventually leave behind the cruelty of the meat, dairy, and egg industries.

July 16, 2013

The meaning of life

The purpose of our existence, the reason we're alive, the meaning of life – this is something that philosophers, religious leaders, and most ordinary people have thought about and tried to answer for millennia. I have my own theory about why we're here – one that ties in to my philosophy about how we relate to each other and to animals. Here's a (very) brief overview:

The world can be a positive place and a negative place. The reason we're here is to come to the realization about the negative phenomena in the world around us, and to take steps to try to eliminate these negative phenomena, thereby making the world a better place. The first part is fairly straightforward. I think that most people can agree that the world can be a very unfair place. There is a lot of hatred, violence, negativity. There are a lot of problems in the way we interact with one another. It is important to go beyond these obvious things, and see another big problem in the way we interact with the animal world. Generally speaking, I believe that many of the world's problems are a result of focusing too much on our own needs, ignoring or paying too little attention to the needs of those with whom we have to share the planet. A narrow, egotistical focus doesn't necessarily mean that we like the fact that we exploit other human beings, abuse

and kill millions of animals, or destroy vast natural environments. It can also simply mean that we are too focused on our own lives to do anything about these things. In my opinion, not caring is as bad if not worse than not noticing that there is a problem.

Secondly, we have to act in order to improve our world. Even if we consider ourselves "in tune" with what's going on in the world, how much do most of us honestly do to improve the world we live in? Unfortunately, not much. Many of us are simply complainers and not doers. Many of us are overwhelmed by all the negativity in the world, and prefer to believe that the world is too far gone; that things will never change. This opinion is easily refuted, if only by looking at all the positive achievements that have happened in the past 200 years. There was a time when it was OK for kids to work in factories, when women could not vote, when domestic violence was treated as a joke, when slavery was legal. All these things did not change for the better because people adopted a "things will never change" stance, but because people had the courage and the motivation to actively pursue a better reality.

Some people believe that the point of living is to try to have fun. Other less hedonistic individuals believe that the point of living is to try to become successful, or to have a family, to have kids, etc. For people like myself, both of these ways of thinking are incomplete. I believe that a person who only focuses on his/her own needs is basically missing the point of existence. Sure, selfishness is always an option, - it is the easy way out, and most of us have been taught to be selfish, in one way or another, our whole lives. Still, this is the wrong path because it betrays a very narrow focus. If the world is a room, focusing on your own well-being is like standing in the corner your whole life. Focusing on our friends and family is indeed less selfish than living only for ourselves, but, ultimately, this approach is limited as well. In order to fully realize our potential, we have to truly open our hearts, to pinpoint unfairness in the world around us and try to eliminate it. If we ignore something because 'it's not our problem', it may one day become our problem. It may become our children's problem. I believe in the concept of "what goes around comes around", and, subsequently, that if we're not giving much, we probably won't get much in return. Helping can be a very fulfilling thing. It can be a beautiful thing.

So how does our relationship with the rest of the animal world tie in to the whole idea of why we're here? While many other philosophies present fairly similar steps in order to add meaning to our lives, they often say nothing about our relationship with the animals with whom we share the planet. The belief that other animals also deserve to be happy is something that many, too many, are missing. By treating other animals well (ie. respecting their right to live, not abusing them, not abandoning pets, adopting a meat-free diet, etc.) we are taking a giant step in fulfilling the second part of our "mission", - making the world a fairer place.

July 29, 2013

Zoos, marine mammal parks, wild animal parks, etc.

As someone who does not like to see wild animals in captivity, I'm not a fan of zoos, marine animal theme parks, and other such places. Zoos are basically controlled environments that initially came into being in order to allow us to safely see animals that we would normally not be able to see in our daily lives. Unfortunately, this has often meant that the animals were taken out of their natural habitat and put in very unnatural, confined surroundings. None of us wants to be taken out of our natural habitat and put in a glorified cage for the amusement of others, so we shouldn't do this to animals. We fight to be free, yet so easily deny the same freedom to these poor creatures. The worst type of zoos are the ones that operate on the misguided, archaic view that animals exist to serve us any way we see fit. The situation in many marine animal theme parks is especially bad since the poor animals who live there are made to do all sorts of tricks.

It is important to know when to help animals and when to leave them alone in the wild. The majority of zoos don't get this concept, but some do. Many of the better zoos (and they are indeed in a very small minority) put an emphasis of the preservation of species, - taking in animals that are, for one reason or another, endangered in their natural habitat. Unfortunately some animals are not guaranteed a safe life in their natural habitat, due to poaching, hunting, and other such illegal activity. In these types of cases, zoos can serve a conservation purpose. Some of these more ethical zoos do whatever they can to create the best possible life for their animals, recreating their natural environment for them and making them feel as comfortable as possible. Wild animal parks are better, in theory, since they are meant to recreate an animal's natural habitat in the wild. The reason I say "in theory" is that even though this type of environment is meant to be more natural, it is still a controlled environment, and as such, steps have to be taken to ensure that the park is managed well, and that the animals are healthy and happy. Not every wild animal park does this, and many don't provide adequate care, an adequate environment, or even an adequate level of privacy (ie. too much interaction with visitors) for the animals that live there. Furthermore, some of these parks exist in completely inappropriate climates for the animals that live there.

Of course the best possible controlled environment would be an animal refuge or sanctuary, set up as part of a conservation effort; a non-profit organization, unlike nearly all of the above mentioned zoos, marine animal theme parks, wild animal parks, etc. This is the best way to ensure that they animals are in their natural environment; that they are being protected without being placed in cages, in closed-off premises, etc. Although it's true that conservation efforts are still fairly low on most governments' agendas, the more people that attain a higher consciousness regarding the need to help other animals, the easier it will

be to change this. For now, a good first step is to become aware of what's going on in the zoo in your area, and if you find that an animal is being kept or treated in an inappropriate manner, to notify the director of the zoo, local animal rights organizations, and any other appropriate authorities. This will send a message that there are people who care about the welfare of these animals, and who will not stand for mistreatment.

February 5, 2014

The archaic belief that not eating meat is unhealthy

A couple of days ago, I posted a funny image about never hearing a valid argument against vegetarianism. One of my Facebook friends, a psychiatrist, took this to heart, and decided to prove to me that a plant-based diet is, in fact, dangerous to one's health.

Now, this type of reaction is not that uncommon. People have long used the "vegetarianism/veganism is unhealthy" argument. This belief generally stems back to a long time ago, when many people still didn't think much about the unethical aspects of eating meat, so they didn't really look into alternatives to meat as much as they do now. The medical world did not really delve too deeply into vegetarianism or veganism, so a lot of the textbooks were pretty conservative in this respect. Even now, some doctors around the world are still taught somewhat archaic nutritional information, so they unfortunately still end up thinking that eating meat is the only way to go. This is the case with my psychiatrist friend. Many modern doctors have thankfully come to the realization that it is indeed possible to be healthy getting one's protein, iron, and other elements from a plant-based diet. Some have even published their findings in order to encourage others to cast aside outdated information.

People get upset when their deep-rooted dietary habits are challenged. They take this personally. Now, before you go saying that vegetarians can be closed-minded too (true), let me say that I've always maintained that whether you're a carnivore, a vegetarian, or a vegan, a well-balanced diet is key, and that it is, indeed, possible to eat healthy, even if one consumes meat. My psychiatrist friend, however, is one of those people that have a hard time opening their mind to different beliefs, so he proceeded to post about six articles about the dangers of a plant-based diet, some of which were as inconsequential as individual case studies that were too specific to prove anything. I assume that he fails to acknowledge the obvious truth that both vegetarians and carnivores can have vitamin and mineral deficiencies, sometimes due to bad diet, genetics, etc., but that (once again) a well-balanced diet in both cases can ensure that we remain healthy. It always makes me smile when someone posts articles from the

medical world, since, of course, two can play at that game, and one can easily post other articles citing studies that prove the exact opposite.

If someone argues that vegetarianism is unhealthy, they are, in fact, saying that eating meat is healthy. This, in itself, is a very dangerous assumption, especially with the growing evidence that eating meat can, in fact, lead to all kinds of problems. A simple Google search reveals many articles which conclude that the consumption of meat can in fact be bad for one's health. But, again, getting into an "article war" isn't the point. Detractors of vegetarianism will always find proof, no matter how unconvincing, to make themselves feel better about their beliefs, as will its supporters. So, as is often the case in life, it comes down to a choice. Which do you prefer, the compassionate path that seeks to save the lives of animals and prevent their suffering, or the status quo, which leads to the slaughter and suffering of millions of these animals? For me, the choice is pretty clear.

A final point, and one that's possibly most important, is that there are millions of vegetarians and vegans (like myself) out there that prove that it's possible to live a healthy life without meat. Many of us lead active lives, go to the gym, play sports, etc. We are living proof that vegetarianism/veganism is healthy, and living proof is pretty hard to argue against.

April 17, 2014

Do vegetarians and vegans feed their pets meat?

Most people would agree that cats are carnivores, and need meat to survive. Dogs are omnivores. They can survive on a carefully planned, nutritious plant-based diet, though many vegetarians still feed their dogs at least some meat or meat-based dog food. Not that this matters much, but dog food generally has much less meat as a percentage than cat food does.

So isn't it hypocritical for someone to not eat meat, while still feeding meat to their pet(s)? This is a dilemma many vegetarians and vegans continue to struggle with, and understandably so. The question itself seems to require a "black or white" answer, but reality can be a lot more gray. I have four cats, and, like I stated above, cats are carnivores, so I do feed them meat-based cat food. I don't like doing this, but it was a choice that I made when I decided to take them in. All of my cats were either saved from shelters, or found sick on the streets. Was it wrong to save the lives of these animals knowing that they would need to consume meat? I personally don't think so. As I have written many times before, I'm not a big fan of the "saint or sinner", "black or white" approach to these issues, but like to see the big picture, - how one lives, what one eats, what one wears, etc. Let's take a couple who eats meat, eats dairy, wears leather, and

feeds their dog meat. If they eliminate the first three things from the list, and only feed their dog meat, they will have eliminated 75% of the harm that they do, from the perspective of interacting with other animals. 75% is not 100%, but it's a lot closer to 100% than it is to 0%. At times like this, it's important to be supportive and praise someone for the progress they have made, than to mire them in guilt and call them a hypocrite for what they haven't.

An important thing to remember here is that humans (at least most of us) have a choice when it comes to eating meat or not eating meat. Animals don't have this choice. While we should respect the lives of all sentient beings, we should not mimic the behavior of these animals, such as the carnivorous diet of cats for example. I believe that were given freedom of choice so as to be able to choose a compassionate path, and that, for humans, vegetarianism and especially veganism represent progress.

That said, helping carnivorous animals survive is not a bad thing. Look at the organizations that work so hard to preserve species of birds and wild animals around the world. More often than not, the animals in these refuges require fresh meat for survival. On a more local level, like many people, I care about our shelter pets. I have done what I can to help encourage people to adopt, and to spay and neuter their dogs and cats. Encouraging the spaying and neutering of pets is something that I believe everyone who cares about farm animals should get involved in, since humanely cutting down on the population of unwanted pets will go a long way to minimize the amount of meat that is used to feed these animals, thereby saving many lives.

When all's said and done, it all boils down to how comfortable you are with having a pet that requires meat to survive. Like I said, for people who truly empathize with the plight of all animals, it's often a very hard choice to make. Some vegetarians/vegans will not have pets for this reason alone, and I can respect that. I also respect and understand the other side of the argument, one that recognizes that carnivorous animals sometimes also need to be saved.

May 7, 2014

Is it OK to eat cats and dogs?

Generally speaking, articles about eating dogs or cats get people from "Western" countries pretty upset. People in countries like Great Britain, the USA, or Germany are accustomed to thinking of these animals as "pets" and, as such, they are often loved and considered part of the family. The fact that someone would eat these animals is seen as barbaric and disgusting. To counter these accusations, supporters of eating these animals state that this is a "cultural difference", one that should be accepted even if we don't agree with it.

So who's right? Is it OK to eat cats and dogs, or is it indeed barbaric?

First of all, "cultural differences" simply doesn't cut it as an argument. Violence and murder should be seen for what they are, no matter where they happen in the world. In the same way that we wouldn't support forced female circumcision, or sex with minors just because they happen to be part of some "culture", we should not turn a blind eye to violence when it comes to our interaction with the rest of the animal world, no matter where it happens. Some things should transcend borders and cultures.

I believe that it is not OK to eat any animal, - cat, dog, pig, cow, chicken, fish, or whatever. It is true, however, that many of the people who are appalled by the fact that some Asians eat dog meat are the same ones who think it's OK to eat pigs, cows, etc., despite the fact that there is growing evidence that the animals that we farm for food are no less intelligent than many of our pets, and that they can build equally meaningful relationships with us. So, does this mean that we should just dismiss "selective" carnivores?

Not really.

While we should strive to keep hypocrisy at a minimum, we should remember that any step that eliminates violence and suffering is a good step. I am personally very thankful that I live in a society that values the life of many kinds of animals, including dogs and cats. The best way to improve our relationship with other animals is by developing a personal bond with them. This is what has happened in our culture with our relationship with dogs and cats (as well as other animals we consider pets). These animals fill many of our lives with joy, and help alleviate loneliness and other negative emotions. They motivate us to become more compassionate, more empathetic. Many of us use our love for our pets as a springboard to start respecting (and possibly loving) other animals as well, including ones our society considers "food". This is a very important phenomenon, and we believe that the more love we show for selected animals, the bigger the chance of an awakening to the suffering of other animals in general, and to the unfair way our world treats them.

Whenever we see the animals that are (or are not) eaten around the world, we should learn from this, - and the lesson here is not that "all animals are fair game", but that it is indeed possible to start with respecting the life of one species, and then, hopefully, expanding that respect to include others.

Wednesday, May 28, 2014

On vegetarians/vegans who date meat eaters

Is it alright for vegetarians/vegans to date (or marry) someone who eats meat? Can a relationship made up of someone who eats meat and someone who doesn't last?

It all depends on how serious someone is about their vegetarianism/veganism and how connected he or she is to the reality of animal suffering. I personally would never date someone who eats meat. Why? Because I believe that eating meat is ethically wrong. This belief is not something superficial for me. It permeates my whole being. A lot of my time is spent on helping other animals and improving our relationship with them. The last thing I'd want is to share my life with someone who engages in something that for me and many other true animal lovers, is simply not acceptable. This would be like the parent of a molested child going out with a child molester, or an anti-abortion crusader going out with an abortion doctor.

"But relationships are all about respecting the choices that your partner makes." Now I realize that not all vegetarians/vegans choose their diet for ethical reasons, and not all of them feel as strongly or deeply as I do about animal rights. Anyone who does feel this strongly would never use the "choice" argument. If I like the color green, but my girlfriend likes red, that's her choice, and I can respect that. If she likes Paris, but I prefer Madrid, I can respect that too. I like tattoos, she doesn't - we can work something out. If, however, she believes that murdering animals for food is alright, or "necessary", then we'd have a problem. Those like me feel that killing animals (and condoning this killing by consuming their meat) is closer, on an ethical scale, to killing other people, than it is to choosing the color of a dress, a travel destination, etc.

A vegetarian friend of mine once said that she was OK with dating an "open minded omnivore". Being open-minded is great, but this should not be used to justify causing suffering or killing, whatever species we're talking about. Hypothetically, someone like this would accept that his partner is a vegetarian, but would still continue to be part of the whole death-cycle of the meat industry. No thanks. People like me, those with a deep-seated empathy for other animals look for someone who is willing to say no to violence, to stop taking part in the death cycle of eating meat; someone who actively looks for a better way to interact with the rest of the animal world.

Thursday, July 10, 2014

Helping vs. selfishness

Many people claim that they love animals, but the millions of animals in the world that need our help will not survive on kind words and good intentions alone. While the factors that prevent people from helping other animals are

plentiful, I will forget about the most obvious ones, such as lack of compassion, and focus instead on one that is a little more ambiguous - seeing helping as a burden, one that either financially, emotionally, or physically complicates one's life.

A good example of this desire to not complicate one's life too much is the hesitation when faced with the prospect of adopting a pet. It really saddens me that so many people basically have to be convinced to do this, when the presence of a cat, dog, or other animal in the household can bring so much happiness to all parties involved. Still, people have their routines, which they feel will be compromised by having to walk a dog, by making it harder to travel, by having to spend more money on cat food, litter, vets, etc. While I can understand all of these reasons, I still have to remind you that life is about stepping outside your comfort zone in order to help those that need it; and a cat or dog living a relatively lonely life in a shelter would definitely qualify as someone who needs help. Personal well-being is important, and there's nothing wrong with ensuring this well-being, but the reasons that most people give for not committing to a stray animal are not very convincing. Any changes in your lifestyle will be outweighed by the benefits of the noble act of rescuing an animal. I myself have adopted or rescued several animals. The first cat that I rescued initially seemed like a burden, because at that point I had never taken care of another animal, but over time she became an inseparable part of our family, and to this day I love her very much.

Another example of choosing the easy way out, the path of least resistance, if you will, is the reluctance of many animal lovers to adopt a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle. Again, even with all the new information about the benefits of a plant-based diet, as well as more and more meat-free options readily available, many "animal lovers" still can't completely cross over to a lifestyle that says no to violence towards animals. Sometimes this is because of uncertainty about missing out on essential nutrients or the fear of having to take supplements. I often wonder why the same people don't realize the simple truth that any diet has to be well-balanced to work, and that more meat-eaters take supplements for one reason or another than vegetarians or vegans do. Others say things like "animal proteins are more complete", and that they don't want to have to work hard to mix and match plant-based foods to ensure they get the same protein. Once again, the comfort zone. "I don't want to have to do anything that will make my life any more difficult". I, and many others like me, will gladly mix and match veggie proteins if it means not partaking in the violence and death of the meat and dairy industries. For any truly compassionate individual who can see the big picture, this is a no-brainer. There are also quite a few people who simply state that they love the taste of meat and can't live without it. Whether overtly or not, what they are saying is that they don't give a damn if animals are killed, as long as they get to have that pleasure of eating meat. Hopefully someday these people will wake up to a more compassionate way of life, for their own sake and for the sake of all the innocent animals in the meat industry.

It's a lot easier to help with helping is easy. Unfortunately, helping is sometimes not easy. Even in our world, where instant gratification has become more and more commonplace, not everything can be arranged at the push of a button. Difficult ethical choices sometimes have to be made, ones that challenge the way we live. Acting to help animals is a very important part of life. We should all ask ourselves if we're doing enough to help, or if, like most people, we're too stuck in our comfort zone to really make a difference.

July 24, 2014

Humane meat - ultimately not that humane

I recently stumbled upon an article that discusses whether or not animal rights activists should get involved in the promotion of "humane meat". First and foremost, once you reach a certain level of empathy, there is no such thing as "humane meat". All sentient beings want to live. All sentient life is precious, and the right to life of these animals should be respected. In a way, I kind of find the whole idea of "humane meat" a little twisted. One can almost understand the lack of empathy in the world of factory farms. Animals are treated as mere commodities, and the whole death machine is set up to kill as many of them as possible as quickly (though often not painlessly) as possible. On farms where animals are raised "ethically", the animals are theoretically happier than their factory farm counterparts, and there is often much more contact with the animals, thus providing an opportunity to really appreciate the personalities of these animals and to get to know them better. One would think that this would create even more awareness and more empathy for these animals.

Unfortunately, this is not the case, or even if it is, it is overshadowed by the "it's sad but necessary" myth. This is what puzzles me, with so many people in the world embracing and thriving on vegetarian and vegan diets, and with so much proof that animals are both sentient and intelligent creatures, how can we view "ethical meat" as the ultimate solution? Is this truly a fair way to treat other animals?

The answer is no, but it is more fair than factory farms. In my humble opinion, and in the opinion of many people who care about animal rights, activists should adopt a two-pronged approach to this topic. On one hand, we should fight to end factory farming, as the horrors and injustices inherent in that system are something that most people in the world would agree have to stop. On the other hand, we should continue educating people that while small farms where animals are treated "well" before they are killed are more ethical than factory farms, they are ultimately not "ethical" per se.

In order to truly end the violence towards other animals, and to understand this second part of the equation, we have to leave the above-mentioned "it's sad but necessary" myth behind. In the above-mentioned article, there were responses in the comments sections that were typical of meat apologists. One stated that due to the "differences in our constitutions", not everyone can become a vegan/vegetarian, and that we should just accept that some can and some can't. I have a simple response to this: where there's a will there's a way. I've already written about common myths that meat eaters use to justify their diet. Breaking free from a lifetime of habits is not easy, but those who truly respect other animals' right to live will find a way to make their new diet work. It is possible, and pretty much anyone can be happy and healthy without meat, if they are truly committed to this.

August 20, 2014

Stray dog attacks - who's to blame?

I just read a report about a stray dog that attacked a family in Mexico. As is often the case in these types of situations, the dog was later found and killed. In some countries with high populations of homeless dogs (Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania come to mind), attacks such as this one have led to calls to quickly solve the problem by any means necessary. Unfortunately, at least in the countries mentioned above, this "quick fix" often involves anger-motivated revenge killings of strays, sometimes en masse.

The way a society treats its animals says a lot about how advanced that society is. Before blaming stray animals, there are a couple of things to keep in mind: First and foremost, we are responsible for the problem of stray animals, and we, collectively, have to deal with this problem in a humane way. There are two main factors that contribute to the high number of strays. The first reason is the abandonment of dogs that are no longer wanted. Many societies where stray dogs (or cats) are a problem are the same ones where people often just dump their pets after they stop being cute, or they get sick of them, etc. As long as people are not taught from an early age to see pets as sentient beings, and to care for them like they would a family member, homeless animals will be a problem. The second reason involves the lack of spay and neutering programs involving strays. Most people who have dealt with homeless pets around the world would agree that a good spay and neuter (or treat and release) program is an effective way to lower the numbers of stray animals.

So, education and spaying and neutering are the way to go. We can do this in our own families, by educating our children to respect and to help homeless pets, and we can demand the creation of government programs that do this on a larger scale. Culling (killing) strays en masse is a poor solution for several reasons. First, it is just plain wrong to kill innocent sentient beings. Second, most

strays are not dangerous, and it is only a minority that become overly aggressive. The majority live a sad, lonely life on the streets of cities whose citizens are desensitized to their suffering, and do nothing to help them. I don't think I have to tell you that punishing the majority for the actions of a small minority is a horrible idea. Third, without the long term solutions I've outlined above, any mass killing will only solve the problem temporarily. Until people are taught to respect the lives of their pets, and to be responsible for them (including spaying and neutering them), the problem will resurface over and over again. Government officials often state that there is no money for programs such as this, but this is only because they fail to see the importance of this and to make it a priority.

So, again, do not blame the strays. Blame the heartless individuals who have created the problem by failing to take responsibility they had for these animals. Blame the government for failing to create spay and neuter programs that have been shown to reduce the number of strays, for failing to set up humane animal shelters that try to find homes for the ones that can be rehabilitated, and for failing to create and enforce laws that punish animal abandoners and abusers.

These are modern, ethical solutions for a modern state, and all responsible heads of government should implement these to help create a better world for both stray animals and the humans around them.

August 31, 2014

The rise of meat consumption in China and India

I recently came across an article about how more people in India are starting to eat meat. The article attributed this trend to a general growing financial prosperity in that country. This came as a surprise to a lot of people since, as many of you already know, India is one of the world's bastions for vegetarianism, with an estimated 40% or more of its population being vegetarian. Still, while the phenomenon is an unfortunate one, it is understandable.

In many parts of Asia, meat consumption was relatively low because meat was expensive. It was reserved for special occasions. In places like China, where many are benefiting from economic prosperity, meat consumption is up, because many people can now afford it. This phenomenon has very little to do with ethics, and much more to do with economics. I, for example, have attained a higher level of empathy for other animals, so I'm not going to start eating meat no matter how much more money I'd make. On the other hand, a person who normally would eat meat anyway, but simply didn't have the means to do this on a regular basis, would benefit from his new-found wealth to consume more meat. It becomes important, then, in societies where meat consumption is on the rise,

to actively teach (and remind) people that the lives of sentient beings like pigs, cows, chickens, fish, etc., should be respected. An increase in wealth does not have to mean an increase in violence towards other species. Theoretically, this should strike a chord in countries which already have a strong tradition of tasty and healthy vegetarian alternatives. It's great that some people can enjoy life more, but it's important that animals should be given an opportunity to enjoy their lives as well.

So what about the increase in meat consumption in a country like India, a country with such a strong tradition of vegetarianism? First, the fact that 40% of India is vegetarian obviously means that about 60% of its citizens are not vegetarian, which means that quite a lot of people do eat meat. Second, a lot of the vegetarianism in India is based on religion, primarily Hinduism, but also Jainism and (some schools of) Buddhism. Like anywhere else in the world, people are often born into a religion, and follow it because of family tradition, etc. In this case, they are born into vegetarianism. While I think this is very positive, it doesn't automatically guarantee a deep empathy (or even respect) for animals. Some will develop this, and some won't. As I've written before, anyone who hasn't attained a higher level of empathy for animals, can quite easily fall (back) into eating meat. Once you get to the state where you realize that all sentient life must be respected, it's pretty hard to go back to a less enlightened way of treating other animals, including eating them.

October 13, 2014

Empathy 101 (How to help stray animals when you travel)

A couple of years ago, I wrote about my experiences with feeding stray dogs in Mexico. As I wrote back then, after seeing the sad state that these animals were in, I felt compelled to do something to help them. It upset me how few tourists (and even expats) actually did anything to help these animals, opting instead to take photos of them, or dismissing their plight as "local culture". If you consider yourself an animal lover, when traveling in areas with large numbers of strays, don't neglect their plight. I'd like to share a couple of things that I do when I travel to give you an idea of just how easy it is to help.

First, I go on feeding walks. I usually go out and buy dog food (or cat food, if that's the case) and some paper plates, and walk around leaving food (and/or water) for stray animals. This is not hard to do, nor is it time-consuming. Once I have the food and the plates, it takes me no more than 1 hour to leave a couple of pounds of food for about a dozen (or sometimes more) dogs. Now, it is true that one meal will not make a big difference in a dog or cat's life, but there are

other things to consider. In many countries, strays aren't even noticed by people anymore, or are simply considered a nuisance. By publicly feeding them, we remind people that these animals are living sentient beings, ones that suffer and go hungry much like we do. We can show people that we can and should help these animals. People forget that many of these dogs weren't born this way, that they were most likely abandoned by irresponsible owners, let down and left to suffer and die on what are often very uncaring streets. By teaching by example that compassion is the key, we can hopefully get others to start doing the same. During my feeding walks, I have often been approached by people who are curious about what I'm doing, many of whom have been very supportive. Apart from reminding others about the benefits of helping, feeding walks serve to remind ourselves just how easy it is to help.

Second, while feeding walks are good, a long term solution would be to stop the trend of animals being dumped on the street, and to stop these animals from reproducing by spaying and neutering them. Of course we, as tourists, can't really do this, but we can easily show our support for local organizations that are trying to solve this problem, ones that provide a no-kill shelter for these animals, organize spay and neuter events, etc. When I travel, I like to donate a bit of money to local organizations, and I encourage you to do the same. A little research will go a long way to finding an organization that helps animals in the area where you'll be traveling, and most organizations will be happy to get any money you choose to donate to them. As hard as it is for such organizations in the US, Canada, England, etc. to get by, it's even harder in poorer countries, where there is neither government nor private funding for the good work that they do. It's really not that hard to donate (a quick PayPal donation takes a couple of minutes), and it's very rewarding.

Stray animals have it tough. There is really nothing to romanticize about an existence that is full of hunger, fear, and suffering. Furthermore, although one does tend to see more stray animals in poorer societies, we shouldn't just dismiss this as being "par for the course". In my travels, I've met quite a few people who, despite their limited means, try to help animals as much as they can. Next time you travel to paradise, don't forget about the creatures for whom life there is often nothing but. If you do indeed love animals, please do one (or both) of the above mentioned things to help improve the lives of strays, and to help those who help these animals on a daily basis.

December 12, 2014

Stay strong when talking about animal rights

There are many people out there who have a problem with those of us who don't eat meat for ethical reasons. Some think we're preachy. Others think we're misguided (for a variety of reasons). A quick look at any popular social media

post related to not eating meat will reveal a multitude of opinions relating to just how ridiculous and plain wrong not eating meat is, according to these people. I've already discussed why we shouldn't eat meat many times, so I'm not going to go into this again. I would, however, like to remind my fellow vegetarians and vegans who avoid meat for ethical reasons, to stay strong, and to not be misguided into taking a soft stance on what you believe in.

When people who eat meat accuse you of being closed-minded, remind them that it is your mind that is open to ending the suffering of all animals, while their mind is the selective one, only caring about humans. Your adoption of a meat-free diet shows that you have a mind that is open to diminishing violence in the world. If they believe that it is alright to kill animals such as cows, pigs, sheep, chickens, fish, etc., then their minds are not open to eliminating violence, no matter what they claim. They claim that some animal rights activists (most of whom are vegan) are violent, and this is true. But much of the violence that is carried out by animal rights activists is done out of frustration of dealing with closed-minded individuals who think it's alright to continue to torture and kill animals, whether it be for food, clothing, entertainment, etc. The only reason that people get outraged at animal rights "violence" is that they still see these animals as less important, as creatures that are somehow born to suffer and/or serve us. When people call you extreme, ask them this: Which is more extreme, wanting to save the lives of animals or condemning them to death by either being an apologist for meat or being indifferent and not taking a stand against it? Is it more extreme to want to end violence than to make excuses for it? All things considered, it is much crazier to eat meat than to not eat it. When people say that it is OK to kill animals as long as we treat them humanely beforehand, remember that, while better, this is not the ultimate solution. The most basic right that we all have is the right to live. When people call your ideas a pipe dream, remind them of the countless other pipe dreams throughout history that led to a better life for both humans and other animals. Speaking up against inequality is the first step on the road to obliterating that inequality.

When they say that we don't have the moral right to preach, tell them that indeed we do. Yes, lots of us are shamed into being apologetic about what is sometimes perceived as "preachiness", but in actuality we have every right to speak out against violence and to protect animals. We are the voice of the voiceless, and, as such, we are the ones that truly "get it". If the things that are being done to animals were done to humans, there would be no discussion. Everyone would get on board and agree that change was needed. We should be proud that we have understood a very important truth, that all sentient life is important. When it comes to our interaction with animals, we are the ethical elite, and we have the responsibility to try to elevate others to the same level of understanding.

February 25, 2015

Suffering vs. death in regards to animal welfare

A friend of mine and I recently discussed animals that are killed in various food industries, and whether or not suffering is, in fact, even worse than death for these animals. At least, my friend would say, the moment of death comes quickly, and the bigger problem, in fact, is the suffering they endure while they are still alive.

I understand his reasoning, and I only slightly disagree. On one hand, the suffering that these animals endure is immense. The reason for my disagreement is that I believe that, ultimately, killing another sentient being is still the worst thing you can do. This is why I do not support so-called, "ethical meat", where animals are supposed to have "happy lives" before they are killed; relatively happy lives, sure, though they are still murdered at the end. That said, making another innocent being suffer, as animals are made to suffer in many food industries, including the dairy industry, is almost as bad, so getting active in diminishing this particular suffering is also crucial. Thankfully, this doesn't need to be an "either-or" decision. We can easily fight to end both.

My friend and I are basically on the same page. The only difference is that he would prefer to kill an animal than to see him/her suffer. Of course in some situations this may be necessary, though the concept becomes problematic when, for example, the animal that is killed is simply replaced by another suffering animal. This is the case with many animal shelters in the US. They use killing as a method of population control of dogs and cats, while no-kill methods can work just as well if one implements them correctly. Another good reason to respect animals' right to live is that often awakens us to the idea that this life should be dignified and suffering-free. Many people start off with a simple "we should not kill animals", and then move on to an even more empathetic awakening of their consciousness regarding the unfair way that we currently treat these animals. This is why many vegetarians who stop eating meat for ethical reasons later become vegans.

March 31, 2015

Vegan vandalism

I recently saw a photo that was circulating among some of my friends of a chicken restaurant that was vandalized with spray-painted "meat is murder" and "go vegan" messages. The Facebook page with the original photo had a bunch of comments, mostly negative, about the perpetrators of this vandalism. This made me think about my own views on this type of extreme activism.

Generally, I do not approve of this sort of thing. I find it rather counterproductive to the cause, and not effective in achieving goals that I think are important: the expansion of the average person's consciousness to include caring about animals, and the saving of animal lives. First, let me say that I do not disapprove of this type of action only because it is illegal. Animal liberation by way of breaking into labs and rescuing animals that are being experimented on is also illegal, but at least it fulfills one of the two above-mentioned goals, the saving of animal lives. I mostly have a neutral view of organizations such as the ALF, because I believe that sometimes people do feel powerless when faced with all the animal abuse going on around them, and believe that legal ways of saving these animals' lives are either non-existent or too complicated. I understand this.

However, liberating animals and spray-painting "meat is murder" on a restaurant window are two different things. The latter, although expressing a true and important sentiment, will do very little to raise awareness among the people who see it, most of whom will simply dismiss it as extremist vandalism. This, in turn, will make it harder to get these people to discuss animal suffering in the future. Thus, the effect on the opinions of customers and restaurant staff would be minimal, and the perpetrators will most likely be seen in a negative light. Apart from this, no animals will be saved by this action. All in all, it's an act born out of frustration, but there are better ways to get the point across. Instead of spray painting slogans, why not pass out pamphlets to people outside a restaurant, explaining why it's best to avoid eating meat? Why not pressure your politician to pass new laws that protect animals? Why not pressure your teacher (or your children's teacher) to set aside some time to talk to kids about animal rights and how to treat animals well? If direct liberation is your thing, why not get in touch with the Animal Liberation Front, and see how you can help them? Right there, off the top of my head, you have several things which would be much more productive than the above-mentioned vandalism.

May 19, 2015

Refuting the food-chain argument against vegetarianism

While visiting my home town of Los Angeles, I passed a fairly well-known burger joint and noticed a sign/ad that was hanging in their window. I can't remember the exact wording, but it was something like "man did not claw his way to the top of the food chain to eat soy". This is actually a fairly common argument against vegetarianism, though, as with pretty much every other argument that I've heard, one that's not difficult to refute.

This argument falls apart on several different levels. First, it assumes that we are still cavemen. It assumes that we still walk around with spears in our hands,

looking for animals to kill, less we die of hunger. We do not. We generally walk over to our local supermarket and buy meat that was killed for us. We choose to buy meat even though there are more and more tasty, healthy, ethical vegetarian and vegan choices right in front of us, often right in the same supermarket. This is a luxury cavemen didn't have. This, my friends, is called evolution. For those of us who have accepted that it is time to evolve to a higher plane of empathy, eating meat can be clumped in with other behavior of our prehistoric ancestors that we now almost uniformly call "barbaric". We, unlike our primitive brethren, have been given a choice – to move forward and to continue diminishing levels of violence in the world, or to continue our harmful dietary habits. I suggest we embrace the former in order to make the world a better place for both ourselves and the animals with whom we share it.

But isn't the fact that we have eaten meat for centuries, even millennia, a sign that this is, indeed, the natural way to eat? Once again, to the limited prehistoric man (and even to some of our more recent ancestors), meat was the most readily available form of sustenance, so it, indeed, seemed both natural and necessary. (That said, let's not forget that the above statement doesn't even apply to all societies. Much of the Indian subcontinent, for example, has a very long history of vegetarianism, and there have been pockets of empathetic groups throughout history that have said no to the consumption of animals.) As I mentioned in the first paragraph, leaving behind harmful behavior is progress. Doing so helps us to become better people, to grow as human beings, and to pass on these new, positive, life-affirming values to future generations. We have already said no to many things that once seemed "natural": slavery, child labor, certain blood sports, torture, and many others. Many of us have added animal suffering and the killing of animals to the list of things to eradicate, and not eating meat is a great step to take toward this end.

It is important to contemplate how we are similar to other animals in order to grow our compassion and empathy. It is also important to realize how we are different, especially when it comes to our diets. Carnivorous animals do not have a choice when they (kill and) eat their food. These animals are pretty much slaves to their instincts. In the wild, they have to be part of a food chain. A lion cannot go to a supermarket and buy an ethical plant-based product, instead of killing a gazelle. We can. The fact that we have this wonderful ability to choose a less harmful path is crucial, and we should not squander it in order to feed our bad habits. There are more and more people choosing a less violent path, and hopefully this trend will continue, despite short-sighted advertising campaigns.

June 15, 2015

How some animal metaphors perpetuate negative stereotypes and trivialize animal life

As most politically correct individuals will tell you, language can play a pretty important part in shaping and maintaining our opinions. While I am closer to Lenny Bruce than I am to hardcore purveyors of political correctness, I do believe that we have to be mindful of using language that perpetuates negative stereotypes, and especially violence. Most people will have no problem identifying and avoiding language that marginalizes, insults, and derides other human beings, yet there is very little that is said about language that perpetuates our view of animals as lesser (read: less significant) beings.

English, like other languages, has many phrases, idiomatic and otherwise, that refer to animals. Some are neutral, or even positive (eg: "pretty as a peacock"), others, less so. For example, although pigs are intelligent creatures, people often use the word "pig" to refer to someone who is greedy, dirty, or unpleasant. This usage of "pig" creates and/or reinforces the idea that these animals exhibit these negative qualities, which is not true. In fact, this particular phrase is a classic example of misattribution of human qualities (in this case defects) to animals. There are quite a few things we got wrong about pigs in our pig-related phrases. For instance, the phrase "to pig out", are also inaccurate. Similarly, when we refer to someone as a "rat", we are saying that person is disloyal, deceitful, and/or just plain horrible. Why use "rat", an animal that has nothing disloyal/deceitful about it, when you can easily use, say, "politician"?

A dog is one of the most noble, faithful animals there is, and yet when we call someone a "dog", we're not referring to that person's nobility and/or faithfulness, but to his wickedness, often of a sexual variety. To "beat someone like a dog" is still often used to refer to giving someone a nasty beating. Do we really need to verbally associate (and thereby reinforce) "beating" with a dog, a mule, or any other animal, when violence towards animals is still a big problem in our society? While thankfully not used as much these days, "there's more than one way to skin a cat" used to be a pretty common phrase referring to there being more than one way to do something. This begs the question: Why would anyone use such a violent image, when so many other less disturbing ones could be used in its place? The answer is quite simple. Back when the phrase was first coined (mid 19th century), the sentience of animals such as cats was not something most people knew or cared about, so making light of such an animal's professedly insignificant life was completely acceptable. We, however, are living in 2015, and in our modern world, violent phrases that make light of animal suffering should not be used. "Shooting fish in a barrel", which refers to obtaining something without any effort, is another such phrase. Although seen as humorous by many, it is pretty unambiguous in its acceptance of violence. The underlying idea here is that it's OK to kill fish, it's just the method that matters.

Fish and other marine animals continue to have a hard time getting an empathetic nod from people, so we don't really need to use phrases that reference violence towards them.

Birds too, are not immune to negative metaphors. "Bird-brain" is still used to refer to someone we think is stupid. This ignores the fact that crows, for example, are extremely smart animals. We are learning more and more about the intelligence of birds, and using phrases such as "bird-brain", and the horrible phrase "to kill two birds with one stone", either downplays these animals' intelligence, or reflects an unacceptable matter-of-factness about killing them.

These are only some examples of the way we use language to either misattribute human qualities to animals or to trivialize animal life. Many of these phrases came to be because of the "it's just an animal" approach to other sentient beings. These days, we should know better. We should respect sentient life, and not using words and phrases in ways that perpetuate archaic and erroneous ideas about these animals is a good step along that path.

July 8, 2015

So you like the taste of meat?

Many people who say no to veganism & vegetarianism do so because they claim to love the taste of meat too much and can't live without it. If you have eaten meat your whole life, it is easy to feel this way, but there are a couple of things you should consider before taking that next bite.

The argument that "it's all about the taste" kind of dies when you think about the taste of our own flesh. Ethics of cannibalism aside, we can, indeed, eat human flesh, and several well-known cannibals have confirmed that it is quite tasty, comparable to pork, beef, and even veal. Again, I'm obviously not advocating cannibalism, just stating the obvious that it's NOT all about the taste, that there are ethics involved.

Sure, you might say, but we are not going to cannibalize ourselves, - that's why we have to eat other animals, and they DO taste good. This is where our ethics should kick in, and we should remember that while humans are indeed different from animals (especially in our higher intelligence), we also have a lot in common with them. The animals that make up our diet are sentient beings, who have the ability to feel emotions (both happy and sad), and to suffer and feel pain much like we do. This alone should be enough to respect their lives like we respect the lives of other humans, and to say no to eating their meat, no matter how tasty it is. At this point, many will either deny that these animals are sentient in order to put off admitting the indirect cruelty of eating their flesh, or

simply admit that they're selfish individuals who are willing to sacrifice the life of an animal for their own pleasure.

Much of the blame for our ambivalence lies in the smoke and mirrors act of the meat and restaurant industries. The meat industry does everything so that you don't associate the meat you're eating with the death of an innocent animal, and the restaurant industry dresses it up nicely in a variety of garnishes, herbs, and spices, so that the presentation of the food becomes the focus, once again bypassing the inconvenient little fact that what you're eating is a piece of a once living, breathing sentient being.

Of course not everything that is pleasant to our minds and bodies is beneficial to us. And I could point out that saturated fats (often found in meat, dairy, and animal products) taste great, but have been linked to obesity, heart disease, and several other health issues; or that our love of meat has spawned factory farming, which is destroying the environment like few other industries in the world... but for the purpose of this post, I'd like to stick to ethics. Ask yourself the following questions: how comfortable would you be drinking coffee made by people working under slave-like conditions, mistreated and abused, and paid almost nothing vs. coffee made by workers who were treated well and paid a fair wage? How comfortable would you be wearing clothes made by children in a sweatshop for almost no money vs. clothes made by well-paid adults with employee benefits? How comfortable would you be if you knew that the retrieval of a certain product was so hard, that people actually died during the process? Would you still purchase that product? If you understand the ethics involved in the above questions, you should understand the difference between eating meat and going vegan. If you are ambivalent about these things, then I suggest you examine your empathy and try to grow it. If you are a sensible, caring individual, however, then please add animals and animal-products to your "do not eat" list.

August 18, 2015

You can't force someone to care

Once someone starts feeling true empathy for animals, they usually realize that it's not alright to have these animals suffer and die for our benefit. Most people at this point either go vegetarian, or go vegan, the latter being even better when it comes to not partaking in the above-mentioned suffering. The next step, for many, is to try to change the way others think about eating meat, and to hopefully get them to see that they can indeed transition to a way of life that involves less animal suffering. The way we treat animals is not fair, so getting involved in this would be as valid as fighting against any other injustice. That said, there are more and less effective ways to do this, with the better way being

the gentler way. While there is nothing gentle about the way animals are used and abused in our society, and while sometimes we want to scream at how blind someone is to the harm he or she causes, we should refrain from being harsh in our condemnation of people who have not yet gotten where we are, ethically speaking. Why? Because a real understanding that the life of all sentient beings is important is one of the hardest realizations to come to for most people. For some reason, speciesism is much more deep-seated than racism, sexism, and many other isms. While many can grasp what the concept is all about, to put it bluntly, many of the same people just don't care enough to change.

When someone goes vegan, he or she often forgets what it's like to have the mind of a carnivore. For me, and for many others like me, it is clear as day that breaking free from the meat-machine is a good idea, that it's the right way to live. This is, however, not the case for most people who still eat meat. We all want these people to see the light, so to speak, but an angry vegan (or even an overly persistent one) may end up simply pissing someone like this off instead of getting them to change their diet. Instead of building a bridge, you may be building a gap between this person and their empathy. I've been that carnivore. About 90% or more of vegans have been that carnivore. If you embraced veganism as soon as you heard about it, congratulations! (seriously, not being sarcastic), but this is not the path that most people take to get there. For most people, it is really, really hard to stop being speciesist, to see all sentient life as equal, and to break free from life-long habits. I'm not saying it's impossible, or that it is not worth trying to change this. Of course it is. We are the animals' voice. But again, just be aware of the problem and don't get upset when someone doesn't get it when you compare a human baby to a baby chick, or even a baby kitten to a baby chick. People will listen, many will agree with you in principle, a few (not more) will change their diet, but the vast majority, including those that may agree with you on principle, will still continue eating meat. Why? Because, once again, speciesism is the hardest -ism for most people to understand, to feel, and to overcome.

The better approach is to try to change someone's mind by being positive, by leading by example. Remember what it was like when you ate meat. Remember how hard it was for you to completely make that leap to what seemed like a totally different lifestyle. Tell people that it's really not that different being vegan; that we eat a lot of great healthy food. Invite them over for dinner. If they insist of going vegetarian for a while, don't give them the "no, you're vegan or you're a murderer" attitude. Someone who goes vegetarian after being a carnivore has taken an empathetic step forward. Although going vegan would be better, don't forget to recognize the importance of that initial step. Remind them that you too were like them; that there was a time when you didn't make the connection between animal suffering and the food you ate, or that you simply didn't care enough about that connection to stop eating meat. It's important to remember, though, that no matter how eloquent, logical, and well-presented your arguments for a cruelty-free diet, you will hear a lot of excuses about why

someone will still eat meat. Some vegans get frustrated with the excuses, and try to argue against them, which usually causes our carnivorous friends to come up with even more of them. Here's the real reason for all the excuses: Many people simply don't care enough about animals to stop eating them, but consciously or subconsciously, they don't want to come off as callous, so they come up with excuses because an excuse justifies this lack of compassion and respect for life, without actually calling it by its name. It deflects the blame. Adding to many vegans' frustration, is that these people might feel selective empathy for some animals, but not others. Again, though it's illogical why someone would love a cat, but not care about a pig, most people embrace this selective respect for animal life. As frustrating as it may seem sometimes, you can't force someone to care. We can try to help them along, but, ultimately, they have to get to that point themselves.

October 5, 2015

Good and bad culinary traditions

Whenever I travel, checking out the local cuisine is a big part of the experience. While I obviously try to check out vegan restaurants (if they exist), I also like to examine what people eat in general. On a recent trip to France, I thought a lot about tradition in food and how this relates to the embracing (or not) of new ideas (such as veganism) that often cause a break from tradition.

France, as most of you already know, boasts one of the world's most renowned cuisines. Many people come to France for this reason alone - to try the food. Now, generally speaking, there is nothing wrong with being happy with your country's culinary accomplishments. Unfortunately, much of France's extremely diverse and often tasty cuisine comes at the expense of animal lives and animal suffering. Don't get me wrong, France is not the only place where cruelty is part and parcel of culinary tradition. This is true of most cuisines around the world. It is, however, one the proudest countries when it comes to this, and, in my experience, one that is very reluctant to let go of its traditions, some of which are pretty cruel. We all know about foie gras, with its incredibly cruel method of force-feeding ducks and geese before killing them and eating their liver. According to a poll conducted in 2014, almost 50% of French people said they would support a ban on force-feeding ducks and geese when making foie gras. Good news, but one can't help but feel a little sad that over half the people in that country still don't mind that these animals suffer so much. To see just how cruel French cuisine can be, one need look no further than "ortolans", a dish which basically involves cooking a beautiful songbird alive. The practice is currently (thankfully) banned in the EU, but some French chefs would like the ban to be lifted. Why? Because, to them, it is tradition.

The following message is not only for the French (and others) who support foie gras, ortolans or other horrorshow food; nor is it only for the apologists of bullfighting around the world, though it applies to both of these cases. It is meant for anyone that glorifies a tradition despite the harm that it causes to other sentient beings. The message is simple: A tradition that involves animal suffering and death is not a tradition worth keeping. Looking down on your plate and seeing the remains of a living sentient being, any sentient being, should bring one shame, not pride. And the more suffering that was involved in bringing the meat (or other animal product) to that plate, the more shame one should feel. And it doesn't matter how beautifully you dress it up, because that's just smoke and mirrors designed to prevent you from thinking about the suffering. The exquisite garnishes master chefs use to make lamb look good on your plate should not distract your attention from the fact that an innocent animal lost its life so that you could have a momentary (and ultimately unnecessary) pleasure. If a restaurant's menu is made up of meat, dairy, and egg products, it doesn't matter how many stars it was given by a Michelin guide, or how many tourists line up outside its door every afternoon. We have come to a time in our evolution, when an ethical approach to cuisine should trump all of this.

The solution, then, is to create a new tradition that is not based on cruelty. The people who I find the most inspiring, from a culinary point of view, are those that break new ground by finding innovative ways to make super tasty cruelty-free food. France is struggling with this. Out of all the countries that I've visited, it has the fewest number of vegan restaurants (and I'm talking about big cities, not small towns). I'm not sure if this is because of the general pride in traditional French cuisine, a lack of knowledge about the rich variety of vegan cuisine, or because people just don't care enough about animals... possibly a combination of all three. French chefs are renowned for being wonderfully innovative and creating spectacular world-class culinary concoctions. Hopefully, in time, more of them will start being innovative with plant-based cuisine, and in doing so give it some of the renown currently enjoyed by its traditional cuisine.

December 7, 2015

Speciesism, the dos and don'ts

Speciesism as a concept has been gaining popularity of late, mostly among folks like myself who are into animal rights and/or veganism. The concept, as you can probably guess, refers to discriminating on the basis of an animal's species - ie. having one set of rules for humans, and another for other animals, or having one set of rules for cats or dogs, and another for cows. Many speciesists believe that it is OK for some animals to suffer simply because they happen to be cows, pigs, chickens, fish, etc. Many also believe that the above-mentioned animals' sense of

pain, emotion, etc. is not as strong and/or important as ours, so it's ok kill them for food, or that, to put it bluntly, their lives simply matter less than say our pets' lives or our own. These days, whenever someone online makes excuses for animal suffering, there will most likely be someone who correctly calls that person out for being a speciesist.

In my mind, there are two issues worth mentioning regarding speciesism, - the first is how we as human beings see ourselves in regards to other animal species. At this point I'd have to confess, that using a strict definition of the concept, I too could be considered a speciesist. I do not believe that humans and the animals we share our planet with are exactly the same. For better or worse, it is much more special to be human. Although you'd never guess it from what's going on in the world right now, humans are more intelligent than animals, and only we have the capacity to change our planet for the better, or, if we continue down the path we're on, to destroy it completely. This is a lot of power, a lot of responsibility. Unlike other animals, we are the guardians of this planet, - and it is up to us to create a harmonious world in which we can all coexist.

The keyword here is "guardians", not abusers. This is a very important distinction, as it says no the arrogant abuse of animals that has been part of our daily lives for centuries. Those who feel that we have some kind of right to do with animals as we see fit should be reminded of the following: Yes, we are very different from other animals, but the things that we have in common are so important, that they are reason enough to respect these animals' lives, and to find ways to harmoniously coexist with them, instead of using and abusing them for our benefit. Cows, pigs, chickens, etc., although not human, have emotions, can get depressed, feel fear, and wants to live just like we do. It is therefore unethical (and, for most of the world's population, unnecessary) to kill these animals and to make them suffer. While someone might not embrace the concept of speciesism, they will most likely be able to understand this simple reasoning. This is how we build bridges to empathy.

The second issue worth contemplating regarding speciesism is why we value our pets more than we value other animals. This, in my opinion, is more important to discuss, and easier to fight. We, as a society, have chosen some animals to be on our "do not harm" list, - ones that we have gotten to know, and to love, and to share our homes with. There is nothing wrong with putting animals on the "do not harm" list, but we should indeed question why dogs or cats are on there, while other animals that can be equally caring, and as intelligent (or in some cases even more so), end up on the unfortunate "eat or ignore" list. While we can hypothesize until the cows come home, the truth of the matter is that this is fairly random. The thing to remember is that it really is as easy to bond and get attached to a loving pig, calf, rat, turkey, etc. as it is to a cat, for example. If you need proof of this, just do a simple YouTube search and you will see that there are plenty of people that are very happy sharing their lives with these animals. While you don't necessarily have to join their ranks and adopt a baby pig, this

will hopefully make you realize the importance of not discriminating, of respecting all sentient life.

The last thing I want to mention is how some animals rights activists use racism and sexism as the logical precursors to speciesism. I have done this myself. When doing this, however, you can't just throw all these concepts out there and expect people to magically make the connection between them. You have to walk people through it, remembering that most people will initially not get the connection between the first two and the last concept. The fact that racism and sexism still exist proves that many people in the world can't even get around treating their own species well, let alone other species. Empathizing with the latter can be pretty hard for some, especially when someone still sees certain animals as food instead of sentient beings. This is why it becomes even more important to remind people of certain truths: 1) that animals do suffer 2) that a lot of this suffering is because of our diet, clothing, and entertainment, and 3) that switching to a plant-based diet can help end this suffering. Even if someone believes that humans are (in whatever way) superior to other animals, they can still embrace the above mentioned concepts and do a lot less harm.

December 15, 2015

Teaching kids to treat animals well

Kids are very impressionable, and we all know that it's important to teach them right from wrong, to encourage positive behavior and to discourage the negative. When doing so, it's also important not to forget to teach them the correct way to treat the animals of the world, and to respect these animals' lives. Learning to properly deal with animals will go a long way to help a child blossom into a good human being, one who understands the importance of fairness and compassion.

If you're vegetarian or vegan, you probably know that it's possible to raise a healthy and happy child on either one of these diets. A quick online search will reveal many well-informed websites which will help you through any questions you might have about this. Don't be afraid to go this route. I personally have several friends who are raising vegetarian kids, and all of them are perfectly happy. In some countries such as India it is completely normal to encounter individuals of all ages who have never tasted meat. If you're not vegetarian/vegan, you probably won't be raising your child this way. Still, be mindful of their natural empathy (which many kids have a lot of). Encourage it, and don't stifle it. Many kids are shocked when they find out that the animals that they love so much are actually the same ones they eat. While it's often easy to indoctrinate a young mind into believing that this is "right" and "the way of the world", you should allow your child to not eat meat if he/she doesn't want to. If you have a child like this, be thankful. – S/he is an empathetic individual who realizes the importance of all sentient life. S/he is someone who "gets it".

Another important thing to teach your kids, whether you eat meat or not, is that animals have feelings and can suffer and feel pain. You might think that your child would come to this conclusion naturally, but just like many kids have a lot of natural empathy, many others don't really understand that animals can be hurt when mistreated. This is an important thing to teach your kid, one that can prevent him/her from harming animals while s/he is young, and to treat them better when s/he is older. Respecting animals and treating them correctly (both pets and other animals) should also be taught at schools, and in an ideal world this would be standard practice. If this issue concerns you, don't be afraid to contact your child's school and to ask them if they already have any kind of compassion-building lessons in place geared specifically at helping kids understand the importance of respecting animals' lives. If they don't, ask them to consider developing some.

When it comes to the unfair treatment of animals, whether it's eating them or abusing them in one way or another, a lot of our bad habits stem from our childhood. Teach your kids to love and (more importantly) respect animals to make sure that they grow up with good habits instead.

Tuesday, January 26, 2016

Enjoying life

Recently, a friend wrote me with some bad news. Someone she knew had died, somewhat unexpectedly. After describing what had happened, she concluded with a "Life is short, so let's enjoy it." I completely agree that life is, indeed, short, and that we can never know what's going to happen. I also agree that enjoying life, and being able to appreciate what we have, is important. Having said that, it's also important to remember that, while enjoying life, we should keep our egotism in check, and that we should not enjoy it at the expense of others.

It would be a bit short-sighted if all we learned from life's sadder moments was "let's just have fun". Instead of taking a step towards hedonism, these types of events should remind us of the pressing need to engage in charity. For people like me, the meaning of life is very much connected to the act of helping others - other people and/or animals. A tragedy should remind us that other human beings and animals suffer a great deal as well, and that we should not put off actively helping whenever we can, while we still can.

This, of course, does not mean that we should abstain from any kind of mindless fun. Mindless fun can be quite enjoyable. From an ethical point of view, however, there is a difference between (relatively) harmless mindless fun and harmful mindless fun. If I wake up one morning, and decide that I'm just not spontaneous enough, it would be wrong for me to go and walk the streets and

just start punching people in the face. Sure, this is pretty spontaneous, but there are countless other ways of being unpredictable without inflicting violence on innocent passers-by. If I suddenly decide that I need some excitement in my life, it would be wrong to go and become a bullfighter, since this, although exciting, promotes the torture and killing of innocent animals. Again, there are countless other ways to get our heart pumping and our adrenalin flowing that don't involve making innocent beings suffer. If I want to try a new food, it shouldn't be meat, because killing a sentient being for the selfish pleasure of eating his/her flesh should simply no longer be acceptable in our day and age. The meat, dairy, and egg industries are responsible for an enormous amount of death and suffering that occurs in the world, so you would do well to avoid these products.

Life is, indeed, short. We can use this as a pretext to focus on our own needs, and to pursue selfish gratification. Historically, this has been the approach of most people, and look where it's gotten us. Alternatively, we can embrace a less selfish approach to life. After all, we only have a limited amount of time to learn to live ethically, to learn to be good human beings, to learn to not use and abuse the other creatures that we share the planet with. We only have a limited amount of time to see beyond our immediate needs and to reach out to help others. We only have a limited time to see beyond our conditioning and to break the bad habits that are destroying us and the world we live in. If this is what we remember and act on every time we're reminded that we won't be here forever, we will have achieved progress and instilled our lives with true meaning.

February 11, 2016

Does vegetarianism/veganism cause psychological disorders?

There are many excuses that people give for eating meat, eggs, and dairy. Some of these focus on the supposed health risks to those who omit these items from their diet. One that I came across recently was that those of us who do not consume meat or animal products run a greater risk of becoming depressed, developing anxiety issues, etc. In other words: Veganism can lead to psychological disorders.

There have been several studies in the past little while done on this subject. Two that are often quoted are a German study from 2012 and an Australian one from 2014. There might be others; I'm not sure. The above-mentioned studies do show that there is a stronger incidence of some psychological problems, including depression and anxiety, among vegetarians and vegans.

Before you carnivores start doing a victory dance over the carcass of the poor murdered animal you're about to eat, consider the following points: Neither of the studies determined that a meat-free diet CAUSED the above-mentioned

problems, only that there was a higher incidence of these problems in those who didn't eat meat. In fact, the German study concluded that "there was no evidence for a causal role of (a) vegetarian diet in the etiology of mental disorders." This study went on to state that many if not most of the participants had been diagnosed with said conditions BEFORE they switched to a meat-free diet. Does this conclusion mean that vegetarians are at least more prone to certain psychological issues? Possibly, but not because of our diet. Many people stop eating meat because they are sensitive, compassionate individuals. Is it really so strange that a sensitive person in a desensitized world would be more prone to anxiety, depression, etc.? Not really. Is it really so strange that a person who empathizes with the plight of animals could eventually break down when faced with the overwhelming lack of empathy from all around? Not really. It is easier to go through life with thick skin. I don't have scientific proof that people who don't let the evils of the world get to them too much are less prone to the above-mentioned ailments, but this would seem logical. But what about the folks who go vegetarian for health reasons? In relation to the study above, some of them might have done so because of an exaggerated concern about their health, something that could easily stem from a pre-existing psychological issue as well.

The truth of the matter is, there is no direct proof that not eating meat makes one more susceptible to developing psychological disorders. There is no proof because there is no direct causal relationship between the two. Some of my friends know that I had problems with anxiety a couple of years ago. Some might have even thought that this was because of my meat-free diet. Well, it wasn't. What most of my friends don't know is that I had the same problems in my mid-20s, back when I ate meat regularly.

To be fair, I'm not arguing that all vegetarians and vegans are perfectly healthy individuals. In fact, it is sometimes a challenge for some of us to obtain nutrients that are easily available in meat (things such as iron, B12, etc.), especially when we first make the switch. If someone is not careful, it is possible that a prolonged absence of certain nutrients might lead to physical and/or psychological problems. Thankfully, we live in times when a simple internet search will give you quick and easy ways to make sure you're getting all the nutrients you need. My B12 levels are through the roof, as are my iron levels (too high, in fact). I know a couple of people whose iron levels INCREASED when they went vegan. Whether you eat meat or not, a balanced diet is key, and a little bit of research goes a long way to making sure that your diet is balanced enough to ensure you're healthy.

Friday, March 18, 2016

Lab meat - how ethical is it?

In the past year or so, I've come across several articles about an incredible new discovery - the ability to cultivate meat in a laboratory. Instead of killing an animal to get meat, this new process "grows" the meat in a laboratory, so no killing is involved. Many have applauded this new breakthrough, and many of the same people have claimed that we have finally developed an ethical way of providing/eating meat. You no longer have to go vegetarian or vegan, people, you can now eat meat guilt-free. But is this really true?

First of all, there is something sinister about cloning. Whether it's a fruit, a live sheep (remember that one?), or a slab of meat, creating living things (or parts thereof) in the lab is generally disquieting. But let's say, for argument's sake, that we attribute this reaction to paranoia. Let's ignore the fact that this might be very hard to sustain (much harder than growing natural plant-based alternatives to meat). Let's ignore the fact that this is simply genetic modification (which itself is rightfully getting a lot of slack) taken to scary new levels. This still leaves us with my second (and more important) point: The fact that meat is created in a lab doesn't make it completely ethical. Sure, no killing is involved, but you are still eating the flesh of an animal, even though the animal never existed. Let me put it this way: would you eat the flesh of a dog if it were cultivated in the same way? Or a cat? A person like myself would never go back to eating meat for this exact reason. Why would I want to remind myself of the dead flesh of an animal, when I have so many natural plant-based products I can eat? Let's not forget the fact that this meat isn't created from scratch. The culture used to make it comes from the necks of living cows, and is then covered with the blood of dead calves... Yum. In my opinion, this simply reinforces bad habits, especially one of our worst habits - our addiction to meat. It reinforces (albeit semi-subversively) the idea that eating meat is OK or even necessary. This is contrary to what many people like myself believe - that transitioning to a plant-based diet represents progress for the individual and for the world in general. It'll be hard to progress if you still crave the flesh of animals. If you really want to change yourself and the world around you, focus instead on transitioning to a diet that is truly cruelty-free - a plant-based one.

So, no, I won't be trying the lab meat. Having said that, I do see some value in developing it. I believe that this could be effective as part of a greater strategy to get to all those hopeless cases that claim that they'll never even try a veggie burger as long as they live. While you can't force "ethical Neanderthals" to eat plant-based food, you can ban the killing of animals and then ONLY provide lab meat (at very high prices) to them. Sure, they'll complain a whole lot, but at least they'll have their "meat", and no animals will be killed in the process. This is something I would get behind.