**Conscious Choices and the Web of Life**

Sermon Presented 9/23/2018 By: Ron Pile

Good morning.

As Peggy mentioned, The *UUS Vegetarian Community* has been given the opportunity to plan today’s service in conjunction with the “First Annual VegFest of Eastern Iowa” which we hope will bring lots of people to this building next Saturday. The VegFest will provide information, education and support for anyone who wants to take action toward a goal of making themselves healthier and making the world cleaner, and more just.

And there will be some delicious food.

For those of you who don’t know me, I’m Ron Pile and it’s my honor to represent the UUS Vegetarian Community for this part of the service.

I've been a vegan for about 9 years now. Normally, I try not to be "preachy" about it but it seems to me that standing in this spot at this time, should give me a certain license to be just a little bit preachy today. So, with your kind indulgence, I'd like to start with a brief overview of my journey.

My upbringing consisted of a very narrow sliver of the world that included the family farm, lots of meat and potatoes and the little country church my family attended faithfully. In that church, I learned that the Bible was the divinely inspired word of God, and the only and absolutely reliable source of knowledge of how to act in the world.

As I grew up, left home, and came in contact with the wider world, it was quite a shock to find people who identified themselves as agnostics and atheists. What amazed me even more was that they seemed to be at least as morally upright as the people I'd grown up with. In fact, in contrast to the people at home, some of these people put a lot of thought into what was the right thing to do and what was the wrong thing to do. People back home discussed right and wrong by quoting Bible verses, but these people used reason. To this young farm boy, that wasn't just a novelty, it was a breath of fresh air.

As the years went by, I became more interested in this new method of finding one’s way in the world. Once I started reading the works of people who had spent their lives studying ethics, I noticed something: All the ethicists I read, who mentioned anything about their personal habits, were vegetarians. Very interesting.

As even more years passed, I gradually became sort of a "fair-weather vegetarian" myself. That is, I didn't eat meat, unless not eating meat happened to be inconvenient. When I did eat meat, I had a vague notion that it might be technically unethical and I sometimes wondered if I were building some kind of bad karma.

But like many people, I successfully pushed those concerns to the back of my mind, and rationalized my guilt and fears away.

I'm not proud to admit it now, but what finally pushed me over the edge to becoming a full-fledged vegan was not some altruistic drive to reduce my carbon footprint, or a Buddhist sense of compassion for all sentient beings. No, what convinced me to stop eating animal products was brazen self-interest.

By this time, I was well into my fifties, and seeing people my age taking cholesterol medication, battling high blood pressure, and even having heart attacks. That's when a co-worker told me about a book by Dr. T. Colin Campbell called "*The China Study*".

In that book, Dr Campbell makes a very compelling case that the way to avoid things like heart disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, and Alzheimer's, to name but a few, is to adopt a whole food, plant-based diet.

This book, and others, convinced me that if I wanted to live a relatively long life, and more importantly, live a healthy, active life right to the end, the best way to increase my odds would be to switch to a full-time vegan diet.

So I did.

But when I made that switch, no one warned me about the side-effects. One of the first side-effects I noticed was about a 20 lb weight loss which, though I needed it badly, wasn't really a goal. It just happened.

But what surprised me more was a sort of “spiritual" side-effect.

I found that the longer I went without the onerous burden of needing to rationalize eating animals, the more my compassion toward all life grew.

The longer I refrained from perpetuating violence against other species, the clearer I could see the connection between what our culture puts on its collective plate and how it treats fellow human beings. For me, choosing to be a vegan has enhanced my spiritual life in ways I never predicted.

I was not a Unitarian Universalist at the time, so had never heard the phrase “the interdependent web of all existence,” but, by not eating animal products, that *concept* became acutely real for me. I experienced a gradual change of consciousness that led me to understand that, yes, eating animals is unethical.

So, ironically, this journey – which I was only able to begin after throwing off the only version of spirituality I knew – led me full circle, back to spirituality. But this was a different kind of spirituality – one which, at the time, I didn’t even recognize as such. It was a spirituality I did not have the vocabulary to articulate.

Then I discovered Unitarian Universalism. Our seven principles, gave me that vocabulary. As UUs, we refer often to these principles we hold dear. Principles like “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.” I hope it’s safe to say that most of the people in this room see these principles as a guide to how to live life – a guide to the choices we make.

Now, there are a lot of ways to see the world. I would never ask anyone to conform to *my* way of seeing it. I am not suggesting that anyone live by *my* standards. But if the seven principles of UUism are important to you, I would invite you to consider ways to more effectively live by your own standards.

Jonathan Safran Foer, in his book *Eating Animals*, has this to say:

*"We can't plead ignorance, only indifference. Those alive today are the generations that came to know better. We have the burden and the opportunity of living in the moment when the critique of factory farming broke into the popular consciousness. We are the ones of whom it will be fairly asked, ‘What did you do when you learned the truth about eating animals?’"*

What did you do?

He's right. That question will be asked.

And what about us? What about the Unitarian Universalist Society, collectively as well as individually? What will we do with this "burden and opportunity" that is ours?

Those who come after us will ask: "What did you do when you found out that eating meat was the largest single cause of climate change?" . . . What did you do?

Our children, our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren will come to us and ask: "What did you do when you found out that animals being raised for food were routinely tortured and abused in ways any reasonable person would consider unimaginably cruel?” . . . What did you do?

And the next generations of Unitarian Universalists will look to us and ask: "What did you do when it became clear that simply changing to a plant-based diet would contribute more than anything else to all of your own stated principles, your mission and your vision?” . . . What did you do?

When the generations that follow us rightly ask those questions, how will we answer? Will we say "Oh, all those statements, those principles, they were just fancy words. We didn't actually DO anything"?

OR, will we be able to show those generations how we mobilized to make the largest possible impact on the principles we claim to hold?

Will we explain that we became a cruelty-free congregation? Will we point to all the actions taken by the board and the committees and by individuals to make sure that this congregation of Unitarian Universalists did our part to make the world more compassionate, more peaceful, cleaner and healthier? Will we tell them about the shift in our collective consciousness when we instituted a policy that every UUS potluck, every free lunch, every coffee hour snack and community meal was totally free of animal products? Will we be able to tell them that participation in the *UUS Vegetarian Community* became so high that it provided a strong, vibrant network of support to individuals and families in the church and in the community who wanted to eat more ethically?

How will we answer the generations that follow us?

Does it matter?

My own journey of ethical eating has led me to agree with Will Tuttle when he says, in his book *The World Peace Diet:*

*“To meditate for world peace, to pray for a better world, and to work for social justice and environmental protection while continuing to [consume animal products] exposes a disconnect that is so fundamental that it renders our efforts absurd, hypocritical, and doomed to certain failure.”*

Yes, we can talk about social justice, world peace and the “interdependent web of all existence" all we want, but until we put our beliefs into action, our words are just more noise in an already noisy world.

My hope is that when we are held accountable by the following generations, we as Unitarian Universalists will be able to hold our heads high, and that those generations will point to us and say: "That's religion in action. That's what is meant by living your beliefs."

Thank you