

Caring for Creation One Bite at a Time

By Nekeisha Alexis-Baker

Before becoming vegan (a person who neither consumes nor

wears items made from animals or animal byproducts), I was already an eco-conscious young adult. My Trinidadian upbringing helped me appreciate nature's gifts in my earliest years.

Growing up in New York City, I learned to recycle, joined an after-school environmental program, and went ten straight days without a shower one year at summer camp. During college, I became passionate about



Nekeisha Alexis-Baker holds fresh strawberries picked from the strawberry patch in the AMBS community garden.

Produce from this garden is used in the seminary kitchen and donated to Church Community Services, a non-profit organization providing food to those in the area who need it.

Photo by
Bethany Keener

seeking justice for human members of God's creation. I spoke out in prayer and protest against war, volunteered at a homeless shelter, and worked with adults with developmental disabilities. Shopping at thrift stores, supporting the farmer's market, reclaiming old furniture—these were the ways I tried to care for the world that God so loves.

As my awareness of global warming increases, my concern for creation also takes new shapes.

Since relocating to Elkhart, Indiana for seminary study, my husband, Andy, and I compost our kitchen scraps, as well as use energy-saving light bulbs, and monitor how we heat and cool our apartment. We've carried out "light bulb evangelism," sending energy-saving light bulbs to family members at Christmas, and have grown our food each summer. We pay attention to how much we drive, use environmentally safe cleaning products, and do our best to avoid patronizing stores that prioritize low prices over people's

welfare. In these and other ways, we lessen our ecological footprint, though we recognize there is always more work to be done. Despite all the sustainable changes we've made, however, none have been as challenging or rewarding as changing what we put on our plates.

Like other green choices I've made, becoming vegan started with a process of education and self-examination. Although as a long-time vegetarian I was aware that farm animals, no matter how well they are treated, are eventually subjected to death and dismemberment, I had been blind to the cruelty that plagues most meat, egg and dairy production. Hidden from my eyes were millions of de-beaked hens, confined four at a time to sixteen-inch cages in order to produce my eggs. Out of my view were millions more artificially inseminated cows held captive in dark stalls and milking stations, so I could enjoy dairy products. I didn't realize that the dairy and meat industries were directly connected through veal production and the sacrifice of dry cows. I was not aware organic farming does not protect animals from abuse when they are transported to slaughter and eventually killed.

Faced with these and other harsh realities about how food arrived at my table, I began asking myself difficult questions: What difference did it make to stop eating meat if my other eating habits still supported the meat industry? What did it mean to be a Christian peacemaker when my diet contributed to violence against God's creatures? How did I justify caring about oceans, mountains and polar bears while keeping domestic animals outside my moral consideration? How was I being called to care for creation in light of all this suffering?

Although I wish I could say I became vegan immediately after learning this information, the truth is, the process was a gradual one. It took several months to stop eating eggs and dairy even as I switched to tasty vegan substitutes. Yet, over time, Andy and I found new mouth-watering recipes and transitioned our diets one meal at a time.

As my commitment to peaceable eating has increased, so too has my awareness about the effect this choice has on the rest of creation. Since animal farming accounts for 18% of global warming and has caused worldwide deforestation, land degradation, water



Nekeisha during a trip to the South Bend Botanical Garden and Greenhouse in South Bend, Ind., in 2006.

Courtesy photo

Nekeisha enjoys weeding flowers and vegetables in the backyard garden she keeps along with her husband, Andy.

Photo by
Bethany Keener



pollution, loss of biodiversity and coral reef degeneration, renouncing animal byproducts is a small but positive ecological step. With global meat production expected to double to 465 million tons by the year 2050 and milk production projected to rise from 580 to 1043 million tons in the same period, abstinence from these items is one way to slow the damage to God's green earth. I have also discovered the benefits veganism offers to people. I've learned this lifestyle can lead to increased physical health, and have found interesting overlaps between peaceable eating, pacifism, feminism/womanism and rejecting oppression. Being vegan in the middle of meat-eating America has not been without its challenges, but in the end, I am grateful for the theological, Biblical and ethical depth it has brought to my life.

In "Everything You Know Is Wrong," Phil Hamlett writes, "Grasping the totality of sustainability... requires a thorough examination... It goes further than changing all of the light bulbs." His words resonate with my journey toward more harmonious living with creation. Each bite I take and change I make allows me to join in God's restorative project. I am glad to be involved in this good work. 📌

Other Useful Resources

Good Eating by Stephen Webb, Brazos Press, 2001 is a "good, accessible book by a Christian author," says Nekeisha.

Veganomicon: The Ultimate Vegan Cookbook by Isa Chandra Maskowitz, Marlowe & Company, 2007 helps vegans make delicious meals.

Two excellent websites with more information on vegans are <www.vegforlife.org> and <www.goveg.com>.

The United Nations report referenced in this article,

"Livestock's Long Shadow," can be found in its entirety at

<www.virtualcentre.org/en/library/key_pub/longshad/A0701E00.htm>.