

EVEN Interview with Matt Bear

Connector,
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Matt grew up in southern Minnesota on his grandparents' animal farm and later on an intensive pig factory farm. He credits his transition to vegetarianism for giving him the key to a world of empathy, understanding, and compassion he otherwise may never have known. Matt continued to expand his circle of compassion by going vegan. He now researches, writes, and teaches others about vegan choices and the positive far-reaching effects of living a life connected to one's values.



***Every day you are invited to make choices.
Live your values. Change the world.***

Matt helped create NonviolenceUnited.org, the popular [VEGAN shirt](#), the inspiring [ALifeConnected](#) project, and the highly-praised [VEGAN video](#), a short, 12-minute video explaining in a positive way how vegan choices can help build a better world. The video is currently being translated into 14 languages around the world and continues to be seen by thousands of people every week.

Matt is a popular speaker and teacher drawing from his first-hand experience with farmed animals, his dedication to Social Justice issues, his continued advanced study of active Nonviolence, and his broad understanding of the interconnection and implications of our consumer choices on other people, on the planet, and on non-human animals.



EVEN: How did veganism become part of your life?

Matt: I grew up on my grandparents' family farm – an “Old MacDonald’s” kind of farm with a moo-moo here and a baa-baa there, an oink-oink here and a cluck-cluck there.

In the spring, Grandpa would come home from the feed store with dozens of little yellow chicks, peeping and blinking at a new world only a few days old. Grandma would set up the brooder house where the chicks would spend their lives over the next few months. They would peck and scratch the ground outside during the day, and at night they would huddle under heat lamps locked up from the night.

When I was seven years old, a particular chick caught my fancy. He wasn't any smaller or bigger than the others, but we had a connection. When I would walk in to sit and watch the baby chickens, he would come running to me. He'd jump in my lap to be held and petted. He had a way of looking me in the eye. He seemed like a long-lost friend somehow trapped in the world of being a chicken. I named him Foghorn. And I loved him.

Chickens grow fast. Soon August arrived. My aunts, uncles and cousins rolled down the dusty gravel road toward the farm to take part in the traditional family event. Grandma boiled water in huge pots out in the pump house, and Grandpa sharpened the long, steel blade of a homemade machete. Midmorning came. My cousins picked up the nearly full-grown chickens by their legs and carried them to my Grandpa. I followed behind cradling Foghorn. I handed Grandpa Foghorn, who looked at me and blinked. Grandpa folded Foghorn's wings to his sides and held his legs all with one giant hand and lay him down on the tree stump.

Seconds later, he handed Foghorn's bleeding body back to me. I held him upside down by his legs as I was told to do and let the blood drain from his severed neck. As I stood in line with my cousins to take Foghorn to the scalding pots to make it easier to pluck out his feathers, I looked back at his head lying in a heap with the others -- one last blink, beak open.

I was lost in a fog of confusion. A friendship was lost that day along with my kindred spirit.

And a trust was broken -- trust between my grandparents and me and between me and my friend.

Back then, we kids worked all aspects of the farm -- the mucking, castrations, dealing with downed pigs. The screams are still in my head. What they say about family farms being "humane" is simply not true. While in college, I brought Barbara (now my wife) back to the farm. As we were about to head back to school, we came upon a "downed pig" who was struggling and breathing heavily. I knew she wouldn't make it. I told my stepfather about her. He handed me the rifle and told me to "take care of it." I just couldn't do it. Barbara and I gave her some water and said our goodbyes. Her face and eyes are burned deeply on my soul.

We promised her we would go vegetarian -- and so started our journey.

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

Matt: There wasn't one particular hero that made it all "click" for me; there were many little things, minor players, half-remembered conversations that lit the way along my path. I remember my mom teaching me to be kind to animals (hard for me to reconcile on the animal farm). I remember a professor in college ordering his pizza without meat – I heard the word "vegetarian" for the first time as an 18-year-old in college (this was rural Minnesota in the early 1980s). I remember seeing my first Animal Rights literature sitting on the kitchen countertop of a friend of a friend. I remember the folks in a natural foods store in Iowa City explaining what rennet was and then, thinking I'd found the perfect rennet-free cheese, I remember the co-worker of a friend saying, "You care so much about animals, you should consider going vegan" – my eyes and heart were opened for the first time to the plight of mother cows and their babies used up and discarded by the dairy industry. I remember my first taste of many vegan foods – all offered with a smile by people I can't even remember but to whom I am eternally grateful.

I also remember my shift from seeing animals as abstract groups to seeing them as individuals. I was influenced by the individual animals I hurt on the farm (castrating, clipping teeth, notching ears, cutting tails, and worse – all standard even on the most "humane" animal farms). I can see their faces now; I can look into their eyes; I can hear their cries.

Going vegan for me was an accumulation of knowledge and a strengthening of the heart. Some of us have that "ah-ha!" moment that makes us finally "get it" and commit to compassion, but never underestimate the power and impact of each conversation, a VEGAN message t-shirt, or a vegan cookie handed to a stranger – it all lights the path.

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

Matt: Do it! Most vegan advocates are vegan because they are trying to do the most good they can to make the world a better, more just, and compassionate place. While a vegan may save upwards of 100 non-human animal lives every year, imagine introducing even one more person to the path – and they influence one more person, and so on, and so on. It's been estimated that if every vegan influenced one more person to go vegan every year, the entire world would be vegan in eight years.

The word "activist" sometimes evokes images of marching in protest, waving signs, yelling at the opposition. But activism has matured; and activism is everywhere. Be creative and find the kind of activism that fills your soul. Maybe you're an artist, a musician (write a song!), a baker (make vegan cupcakes!), an accountant, a chemist

(how 'bout creating the new vegan cheese!), a sociologist (what makes people tick?), a teacher, a gardener, a web designer, a writer – wherever your talents lie and whatever fills your heart, the movement needs YOU!

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

Matt: It isn't so much a matter of will power or dedication; it's much more complicated.

It's about disconnection, misinformation, enculturation, and an uneven playing field.

First disconnection – we're disconnected from our own values. Most of us want to be kind to other people, we want to help the planet, we want justice and kindness for non-human animals, but we're disconnected from the impacts of our consumer choices on other people, on the planet, and on non-human animals.

This isn't necessarily our fault – we're surrounded by misinformation and violence to the point of becoming overwhelmed and numb. But we can take control of our own lives and make choices that are connected to our values. Kids are horrified to learn what a “hot dog” really is, but then they are indoctrinated into the mind-numbing conformity of a domination paradigm (the false belief that “might makes right”). This is the difficulty of overcoming enculturation (much more can be said about this, but I'll try to keep this answer short).

Then there's the uneven playing field. This is a tough one to get a handle on and economics makes me a little dizzy, but it's important to understand that the U.S. and most of the world is part of an economic system that rewards and feeds on overconsumption. The animal agribusiness industry is one of the most wasteful and consumptive industries on the planet – perhaps surpassing war as the number one profiteer of death, disease, and consumption. If all the tax subsidies (water, land, grain, etc.) were taken away, a hamburger would cost \$25. Animal products would not be affordable, cancer and heart disease would become a rarity, we could replant the rainforests, save the oceans, and quite literally save the world. If the playing field was leveled, vegan would be the default choice and killing and domination would become questioned rather than expected.

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

Matt: That choosing vegan is a negative act – a moral protest, a deprivation, or a limitation. The truth is that choosing vegan is one of the most powerfully rewarding,

positive, life-changing things one can do. Nearly every vegan I know says something like, “Going vegan is the best thing I’ve ever done.” There is something unexplainably wonderful about the feeling one gets when finally living one’s life aligned with one’s values. That’s what choosing vegan offers.

Another common misperception is that choosing vegan is limiting, but for me, just the opposite was true. My food world has been blown wide open since I went vegan.

EVEN: What one thing from your thinking in childhood do you wish you could change?

Matt: That not feeling was superior to feeling. That being strong meant not caring. Yes, being aware is painful. Ignorance is bliss. Gut ignore-ance is living life at half-throttle. Being aware is living a complete life. There is no honor in ignore-ance. There is no strength in not caring. The honor comes in bearing the pain. The strength lies in answering our responsibility to ease the pain of others. So, I’ll absorb the pain and I’ll repackage it as love. The pain of caring is this thing called life.

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

Matt: Study, understand, and practice Nonviolence in theory and as a way of life. This means truly understanding (knowing is doing) Gandhi’s tenet to “be the change you wish to see in the world.” It means living one’s life with the kind of integrity you’re asking of others. It means recognizing your interconnection to every other person, to the planet, and to the every non-human animal. It means recognizing your responsibility to the world community.

The question isn’t whether or not you can make a difference. You ARE making a difference. But what kind of difference are you making? What kind of difference do you want to make?

The goal isn’t to be better than anyone else; the goal is to be better than you were yesterday every single day.

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

Matt: Wow, I have so many favorites – from grilled Jamaican jerk seitan kabobs to coconut milk nice cream. What’s really worked for me over the years has been just “veganizing” my old favorites. I use my mom’s old cookbooks and I eat just about everything I used to eat including pizza, bratwurst (kudos to Fieldroast’s Apple Sage!), burgers, smothered burritos, grilled cheez, BLTs, cereals (with almond milk), baked goods, pasta salads, smoothies – really this list could go on for pages and pages. The point is that choosing vegan isn’t limiting at all – you don’t even have to relearn how to eat; just a switch ingredients. But you’re bound to find new favorites. It’s exciting to explore the food world going vegan opened up for me.

EVEN: What one thing makes veganism worthwhile for you?

Matt: Gandhi said, *‘Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.’* I thought I cared about animals; I said I cared about animals; and now what I do and how I eat are in line with my values. That’s what going vegan offered me – happiness.

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

Matt: Something big is happening! People are quickly coming to recognize our vast interconnection and their personal responsibility to the world community. People are tired of war, tired of domination, tired of exploitation, tired of killing, tired of profit over everything. We’re tired of the domination paradigm. Recognizing that is the first step in creating a whole new way of doing things. And it’s coming fast.

Vegan is becoming the moral baseline of the social justice movements – uniting the human rights, animal rights, and environmental movements. Gone are the days of single-issue social justice movements. We are one.

People of the near future will look back and wonder who was vegan, who cared enough to commit to changing their own habits, who was strong enough to change what they believed, who was connected with their own values and with the world community.

If we truly want to feed a growing world population, if we want health and vitality, if we want kindness over killing, vegan is the answer. The future is vegan – I believe it’s the next step in our shared moral evolution.

