



# A Meaningful Life

**Animal Advocacy, Human Nature,  
and a Better World**

**by Matt Ball**

All advocates are faced with two main challenges. The first, and arguably more important of the two, is how to open people's hearts and minds, so that they might deliberately and conscientiously consider new ideas.



# Preface

Effective advocates—those who are truly successful in fostering change—are thoughtful psychologists. They understand that each of us is born with a certain intrinsic nature. We are then raised to follow certain beliefs, and taught to hold specific prejudices. Over time, we discover new “truths” and abandon others; we mix and match, supplement and refine, continually altering our collection of attitudes, principles, and values.



Matt Ball, the author of *A Meaningful Life*, with his wife and daughter, Anne and Ellen Green.

Even though we can recognize that our belief system changes over time, at any given point, most of us are likely to believe that our current set of positions and opinions are “right”—that our convictions are well founded, our actions justified, and that we are each, at heart, a good person. Even when, years later, we find ourselves reflecting on previously held beliefs with a sense of bemusement, it does not occur to us that we may someday feel the same way toward the attitudes we *now* hold.

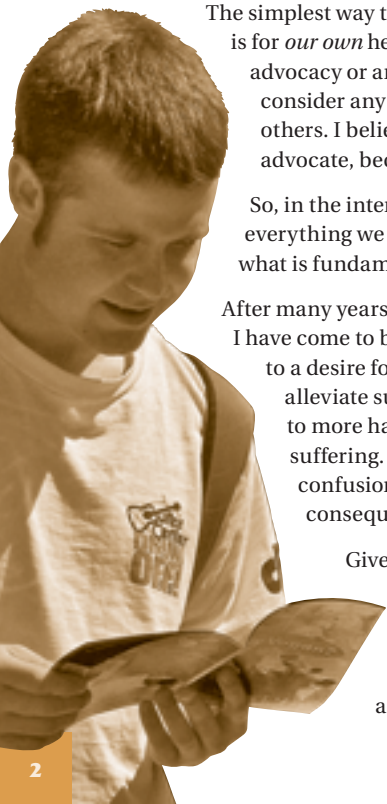
Similarly, effective advocates understand that they don’t change anyone else’s mind. No matter how elegant an argument is, ultimately, real and lasting change comes only from opening a person’s heart and mind, allowing them the freedom to explore new ideas and new ways of viewing the world. Of course, there is no magic way of doing this.

The simplest way to encourage other people to open their hearts and minds is for *our own* hearts and minds to be open—and not just for the sake of advocacy or argument. Rather, we must be *truly* open, able to sincerely consider anything and everything that is said during interactions with others. I believe an open heart and mind is imperative for a sincere advocate, because no one person has all the answers.

So, in the interest of moving forward, let me suggest we set aside everything we believe we “know,” and try to find the core of our concern, what is fundamentally important.

After many years of struggling to distill my advocacy to its purest form, I have come to believe that virtually all of our actions can be traced to a desire for fulfillment and happiness and a need to avoid or alleviate suffering. That is to say, something is “good” if it leads to more happiness, and something is “bad” if it leads to more suffering. This is a simplistic view, of course, but does cut through confusion, leaving us with a simple measure by which to judge the consequences of our actions and evaluate our advocacy.

Given that pain—be it physical, emotional, or psychological—is generally the single greatest barrier to contentment, I believe suffering must be our first priority, especially since there is so very much of it in the world. In essence, then, my advocacy philosophy can be best described as a desire to decrease the amount of suffering in the world.





## Principles of Advocacy

If you are reading this, I would guess that you are concerned about more than just the pursuit of your own happiness. The question then is: How can we make a difference in a world where suffering is so widespread?

In addition to starting with open hearts and minds, a basic understanding of human nature shows that people have an affinity for the known and the immediate. This is true not only of the population as a whole, but for advocates as well. In general, most people working for a better world concentrate on those closest to them, geographically and/or biologically. Even those who look beyond species focus on either the familiar or the fantastic, with a disproportionate amount of resources and effort spent on cats and dogs, endangered species, or individual animals in high-profile situations.

This is not surprising, given our basic human desire to have a visible impact on the world. We all want to feel like we are accomplishing something, that we've been victorious. It often doesn't matter how significant the accomplishment or victory is—or even if the world is *truly* better off—but rather that something tangible has been achieved. This

need for visible results is what leads some people to say they are unable or unwilling to support Vegan Outreach, because what we do is too slow or too abstract, and there is no way to see the animals saved.

Understanding human nature and recognizing the primacy of suffering has led Vegan Outreach to formulate two guiding principles for advocacy:

1. We should, as much as possible, strive to identify and set aside our personal biases and needs. Vegan Outreach's approach to advocacy tries to orient itself through a straightforward analysis of the world as it is, motivated *solely* by the suffering of others.
2. When we choose to do one thing, we are choosing not to do others. The people who want to create a better world, including those who make up Vegan Outreach, have extremely limited resources and time. So instead of choosing to “do *something*, do *anything*,” we pursue actions that we believe will lead to the greatest reduction in suffering. Once again, this may sound simplistic, but given the endless demands on advocates, we believe it is an important principle to follow.





# Why Vegan Outreach?

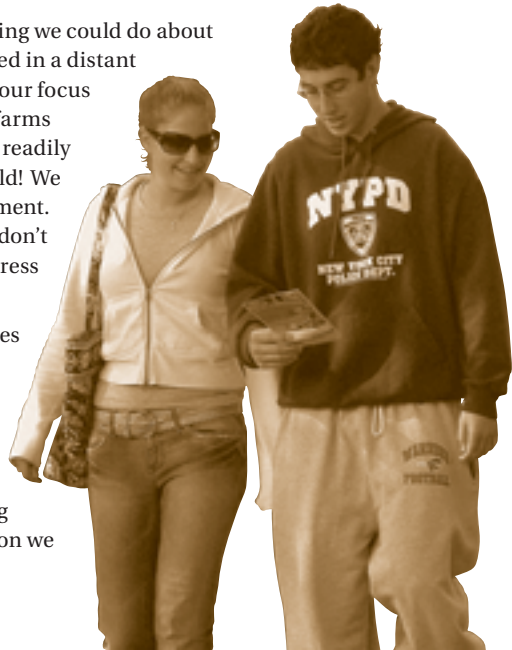
Based on these two principles, we choose to focus on exposing the cruelties of factory farms and industrial slaughterhouses, while providing honest information about how to pursue a cruelty-free lifestyle. Let me repeat—our emphasis on ethical eating is derived from our principles of advocacy, not vice versa. No specific diet—conscientious carnivorousism, veganism, etc.—has *any* value in and of itself. Rather, the importance of promoting cruelty-free eating is that it allows us to have the maximum impact on the amount of suffering in the world. There are three basic reasons for this:

- 1. The Numbers** The number of animals raised and killed for food each year in the United States alone *vastly* exceeds any other form of exploitation, involving numbers far greater than the total human population of the entire world. Ninety-nine out of every 100 animals killed in the United States each year are slaughtered for human consumption.
- 2. The Suffering** Of course, if these billions of animals lived happy, healthy lives and had quick, painless deaths, then our concern for suffering would lead us elsewhere. But animals raised for food must endure unfathomable suffering.

Most advocacy tends to revolve around detailed stories of individuals, and the story of any individual chicken, pig, or veal calf clearly rivals any other case of cruelty. Indeed, perhaps the most difficult aspect of advocating on behalf of these animals is trying to describe the indescribable: the overcrowding and confinement, the stench, the racket, the extremes of heat and cold, the attacks and even cannibalism, the hunger and starvation, the illness...the near-constant horror of every day of their lives. Indeed, every year, hundreds of millions of these animals—*many* times more than the *total* number killed for fur, in shelters, and in laboratories—don't even make it to slaughter. They actually *suffer to death*.

- 3. The Opportunity** If there were nothing we could do about these animals' suffering—if it all happened in a distant land beyond our influence—then, again, our focus would be different. But exposing factory farms and advocating ethical eating is the *most* readily accessible option for making a better world! We don't have to overthrow a foreign government. We don't have to forsake modern life. We don't have to win an election or convince Congress of the validity of our argument.

Rather, every day, *every single person* makes decisions that affect the lives of these farmed animals. Inspiring someone to change leads to fewer animals suffering on factory farms. Many major national campaigns spend huge amounts of time and money for far less payoff. By choosing to promote cruelty-free living, every person we meet is a potential major victory.







## How to Promote Compassion

The rationale outlined above seems logical, but we didn't arrive at these conclusions overnight. Before founding Vegan Outreach, Jack Norris and I sought to end many different forms of animal exploitation and pursued various methods of advocacy—from letter writing campaigns to scores of protests and everything in between, including civil disobedience.

Even within the realm of promoting vegetarianism, there are many different opinions and options. For example, the Christian Vegetarian Association works within the context of the most commonly practiced religion in the United States. The CVA's booklet *Honoring God's Creation* reaches out to people through their existing ethical framework. This approach allows the CVA to advocate—quite successfully—to a vast audience for whom other approaches would be less effective.

Other advocacy organizations focus on harnessing the power of video footage, such as *Meet Your Meat*. Some groups take out free spots on public access stations, and sometimes can afford to purchase commercial airtime. A different approach is to go right to the public via “FaunaVision” vans (equipped with large TV monitors,

speakers, and portable power units) and “Faunettes” (small mobile units that can be wheeled on sidewalks and inside buildings), which act like magnets, attracting people who may otherwise ignore someone leafleting. Many regional groups provide important resources and support, from publishing local shopping and dining guides to organizing social gatherings.

*Why Vegan?* is distributed at the Houston International Festival by Eugene Khutoryansky (above) and at the African Festival of the Arts in Chicago by Joe Espinosa (below), who is wearing a “body screen” playing *Meet Your Meat*.



# Maximum Change

At Vegan Outreach, we work for maximum change, seeking to achieve the greatest reduction in suffering per dollar donated and hour worked. We believe the way to accomplish this is to present the optimal message to our target audience. This leads to two basic questions: Who is our audience, and what is the message that will elicit the greatest change?



Of course, with infinite resources, we could reach out to everyone. Given our very limited resources, though, the goal of maximum change leads Vegan Outreach to focus on students (especially college-age), for three main reasons:

- 1. The Relative Willingness and Ability to Change** Of course, not every student is willing to stop eating meat. But *relative to the population as a whole*, college students tend to be more open-minded—even rebellious against the status quo—and in a position where they aren't as restricted by parents, tradition, habits, etc.
- 2. The Full Impact of Change** Even if students and senior citizens were equally open to change, over the course of their lives, students can save more animals. Young people not only have more meals ahead of them, but also have more opportunities to influence others.
- 3. The Ability to Reach Large Numbers** College students are typically easier to reach in large numbers. For a relatively small investment of time, an activist can hand a copy of *Even If You Like Meat* or *Why Vegan?* to hundreds of students who otherwise might never have viewed a full and compelling case for compassion.

Jon Camp hands out copies of *Even If You Like Meat* at Yale University in Connecticut.





Kaya Hansen leaflets the College Park campus of the University of Maryland.

Our message for this audience is the suffering on factory farms and in industrial slaughterhouses. We have found that this simple and straightforward message has many benefits, including the following:

- 1. Honesty** In general, people can sense insincerity. They don't respect the tactic of bait and switch, and few people believe that vegetarian advocates are *truly* concerned about everyone else's health.

Nearly every new vegetarian, though, goes through the phase of, "Even though I care about animals, other people won't. People are selfish—I'll appeal to their self-interest!" But look around—is the health argument working? For years we've known that being obese is the single greatest threat to good health; yet every year, more and more people in the United States become more and more overweight! Is this really the message with the best chance to create the real change that will save animals?

- 2. Impact** Many animal advocates buy the "trickle up" theory of change: "If they oppose wearing fur coats, they might eventually stop eating meat!" Does anyone *really* believe that an hour spent holding a sign outside a furrier does more to help animals than spending that hour handing out *Even If You Like Meat* brochures? Even if a person doesn't become vegetarian right after reading *Even If You Like Meat*, they are *far* more likely to be sympathetic to other cases of animal abuse than they would be after seeing an antifur poster—the "trickle down" approach to animal liberation!

- 3. Motivation** We don't want to get people to just *consider* changing their diet. We want them to change and *maintain* that change. If someone gives up meat to improve their health, the next time they hear someone praise the Atkins diet, that same person might switch and end up eating even *more* animals than before! So we should try to get them to consider boycotting factory farms for reasons that are sustainable.

I'm not fooling myself—I know that exposing what goes on in factory farms and slaughterhouses isn't going to appeal to everyone. But feel-good arguments that avoid the horrors of meat production are simply not compelling enough. We don't want people to nod in agreement and continue on as before. It is far better if 95% of people turn away revolted and 5% open their minds to change, than if everyone smiles politely and continues on to McDonald's.

Let me repeat: Trying to appeal to everyone hasn't worked, *and it won't work*. It is *well* past time to give up the fantasy that there is some perfect self-centered argument that will magically compel everyone to change.

Conversely, showing people what goes on behind the walls of factory farms and slaughterhouses *does* work! We have found cruelty to animals to be the most compelling reason to change one's diet—and *maintain* that change—in the face of peer pressure, tradition, the latest fad, etc. During the two years that Jack devoted to leafleting colleges around the country, he found a *tremendous* willingness among students to take and consider information about the realities of modern animal agriculture and the compassionate alternative. Other activists have found the same. We constantly receive feedback like, "I had no idea what went on! Thank you so much for opening my eyes!"

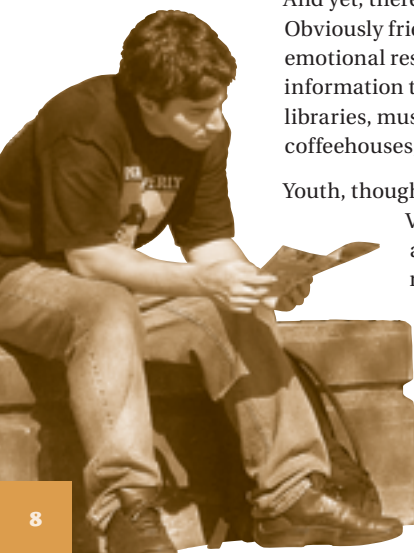


Ayako Mogen hands out *Even If You Like Meat* pamphlets on the campus of the University of Pittsburgh.

And yet, there are many, *many* more willing people to reach. Obviously friends and family, but we can't spend all our time and emotional resources on the immediate. The simplest way to get information to interested people is to stock displays in your area: libraries, music and bookstores, co-ops and natural food stores, coffeehouses, and sympathetic restaurants.

Youth, though, is where the animals get the biggest bang for the buck. Vegan Outreach's Adopt a College program, where activists leaflet at local campuses, serves to reach out methodically to our prime audience. *This is the first systematic plan for bringing about animal liberation by targeting our most receptive audience.*

The animals can't afford our continued, reactionary, try-everything-and-anything campaigns. We know what works. *We just need the dedication to do it!* You can join up at our web site: [VeganOutreach.org](http://VeganOutreach.org)





# Pitfalls

Anyone who has been vegetarian for more than a few minutes knows the many road-blocks—habit, tradition, convenience, taste, familiarity, peer pressure, etc.—that keep people from opening their hearts and minds to consider the animals' plight. Our message must overcome *all* of these!

When it comes to advocating for the animals, people are looking for a reason to ignore us—no one sits around thinking, "Wow, I really want to give up all my favorite foods and isolate myself from my friends and family!" Knowing this, we can't give anyone any reasons to ignore the terrible and unnecessary suffering on factory farms and in slaughterhouses.

If we want to be as effective as we possibly can be for the animals, it is absolutely essential that we recognize and avoid common traps. Remember: *Our message is simple*. We shouldn't distract people from it by trying to present every piece of information that sounds vaguely pro-vegetarian. Nor should we try to answer every tangential argument—advocacy isn't



Students of McGill University in Montreal (above) and Pennsylvania State University (below) are introduced to *Even If You Like Meat* by Ryan Enright and Jessica Parry.

about how much we know. We can't, for instance, let the discussion degrade into an argument over sterility and impotence, third-world starvation, Jesus' loaves and fishes, impending dust bowls, abortion, chickens being smarter than human toddlers, the President, bone char, or Grandpa's cholesterol level. Whatever is said cannot counter the fact that *eating animals causes unnecessary suffering*.





Jenna Calabrese hands out copies of *Even If You Like Meat* on the campus of the University of Massachusetts – Lowell.

Similarly, we can't afford to build our case from questionable sources. Factory farms and slaughterhouses are hidden from view, and the industry's PR machine ("Animals are treated well, slaughterhouses are well regulated") denies standard animal agriculture practices. The public won't believe otherwise just because we say so. However, there is no need to cite "biased" sources; the cruelties of factory farms and industrial slaughterhouses are well documented by nonpartisan third-party sources and the industry itself. Just as our case is perfectly strong without the most extreme claims, it is also complete when based on sources most people will regard as indisputable.

We should always stay focused on the animals, not ourselves or our particular diet. Ethical eating is not an end in itself. It is not a dogma or religion, nor a list of forbidden ingredients or immutable laws—it is only a tool for opposing cruelty and reducing suffering.

Remember:

- ◆ We *don't want* to attack anything or anyone.
- ◆ We *don't want* to express *our* rage at how animals are raised and killed.
- ◆ We *don't want* to show how smart and enlightened *we* are.
- ◆ We *don't want* to "win an argument with a meat eater."
- ◆ We *don't want* to gross out someone so they don't eat meat at their next meal.

We *want* people to open their hearts and minds to change. It all simplifies to this:

- ◆ Buying meat, eggs, and dairy causes unnecessary suffering.
- ◆ We can each choose not to cause this suffering.

# Staying Healthy

For many, maintaining a change in diet is a far more significant undertaking than most advocates admit—or even realize. While leafletting colleges across the country, Jack was often told, “I was vegetarian for a while, but I didn’t feel healthy....” He heard this so frequently that he sometimes felt he met more failed vegetarians than current vegetarians!

Contrast this with the messages many activists like to present, such as “Meat is a *deadly poison!*” Just consider a meat eater hearing a friend’s story of feeling unhealthy on a vegetarian diet, and then being faced with the nearly desperate-sounding activist chant of “Meat causes heart disease! Colon cancer! Breast cancer! Diabetes!”

As we know, even a moderate health argument doesn’t hold much sway over most people—especially young people. But the health argument is not only an inefficient use of our limited resources: when we regurgitate extremist-sounding, black and white propaganda, we hurt animals. Everyone who tries a vegetarian diet because of its “magical properties”



“Staying Healthy on Plant-Based Diets” is a detailed article on nutrition written by Jack Norris, RD (above). You’ll find an abridged version in our *Guide to Cruelty-Free Eating* and the full article with references at [VeganHealth.org/sh](http://VeganHealth.org/sh)

will quit if they don’t *immediately* lose weight and increase their energy. They will then tell *everyone* how awful they felt as a vegetarian, and how much better they feel now as a meat eater. Just *one* failed vegetarian can counter the efforts of *many* well-spoken advocates.

It is well past time that we accompany the case for ethical eating with an *honest and thorough* plan for staying healthy. The nutritional case historically presented by advocates is so bad—and has led to so many failed vegetarians—that Jack went back to school to become a registered dietitian, so he could evaluate nutrition research and provide sound recommendations.

If we want to do our best to prevent suffering, we must learn and present a complete, unbiased summary of the nutritional aspects of a cruelty-free diet, including uncertainties and potential concerns. Doing so not only leads people to trust that we are not just partisan propagandists, but also creates healthy spokespeople for the animals!

Compassionate Action for Animals’ biannual vegan food showcase at the University of Minnesota.



# Countering the Stereotype

Perhaps the biggest problem for advocates is society's stereotype of vegans. No longer does "vegan" need to be explained when referenced on TV or in movies, but unfortunately, the word is often used as shorthand for someone young, angry, deprived, fanatical, and isolated. In short, "vegan" = "unhappy." Just like one failed vegetarian counters the efforts of many honest advocates, this caricature guarantees that veganism won't be considered—let alone adopted—on a wide scale.

Regrettably, the "angry vegan" image is based in reality, and fighting this stereotype just reinforces it. Not only have I known many fanatical vegans, I was one. Like every error I have tried to point out in this essay—

inefficient tactics, obsessing over ingredients, arguing minutiae, etc.—this is another I've been guilty of. My self-righteous indignation gave *many* people a lifetime excuse to ignore the hidden realities of factory farms and the compassionate alternative.

It is not enough to be a vegan, or even a dedicated vegan advocate. If we want to maximize the amount of suffering we can prevent, we must actively be the *opposite* of the vegan stereotype. The animals can't wait until we get over our despair. We must learn "how to win friends and influence people." We must—regardless of the sorrow and outrage we rightly feel—leave *everyone* we meet with the impression of a joyful person leading a fulfilling and meaningful life.

*Even If You Like Meat* brochures are distributed by Suzanne Haws at San Jose State University (below) and Stewart Solomon at Cal Poly Pomona (opposite page).







## Summary & Questions

This isn't a particularly exciting or inspiring prescription:

- ◆ Focus on preventing animals from being bred for factory farms.
- ◆ Accept that, at this time, only a minority will listen, and many others will react with disdain.
- ◆ Avoid extreme claims, absolutism, and self-righteousness.
- ◆ Accept and admit to uncertainty.
- ◆ Be a friendly, upbeat, and respectful "people person."

It is understandable to want something more immediate, more rewarding. Nearly every time I give a talk, at least one person says something like, "We have to do it all, now! We have to save them all!"

Of course, I can't dismiss the possibility that there is a better way, but history is not encouraging. Millions of people before us have been outraged and furious with the state of the world; yet today, there is more suffering than ever before. Obviously, anger and dedication *aren't enough*.

Look at this country's animal advocacy movement. In just the past few decades, hundreds of thousands of people have donated hundreds of millions of dollars and worked hundreds of millions of hours on behalf of the animals. What is there to show for it?

- ◆ Most who became active during this time have burned out and quit.
- ◆ Average per-person animal consumption has gone up, not down.
- ◆ The amount of animal suffering in the United States has exploded!

Still, many activists insist, "Animal liberation by any means necessary! I'm willing to do anything!"

If this is the case, we need to ask ourselves these questions:

- ◆ Are we willing to give up—i.e., refocus—our anger?
- ◆ Are we willing to direct our passion, rather than have it rule us?
- ◆ Are we willing to put the needs of unseen animals before our own desires?
- ◆ *Are we willing to accept slow change over no change?*





## The Final Challenge

I'd be lying if I said this was easy. Often, the logical response seems to be, Why bother? I'm doing enough by being vegan. Changing the world is hopeless.

This brings us to the second of the two challenges mentioned at the beginning: Why care?

It is relatively easy to look at horrible pictures or watch footage of brutality to animals and be angry and motivated in the short term. But what about a week down the road? A month? A year—after being rejected by relatives, ignored by coworkers, mocked while leafleting?

In many ways, remaining dedicated and motivated is a harder challenge than opening other people's hearts and minds.

Is the situation hopeless? If you look at the big picture, I do believe that there is reason for optimism. Indeed, anyone interested in creating a fundamental change for the future is advised to take the long view—at least longer than the next year, or even the next decade. Although it is frustrating how slow the pace of progress can seem to us, the rate of change has been unprecedented in the past few centuries. As Bruce Friedrich points out:

Socrates, considered the father of philosophical thought, was teaching more than twenty-five hundred years ago. It was thousands of years later that we saw the beginnings of our democratic system. Not until the 19th century was slavery abolished in the developed world. *Only in the last century* was child labor ended, child abuse criminalized, women allowed to vote, and minorities granted wider rights.





When viewed in this context, it seems clear that today we have the great and singular opportunity to make *The Economist's* prediction come true:

Historically, man has expanded the reach of his ethical calculations, as ignorance and want have receded, first beyond family and tribe, later beyond religion, race, and nation. To bring other species more fully into the range of these decisions may seem unthinkable to moderate opinion now. One day, decades or centuries hence, it may seem no more than “civilized” behavior requires.

Is this enough to keep an activist going, day in and day out, when trying to do the hard work of promoting ethical eating—especially while not surrounded by other activists to provide support? We aren't robots. We each *want to be happy*.

Yet our desire for happiness, I believe, is the answer to the final challenge.

Ultimately, happiness isn't to be found in “stuff.” While the United States is the richest country on earth, Americans aren't the happiest people on earth. The phrase isn't “the *pursuit* of happiness” for nothing! Over the millennia, those creatures who were satisfied found themselves erased from the gene pool by our unfulfilled ancestors. Those that passed on their genes always desired *more*, leaving us with a basic nature that *pursues* happiness but isn't able to *acquire* it.

Where does this leave us? The best answer I've found is that happiness is the result of a meaningful life, and meaning comes not from *things*, but from *accomplishment*.



**I believe that meaningful accomplishment  
comes from living life beyond ourselves,  
viewing our existence beyond the immediate.  
Doing my thoughtful best to make the world  
a better place is as meaningful a life as I can imagine.**

**To paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr.:**

**The arc of history is long  
And ragged  
And often unclear  
But ultimately  
It progresses towards justice.**

**I want to be a part of that progress.**



**Vegan**  
**—OUTREACH—**

*Working to end cruelty to animals* →

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Some of the photos that appear in this booklet were provided courtesy of Casey Constable, Compassionate Action for Animals, Farm Sanctuary, Mauricio, Nick Lesiecki, Kari Nienstedt, Protecting Animals USA, Dawn Ratcliffe, USDA, and Joshua Warchol

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