

BIOPHILE 6 – Jan 2008

‘Vegan (n): one of a sect of vegetarians using no animal produce at all.’

That’s how Chambers dictionary describes me and my ilk. The definition isn’t precise enough for my liking, but more on that later. What gets my goat (sorry, gets my aubergine) is the ‘sect’ word. It sounds so
Jonestown, you know? So Moonies. Kinda like, Patty Hearst joins the Bader Meinhof gang and Patty Glyn signs up with the vegans. Hell, I wasn’t even a Girl Guide for Petal’s sake. Now I’m part of some cult? I’m outraged.

Then an email arrives which does anything but allay my fears that I might be caught up in some kind of manic movement. The letter comes from a ‘proper’ vegan – a graduate and an elder in the tribe:

“I’m not quite sure how long you have been a vegetarian,” she writes in response to my October 2007 column, “but I feel distressed when I read that you refer to yourself as a vegan, after only being a vegan for eight weeks. ...Don’t flatter yourself.”

She tells me further that she’s been a vegetarian for 17 years and a vegan for ten. She doesn’t eat honey, does not wear leather or go horse riding. Next she plans to stop eating bread, due to the fact that it contains yeast – a living organism. She beats herself up for eating the odd square of milk chocolate but is working on this abominable weakness. In short, a vegan’s struggle credentials are slow and painful to obtain and I have no right to carry a carrot-cruncher membership card before many years of self-flagellation with a cat-o’-limp-celery.

Which brings me to the nub of the matter: the question of definition. What is a vegan and when can one claim the title? In the absence of a universally accepted standard as to what this effigy of virtue is, personal ethics tend to prevail – and that’s always very tricky turf. Some of my vegan chums, for instance, would be most upset to learn that yesterday’s breakfast of toast and honey had resulted in them being expelled from the fraternity. I have twice eaten a meal containing cheese rather than offend dinner party hosts who don’t understand my ‘rules’. What should happen when I fall off the wagon

like that? And have I gone back to square one in the count-down to my vegan graduation? Slipped down the longest cobra in the Snakes and Ladders game of Ethical Eating?

I mean, is a Christian a Christian after 'seeing the light' or only after a lifetime of unimpeachable conduct? Are good intentions enough? Is a philosophical standpoint sufficient to warrant the label 'vegan'? Or 'Buddhist'? Or 'Democrat'? I'm in the process of wearing out my leather shoes and belts because I feel that an animal suffered and died to supply them, the deed is long done and they shouldn't be tossed into the bin just because I've changed my views on the matter. Is that kind of pragmatism wrong? Who makes the rules on how to dispense with one's old ways of life? You? Me? She of the email? A yogi in India? A vegan council? Must I wear a pair of those quite ghastly luminous Crocs for 10 years before I can leave rehab?

And that brings us to another question of definition. Who's to say what's 'extreme'? It's a word thrown at me constantly these days by those trying to describe my worldview – along with 'eccentric' and even 'attention seeking'. I reject these labels with contempt, but here's the thing – they're *exactly* what came to mind when I read the email I have just quoted. Is that because the writer pricked my conscience – as I do those of my meat-eating friends? Is this person on a completely different path to mine, or merely further down the same road? Will I too become more and more 'extreme'?

Maybe the time will come when I'm so sensitized that I'll feel as if I'm dining in a mortuary when I eat kidney beans or artichoke hearts, or in an abattoir when I consume chick peas or soya mince. As it is, I'm beginning to doubt my ability to consume potatoes. It's their eyes, you know!