

"Veganism and the 7<sup>th</sup> Principle"  
Juliette Moore  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Staten Island  
April 16th, 2023

Link to Video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lml7fxWEEsc&t=1245s>

Opening Words: "The question is not, can they *reason*, nor can they *talk*, but can they *suffer*? Why should the law refuse its protection to any sensitive being?" - Jeremy Bentham (1789) – *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*

Readings:

"It was all so very businesslike that one watched it fascinated. It was pork-making by machinery, pork-making by applied mathematics. And yet somehow the most matter-of-fact person could not help thinking of the hogs; they were so innocent, they came so very trustingly; and they were so very human in their protests—and so perfectly within their rights! They had done nothing to deserve it; and it was adding insult to injury, as the thing was done here, swinging them up in this cold-blooded, impersonal way, without pretense at apology, without the homage of a tear." -*The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair

"The food we eat masks so much cruelty. The fact that we can sit down and eat a piece of chicken without thinking about the horrendous conditions under which chickens are industrially bred in this country is a sign of the dangers of capitalism, how capitalism has colonized our minds. The fact that we look no further than the commodity itself, the fact that we refuse to understand the relationships that underly the commodities that we use on a daily basis." -Activist Angela Davis

Sermon:

Thank you very much for letting me speak today, especially on such a fraught topic. I think this presentation naturally comes under the purview of the 7th UU principle which is: "Respect for the Interdependent Web of All Existence of Which We Are a Part." So, not very big.

I want to start from a quote from *We are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* by Jonathan Safran Foer. "Our free will is not omnipotent—we can't do whatever we want. But ... we are free to choose from possible options. And one of our options is to make environmentally conscientious choices. It doesn't require breaking the laws of physics—or even electing a green president—to select something plant-based from a menu or at the grocery store. And, although it may be a neoliberal myth that individual decisions have ultimate power, it is a defeatist myth that individual decisions have no power at all. Both macro and micro actions have power, and when it comes to mitigating our planetary destruction, it is unethical to dismiss either, or to proclaim that because the large cannot be achieved, the small should not be attempted."

The interdependent web of existence is many things to many people, like a lot of UU concepts. And why not? That's part of the Unitarian Universalist DNA, as it were, of having an open mind. So today, I am going to talk about one possible vision of the web of life—a vegan view. A vegan is someone that tries to avoid eating or using animal products including meat, milk, eggs, leather, wool, etc.

Mankind has affected our planet in devastating ways—the most prominent way I think is putting too much carbon in the atmosphere. We are familiar with the effects of a warming world: Hurricane Sandy, the atmospheric river in California and others

too numerous to mention. Humans have also transformed the surface of the earth. One of the major ways we have transformed the earth is industrial agriculture.

Of all birds on earth, 57% are now food animals. Livestock production is the number one cause of habitat and biodiversity loss. We know that the Amazon is being clearcut for beef cattle. Animal agriculture produces about 18% of the greenhouse gases worldwide. But that's food, right? The funny part about that is we grow tons of food, mostly soybeans and corn, tons of it; not for humans' consumption but to feed agricultural animals. Some of you may be familiar with the math problem that it takes 10 pounds of grain to raise one pound of meat; humans lose 9 pounds of nutrition in that equation. The majority of the world's fresh water is spent on animal agriculture. A vegan diet can lower one's carbon footprint by 73% per a recent Oxford University study. So we know the impact of these systems on our world in the larger sense. It's easy to understand these concepts, but I want to take this discussion out of the scientific plane.

I was not raised with the idea of veganism or vegetarianism as something to practice. When I moved out on my own, I had adopted 2 cats, and they were truly my pets not my family's; so, I was responsible for them in all ways. While I was responsible for them, it dawned on me how much power I had over them. If I was a sadist, I could be cruel to them or I could be a bad parent and neglect them. It was a revelation, the immense amount of power humans have over all types of animals. And I didn't see any difference between my pets that I loved and zoo animals, farmed animals, all animals under human power. So it was really the power imbalance that got to me and I just decided I couldn't eat meat anymore. I started to learn more about our industrial food system and over the years that I was a vegetarian I tried to choose cage-free eggs and organic milk without hormones and things like that. I tried to be someone with awareness about the food system, but I thought that eating cage-free eggs and hormone free milk was enough. But it turns out it was not enough for morally.

Almost 15 years ago I visited a farm sanctuary. A farmed animal sanctuary is where animals have been rescued from the industrial food system and can live out their natural lives—which is something that never happens to animals that humans exploit. There are quite a few sanctuaries upstate and all over the country and they are wonderful places to visit. It's the only place farmed animals are treated as individuals. Anyway, I had some sunny side up eggs for breakfast before I went to the farm sanctuary and those were the last eggs that I ever knowingly ate, once I learned about how animals are treated in our industrial food system; that cage-free doesn't really have any kind of legal meaning; the exploitation and abuse and manipulation of egg-laying hens; the exploitation and abuse of dairy animals. I had to confront myself and say, "If you are disturbed by the abuse of power by humans over animals then there is really only one conclusion to come to. To not participate in such a system of abuse."

I am going to talk about on aspect of animal farming that's very prominent in NY State, and one that a lot of people know little about. I mean, a steak or hamburger is straightforward, right? You grow an animal, then slaughter it. Simple. The dairy

industry is different because what we obtain is a product an animal makes, which to my mind, makes them even more of a cog in a machine. To give milk a cow must first be impregnated; mechanical insemination is most efficient. No consent is required, of course. After nine months, cows give birth, usually on a concrete floor and their babies are immediately taken away. The mothers are hooked to milking machines. The babies can't even nurse them once because the milk is for us; it's to be sold to us. The boy calves are chained up for about six weeks before they are slaughtered for veal. The reason they are chained up is to prevent them from moving and developing muscle tissue which would darken the meat and ruin the taste. I want to be clear here about the financial connection between the dairy and veal industries, they are inextricably linked. The girl calves are also taken away and one day they too will be impregnated again and again and again and have their babies taken away again and again. Because of how the calves are born, and their mother is harnessed and unable to turn around, sometimes the newborns get stepped on and get a broken leg. Now the animal is really useless. There is no medical help coming for that baby. There are no painkillers. That baby will not be fed because it no longer has value. Cows can live to about 20 years, left to their own devices. But not a dairy cow. The multiple pregnancies leach her body of nutrients, weaken her, and she will be slaughtered when she's about 4–6 years old. Some people in the dairy industry say cows don't care about their babies; when they take the babies away the mothers only cry out because they are giving milk, not because the baby intended to drink that milk is gone. Some cows will cry for their baby until their voices break and they can't make a sound anymore. I recently saw a video online of some veal calves in California. That's a big dairy state and it's been affected by flooding. So the calves were in their individual pods, like dog houses, where they remain chained their entire lives. Well, it flooded, and only the calves' heads are above water, and there were dozens and dozens of chained calves with water up to their necks treading water desperately. It's easy to find the video online. Anyway, that's not animal cruelty by any law in America because those animals are an investment. That's an insurance loss, those drowning babies are an insurance loss. When a pig facility catches fire and thousands of pigs are locked in and burned alive that's a tax write-off. Animal industries lobby mightily to keep such massive suffering concealed. You can google "Ag-Gag" law – those are laws designed to punish those who reveal this massive system of animal torture. I know, it's difficult to hear that a living, breathing, feeling creature is just a commodity to be discarded when used up or left to die when convenient, but have you heard about capitalism? I mean, it's pretty SOP, as we know. Can we be comfortable with this status quo?

So how does this tie to the seventh principle? Does the interdependent web mean that we can have cheese without any ethical questions? The vision of RESPECT FOR THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB OF LIFE OF WHICH WE ARE ALL A PART means, for me, that in exploiting and killing animals, and damaging and polluting our only home, and destroying families, we create physical and mental suffering on a massive scale. We unknowingly become complicit in this. We ingest suffering. We pay for it. I am sure you can guess that billions of our tax dollars go to the dairy industry. There are nine million dairy cows in America, *nine million*. And they are all birthing mothers with babies.

Human suffering is vast and consequential. I am not trying to erase human suffering here. My phone has conflict metals in it, maybe mined by children. I drive a fossil fuel

car. I live in single family home, which is famously energy inefficient, much worse than apartment buildings. As an American, I produce much more carbon than climate refugees in central Asia fleeing floods ever could. So, everything is not so clear cut.

The industrial powers that be don't want us to have an encompassing view of the world. They want us to worry about ourselves, not just first, but only. They want us to be inattentive, unseeing. This way they can maximize profit without regard for suffering and build it into the system. But hopefully, some eyes are opened today.

We all pick and choose the sins we commit, along with all the mercies we grant, the ethical lines we cross. We wrestle, we change, we have new information, or we remember things we forgot. So why vegan? Because that's an action I can take in the here and now, every day and every meal. Because my memories, my aesthetics, my family traditions, my social milieu do not make me forget what I know now and will always have awareness of. Let compassion be our guide. Let us have sympathy and empathy for others, including other beings. Are there people who enjoy this cruelty? I suppose there might be some sadists who do. But I think the opposite of compassion is not cruelty; it's indifference.

So don't be afraid of awareness. We can be mindful of the farm worker that picked the berries we are eating. We can be mindful of the slaughterhouse worker—their gruesome exploitation is a whole other sermon—who dispatches the chicken we eat, and we can be mindful that the cheese we ate came from a mother in an industrial system. I refuse to believe that opening your heart to the suffering of others can be wrong for us to do, even as it may be shocking or painful. Even if it doesn't transform our complicated lives in the interconnected web of obligations, traditions, habits, and humanity of which we are a part, the awareness engenders compassion. And more sensitivity to suffering changes us. We are more ready to recognize suffering of all kinds and how can that be wrong? Compassion and empathy create love. And love is not limited to just ourselves or our family. We can love humanity; we can love animals and we can love the earth. This is the root of 7th principle. It is love for all life. Love has no scarcity; we need only give it. And what is love? Some say Love is action, it's true. But a lot of love is attention. So, attend; attend the suffering of mothers and babies in our industrial food system, a system that commodifies them, a system of life-long suffering ending in death. When we do our work on the vision of the world that we want to see and be, we will love them, and we won't be able to forget them.

Closing Words:

“If you could live well without harming others, why wouldn't you?” -Gene Baur, founder of Farm Sanctuary.