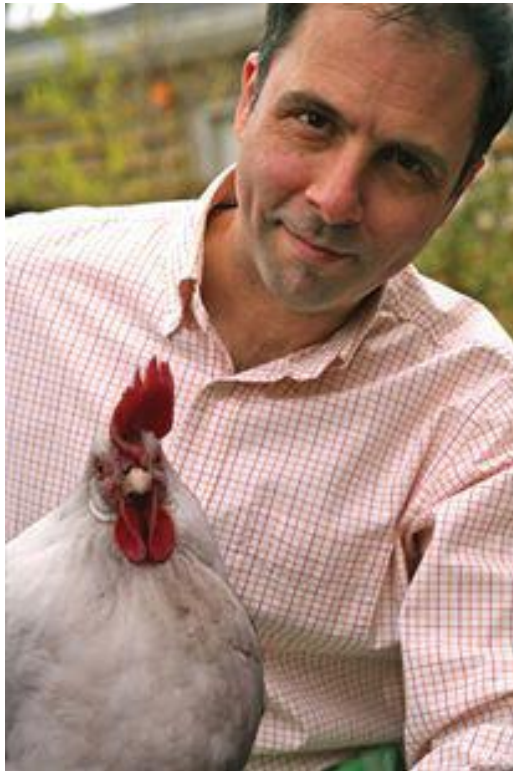


– an **EVEN** exclusive interview –



with

Robert Grillo

Founder and Director of Free from Harm

*Robert Grillo is the founder and director of **Free from Harm**, a 501(c)(3) non-profit that promotes farmed animal rescue, education and advocacy. **Free from Harm** strives to be a leader in online activism by building a strong online community and publishing content that empowers and informs activists as well as institutions and the general public. **Grillo** has a professional background in marketing and communications and leverages his 20 years of experience to strengthen his*

Robert and Sweet Pea

Photo by Joe Branske

*animal advocacy work. A typical day involves organizing events, coordinating rescues, writing articles or a letter to the editor, brainstorming ways to enhance the **Free from Harm** website and looking for the next viral video idea. He enjoys the outdoors, hiking, biking, gardening, cooking and the company of good friends.*



EVEN: How did veganism become part of your life?

Robert: For me the turning point was identifying with the victim. Or, should I say, recognizing that a victim even exists, since we are conditioned all our lives to believe that animals can't be our victims. It took time for me to see how our animal-eating culture teaches us to block our awareness of the suffering of the animals we consume, to deny the existence of any problem, and, worse, to stifle any critical thinking on the subject.

In my talks, I often ask people if they can recall a time in their childhood when an adult told them to not care, turn a blind eye, “grow up,” accept the way things are, or “stop being sentimental” with regard to farmed animals. Almost everyone seems to be able to think of something.

While social pressures can be obstacles for others, I’ve always been comfortable with being a nonconformist in my life. So, I’ve always been open to considering alternative lifestyles. I thought my vegan “wake up call” happened in an instant, after stumbling upon some undercover video footage. But later I realized that there were a number of other experiences, over the course of years, leading up to that point. Ultimately, it was the disruption of my normal thought process from powerful videos that set me on a path toward veganism.

EVEN: Who was an influential person in your life earlier on that led you to veganism?

Robert: I’ve racked my brain to try to think of even one person in my pre-vegan life that could have been an influence on me to consider veganism, and I sadly cannot think of even one person!

Maybe it wasn't any one individual that prompted me, but instead my fascination with nature that instilled in me an appreciation and reverence for plants and animals from a very early age.

I recall all of the time I spent exploring and daydreaming in a beautiful ravine as a child. Maybe it was that ravine that was my biggest influence.

EVEN: What advice would you give to a vegan advocate wanting to become more of an activist?

Robert: Go for it! Don’t hold back! Be brave, courageous and proud! Others will follow suit.

Defend non-human animals as you would defend humans. They're different in important ways, but that never means they should be denied the same fundamental right to life, liberty and happiness. We have no just cause to deny them this fundamental right.



(Martini with Robert at Precious Life Sanctuary, Sequim, WA. Photo by Pamela Ziemann)

Let our response be commensurate to the actual realities of our cause, not what a desensitized majority tells us is “normal,” “practical,” or “effective.” We should allow ourselves to feel what we are feeling, including sadness, frustration, outrage, and anger. These are all natural emotions in response to the terrible tragedy we face. You're not “crazy” for expressing these emotions, no more or less than those who react in this way to *human* tragedies. Don't let them define for you what is “crazy” or “extreme.” It's not your reaction that is crazy; it is instead society's collective denial that is crazy, toxic and extreme. It's the industry's systematic use and abuse of animals that is “crazy,” as well as the way they use propaganda to condition people to believe what they are doing is “humane.” Let's never ever get that twisted.

Let us communicate truth, transparency, clarity, consistency and authenticity. People want the truth; especially a truth they know is being concealed from them!

This is the classic theme of truth versus fiction, illusion versus reality, that is central to films like *The Matrix* and as old as story-telling itself. Many people have thanked me after presentations for speaking the truth plainly and with dignity.

Let us empower ourselves with the best sources to build our case against exploitation and keep them on hand for easy reference. Let us appeal to both the heart and to the mind, the emotions and logic.

EVEN: What do you think makes veganism hard for people?

Robert: Culture. Our culture conditions us against veganism. Our culture promotes a socially-accepted and institutionalized prejudice, violence toward and killing of animals. Our culture teaches us to categorically exclude just a handful of species — namely chickens, turkeys, pigs and cows who constitute the 99% of all animals we exploit — from any moral consideration. Our culture conditions us to believe that the way we treat them for the short time we allow them to stay alive matters, but their very lives have zero value.

Our culture teaches us to ignore the confused standards we apply to farmed animals when compared to those we apply to companion animals and ourselves.



(Robert with Elba)

As a result, the standards that we claim are “humane” for farmed animals would be considered extreme torture, an atrocity, if the victims were instead companion animals, wildlife or humans. It makes no logical sense at all.

EVEN: So how would you advise them?

Robert: Like other activists who fight against other forms of prejudice, we must find creative ways to challenge and defeat these prejudices. This means we’re vocal, persuasive, confident, outspoken and unequivocal. This means we’re reaching entire social groups, networks and institutions that

determine the fate of millions and billions of lives, including popular media, government, community organizations and corporations. I'm not suggesting that we need to become their best buddies; we just need to reach them on various levels to effectively communicate our message and make our case clearly understood.

I don't think most people who are aspiring vegans (and even many vegans themselves) fully appreciate what a huge obstacle our culture is to the change we want. People focus instead on the perceived "difficulties" in giving up certain foods without any attention on the many fully-satisfying substitutes.

Aside from the practical steps needed to shift to a vegan diet and lifestyle, the cultural influences all around us are relentlessly pushing us in the opposite direction, and most of us are unaware or unconscious of these forces.

This is what prompted me to develop a presentation on the subject of popular culture and how it shapes our food choices and our beliefs about animals. The presentation contrasts two very different worlds: the fantasy world of popular culture and its portrayal of animals, and the world of real-life animals who live in sanctuaries.

Through my work on this project,

I realized that the solution is not just to expose what's wrong, but also to illuminate what's right. It's the contrast between right and wrong, truth and fiction that are so striking.

This presentation is a kind of journey that seems at times surreal and at other times all too real. I juxtapose examples of animals in the feel-good, Disney-like world of popular culture with examples of the remarkable, real-life individuals I have come to know through my rescue work.

EVEN: What, in your opinion, is the most misunderstood idea about veganism?

Robert: The idea that veganism is a state of perfection, utopia or nirvana. It's none of these. It is a huge step in the right direction, but it's actually not the most we can do. Instead, it seems to me, to be *the very least* we can do for animals. That is to say, it is sparing animals the most gratuitous and needless forms of suffering through our daily food and lifestyle choices. There is actually much more that we can do for animals and our planet beyond being vegan.

EVEN: Can you elaborate a bit more on what you claim is this false connection between perfection and veganism?

Robert: We're dealing with the mistaken notion that if it's impossible to achieve vegan perfection, it is, therefore, pointless to try. This implies that if we cannot raise food without harming anyone, we might as well raise and kill whatever we want. So if perfection is not obtainable, then let's throw out ethics (including intention) all together. This just becomes a reductive "all or nothing" justification for doing whatever we want, and it negates what we say we already believe, that less suffering is better even if we can't eliminate it completely.

By going vegan, we will not become perfect or even cruelty-free. We will, however, just by making some simple dietary and lifestyle changes, have reduced an enormous amount of suffering to innocent beings who have done nothing to us.

Another misguided belief goes back to my earlier point about the denial of the animal as *victim* as well as the human as *perpetrator*. And it all too often leads us to the erroneous conclusion that eating animal products is a morally-neutral act, a personal choice, or some other variation on this theme.

There is a hidden judgment in the statement, “Don’t judge.” If you claim that people should not be judged for eating animal products, then you also are making the judgment that an animal’s entire lifetime of experiences is worth even less than satisfying some trivial, momentary taste sensation. Such a judgment stems from an entrenched prejudice against a handful of species that we just so happen to want to exploit and kill for food.

Once we become aware of this prejudice — and the ensuing injustice perpetrated against its victims — there is no personal, neutral or morally-relative position on eating animal products that we have no biological need to eat.

If animals matter even in the most superfluous sense, then we don’t violate their most basic right to life and liberty when we can so easily avoid it, such as in the case of veganism, where we can replace animal products with kinder and more nutritious alternatives.

EVEN: What was an important life event for you from your childhood that helped shape you into adulthood?

Robert: To me it seems like a given that we, as adult vegans, regret that we were born and raised into an animal eating culture. Sure, we wish we could have changed that.

I think the experience of losing my father at 10 helped make me a very different person than if he had been in my life longer. I experienced first knowing him as a strong, strict father figure for many years and then, at one point, seeing him regress into a state of frailty and poorer health and finally to a state where he no longer recognized me or my sisters. It shattered any myths I may have had that he would always be the pillar of strength and stability in our lives. That whole process gave me a heightened understanding of loss and suffering at an early age.

EVEN: If you were to mentor a younger person today, what guidance might you offer? What encouraging words might you share with a newbie?

Robert: First, question what you've been taught. Be a critical thinker.

*Fresh and innovative ideas can emerge from critical thinking.
Myths and assumptions are exposed for what they are.
Weak ideas and unfounded assumptions lose their power
against critical thought.*

Discover what your strengths are and figure out how you can put those skills to work for your cause. This can take a lot of soul-searching and creative thinking. It's a great exercise that aids in both personal and professional development.

EVEN: Do you have a favorite vegan meal or food you can tell us about that really makes veganism work for you?

Robert: I have many favorites. I like to experiment with recipes. I love using cashew cream. It's an amazing ingredient to replace dairy cream that creates incredible desserts and wonderful sauces for pastas and other entrees.

EVEN: What one thing makes veganism worthwhile for you?

Robert: Veganism lays the foundation for fulfilling our moral obligation to animals. It is not the most or only step we can take to complete that obligation, but it is perhaps the most fundamental first step.

As a new vegan in 2009, I quickly sought out ways in which I could expand upon that foundation. This led me to adopt and rehabilitate animals. I later realized that my motivation for this work was born out of a deep sense of remorse and regret for the suffering to which I had contributed all my life through my food and lifestyle choices. After a lifetime of taking, it was time to give back.

And so, to answer the question, the most worthwhile thing about going vegan was that it led me to experience a very different kind of relationship with animals, namely chickens. These relationships are based first and foremost on recognizing the intrinsic worth of each individual. For the first time in my life, I allowed animals to teach me what I could never have learned on my own. For example, I saw how unique and unexpected their interactions are with other flock mates.



(Robert with Doris)

I also saw how sophisticated their abilities are to interact with other species, including humans, and build strong life-long bonds of love and friendship. They think and act by recalling past experience and memory as well as anticipating the future.

But the insights I gained from chickens extended far beyond my understanding of them. I gained a new perspective on all animals, including the human ones, including myself. Observing and interacting with chickens became the pathway for me to evolve into a very different person today than I once was.

EVEN: Any opinion or insight on the future of veganism in today's world?

Robert: First, I think we have much to learn from and much to be inspired by how other social movements have evolved, such as the civil rights movement and feminism. While there are important differences, there are common threads that can illuminate our path forward. *Circles of Compassion: Connecting Issues of Justice* is a new book anthology (edited by Will Tuttle and published by Vegan Publishers) to which I contributed an essay called, “*Eating Animals and the Personal Choice Deception.*” It’s a great honor to be a part of a school of thought that seeks to make many needed connections between non-human animal and human justice issues. For too long, we have denied these connections based on morally-irrelevant criteria. The similarities are far more striking than the differences, and I think this collection of 26 authors will be an important contribution to understanding how we are connected.

Second, as a marketing and creative professional for 20 years now, I see some important lessons we could learn from brands like Apple Computer. I certainly don’t hold up Apple as a paragon of corporate responsibility, but if we focus strictly on Apple’s rebranding strategy, I believe there is an important lesson to be learned. Social movements are like brands in that they both rely on a big idea and they emerge from obscurity by first building a strong base of support.

The vegan base is still quite weak and needs a lot of reinforcement right now if we are going to reach that tipping point and begin to win over the early majority, which would be the next large sector of our population most sympathetic to our cause. I explore this idea a bit more in my article called, [“*What Vegans Could Learn from the Apple Brand.*”](#)

EVEN: Do you have any final thoughts on the future of veganism?

Robert: Yes. I like to cite the news story of Felicity, the branded pit bull, who was fortunate to have been rescued by people who genuinely cared about her fate. Her story is a testament to the fact that people care when they bring themselves to witness the injustice perpetrated against another and when they can identify themselves as the victim in a specific and intimate context. In this case, her rescuers, not only acted as individuals to right the wrong done to her; they actually mobilized a concerted group effort to raise funds, garner media attention, provide her with costly surgical treatment and find her a new loving home. And they accomplished all of the above.

For those of us who care and seek to awaken the same caring in others, there is a valuable lesson to learn from Felicity. Let's not sabotage our efforts by repeating the mantra of failure we inherited from our meat-eating culture that tells us "people just don't care." It's been used against many similar efforts to change prejudicial social norms. It only serves to protect the dominant culture's oppressive beliefs while stifling efforts for positive change.



(Robert at home with Sweet Pea, Doris and Elba)

Let's recognize that, beyond all the justifications for supporting unnecessary harm to animals that lurk on the surface of our conversations with others, most people do care. Even if they were taught not to care about farmed animals, they can re-learn the empathy they lost as children. Most people do care.

###



Free from Harm is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable organization promoting farmed animal rescue, education and advocacy and registered in the state of Illinois. We are a hard-working group of professionals with diverse backgrounds coming together around a common cause.

[Visit Free From Harm](#) and learn [what you can do to make a difference.](#)