



WHEN *Good Vegans* MAKE Bad Neighbors

Photos and text by Mark Mathew Braunstein

My new home borders a deep forest, so an array of wildlife makes their rounds to my backyard as I watch them in wonderment. They visit not to put on a show for me, but to search for after-dinner snacks in the compost heap of scraps generated from my vegan kitchen. Viewed from my window, my unannounced dinner guests run the gamut from herbivores to omnivores to carnivores. While I adore them all, I harbor a deeper affection for the local deer and rabbits because, as strict herbivores, they share my own tastes. I call them the home team.

The visiting team of bobcats, foxes, and coyotes are also welcomed. While they hunger for a yummy bunny, they are not averse to making a free lunch out of whatever plant-based

foods that they can lay their paws on. When they patrol my compost heap, they are on the prowl for mice and chipmunks, not lettuce and tomatoes. In the absence of rodents, they simply settle for produce. They are not strictly carnivores.

In my neck of the woods, the only unwavering carnivores are a pair of hawks. When times are tough, the hawks swoop down for a landing on my lawn to snag earthworms. But no self-respecting hawk would stoop any lower on the food chain. While the perch for their earthworm vigil is just thirty feet from my desk, I have yet to witness one plucking even a single blade of grass. From my desk, I can spy on their nest when trees have shed their leaves in the fall. In the spring, the hawks right before my eyes unabashedly perform their mating ritual countless times while cavorting in the treetops. Yet during summer, their nest seems to remain empty.

Good Neighbors

To my right and left, my neighbors are pairs of humans who perform their mating rituals in privacy. On my left, the husband and wife are empty nesters. On my right, the middle-aged couple's nest is full. Their household consists of two pre-teenagers, a dog, a cat, and three cars. I am painfully aware that fifty years ago when the forest was flattened and subdivided into our yards, all the wildlife were banished from their ancestral homes. As reparation, I have taken a vow that no further razing will make way for my own children, because I have none.

In this propertied community, no white picket fences cor-don off our front yards because no fences of any kind define our boundaries. Our oversized parcels of land assure that ample distance alone buffers us from one another. My kind of social distancing. I usually can't hear my neighbors' raised voices or loud music or idling car engines or barking dogs, so I feel confident that they can't hear mine. Especially not my barking dogs, because I have none.

Punctuated with trees and shrubs but otherwise nondescript, our front yards wear uniforms, like some students do in private school. In contrast, our backyards show our true colors, like after school when those same students peel off their uniforms to don their street clothes. My backyard features that famously plundered compost heap, a fresh meadow of wildflowers and wild raspberries that the forest has been busily reclaiming from lawn, and a vegetable garden. If some of my human neighbors lack gardens, it is because their backyards are crammed with humanmade edifices such as gazebos, tool sheds, dog enclosures, add-on garages, dry-docked boats, built-in pools, basketball half-courts, and sprawling patios centered around fiery altars shaped as clay ovens or cooking grills.

When an ill wind blows my way, I can smell steak sizzling on my neighbors' barbecues. They are sending smoke signals announcing, "Animals beware, omnivores dwell here." Evidently, we humans run that same gamut from herbivores to

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omnivores to carnivores as does the vaster animal kingdom. It would be a far stretch from the truth to imagine that among wildlife the prey get along with the predators. But as a human herbivore, I do get along with the wild omnivores and the human omnivores alike. I am a good neighbor to all, and the humans next door are good neighbors to me.

Trick or Treat!

I act especially neighborly to the children of the town. On Halloween night, while marveling at their imaginative mostly homemade costumes, I enjoy interacting with the little kiddies, even the ones posing as scary skeletons, witches, and werewolves. Some plainclothes parents come tagging along with their very youngest and smallest. To speak up for their shy and quiet children, the parents sometimes are the ones who invoke the rallying cry of “Trick or Treat!” This can lead to my brief exchanges with the moms and pops, and I enjoy those discourses even more than with the underage ghosts and goblins.

To participate in the festivities of Halloween night, I must pay a modest price of admission. The cost of the treats. I dare not dispense sugar-laden candy, as that would be more trick than treat. I wish I could bestow freshly picked apples, like when I was a child, but nowadays cautious parents look suspiciously on any booty not factory-sealed in cellophane. I could buy foil-wrapped bitesize goodies made only of dried fruits and nuts, but those cost a pretty penny for a tiny morsel. Also, my nod to nutrition would likely go unappreciated. Though an elitist who snobbishly shuns salt as much as sugar, during my first few years living here I doled out potato chips fried in cheap motor-grade oil. Which oil is worse, I pondered, cottonseed or canola? And which condiment is worse, salt or sugar? Only a hardcore and headstrong vegan turns every food choice into a troubling moral dilemma.

Because less salt and oil sully popcorn than the chips, I have settled on dispensing snack-size bags of popcorn. Their shouts of joy attest that the junior ghosts and midget goblins delight in my standout handouts. Some repeat offenders even proclaim how much they look forward every Halloween to knocking on my door.

One day, not on Halloween, my next-door-neighbors on my right came knocking. In a reversal of Halloween, the daughter and her mother were going door-to-door selling Girl Scout cookies. In a further reversal, both of them were out of uniform. The daughter was silent. I don’t remember exactly what the mom said, except that it wasn’t, “Trick or Treat!” She invoked the name Girl Scout cookies, a magic charm to some, but not to me.

“I avoid white flour and white sugar,” I interjected, and not apologetically either.

The quick-thinking mom then politely suggested an alternative. I could make a donation to convey free boxes of cookies to neglected veterans aging away in VA hospitals.

“I would not want to be responsible for feeding white flour or white sugar to someone else,” I countered, again unapologetically.

“I feel sorry for you,” she replied, without any hint of sorrow in her voice. End of conversation.

Tactfully not speaking it aloud, I thought, “I feel sorry for daughters whose mothers feed them white flour and white sugar.”

While mother and daughter never again returned to peddle their cookies, the daughter and her brother still come knocking on my door every Halloween. Popcorn must be an irresistible treat, especially on Halloween night.

Stuffed

Armored in our cars, the mom and I continue to smile and wave hello while driving past each other’s front yards. And from our backyards, the dad and I call out each other’s name to shout hello and to sometimes approach closer to chat about the weather or to chuckle about the crabgrass and clover that invade his front lawn from mine. Or maybe I’m the only one chuckling, because every few years I reseed that clover.

To my left, my next-door neighbors are a retired couple who I notice in their backyard mostly during summer. Through gaps in the bushes, I glimpse the wife seated on their deck while absorbed reading a book. Her outdoor reveries are rare. I more often see the husband, as we both are vegetable gardeners, his honored crop being tomatoes. While puttering around in our gardens, we are too far away to engage in conversation, so we just shout each other’s names and wave friendly greetings. Last week, for his third time ever, he ambled over to me to strike up a conversation. After an exchange of pleasantries about the weather and gardening, he said his wife had made some extra stuffed cabbage. “Would you like some?”

A recollection of the stuffed cabbage from my mother’s home cooking flashed to mind. A cabbage leaf rolled around chopped meat. The opposite of taxidermy. Rather than a dead animal stuffed with cotton, the cabbage leaf stuffed with a dead animal.

“I’m a vegan,” I explained, as though stating the obvious, as if almost everyone were vegans. “Does it have meat or fish or milk or dairy or eggs in it?” I recited my list somewhat routinely, like when querying a waiter in a restaurant that serves meat.

Unprimed for my question, my neighbor fell silent, perhaps dumbfounded. Without answering, he indecorously walked away.

In hindsight, I realized that his offer was a gesture of camaraderie beyond being merely good neighbors. And I muffed it. No “No, thank you” from me. Not even the subtle sarcasm of the colloquial “Thanks, but no thanks.” Was my lack of decorum the thoughtless and reflexive response of a self-righteous animal-rightist? Did my reply stir in him a bitter memory of an incident with some cantankerous vegan more strident than even I? Did that incident irritate or embarrass him? Did I irritate or embarrass him? Should I care? If our bodies are our temples, should I mind my manners but not my manors?

In our society of the flock and the herd, eating a vegan diet is branded as extremist, while patronizing farm animal abuse is accepted as the norm. Everywhere I look, ads and logos promoting meat eating assault my senses. Throughout this narcoleptic nation, every food store and nearly every restaurant reinforces the very idea of meat. Every day we get shoved down our throats a barrage of food porn. Burger King and Dairy Queen. KFC and BLT. Franks and beans. Burgers and fries. Spaghetti and meatballs. Bacon and eggs. Stuffed cabbage and turkey stuffing. Thanksgivings for which turkeys have no reason to give thanks. A porterhouse from the slaughterhouse. Caviar without caveat. Eat, eat, eat. Buy, buy, buy. Kill, kill, kill.

I close my eyes. In the school or workplace cafeteria, the odors of crematoria fill the lunchtime air. The smoke wafting



from my neighbors’ barbecues offends my olfactory nerves. My response is visceral, not rational. Aromas that make meat eaters’ mouths water instead make my stomach churn. When I shop in supermarkets, which is seldom, I avoid like the plague the mass graves of the meat departments. Same for the cadaver freezer in the health food store.

Upon reflection, I owe no apology to my neighbor for my curt reply. He is a highly educated professional. The industrialized atrocities of the factory farm and the disassembly line of the slaughterhouse are no longer secrets hidden from the public, and no longer from him. What’s his shaky excuse for eating meat? Apathy? Maybe. Apoplexy? Surely. Nutrition? Flimsy. Hunger? That’s more honestly. Habit? Of course. Ignorance? No longer.

Why not eat just that round and perfect head of cabbage the way nature intended, without the accoutrement of meat? Maybe, just maybe, my neighbor’s wife had an overriding reason for stuffing that cabbage with meat, and her husband a valid reason for eating it. If so, I can learn it only from them. Maybe later this summer, if he ambles over to my yard to present to me some vine-ripened tomatoes from his garden, I will ask him.

Unless I amble over to his yard first, to offer him from my garden a head of unstuffed cabbage.

Mark Mathew Braunstein, a vegan since 1970, is the author of five books, including *Radical Vegetarianism* (1981, Lantern Books revised edition 2010), and a contributor to many holistic health magazines, including six times previously to *Spirit of Change*. For a free PDF of *Radical Vegetarianism*, contact the author at: www.MarkBraunstein.Org



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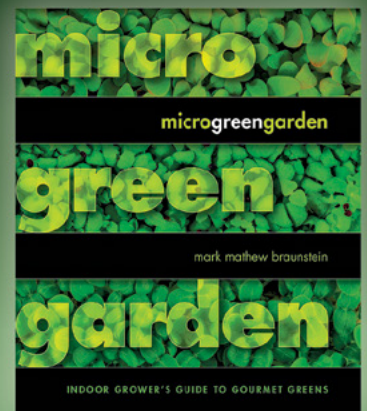
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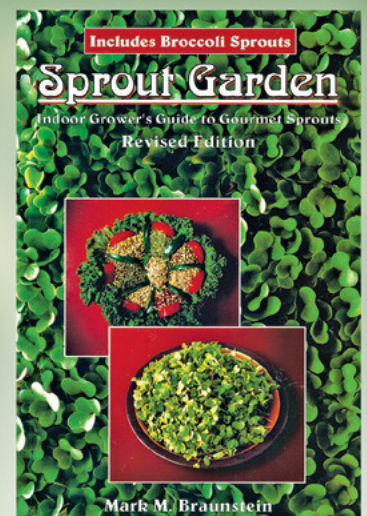


Mark Mathew Braunstein

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