

My life changed forever in the year 2007, while I was still living in New York City. I had lived there since March 1998, and I was making plans to leave New York for good and return home to New Zealand. I was your average “vegetarian”; I had stocked up on leather sandals that summer from a discount department store, I loved my silk scarves and dresses, I bought perfumes and makeup from famous brands without any knowledge nor interest in what went into them or into the making of them; the same with shampoo and skincare products. I ate the bodies of fishes and other animals from the sea, and the eggs of chickens. I had stopped consuming milk products a couple of years before, but only because I thought it would help with the acne that had plagued me for most of my life, even right up until my 30’s and beyond. I was 34 years old.

I had always thought of myself as an “animal lover”, firmly convinced that I was way above “cruel” humans who were “cruel to animals”, and now that I was “vegetarian” I also felt better than people who ate “meat”, although I finally settled on the term “pescetarian” because I was still eating the fishes and other beings from the sea. I had never heard of “ovo-lacto” so I didn’t know to call myself an “ovo-lacto pescetarian vegetarian”, nor did I nor anyone I know care enough to be concerned about it. Today I find all of those terms very distasteful, however back then we just said we were vegetarians. We consumed huge amounts of cheese, until I was told that it might be exacerbating my acne. I gave it up immediately – any addictive properties that cheese may hold, as is the claim, were easily overcome. I did want it, my tastebuds did crave it, but not enough to make me eat it. I still suffered from acne, but realised that since giving up cheese it had marginally improved, so I gave up all milk products, even learning to *gasp* read the ingredients in things and avoid products with milk powder in them. No one accused me of being “fanatical” by the way – everyone knows acne sucks.

One night, early in 2007, I couldn’t sleep, so I turned on the little television that my roommate had lent me, and started flicking through the channels. We didn’t have cable, so that meant at that time of night my options were mostly infomercials, old reruns, or MNN – the Manhattan Neighbourhood Network. I knew about MNN because my best friends produced a show on there themselves. At MNN anyone who resides in Manhattan can make a TV show about whatever they want, and broadcast it on the air. You get a slot (my friends’ slot was Friday night from 11:30 to 12:30) and can use that slot to broadcast pretty much anything you want. You can show a recording, or do a live performance, or have a call-in show. Usually the sound was terrible, but there were some interesting things on sometimes. I can’t remember which MNN channel I landed on that night, but what was showing caught my attention due to the grainy black and white footage, like old tapes from a concentration camp documentary or something. I can’t remember whether I actually caught the very beginning of the show, or whether it was part way through. I don’t remember the first scenes I saw,

but what I was seeing was footage of pigs, in concrete metal-barred cells, all huddled together, in the darkness.

The narrator was matter-of-factly talking about their fate. There was no slaughter footage at the point I tuned in, or I may very well have quickly switched the channel and never watched it. As the film went on, there were scenes of horrific suffering that words cannot describe. The dead and dying, the horrible injuries and deformities, the fear and darkness. The thing that got me the most was looking at their faces and into their eyes, as the narrator calmly pointed out that they were very well aware of what was happening to them and to their fellow beings. The torment in their eyes, peering through the darkness, haunts me to this day.

I began to weep. I couldn't turn it off. I had never seen this before. No one had told me about this. When they were taken to slaughter, the narrator explained that they were all present when their fellow prisoners were slaughtered. They could see it, smell it, hear it, and they all had no doubt that they would soon be next, as each of their friends were dragged away to their terrifying deaths. Seeing them all crowded together, watching in utter terror and helplessness as one by one their friends were brutally murdered, was equally as bad as the slaughter footage itself. I was crying hysterically by the time the documentary was over. I was all alone and I had no one to talk to about it, so I just cried myself to sleep.

I saw this documentary early in the year in 2007, but I couldn't tell you exactly when. Perhaps it was April. Perhaps a month earlier, or later. I was so glad that I no longer ate pigs since becoming "vegetarian" years before, and gradually I erased the horrible footage from my mind. I don't remember even talking to anyone about it. I just wanted to forget about it as quickly as possible. There was no mention of veganism in the film, just a suggestion to contact PeTA, who had produced the documentary, which apparently they had named Pity the Pig.

A couple of months later, I don't remember exactly when, I caught another documentary on TV. This was not grainy black and white undercover footage, it was full colour, on a mainstream channel, and was about the dolphin slaughter in Japan. I guess it could have been produced by the people who made the film *The Cove*. Perhaps a lot of the same footage was used. I don't know because I didn't watch *The Cove*. Either way, this was something that really blew my mind. I knew we killed and ate pigs, but I had absolutely no idea that people killed and ate dolphins. Again I forced myself to watch, and I was again hysterically weeping, just utterly beside myself. I think my roommate was home down the other end of the house – if she heard me she didn't mention it. Again I suffered alone and didn't tell anyone about it. I just wanted to forget what I saw, as I felt helpless to stop it. I didn't eat dolphins so I felt hatred towards those who did. Interesting, considering one of my best friends at the time ate pig flesh quite often, but

I don't recall feeling any hatred towards her for doing so, even after seeing Pity the Pig.

Some weeks later I saw a wonderful documentary about squids. This was a happy documentary, praising the animal and showing off their beauty. There was no mention of their slaughter and consumption, so it was very enjoyable to watch. We were informed that despite common misconception, squids have advanced intellectual capabilities and personalities and all kinds of interests; they were not just mindless jelly-like stuff, floating around in the ocean. I was a "pescetarian" and one of my favourite things to eat were squids – I considered them a delicacy. I felt a little uncomfortable realising that, while I watched them swimming around so beautifully on the screen.

Some time after seeing that wonderful footage I was in Chinatown and I walked past a market selling lots and lots of different kinds of animals from the sea. It was literally mountains of flesh and corpses. A breathtaking amount. I suddenly thought about the dolphins. I looked at all the flesh and bodies, of all the different species, on just one single day at one single market in Chinatown, out of 365 days of the year and countless other markets all around the rest of the city and the rest of the world. I calculated the amount being taken from the ocean each day. I thought of the squids and their interesting personalities. From that moment on I decided I would never consume "seafood" again. The fishes were needed by the dolphins to eat, and the squids did not deserve to be killed anymore than the pigs and dolphins. It was out of concern for the dolphins and the oceans that I gave up eating the other fishes – not out of concern for the fishes themselves.

Thus began my clumsy awakening, but I still had not been talked to about veganism, nor was I even thinking about it myself. A friend of ours had once shown off to me her vegetarian leather boots. She was also a vegetarian yet she did not like to wear skin on her feet (unlike most of us). She was not vegan, but she did point out that there was such a thing as "vegetarian leather" footwear. At the time I did not like the lace-up boots she was wearing, I much preferred my zip-up leather boots and trendy leather sandals.

So, by the summer of 2007, after having seen the documentaries I mentioned and seeing the terrible things that happened to pigs and dolphins, I was still buying discount leather sandals. I think I bought three pairs at once. I couldn't wait to wear them with my dresses. It wasn't until autumn was coming, and I was thinking about getting a new pair of boots, that I suddenly remembered my friend talking to me about her "vegetarian leather" boots. I had by then decided to return to New Zealand in March 2008, so I would be going straight from winter in NY to the beginning of autumn in NZ, and wouldn't be wearing sandals for a while.

Out of curiosity I started googling places in NZ where you could buy vegetarian leather shoes, and came across a NZ “meat free” advocacy website, that needless to say made no mention of veganism, but was advertising a public screening they would be holding of a film called Earthlings. I clicked on the link, and was taken to the website for the film. There were two previews that you could watch directly on the website. All of a sudden my heart started racing. I felt sick. I knew what it was going to be like. I could tell from the website that it was about the things humans were doing to other animals, and I remembered what I had seen in Pity the Pig and the dolphin slaughter documentary. Against my will I forced myself to watch the previews. They consisted of footage from a variety of animal uses, including experimentation, plus footage of unspeakable random acts of violence against other animals. It was horrifying, of course.

I was at work at the time, and was hysterically weeping again. Luckily we had no clients in the studio and my boss was in his office down the hall. I hated what I was seeing in those previews, I couldn't stand it, I wanted to die. For some reason I knew that I had to watch this film, because I couldn't hide from the truth any longer. But I didn't want to watch it. I was too scared, I knew it was going to be so bad, I really didn't want to see any more. But the director of the film Shaun Monson had said something in an interview which was also posted on the website, that resonated with me. “Please watch the film,” he said, “all the way through. You are just watching it with your eyes; they are feeling it with their bodies.” There was no mention of veganism on the website, nor by him, although I now know he is vegan.

I ordered a copy of the film, and when it arrived I put it away and was too scared to watch it. On the Earthlings website there were reviews of the film, and mentions of PeTA, who I believe were involved in making the film. I became a member of PeTA. I sent my donation, and got the magazine. Still no mention of veganism. I also joined the Humane Society, sent them money, received a little card for my (leather) wallet. No mention of veganism. I still didn't watch the film, I couldn't face it. But one day while on the Earthlings website I saw a link to a forum so I signed up to see what others had to say. That was where I finally heard about veganism. That forum was where the education really began.

I would go on the forum and read about people, broken, shocked from seeing the film, bewildered and helpless and despairing, and see the positive messages they were receiving by the people on the forum who were promoting veganism. I decided to go vegan. I still had my non-vegan shoes and clothing, and I was planning to keep them and replace them with vegan stuff when they eventually wore out. I planned to use up my skin care products and other things and then replace them all with vegan products. I still had a fridge full of eggs that I planned would be the last eggs I would ever eat. Did I mention that I had been buying “free range” eggs, after

reading some things that suggested they were from “happy” chickens and were better for my health?

I still hadn't gotten up the courage to watch the film, but thanks to the forum members who were promoting veganism I had already decided I was going to go vegan. One night I finally got up the courage to watch the film. I purchased an entire box of tissues, because I knew I was going to need it, and set it in front of my computer which doubled as my DVD player. It was about 3am, I had just come off my Saturday night shift of my second job as a waitress. I was working 7 days a week in order to get enough money to move myself and Buda, the cat, to NZ. I think it was around early or mid October, 2007, I don't remember the exact date.

I watched the entire film. It was agony, I was more than hysterical. When it was over I called my father and told him how much I wanted to die, but that I didn't want to die. I am sure I made no sense to him. “I don't want to live but I don't want to die” I sobbed. “I want to die!” I cried. He was the best person to call, because he never asks “What's wrong? Tell me what happened!” the way others would. He just listened and soothed me and told me that I was OK and that I would be OK. I threw the eggs straight into the garbage. I took all my shoes and clothes that I knew were not vegan and I donated them to the City Mission. If I were to do it again, I would throw them away, but at the time I donated them.

I was living in NY during the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. I had thought that was the worst day of my life. I remember being on the subway the day after the attacks, going down to 14th Street to see my friends, and the atmosphere of shock, stunned people, everyone with the same haunted look on their faces, no one talking at all, just this collection of shell-shocked and terribly sad and bewildered people, riding on the subway. However, the experience of seeing Earthlings was for me worse than 9/11. I had had nothing to do with what happened on 9/11. It had happened to us, we were victims. However, the things I saw on Earthlings were things I had been directly responsible for, for practically my whole life. I had eaten their bodies, worn their skins, purchased the results of their experimentation, patronised the entertainment they were used for. The guilt was huge, crushing, overwhelming. I was suicidal. I hated myself. I hated everyone. What was worse was that this time, unlike after 9/11, I was the only one on the subway who was shocked, bewildered, unbearably sad. I was the only one with a haunted look on my face. Everyone around me was wearing the skins, eating the bodies, all of it, completely ignorant and indifferent to the horror. And I was not one of the victims, this time I was one of the perpetrators, and so was everyone around me.

I fell into despair, but I stayed on the forum as it was the only place I could talk to anyone about it. None of my friends were vegan. I was all alone in

my sadness, on the subway, at my jobs, walking around the streets. I felt desperate. I wrote to the NZ welfare advocacy organisation called SAFE, and told them I had just seen Earthlings and I was coming back to NZ and I wanted to become an animal advocate. I sent them my donation, I became a member. I told them I would be the best advocate they would ever have. I sent more money to PeTA, who were credited in the film.

Then I saw some things that Renata Peters aka Desert Girl had been writing on the Earthlings forum. She was saying something to people who wanted to promote animal welfare, something that I just didn't understand. "Welfare hurts animals!" she was saying. I almost laughed. That didn't make any sense to me. Then I read some more. She directed people to Professor Gary Francione's website, The Abolitionist Approach. He spoke of being vegan and promoting veganism as the best ways to help animals and as the morally right thing to do. He spoke of the truth about the uselessness of welfare advocacy and how it fails to challenge the fundamental problem, nor does it, as promised, help animals in any significant way. He spoke of the truth about the property status of animals, and how welfare advocacy reinforces it, while vegan advocacy challenges it.

The more I read, the more it made sense. My own experience had taught me that – even after the videos, even after my realisation about the ocean, even after the memberships and donations, I still hadn't been informed that veganism was the best way to help all animals. I had still been buying their skins and eating their eggs, and using products that were tested on them or contained their body parts, etc. It wasn't until regular people, my peers, people who were not part of any organisation, people who were just using their voices on an internet forum, talked frankly about veganism, that I decided to go vegan. I had decided to go vegan from what they were saying, before even seeing the film Earthlings.

After my despair and depression from seeing the film, it was following these advocates' lead and listening to Gary Francione's message of non-violence and of the power of creative, non-violent vegan education, that changed my life and gave me renewed hope. I was no longer suicidal. I was no longer despairing. I no longer hated everyone, I no longer hated myself. I was determined to add my voice to those who were promoting justice and non-violence and respect for all others.

I wrote to SAFE again, and told them what I had learned. I asked them if they had heard of Gary Francione and read his work. They had not. I asked them why SAFE did not promote veganism, and let them know that that was the kind of advocacy I was interested in doing. They basically said that promoting welfare and advocating against cages and the like was "strategic", and geared towards "getting rid of the 'worst abuses'" which by then I knew was a fantasy in the mind of advocates for welfare, as all animal use is the worst abuse imaginable, because animals are property. I

swallowed my disappointment and vowed to bring vegan advocacy to New Zealand, with or without their help. I certainly had no more plans to support any campaigns for “cage free” myths and be part of the “happy meat” delusion. I was perfectly willing to go it alone if I had to, and that is what I did.

I am now an advocate for veganism and have seen more and more people waking up to the moral personhood of all animals and the beauty of non-violence. I wish that I had been taught about veganism from the day I was born, but I am grateful I was taught about it when I was. As with most other things, it is better late than never. As an aside: since going vegan my skin has been absolutely gorgeous – smooth and shining and acne free. It is a nice little perk. Apart from ending the violence that plagues our lives there are all kinds of other benefits to going vegan. It benefits all of us, and may in the end be the thing that will save all who live on this planet from the early destruction our species’ actions are leading to. Be vegan, live vegan. It is the right thing to do, the best way to live, for everyone. Thank you for reading my story.