

A Meaningful Life: Animal Advocacy, Human Nature, & A Better World

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All advocates are faced with two main challenges. The first, and arguably more important of the two, is how to open people's hearts and minds, so that they may deliberately and conscientiously consider new ideas.

Preface

Effective advocates - those who are truly successful in fostering change - are thoughtful psychologists. They understand that each of us is born with a certain intrinsic nature. We are then raised to adopt certain beliefs, and taught to hold specific prejudices. Over time, we discover new "truths" and abandon others; we mix and match, supplement and refine, continually altering our collection of attitudes, principles, and values.

Even though we can recognize that our belief system changes over time, at any given point most of us are likely to believe that our current set of positions and opinions are "right" - that our convictions are well founded, our actions justified, and that we are each, at heart, a good person. Even when, years later, we find ourselves reflecting on previously held beliefs with a sense of bemusement, it does not occur to us that we may someday feel the same way toward the attitudes we now hold.

Similarly, we understand that we don't change anyone else's mind. No matter how elegant an argument is, ultimately, real and lasting change comes only from opening people's hearts and minds, allowing them the freedom to explore new ideas and new ways of viewing the world. Of course, we all know there is no magic way of doing this, no secret hypnotic trick. The simplest way to encourage other people to open their hearts and minds is for *our own hearts and minds to be open* - and not just for the sake of advocacy or argument. Rather, we must be truly open, able to sincerely consider anything and everything that is said during interactions with others. I believe an open heart and mind is the only honest position any serious advocate can take, because obviously no one person has all the answers. So in the interest of moving forward, let me suggest we set aside everything we believe we "know," and start with the core of our concern.

After many years of struggling to distill my advocacy to its purest form, I have come to believe that virtually all of our actions can be traced to a desire for fulfillment or happiness and a need to avoid or alleviate suffering. That is to say, something is "good" if

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it leads to more happiness, and something is "bad" if it leads to more suffering. This is a simplistic view, of course, but does cut through confusion, leaving us with a single measure by which to judge the consequences of our actions and evaluate our advocacy.

Given that pain - be it physical, emotional, or psychological - is generally the single greatest barrier to contentment, I believe suffering must be our first priority, especially since there is so very much suffering in the world. In essence, then, my advocacy philosophy can be best described as a desire to decrease the amount of suffering in the world.

Principles of Advocacy

If you are reading this, I would guess that you are concerned about more than just the pursuit of your own happiness. The question then is: How can we make a difference in a world where suffering is so widespread?

In addition to starting with open hearts and minds, a basic understanding of human nature shows that people have an affinity for the known and the immediate. This is true not only of the population as a whole, but for advocates as well. In general, most people working for a better world concentrate on those closest to them, geographically and/or biologically. Even those who look beyond species focus on either the familiar or the fantastic, with a disproportionate amount of resources and effort spent on cats and dogs, endangered species, or individual animals in high-profile situations.

This is understandable, given our basic human desire to have a visible impact on the world. We all want to feel like we are accomplishing something, that we've been victorious. It often doesn't matter how significant the accomplishment or victory is - or even if the world is truly better off - but rather that something tangible has been achieved. It is because of this need for visible results that some people say that they are unable or unwilling to support Vegan Outreach, because what we do is too slow or abstract, that there is no way to see the animals saved.

This understanding of human nature, along with a recognition of the primacy of suffering, led Vegan Outreach to formulate two guiding principles for advocacy:

1. We should, as much as possible, strive to set aside our personal biases and needs. Vegan Outreach's approach to advocacy tries to orient itself through a straightforward analysis of the world as it is, motivated *solely* by the suffering of others.

2. When we choose to do one thing, we are choosing not to do others. The people who make up Vegan Outreach have extremely limited resources and time. So instead of choosing to "do *something*, do *anything*," we pursue actions that we believe will lead to the greatest reduction in suffering. Once again, this may sound simplistic, but given the endless demands on advocates, we believe it is an important principle to follow.

Why Vegan?

Based on these two principles, we choose to promote veganism to have the maximum impact on the amount of suffering in the world. Let me repeat - our emphasis on veganism is derived from our principles of advocacy, not vice versa. Veganism does not have any value in and of itself.

Rather, promoting veganism offers the most efficient way of decreasing overall suffering, for three basic reasons:

1. The Numbers

The number of animals raised and killed for food each year in the U.S. alone vastly exceeds any other form of exploitation, involving numbers far greater than the total human population of the entire world.

Ninety-nine out of every 100 animals killed in the U.S. each year are slaughtered for human consumption.

2. The Suffering

Of course, if these billions of animals lived happy, healthy lives and had quick and painless deaths, then our concern for suffering would lead elsewhere. But animals raised for food must endure unfathomable suffering.

Most advocacy tends to revolve around detailed stories of individuals, and the story of any individual chicken, pig, or veal calf clearly rivals any other case of cruelty. Indeed, perhaps the most difficult aspect of advocating on behalf of these animals is trying to describe the indescribable: the overcrowding and confinement, the stench, the racket, the extremes of heat and cold, the attacks and even cannibalism, the hunger and starvation, the illness...the near-constant horror of every day of their life. Indeed, every year, hundreds of millions of animals - many times more than the **total** number killed for fur, in shelters, and in laboratories - don't even make it to slaughter. They actually *suffer to death*.

3. The Opportunity.

If there were nothing we could do about these animals' suffering - if it all happened in a distant land beyond our influence - then, again, our focus would be different. But vegan advocacy is the most readily accessible option for making a better world! We don't have to overthrow a foreign government. We don't have to forsake modern life. We don't have to win an election or convince Congress of the validity of our argument.

Rather, every day, every single person makes decisions that affect the lives of these farmed animals. Helping people change leads to fewer animals suffering in factory farms. Many major national campaigns spend huge amounts of time and money for far less payoff. By choosing to promote veganism, every person we meet is a potential victory.

How to Promote Veganism

The rationale outlined above seems logical, but we didn't arrive at these conclusions overnight. Before we founded Vegan Outreach, Jack Norris and I pursued various

other forms of animal advocacy - from letter writing campaigns to scores of protests and everything in between, including civil disobedience.

Even within the realm of promoting veganism, there are many different opinions and options. For example, the Christian Vegetarian Association works within the context of the most commonly practiced religion in the U.S. Their booklet, *Honoring God's Creation*, (formerly, *What Would Jesus Eat...Today?*) reaches out to people through their existing ethical framework. This approach allows the CVA to advocate - quite successfully - to a vast audience for whom other approaches would be less effective.

Other advocacy organizations focus on harnessing the power of video footage. Some groups take out free spots on public access stations, and sometimes can afford to purchase commercial time. Different groups take the video footage right to the public via "FaunaVision vans" (equipped with large T.V.s, portable power units, and speakers) and "Faunettes" (smaller portable units that can be wheeled on sidewalks), which act like magnets, attracting people who may otherwise ignore someone leafleting. Many regional groups provide important resources and support, from local shopping and dining guides, to organizing social gatherings.

Maximum Change

At Vegan Outreach, we work for maximum change, seeking to achieve the greatest reduction in suffering per dollar donated and hour worked. We believe the way to accomplish this is to present the optimal message to our target audience. This leads to two basic questions: Who is our audience, and what is the message that will elicit the greatest change?

Of course, with infinite resources, we could reach out to everyone. Given our very limited resources, though, the goal of maximum change leads Vegan Outreach to focus on high school and college students, for three main reasons:

1. Willingness and ability to change.

Of course, not every student is willing or able to stop eating meat. But *relative to the population as a whole*, college and high school students tend to be more open-minded - even rebellious against the status quo - and in a position where they aren't as restricted by parents, tradition, habits, etc.

2. The full impact of change.

Even if it were equally likely that we could convince teenagers or senior citizens, over the course of their lives, not only would the teenagers be saving more animals, but they

would have more opportunities to influence others.

3. Ability to reach large numbers.

High school and college students are typically easier to reach in large numbers. For a relatively small investment of time, an activist can hand a copy of *Why Vegan?* to hundreds of students who otherwise might never have viewed a full and compelling case for compassion.

Our message for this audience is the suffering on factory farms and in industrial slaughterhouses. We have found that this simple and straightforward message has many benefits, including:

1. Honesty.

In general, people can sense insincerity. They don't respect the tactic of bait and switch, and few people believe that veg advocates are *truly* concerned about everyone else's health.

Every new vegetarian, though, goes through the phase of, "Even though I care about animals, other people won't. People are selfish - I'll appeal to their self-interest!" But look around - is the health argument working? For years we've known that being obese is the single greatest threat to good health; yet every year, more and more people in the U.S. become more and more overweight! Is this really the message with the best chance to create the real change that will save animals?

2. Impact.

Many animal advocates buy the "trickle up" theory of change: "If they oppose wearing fur coats, they might eventually stop eating meat!" Does anyone *really* believe that an hour spent holding a sign outside a furrier does more to help animals than spending that hour handing out copies of *Why Vegan?* Even if a person doesn't become vegetarian right after reading *Why Vegan?*, they are *far* more likely to be sympathetic to other cases of animal abuse than they would be after seeing another anti-fur poster - the "trickle down" approach to animal liberation!

3. Motivation.

We don't want to get people to just *consider* veganism. We want them to change and *maintain* that change. If someone tries veganism to improve their health, the next time they hear someone praise the Atkins diet, that same person might switch and end up eating even *more* animals than before! So we should try to get them to consider veganism for reasons that are more sustainable.

I'm not fooling myself - I know that exposing what goes on in factory farms and slaughterhouses isn't going to appeal to

everyone. But feel-good arguments that avoid the horrors of meat production are not compelling enough. We don't want people to nod in agreement and continue on as before. It is far better if 95% of people turn away revolted and 5% open their minds to change, than if everyone smiles politely and continues on to McDonald's.

Let me repeat: Trying to appeal to everyone hasn't worked, *and it won't work*. It is well past time to give up the fantasy that there is some perfect self-centered argument that will magically compel everyone to change.

Conversely, showing people what goes on behind the walls of factory farms and slaughterhouses *does* work! We have found cruelty to animals to be the most compelling reason to go vegan - and *stay* vegan - in the face of peer pressure, tradition, the latest diet, etc. In his two years of leafleting colleges around the country, Jack found a *tremendous* willingness among students to take and consider information about veganism. Other activists have found the same. We constantly receive feedback to the effect of: "I had no idea what went on! Thank you so much for opening my eyes!"

And yet, there are many, *many* more willing people to reach. Obviously friends and family, but we can't spend all our time and emotional resources on the immediate. The simplest way to get information to interested people is to stock displays in your area: libraries, music and bookstores, co-ops and natural food stores, coffeehouses, and sympathetic restaurants.

Youth, though, is where the animals get the biggest bang for the buck. Vegan Outreach has two programs to methodically reach out to the prime audience. The first (a joint program with Viva!USA) is our semi-annual National Leafleting Day. The second is the Adopt a College program, where activists agree to leaflet at local campuses at least once a semester. These are the first systematic plans for bringing about animal liberation by targeting our most receptive audience.

The animals can't afford our continued, reactionary, try-everything-and-anything campaigns. We know what works. *We just need the dedication to do it!* You can join up at our web site - veganoutreach.org.

Pitfalls

Anyone who has been veg for more than a few minutes knows the many roadblocks - habit, tradition, convenience, taste, familiarity, peer pressure, etc. - that keep people from opening their hearts and minds to consider the animals' plight. Our message must overcome *all* of these!

When it comes to advocating for the animals, people are looking for a reason to ignore us - no one sits around thinking, "Wow, I really want to give up all my favorite foods and isolate myself from my friends and family!" Knowing this, we can't give anyone any reasons to ignore the terrible and unnecessary suffering on factory farms and in slaughterhouses.

If we want to be as effective as we possibly can be for the animals, it is absolutely essential that we recognize and avoid common traps. Remember: *Our message is simple*. Don't distract people from it by trying to present every piece of information you've ever heard that sounds vaguely pro-veg. Don't try to answer every tangential argument tossed at you - advocacy isn't about how much you know. Don't let the discussion degrade into an argument over sterility and impotence, third-world starvation, Jesus' loaves and fishes, impending dustbowls, abortion, chickens being smarter than human toddlers, the President, bone char, or Grandpa's cholesterol level. Whatever is said back to you cannot counter the fact that eating animals causes unnecessary suffering.

Similarly, don't build your case from sources that can be the subject of debate. Factory farms and slaughterhouses are hidden from view, and the industry's P.R. machine denies standard animal agriculture practices ("Animals are treated well, slaughterhouses are well regulated"). The public won't believe otherwise just because we say so. There is no need to cite "biased" sources; the cruelties of factory farms and industrial slaughterhouses are well documented by nonpartisan third-party sources and the industry itself. Just as our case is perfectly strong without the most extreme claims, it is also complete when based on sources most people will regard as indisputable.

Always stay focused on the animals, not veganism. Veganism is not an end in itself. It is not a dogma or religion, a list of forbidden ingredients or immutable laws.

Veganism is only a tool for opposing cruelty and reducing suffering.

Remember:

- We *don't* want to attack anything or anyone.
- We *don't* want to express our rage at how animals are raised and killed.
- We *don't* want to show how smart and enlightened we are.
- We *don't* want to "Win an argument with a meat eater."
- We *don't* want to gross out someone so they don't eat meat at their next meal.

We want people to open their hearts and minds to change. It all simplifies to:

Buying meat, eggs, and dairy causes unnecessary suffering.

We can each choose not to cause this suffering.

Staying a Healthy Vegan

For many, maintaining a change in diet is a far more significant undertaking than most advocates admit - or even realize. In his two years of leafleting around the country, Jack was often told, "I was veg for a while, but I didn't feel healthy...." He heard this so frequently that he sometimes felt he met more failed vegetarians than current vegetarians!

Contrast this with the messages many activists like to present, such as, "Meat is a deadly poison!" Just consider a meat-eater hearing a friend's story of feeling unhealthy on a vegetarian diet, and then being faced with the nearly desperate-sounding activist chant of "Meat causes heart disease! Colon cancer! Breast cancer! Diabetes!"

As we know, even a moderate health argument doesn't have significant sway in most people's lives - especially youth. But the health argument is not only an inefficient use of our limited resources: when we regurgitate extremist-sounding, black-and-white propaganda, we hurt animals. Everyone who tries a veg diet because of its "magical properties" will quit if they don't immediately lose weight and increase their energy. They will then tell *everyone* how awful they felt as a vegetarian, and how much better they feel now as a meat eater. Just one failed vegetarian can counter the efforts of many well-spoken advocates.

It is well past time that we accompany an ethical case for veganism with an honest and thorough plan for staying healthy. The nutritional case historically presented by advocates is so bad - and has led to so many failed vegetarians - that after two years of leafleting, Jack decided to go back to school to become a registered dietitian, so he could honestly evaluate nutrition research.

If we want to do our best to prevent suffering, we must learn, and then present, an honest, unbiased evaluation of the nutritional aspects of a vegan diet, including uncertainties and possible shortcomings. Doing so not only leads people to trust that we are not just partisan propagandists, but also creates healthy spokespeople for the animals!

Countering the Stereotype

Perhaps the biggest problem for vegan advocates is society's stereotype of vegans. No longer does "vegan" need to be explained

when referenced on T.V. or in movies, but unfortunately, the word is often used as shorthand for someone young, angry, deprived, fanatical, and isolated. In short, “vegan” = “unhappy.” Just like one failed vegetarian counters the efforts of many honest advocates, this caricature guarantees that veganism won’t be considered - let alone adopted - on a wide scale.

Regrettably, the “angry vegan” image is based in reality, and fighting this stereotype just reinforces it. Not only have I known many fanatical vegans, I also helped perpetuate this view. Like every error I have tried to point out - inefficient tactics, obsessing over ingredients, arguing minutiae, etc. - this is another I’ve been guilty of. My self-righteous indignation gave many people a lifetime excuse to ignore the veg message.

It is not enough to be a vegan, or even a dedicated vegan advocate. If we want to maximize the amount of suffering we can prevent, we must actively be the opposite of the vegan stereotype. The animals can’t wait until we get over our despair. We must learn how to “Win Friends and Influence People.” We must - regardless of the sorrow and outrage we rightly feel - leave everyone we meet with the impression of a joyful person leading a fulfilling and meaningful life.

Summary & Questions

This isn’t a particularly exciting or inspiring prescription:

- Focus on preventing animals from being bred for factory farms.
- Accept that, at this time, only a minority will listen, and many others will react with disdain.
- Avoid extreme claims, absolutism, and self-righteousness.
- Accept and admit to uncertainty.
- Be a happy, respectful, and mainstream “people person.”

It is understandable to want something more immediate, more rewarding. Nearly every time I give a talk, at least one person says something like, “We have to do it all, now!” “We have to save them all!”

Of course, I can’t dismiss the possibility that there is another answer, but history is not encouraging. Millions of people before us have been outraged and furious with the state of the world, yet today, there is more suffering than ever before. Obviously, anger and dedication *aren’t enough*.

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donated hundreds of millions of dollars and worked hundreds of millions of hours on behalf of the animals. What is there to show for it?

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The Final Challenge

I’d be lying if I said this was easy. Often, the logical response seems to be: Why bother? I’m doing enough by being vegan. Changing the world is hopeless.

This brings us to the second of the two challenges mentioned at the beginning: Why care?

It is relatively easy to look at horrible pictures or watch footage of vicious cruelty to animals and be angry and motivated in the short term. But what about a week down the road? A month? A year - after being rejected by relatives, mocked by coworkers, ignored while leafleting?

In many ways, remaining dedicated and motivated is a harder challenge than opening other people’s hearts and minds.

Is the situation hopeless? If you look at the big picture, I do believe that there is reason for optimism. Indeed, anyone interested in creating a fundamental change for the future is advised to take the long view - at least longer than the next year, or even the next decade. While it is frustrating how slow the pace of progress can seem to us, the rate of change has been unprecedented in the past few centuries. As Bruce Friedrich points out:

Socrates, considered the father of philosophical thought, was teaching more than twenty-five hundred years ago. It was thousands of years later that we saw the beginnings of

our democratic system. Not until the 19th century was slavery abolished in the developed world. Only in the last century was child labor ended, child abuse criminalized, women allowed to vote, and minorities granted wider rights.

When viewed in this context, it seems clear that today we have the great and singular opportunity to make the *Economist’s* prediction come true: “Historically, man has expanded the reach of his ethical calculations, as ignorance and want have receded, first beyond family and tribe, later beyond religion, race, and nation. To bring other species more fully into the range of these decisions may seem unthinkable to moderate opinion now. One day, decades or centuries hence, it may seem no more than ‘civilized’ behavior requires.”

Is enough to keep an activist going, day in and day out, when trying to do the hard and often abstract work of promoting veganism (especially while not surrounded by other activists to provide support)? We aren’t robots. *We each want to be happy.*

Yet our desire for happiness is, I believe, the answer to the final challenge.

Ultimately, happiness isn’t to be found in “stuff.” While the U.S. is the richest country on earth, Americans aren’t the happiest people on earth. The phrase isn’t “the pursuit of happiness” for nothing! As biological creatures, it is our nature to always desire more, to constantly *strive* for a greater share, regardless of what we already have. Over the millennia, those creatures who were satisfied were erased from the gene pool by our unfulfilled ancestors, leaving us with a nature that pursues happiness but isn’t able to *acquire* it.

Where does this leave us? The best answer I’ve found is: happiness is the result of a meaningful life, and meaning comes not from things, but from accomplishment.

I believe that meaningful accomplishment comes from living life beyond ourselves, viewing our existence beyond the immediate. Doing my thoughtful best to make the world a better place is as meaningful a life as I can imagine.

To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr.:

The arc of history is long
And ragged
And often unclear
But ultimately
It progresses towards justice.

I want to be a part of that progress.