

How Do I Feel About the Future of Our Young People?

How many people, when the topic of the vegan movement enters a conversation, say to you: "Yes, my daughter went vegan." Or, "My niece is vegan", or "My grandson just went vegan" or even "My goddaughter..." or "My neighbour's son..." etc. This comes up increasingly often with people I encounter. Are you one of an increasing number of people with a young vegan in your family or close network of friends, and sometimes not quite sure how to deal with some of the personal dissonance that can sometimes arise with people whose lifestyles may cross our own ethical paradigms? This opinion piece offers a few insights on this question.

Please let me impart an observation that relates to what I would like to share about the vegan trend among our youth. Something I have noticed more frequently is a certain genre of music to which we are being subjected either at a public event, in the supermarket, in a shopping mall, in a doctor's office, or other public spaces, including outdoor spaces. Often, it is the music of our young people, filled with anguish, antagonism, and an overt disrespect for others. Not only are the lyrics full of despair and anger with their perspective of our shared world, but the rhythms are monotonous and jarring, and the underlying harmonies are comprised of hard minor chords which drone on and never breathe. Voices of singers are often off-key and out of tune, showing a disregard for the beauty of the arts, for training in the arts, and for achieving excellence in anything. It is a microcosm of listless not caring, something that happens when there seems to be little of value to live for, little of value to hope for. The audio volume is often set to excruciatingly loud levels in many public spaces, including festivals and movie theatres. There is no "air flow" in this simultaneously oppressive and depressing and ugly kind of music, neither melodically nor rhythmically. And much too often, this music is thrust upon my nerves without my consent, something I consider to be a form of social violence.

That genre of music is intended to make us feel sad and angry and despondent, stifled and bruised inside, and the high audio volumes are a form of social control and ultimately oppression. Nothing about that music is meant to uplift anyone or give anyone hope. Young people speak to us through music, and their subtle, and often unconscious, message in this kind of pervasive music is clear: they have been robbed of their future and have no future to hope for. They turn to the commercial system for comfort, as no one seems to care about the future of our young people. (And, tragically, the very commercial system to which the young people are drawn for comfort, will also indifferently betray their future prospects). This is part of what can help us to understand how we might relate to the young vegans in our social circles.

It can be helpful to build an understanding about why youth are turning to veganism. I have no doubt that the strength of this movement is what will secure their future, it is really the only hope they have to create a better world for themselves. And yet there is a quandary here: they cannot bring about this better world without our help; i.e., the help of their elders. Without our help, despair lies ahead for our youth as our precious earth's natural life support systems are destroyed for the indulgences of an expanding population of elders. From a young person's (and indeed also my own) perspective, anyone who has not yet joined the vegan movement stands in defiance of a young person's future, and a young person's values for a non-violent

world for which many people long desperately. This is why this movement can be emotionally charged at times.

In many past cultures and societies, including our own First Nations cultures and many non-Western aboriginal and far Eastern cultures, youth used to be inspired by their Elders. Elders held key traditional roles in their neighbourhoods which served to inspire and teach the youth wisdoms and skills learned over a lifetime. Elders were revered and held in high esteem. Nowadays, elders seem to be viewed as being expendable, because the elders in our culture seem to have placed some emphasis of living in such a way to foster their own personal comforts and conveniences through commercial forces, without regard to the consequences of these kinds of lifestyles on their families and neighbours, and our entire global world. Many elders hide behind an "*I don't want to know*" facade when confronted about the consequences of one's lifestyle choices on others (including family and friends), which projects loudly to anyone on its receiving end: "*I really don't care about you, I just want my comforts and conveniences, and I am entitled to get them, regardless of your feelings about that*".

John Taylor Gatto, a former long time award-winning schoolteacher, offered some interesting insights in his essay "[Why Schools Don't Teach](#)"

... We seem to have lost our identity. Children and old people are penned up and locked away from the business of the world to a degree without precedent - nobody talks to them anymore and without children and old people mixing in daily life a community has no future and no past, only a continuous present. In fact, the name "community" hardly applies to the way we interact with each other. We live in networks, not communities, and everyone I know is lonely because of that. In some strange way school is a major actor in this tragedy just as it is a major actor in the widening guilt among social classes. Using school as a sorting mechanism we appear to be on the way to creating a caste system, complete with untouchables who wander through subway trains begging and sleep on the streets.

I've noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my twenty-five years of teaching - that schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes anymore that scientists are trained in science classes or politicians in civics classes or poets in English classes. The truth is that schools don't really teach anything except how to obey orders..."

I find insightful the observation that young people no longer interact with older people (except perhaps within their own families) to a great degree. It seems to me that often, interactions center around transactions wherein the older people are relied upon to supply material goods. Intellectual interactions are not engaged in much.

I have read some of John Taylor Gatto's essays and have been struck with how much they resonate in my mind on the subject of the disconnect between younger and older generations. This can be an insightful key to connecting with a young vegan.

One thing that I encourage anyone who has a young vegan in either a family or social circle to do is to, "quietly" (so to speak), begin learning about some of the issues shaping the vegan movement. Two great places to start are the animal cruelty issues and the environmental issues. Those are the most compelling reasons why young people are turning to the vegan movement, because it is the only movement that effectively and simultaneously addresses the values of non-violence and environmental integrity in climate, air, water, and ecological health. You don't need to make a big announcement that you are doing this. It helps us, as elders, to become informed about things that we take for granted in our daily lives, that are having an impact on a young person's personal values and entire future.

When I began my questioning journey, I learned that animal agriculture is one of the biggest drivers shaping a young person's future that greatly reduces a young person's prospects of secure family life and shelter options, and also increase threats to personal health and security. Animal agriculture is one of the most violent industries on our earth, it is a key driver to global warming and water depletions worldwide, and to the massive human migrations. It is a driver of war. It is a driver of the Alzheimers epidemics that plague our young peoples' families, and which they will somehow be forced to deal with sooner or later. To help people who are first starting out in this learning journey, I have compiled resources that helped me in my own journey, on the [Resources](#) page of my web site. Anyone can sign up for my quarterly [VegEd Newsletter](#), where I share a portion of these resources in more digestible manner every 3 months.

Once we have informed ourselves about the serious environmental issues that are robbing our young people of their futures, and also the violence inherent in the animal foods industry, that are spilling forth into our communities and also lead to wars, a path is then formed towards connecting intellectually with a young vegan in his or her present frame of mind. A positive thing we can do for this young person is to quietly, without fanfare, try whatever we can to join the vegan movement, which is to show that we, as elders, care about a young person's future. Joining a [Vegan Kickstart](#) helps us start this journey.

Disconnect happens when people feel that others don't care. Our generation of elders have been trained by our school system to be compliant consumers of products, and to not think about the products we buy, including the food that the commercial system has designed for us to buy, or to question that commercial systems methods of production and their consequences. We stay shallow in order to allow ourselves to be manipulated into consuming things that threaten our young peoples' future. We break away from the disconnect when we start to inform ourselves, and then change our lifestyles that demonstrate real caring for others through our choices.

When we ourselves adopt a lifestyle that shows how much we care about the future, then our young people will respond to our efforts and our examples. They will relate to us not as expendable objects of consumption, but as people from whom they can learn and people whom they can trust not to harm their future prospects. Every time we line up in the

supermarket with a cart full of wholesome organic fruits, vegetables, grains, nuts and seeds, the people behind us in the line ups take note. The more of us who do this, the more anyone else in the supermarkets will begin to become reluctant to demonstrably show others that they do not care about the future of our youth by what they put into their carts. And this will cause supermarkets to change what they stock, and ultimately farmers to change what they produce.

Let us be fully mindful of the kind of planet we are leaving our young people with the kind of food shopping that we do. How many of us engage in a kind of shopping centered only on our own comforts, conveniences and addictive fleeting taste pleasures, without any regard for those whom we affect by making these kinds of choices? Our climate and waterways are being spoiled in ways that are unprecedented in history. Wildlife worldwide are being exterminated for the relentless production of animal products, and we are facing unprecedented extinctions of plant and animal and fungal life forms. People who carry out the routine violence on animals are members of our communities; some of them carry forth this violence in their families and neighbourhoods, their daily violence towards living beings becomes integrated in who they are. And, to add to the environmental and social violence burdens, our health care systems are broken worldwide, as they have become profit-making enterprises for the animal-foods-based disease industries (heart disease, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, dementia, arthritis, lupus). Young people can't get access to family doctors because the health care system is clogged with people suffering from lifestyle diseases, which, in the end will entirely burden the young people as they are forced to care for people who refused to take any kind of responsibility for their health.

If we want to connect lovingly with young people, we must live lives that garner their respect, and that is to embrace a lifestyle that secures a beautiful future for them. We must demonstrate that we care for them by the lifestyles we choose to lead.

Learn about the vegan lifestyle, try it out, then invite some young people for a vegan dinner. See how your life changes!