



Now



Hear



This!

Shouting your love of vegetarianism from the rooftops might be momentarily satisfying, but will it convince others to try out the lifestyle? Writer **Marla Rose** explores the power of words to either make, or break, the case for veganism.



SOMETHING ASTONISHING HAPPENED to me when I first became a vegetarian in the 1980s. As a newly minted herbivore, I suddenly noticed that the world around me, one that I had always thought of as just a placid, predictable suburban landscape, actually swarmed with bloodthirsty, vicious thugs behind every corner, scheming out daily sadistic deeds. It was up to me alone, the 15-year-old with the black fingernail polish and a formidable eye-roll, to vanquish them. Not being the physically imposing sort, my main weapon was my active disdain. It may not sound like much but, oh, how I brandished

of the electric meat carver, the sound of evil triumphant. The turkey carcass in the kitchen was incontrovertible proof of my family's barbarism, the flesh on the platter clear evidence of their cold-hearted, privileged indifference. I would argue; they would laugh. I would plead; they would collectively shrug. I would get upset; they would ask me to please pass the turkey. Triggered, I would yell ("Why won't you listen!?!"), condemn ("People like you are killing the planet!"), accuse ("You really don't give a damn, do you?"), and attack ("You are just mean, selfish people,") right before stomping upstairs to my bedroom, slamming

Listen Up

If our true intention is to try to create less suffering and more receptiveness to compassionate living, clearly alienating others is in opposition to this goal. But how do we get our message across when there is such real urgency, when animals are so desperately in need of our outspokenness? Can we speak honestly about the needless brutality inflicted upon animals and still be heard?

According to Nick Cooney, author of *Change of Heart: What Psychology Can Teach Us About Spreading Social Change*, if we want to create significant and lasting change,

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

—George Bernard Shaw

it. “Meat is Murder” was what the angular Englishman with the plaintive voice sang, and within days of first rejecting hot dogs and corned beef sandwiches, it became my personal mantra: simple, unequivocal, and irrefutable; this refrain gave me sustenance and kept me company when I was near meat-eaters, which was, well, kind of all the time. As a result, I regarded the world around me in a near-constant state of diligent outrage. I was a lot of fun to be around.

When I left home for college, the heavens finally parted and I met other vegetarians for the first time. It was as if I had been stranded in the desert for years and finally stumbled upon a bottomless source of hydration: I drank, and gulped, and chugged until it felt like I could burst, and then I drank some more. My revolutionary zeal, fueled by books, videos, and charismatic friends, was inexhaustible. Bulletproof as I thought I was, I still had an Achilles' heel. Going home for the holidays made me wobbly just as kryptonite enervated the Man of Steel.

I'd return home with my impassioned-but-well-reasoned arguments only to inevitably end up feeling like a little child, brooding in my room with my Morrissey poster, in no better position than I was as a sophomore in high school. At home, my voice—thus my convictions, my point-of-view—was drowned out by the cruel whirl

of the door, and scrawling angry poetry in my journal until I fell asleep, exhausted. The next day? Repeat cycle. On the bright side, I did get a lot of angry poems out of my system. On the not-so-good side, there were a lot of hard feelings, and it wasn't an altogether productive chapter in my life as an activist.

Thankfully, it wasn't long before my desire to effect positive change began to outweigh my desire to win arguments, and when that happened, I stopped being one of Those People.

In all social-justice movements, there are Those People. As a young adult, I was one of them. I was flooded with so much outrage for how animals are treated, I created unnecessary divisions, rushed to judgment, and relished opportunities to tell meat-eaters exactly what I thought of them. Those People make more nuanced advocates cringe with their self-serving tirades and unapologetically smug condescension. Those People are the ones you never want to volunteer with because they embarrass you with their tone-deaf approach to outreach. They seem to care less about getting through to people and more about driving home their points, regardless of how (in)effective they are. Back then, when I was one of Those People, I thought I was pushing buttons, and I was. With very few exceptions, the people I interacted with pushed a button of their own, too: mute.

social-justice champions must become savvy about what scientific research shows us are proven strategies for having the most positive influence on others. As founder and director of The Humane League, a nonprofit animal advocacy organization based in Philadelphia, PA, Cooney has no interest in soapbox grandstanding: He wants to get through to people in a profound way, and he wants to use his energy effectively. He wrote *Change of Heart* as a way of sharing the most compelling, empirically tested approaches for advocacy communities. “If we talk to people in a way that doesn't reach them—because we're so upset and emotional, because we demand purity, or because we're just plain annoying—it's like ramming our head against a brick wall,” says Cooney. “Eventually, we're going to get sick of doing it and retire to a life of bitterly complaining on Facebook about how we hate everyone who isn't vegan. On the other hand, if we communicate effectively, we'll see some success and that can motivate us to keep advocating for animals.”

About a year into my stint as a confrontational vegan, I started noticing that people I worked with would stop conversations when I walked into the room. When we ate together at lunch, what had once been a time for laughing and bonding became uncongenial and fraught with tension. Even if I never talked about food at lunch, my biting remarks

throughout the day reverberated and this began to build into resentment toward me, not necessarily for my message, but for how I delivered it. I became aware of something that should be obvious: It is very hard to have a positive influence on those who resent you.

To Cooney, the fundamental question that should be the basis upon which agents of social change operate is not how we can win an argument or shame an opponent but instead: What will be most effective for helping those whom I am trying to help? With successful dialogue as the overriding purpose, Cooney believes that one's ego, self-identity, and deep-seated desire to be right must be restrained in favor of a less instantly gratifying but far more potent approach to communication. The idea of suppressing the urge to be right, thereby quelling the familiar roles we play in our families and in society, is a simple one. Which is not to imply that it's easy in practice.

We each have histories that are unique to us and our emotions can be triggered suddenly by an offhand comment, a mocking tone, or

even a bored expression. When we're feeling provoked, we can become reactive because we're stressed. A famous study conducted by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe from the University of Washington revealed that our personal relationships, such as those we have with family members, rate very high as a source of external stress. Fuse this with our passionately held convictions and the knowledge of the unnecessary horrors inflicted on animals, not to mention the frustration of often feeling alienated from our co-workers, friends, and families, and you have stirred, shaken, and blended one potentially volatile cocktail of emotions. Being around family can be very challenging. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reports that 40 percent of workers already report being stressed out before the holidays even arrive. Stressed people can use poor judgment and feel moody, short-tempered, overwhelmed, and nauseated, which is obviously not an ideal platform from which to communicate. A "take no prisoners" mentality can easily take root in our struggle to be heard. When we release the need to conquer our opponents, at times it means that we must draw on tremendous reserves of self-discipline. To avoid creating a power dynamic that mirrors the structure of warfare or conflict, of heroes versus villains, can take even more restraint.

Speak Your Peace

Meganwind Eoyang grew up fighting in gang wars on the south side of Chicago. Today she teaches people skills for disarming themselves against the emotional war zones we create in our daily lives. As a staff trainer and project manager with the Oakland-based nonprofit Bay Area Nonviolent Communication, an organization that teaches the empathic speaking and listening skills developed by Marshall Rosenberg, PhD, Eoyang observes firsthand the dangers of the seek-and-destroy mentality between people. "There is a tremendous cost to winning the battle," she says. "In that framework, there are basically good guys and bad guys, and it's the duty of the good guys to vanquish the bad guys. So life is perceived as war and battles. The cost is that you've lost the trust and connection with the person you have vanquished. If you win the battle proving who's right or wrong, you can almost guarantee no one's behavior will be changed."

Okay, my inner-angry activist (she's still in

there) just rolled her eyes and stomped her foot. This is very challenging to accept when you are very aware of how heinously animals are treated. We are right! Why waste time on playing nice when there is so much completely unnecessary suffering and violence? Isn't giving voice to our honest, unvarnished dissent the least we can do for the animals? Isn't there a place for direct, heartfelt, and even angry outreach, especially when there is so much urgent need to get through to people?

"Yes," says Eoyang. "In Nonviolent Communication, we refer to that as 'screaming in giraffe.' When you experience life from the eyes of a giraffe, you have a wider field of vision: You can see in front and behind you, to the sides. You have that perspective. Instead of using what we call 'jackal language,' words with sharp teeth that inflict pain, you are speaking aloud about what matters deeply to you behind your anger or hurt. This is powerful and honest language, speaking from the beauty of what matters in your own heart and allowing the beauty that matters in the other person's heart."

Susan Krauss Whitbourne, PhD, professor of psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and author of 15 books including *The Search for Fulfillment*, recommends communicators use the basic manners we often disregard in the heat of the moment: maintain eye contact, avoid interrupting others, speak honestly. In other words, be considerate.

As soon as I made a conscious decision to drop the antagonistic attitude, listen more, and be approachable, a funny thing happened. People started coming to me out of the woodwork, even those whom I had previously written off as a waste of time, with genuine questions about veganism. Instead of being avoided, I suddenly started fielding questions about animal testing, about the dairy industry, about all these subjects I had researched and was eager to share. It just took me making the overture of consideration to build the bridges necessary for good communication. My revolutionary act simply amounted to the Golden Rule: I started treating others as I would want to be treated.

This echoes the advice of Eoyang, who warns against adopting the behavior of the people we want to change in order to ask them to change, ending our role in sanctioning a deeply flawed mentality that we reject at its core. According to the principles of Nonviolent Communication, bullying, superiority, and

Support System

Here are some resources to help you move beyond a state of frustration and into a healthier place where communication is possible.

- Visit the Center for Nonviolent Communication's website to find practice groups, get certified, browse resources, and more at cnvc.org.
- Emotions Anonymous is a 12-step program based on similar principles to Alcoholics Anonymous to help people who are seeking emotional wellness. In addition to meetings across the country, there are online resources at emotionsanonymous.org.
- Pick up one of these books: *Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames* by Thich Nhat Hanh; *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict* by Marshall Rosenberg, PhD; *Emotional Freedom: Liberate Yourself from Negative Emotions and Transform Your Life* by Judith Orloff; *Move the Message: Your Guide to Making a Difference and Changing the World* by Josephine Bellacomo.



unkindness reinforce the same power structure that compassionate-living advocates are trying to dismantle. We need to find a place of being able to hear each other, even if we disagree. Speaking honestly while seeking common ground liberates the people you are speaking with to also share their feelings so that a true dialogue can occur. This bolsters what Cooney says research proves—that smart advocacy uses our similarities to create real, meaningful communication. If we launch our words like missile attacks, aiming to devastate our perceived opponents with a barrage of accusations and insults, our message gets lost in the fusillade of battle. The vegan perspective is fundamentally disorienting to an omnivore even without all the shock-and-awe that a personal attack wreaks. It's both superfluous and counterproductive.

"There's nothing more rattling than hearing someone who looks, acts, and talks like us say something unexpected; for example, that we shouldn't eat animals. Confidence and passion are powerful traits, but if we let them spill over into anger, purism, or guilt-tripping, our overall persuasiveness goes down the drain," says Cooney. "The way farm animals are raised and killed will make people uncomfortable enough. We need to show them a friendly and inviting way out of that discomfort: moving toward vegan living."

The Matter of the Message

Priscilla Feral, president of Friends of Animals, an international animal-advocacy organization founded in 1957, believes that the concept of veganism by itself is naturally upsetting to those who consume animal products. If we approach the topic with equanimity, it is naturally disarming.

"In general, omnivores react defensively to vegan advocacy messages. I've found the claim that someone is strident or confrontational often has more to do with the message than the style of the messenger. Speaking clearly and calmly about an otherwise volatile subject comes off as rational if anger isn't driving the conversation," she says. "Moreover, our culture expects females to express weakness in speech—lifting our voices at the end of sentences, or making indirect remarks. That's the bane of my existence. I always speak directly, which reflects strength and resolve, and if that appears 'confrontational,' the remedy is more speech, not silence or heated debate."

Just as important as how we present our message is how we react to others'. Eoyang has this simple strategy. "First, if you're anxious or upset, name what is in your heart. If you don't name it, the upset can be perceived as aggression. Then do everything possible to identify what's behind your own anger. Is it anguish? Grief? Fear? Last, what is your overall intention? Is it to prove who is right or who is wrong, or is it to invite others to change their behavior? Using 'giraffe language,' the opportunities for being heard and understood expand exponentially. Being able to hear what is in the heart of the people you are talking to can make you a more successful advocate, too."

About a year after I adopted a more approachable attitude, a new friend who was struggling to eat more plants and fewer animals gave me the best compliment. It still gives me goose bumps. Comparing me to another vegan she had known in the past, she said, "The thing that I like about you is that you teach by example. You don't preach. You support me rather than make me feel stupid and worthless." Little did she know that just a year prior, I was an herbivorous hellian leaving bad feelings and a sour taste for veganism in my wake. It just took a simple desire to change to become an effective communicator of my message.

Simple, yes, but like the best things in life, it's not always easy. As the hoary expression goes, practice makes perfect. We can be the angry teenager, colleague, or neighbor pointing fingers and screaming from a soapbox, or we can be effective, honest, moving, and compassionate communicators. Of course, advocacy isn't a one-size-fits-all experience: At its best, it is dynamic and alive. The people we are talking to also have unique histories and come from countless different backgrounds, so there is not a singular golden approach. We must be fluid and creative. Most of all, we need to know what we want—a world of more violence, rage, and division, or one that is that much closer to the ideal we hold in our hearts. If our operating principle remains rooted in this goal of expanding our circle of kindness, we will always know how to communicate. **VN**

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PeacefulPointers

We live in an imperfect world. We're always going to be exposed to people who hurt our feelings or behave in ways that get under our skin, as well as situations that upset us. It's a cliché, but it's true: All we can really control is how we respond to the triggers that make us angry. The next time you're asked which steakhouse you want to meet at for your family reunion, try these American Psychological Association-recommended strategies for keeping your composure before you speak from your heart.

1 Relax. Consciously calm down with techniques like deep breathing, word repetition (like "peace"), or a soothing visualization.

2 Cognitive restructuring. We tend to become reactive and irrational when angered, even when our anger is justified. Instead of going down a familiar path of hurt and lashing out, intentionally take an emotional detour: Defuse the drama by returning to a logical outlook that encourages keeping things in perspective.

3 Use humor. While the APA doesn't recommend "laughing off" your anger, people who are feeling inflamed are advised to use humor as a way of not taking themselves too seriously. By being too self-important, you lose perspective, which results in exaggerated, false dichotomies—a breeding ground for angry outbursts.

4 Change your environment. If all else fails and you start to feel your blood pressure rising, give yourself a "time out." Even 15 minutes by yourself could help you turn around an otherwise stressful interaction and return with restored composure.