A Perfect Vegan

The Pursuit of an Ethical Lifestyle

I made the choice to be vegan when I was fourteen years old. It was after I watched a Humane Society International video for the first time, which depicted a cow being shocked with a stun gun before being slaughtered. I was mortified — I had never seen such suffering before. There were videos under that one, "Baby chicks ground up while they're still alive," "Pigs in factory farm bruised and beaten while awaiting slaughter," "Baby seals beaten to death in front of parents for fur." These videos were the most horrific things I had ever seen, yet they were addicting. I watched one after the other in awe of the appalling imagery. At fourteen, it was the first real opinion or stance I had made on anything, and I was hardcore.

As a new vegan, I made it a point to not associate with anything that was anti-animal-welfare. This, of course, meant not eating any animal products, not wearing animal products, and even not watching some movies that had animals in them. It bothered me that my friends weren't vegan, and I would try every now and then to convince them.

Being vegan was good for me, and I immediately noticed an improvement in my skin. Since sixth or seventh grade, I had acne all over my face.

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I had been to the dermatologist, bought multiple expensive skin care sets, but my face remained the same until I gave up animal milk. At the time, there weren't a ton of vegan replacements available to me in grocery stores. A bag of chicken nuggets and a dairy-free bag of Mexican shredded cheese is what I remember. Because of this, I learned a lot of new ways to cook. You can do a lot with lentils, chickpeas, and tofu. I was also getting more into spirituality and meditation. I learned that you cannot meditate properly with dead beings inside of your body and spirit: the Buddhist belief. Buddhism taught me that all beings, without exception, deserve to be free from harm.

When I discovered The People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, commonly known as PETA, I was thrilled. Their theatrical shows of anti-animal-suffering were exciting to watch, plus they were doing good for animal liberation in a legal setting. I followed everything PETA told me to do, and I loved it.

One article said not to even wear faux leather because it still endorsed the "look" of real leather. What if someone sees your cool faux leather jacket, wants one of their own, and buys a cow leather jacket instead? Of course! I had never thought of that.

As I progressed further into my veganism, I found that I began to have little conflicts with the statements I preached. My elderly, Appalachian roots, unemployed, Vietnam War veteran neighbor was certainly not one who would be interested in being vegan. Even if he was, could he afford it? Vegan store bought meats cost an average of $5-$11. Additionally, your local rural grocery stores and small town Walmart isn't interested in selling $7 chicken nuggets that aren't even chicken.

I also began to consider others, especially those who aren't a cog in the Western factory-farm machine. My close friend has a family rich in Mexican culture so most of their traditional dishes involve meat and cheese, should they have to give those up?

Modern veganism for Americans seems to be catered towards the white, wealthy consumer. Of course, I had nothing to lose when the best things I was eating were Chick-fil-A sandwiches and slow-cooker pork chops. People with unique cultural dishes that are mainly meat-centered have a lot more to consider when wanting to be vegan or vegetarian.

After a while of using vegan leather, I began to question things. Vegan leather is of a lesser quality than cow leather and is often made of plastic. How can I preach sustainability and engage with a product that will contribute to climate change? I still try to buy mainly second-hand leather, however, to minimize my impact. In these scenarios and a few more, I think consumption of animal products is acceptable.

Afterall, isn't the main motive in being vegan the pursuit of an ethical lifestyle? To me, part of being vegan is being kind to all, including humans. It wouldn't be unethical for me to refuse to cook a non-vegan meal for my friends or boyfriend, but it does make them happy. Subtly introducing people to vegan alternatives and inviting groups to vegan restaurants allows people to be more open to the conversation of going meatless.

Head-on, aggressive measures to "convince" people at any cost usually does more harm than good. Although this is what convinced me, exposing people to brutal videos of the most intense suffering they will ever see is unethical in itself, especially with no age-limit on the videos. I do believe these videos can be benefical as they have improved factory farm conditions for the animals and workers. At least now the animals can not suffer as much as they did before they die.

I still believe there is no ethical way of killing an animal, as there is no ethical or right way to kill a person. Even if animals are "raised right" on a caring and loving small farm, they are still put to death as a being who does not want to die. Mother cows are still torn from their babies to produce milk. I am just as pro-animal-liberation as I was when I began. However, I know this lifestyle isn't for everyone. I know that some individuals need meat for their specific diet, or don't have enough money or resources to be vegan.

I still entertain PETA's emails, and sometimes, I agree with them. But, I know that I will never be the definition of "perfect."

As I enter my sixth year of veganism, I think of the great things it's done for me. I've been to vegan food festivals and restaurants I wouldn't have been to otherwise. I've saved, mathematically, countless animals. I am making the world a better place. I love seeing the world around me become more vegan-friendly, and budget-vegan-friendly at that. And in the end, it's been six years of improved health, stronger spirituality, better food and of course, improved morale. Here's to many more years of the same thing.