

LET THEM EAT MEAT

ABOUT



An ex-vegan on veganism. By Rhys Southan

lettheteatmeat [at] gmail [dot] [com].

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Interview With an Ex-Vegan: Heather W. Rudolph

Heather is the co-founder and editor of [SirensMag](#), which is where I saw her article [Lessons Learned from a Vegan Diet](#), about how her month-long experiment with veganism influenced her eating habits for the better. But what most caught my eye was her reference to having been raised vegan.

One of my great fears is to be reincarnated into a vegan family (of course that assumes I won't come back as a factory farm pig as punishment for eating meat), but if Heather was still flirting with veganism as a freewheeling adult, her childhood diet must not have completely traumatized her.

Nevertheless, I decided to ask her about it.



How long were you a vegan as a child? Did it start in the womb?

I believe it did start in the womb, as it was a lifestyle choice my parents had made several years prior. I remained vegan until around age 11, when my parents began introducing dairy products back into our diets. Eventually fish and poultry followed. I think the reasons had to do with convenience and cost more than anything. We were a big family—six kids—and it wasn't as easy to find protein substitutes back then. I can still remember what soy milk circa 1980s tastes like: gritty, grainy, sour and just... bleah.

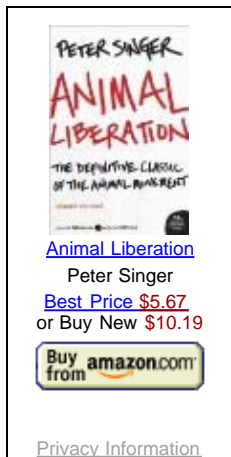
My mother and I remained the mostly-vegetarians in our household the longest—I never wanted to have anything to do with red meat and I eschewed most animal protein. In high school, I made the personal, political decision to be a strict vegetarian, a lifestyle I retained until my late 20s. I started eating fish basically on doctor's orders. I was anemic and needed a better source of iron and protein. I maintain a mostly pescatarian diet to this day.

What were your parents' reasons for raising you vegan?

It was the 1970s in Southern California. They were definitely hippies. However, as they explained our diet to me, their reasons seemed to be a mix between ethical beliefs and good health. My father was interested in organic farming—in fact, we had quite the mini

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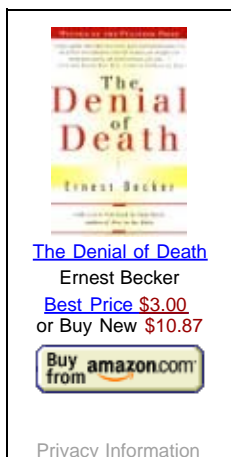
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crop in our backyard—and holistic medicine. It all just went together.

What was your childhood diet like?

Lots of mashed things: root vegetables, peanut butter, avocado, beans, apple sauce, and fruits and veggies of all kinds. I'm so thankful I developed a taste for all vegetables at a young age—turnips, kale and beets, even! There was also pasta, rice and early forms of soy protein. Again, the formulations weren't all that great back then. Tofu was soggy and mushy, and imitation meat products more closely resembled fabric than the proteins they were emulating.

Did this cause any difficulties at school?

Most definitely. That fabric meat I mentioned? I call it that because I was constantly teased about my "fabric sandwiches" at school. Most kids ate bologna on white bread; I had Wham (fake, fabricy ham) sandwiches on sprouted whole grain with avocado. Today, I'd choose the latter in a heartbeat over the former, however, it's not easy to appreciate food quality when you're the object of ridicule. Cheetos and Fruit Roll Ups? None for me! Mom sent us to school with sliced heirloom tomatoes and date-and-almond bars. Again, I much prefer the healthy, tasty snacks of my youth today than processed pantry products. But sometimes a kid just wants a Cheeto.

I remember my first rebellious act of eating Lucky Charms—with real milk!—at a friend's sleepover in the seventh grade. My mom often sent me to these events with my own boring puffed wheat or rice cereal and soy milk. Completely embarrassing to a preteen. So for this occasion, I hid my healthy stash and ate the marshmallow cereal with the rest of the girls. I nearly threw up. It's literally a bowl of sugar. And the milk tasted so rich and odd to me. I've never eaten it—or any other high-sugar cereal—since. Today I can appreciate the importance of introducing young people to healthy, whole foods rather than processed junk.

Did your parents change their minds about veganism?

I'm not sure if they changed their minds. I think they still appreciate the philosophy behind it to this day. It's just an easier lifestyle for a big family to eat more kinds of foods. Both of my parents—and all of my siblings—now eat pretty much everything. I remain the only one who flirts with vegetarian/vegan diets, and I'm very particular about any animal products I eat.

How does your family deal with you being the one semi-vegetarian holdout?

When I decided to be a vegetarian as a teen, my parents supported me. My mom would always make a separate, veggie-friendly version of dinner if the main dish included meat. She still does that when I come home to visit, despite the fact that my diet has changed.

Some anti-vegans like Nina Planck refer to raising a child vegan as child abuse, based on cases where vegan kids died of malnutrition, had severe spine damage by their teens or had symptoms of severe starvation, like bloated bellies (this last one mainly seems to happen with raw veganism). That ignores the majority of vegan kids who survive childhood just fine, though I will say that the kids I've seen on vegan parenting blogs often look unhealthy to me.

Still, from the point of view of vegan parents, there is no reason not to raise their children as vegans. They obviously aren't trying to harm them — they feel they are doing them a favor. And you certainly don't seem resentful over your vegan

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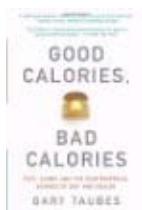
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childhood. What would you say to the “veganism is child abuse” crowd?

I’m very offended by the “you’re a bad parent” talk out there. There’s always someone ready to point a finger and accuse another of failing their children because they didn’t subscribe the same tactics. I think that’s bullshit. It’s absolutely possible to feed and raise a child healthfully on a plant-based diet.

However, I also understand the challenges that presents. Children do have specific dietary needs that must be met. It can be harder to fulfill these on a vegan diet. I think this is the primary reason my family eventually seceded from the lifestyle. It just became too difficult to feed the brood properly—and affordably.

I also think there’s a difference between wanting to introduce your children to a healthy way of eating and forcing a political cause—literally—down their throats.

So far there don’t seem to be any cases of someone being vegan from birth to old age. Do you think it’s possible for someone to survive as a vegan child to a vegan retiree?

I think it’s definitely possible, however, unlikely. It comes down to curiosity and choice. When I was growing up, I rejected the “weird” foods my parents made me eat and rebelled by eating what the other kids did. That made me sick, both literally and psychologically. When I was able to decide, on my own, that I didn’t want to eat meat, it became a much easier thing to live with. I had MY reasons for doing it, not theirs.

Even today, as I go back and forth between strict vegetarianism and occasional meat-eating (still, never red meat; never), I do it for my reasons—health, hunger, diet, cleansing, political inspiration—whatever. My choice, my life, my food.

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