

## **“Cool Beans: Creating a Cooler Climate and a More Peaceable Planet Through the Power of Plant Foods”**

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By Marisa Miller Wolfson

Director of Outreach

Kind Green Planet

Marisa@kindgreenplanet.org

www.kindgreenplanet.org

www.veganatheart.org

www.glasswallsmovie.com

### **Reading from *The World Peace Diet* by Will Tuttle:**

“Food is actually our most intimate and telling connection both with the natural order and with our living cultural heritage. Through eating the plants and animals of this earth we literally incorporate them, and it is also through this act of eating that we partake of our culture’s values and paradigms at the most primal and unconscious levels. As children, through constant exposure to the complex patterns of belief surrounding our most elaborate group ritual, eating food, we ingested our culture’s values and invisible assumptions. Like sponges, we learned, we noticed, we partook, and we became acculturated. Now, as adults finding our lives beset with stress and a range of daunting problems of our own making, we rightly yearn to understand the source of our frustrating inability to live in harmony on this earth. When we look deeply enough, we discover a disturbing force that is fundamental in generating our dilemmas and crises, a force that is not actually hidden at all, but is staring up at us every day from our plates! It has been lying undiscovered all along in the most obvious of places: it is our food.”

### **Sermon:**

*Thanksgiving.* The very word fills us with excitement and trepidation. The promise of good food and friends or family but also the stress that comes with pre-planning, shopping, and toiling in the kitchen for hours. But if given the option not to toil all day, I think many of us might just turn it down. On that day, we like to toil. And we like to pray over our supper...on that day, whereas most nights, there are few prayers said over frozen burritos or leftover Chinese food lovingly heated in the microwave.

My guess is that Thanksgiving connects us with something in our cultural heritage, when food took a little longer, family was a little bigger, and we were all a little more thoughtful about and appreciative of the food that was set on our table every day.

Of course, Thanksgiving also connects us to our national heritage, as we remember hearing about those first harsh seasons that the colonists weathered in the “New World” until the native peoples came and saved the day. The Thanksgiving story has changed a bit since it was told to me as a child. In elementary school, I remember cartoonish cutouts of plump pilgrims and smiling Indians, and it was much later that I learned about the ugly

history of exploitation and suffering that followed those initial interactions between colonists and native peoples. As we grow as individuals and as a culture, our understanding and awareness of that reality has changed, and now the telling of the Thanksgiving story has changed too. Perhaps for many people like me, Thanksgiving has become less about *that* story and a little more about celebrating family and abundance.

In the same way that our appreciation of the holiday changes as we grow and change, so does our palate. I remember when I was a kid, the Thanksgiving meal was all about the turkey—it was about getting moist dark meat, drumsticks and wishbones. Vegetables played a minor role, and as far as I was concerned, cranberry sauce and those little white onion bulbs that floated around in the peas had no business being on the table at all.

Of course, we were not allowed to say “yuck” at the table. Other words that would cause us to be banished to the kitchen included “gross,” “grody,” and the superlative of grody, “grody *to the max*.” I lacked a certain, shall we say, subtlety and charm when I was younger. I remember when my friend Lorena told me in middle school that she was not having turkey for Thanksgiving because she was a vegetarian, I said with a sneer, “Well, enjoy your legumes and roughage.” Legumes for Thanksgiving? Gag me with a spoon! In 1988, big bangs were in and so was the phrase “cool beans.” It was the standard answer to something that you were mildly excited about...as in, “You got the new New Kids on the Block poster too?” Cool beans. It wasn’t as emphatic as “radical” or “awesome” but signified definite approval. Of course, putting “cool” and “beans” together in a phrase didn’t mean you thought beans were actually cool. It was meant to be ironic.

Now that I’ve grown up and have evolved a bit, I think big bangs are ironic and that beans are, in fact, really cool. At age 33 I can appreciate that beans and legumes are high in fiber and protein, low in fat, and won’t clog my arteries with cholesterol. I enjoy them in salads, soups, burgers, “neat loaf,” pates, and yes, frozen burritos that I heat up in the microwave. Soybeans are a special kind of bean that easily qualify as “totally awesome.” I love edamame as an appetizer, tempeh “bacon” at breakfast, and tofu scrambled, stir-fried, baked, you name it, any time of day. I remember learning in school about tofu being bean curd when we were learning about Japan. I thought it sounded like the grossest thing ever. If I’d known then that 20 years later I’d be making tofu turkey for Thanksgiving, I might have actually taken a spoon and gagged myself. But back then, I felt sorry for Japanese people with their bean curd. I was German-American in Indiana, thank God, and we had things like pork and potato dumplings.

My mom grew up in post World War II Germany, and she knew about hunger. To this day, she won’t touch a lima bean or goat’s milk. During and after the war, meat was scarce, so beans were just about it, and because there was no cow’s milk to be had, she had to walk about a mile to a farm with a little tin cup for her weekly serving of goat’s milk. Most of my friends got the “starving children in Africa” speech at the dinner table. I got the goat’s milk speech. My mom obviously appreciates food more having been hungry. Because I’m one generation removed from that, I appreciate food more too. Suffering changes things. Awareness of someone else’s perspective changes things. Our knowledge about the food itself changes things. It even changes the taste of things and

our willingness to try new things.

I used to work with the NY Coalition for Healthy School Foods, and I learned about the amazing work being done by nutrition teachers who went around in schools and taught kids about healthy eating. They did art projects and cooking demonstrations using beans, and the kids discovered they liked beans. They were so excited, they went home and told their parents about all these cool different kinds of beans like adzuki beans and garbanzo beans and black-eyed peas and cannellini beans. Beans were suddenly cool! Cool beans! It shows you that exposure to new information can really change our appreciation of foods, and our tastes evolve as a result. You might've heard that it takes about 15 tries of a new food for people to start to like it. And it's true! Do you remember the first time you tried beer? Or skim milk? Our taste buds change, adapt, and evolve. And so does our conscientiousness around food.

The topic of food consciousness has never been as popular in mainstream culture as it is today. The highest-grossing documentary this past summer was *Food, Inc.* It seems every couple of years we gain a new food consciousness guru: Eric Schlosser, author of *Fast Food Nation*, Michael Pollan, who wrote *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and now we're seeing a new face on the talk show circuit: a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn, Jonathan Safran Foer, author of the new book *Eating Animals*—but more about him later. So now we have the local movement, the organic movement, the vegan movement, the slow foods movement, the cool foods movement, and, in UU circles, the ethical eating movement. Last year at General Assembly, food trumped nuclear disarmament as our next Congregational Study Action Issue, and my being here is part of the work we're doing in our congregations all across the country: for four years we're going to be talking about food.

What is this obsession with food? And why is it so sudden? Well, I think a few things are happening: for one thing, American society has reached a place of affluence and stability (though it may not seem so right now) where we have more food choices than ever... which, historically, has been a good thing for the human species. Of course having as many foods options as possible is going to be evolutionarily advantageous, and I think that's why we evolved to become omnivores. Then the green revolution in the last century—by this I mean the discovery of synthetic fertilizer and genetically modified foods—has made food so cheap and so accessible that the world population exploded. However, too much of a good thing is not always a great thing. Obesity rates are through the roof. Type 2 diabetes is through the roof. Our children are overfed and undernourished. Kids growing up today will make up the first generation that's projected to have a lower life expectancy than their parents because of obesity, diabetes, and other lifestyle-related diseases. Unfortunately, it's the kids in the lowest income neighborhoods who are hardest hit. And that's why I'm working with food justice advocates to shape food policy in New York City so that kids in “food drought” neighborhoods will have more access to affordable fresh, healthy, local, and yes, even organic plant foods.

Besides our rising food-related diseases and the astronomical health care costs that come along with them, we're grappling with the scariest environmental threat ever: climate

change. As more science comes out, the more we realize how big our climate change “foodprint” really is. First there was the organic food-climate change connection. Studies have shown that organic agriculture systems emit 48–66% less carbon dioxide per hectare than conventional farming systems that rely on chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Organic farming methods also often employ methods of soil management that result in the capture, instead of the release, of greenhouse gases, particularly carbon dioxide. Then there was the more obvious local food-climate change connection. If the average meal travels 1500 miles from farm to plate, that’s like me driving from here to Denver. Rich Pirog of Iowa State University, who came up with the figure, found that the conventional food distribution system emitted 5 to 17 times more CO<sub>2</sub> than local and regional systems.

But the food miles issue is just one small part of a larger picture when you factor in all the phases of a food’s life cycle. Carnegie Mellon University researchers Christopher Weber and H. Scott Matthews looked at data from a variety of U.S. government sources and conducted a comprehensive life-cycle analysis of the standard American diet. They discovered that the food miles from producer or processor to the place where you buy the food accounts for only 4 percent of the U.S. food system’s greenhouse gas emissions. Someone who consumes an all-locavore diet every meal of every day for a year saved less GHGs than someone consuming a regular diet but skipped meat and dairy for just one day per week for the same amount of time.

In a recent Forbes magazine article, James McWilliams, author of the new book *Just Food*, somewhat snarkily states, “If you want to make a statement, ride your bike to the farmer's market. If you want to reduce greenhouse gases, become a vegetarian.” I personally don’t see a need to pose it as a choice between one or the other, and I’ll continue to walk to the farmer’s market every Saturday to buy my produce and drop of my compost. However, he is pointing to an often-ignored truth about the importance of taking a more comprehensive view of the life cycle of foods that encompasses many more aspects of production than just food miles.

So, what are these other aspects of production when it comes to animal foods?

Well, first, you’ve got to grow and harvest the feed grains, then transport them to the farms where the animals are. You need energy to operate those farms, then transport the animals to the slaughterhouse. Of course, you have to operate the slaughterhouses, and finally, you have to process and store the animal flesh.

On top of that, farm animals also produce methane when they burp, fart, and breathe. Methane is at least 23 times stronger than carbon dioxide at trapping heat in the atmosphere, according to the EPA.

Now, add to this the fact that we’ve cleared 70% of forests in the Amazon and elsewhere for cattle grazing and cattle feed.

In November of 2006, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization published a

report claiming farmed animals contribute more to global warming than the entire transportation sector. Did you get that? If you add up all the cars, trucks, trains and airplanes in the world, it accounts for 14% of greenhouse gas emissions. Farm animals account for 18%.

A newer report was published just a couple of weeks ago by the well-respected WorldWatch Institute, and it claims that the United Nations overlooked key factors in their calculations and that farm animals are actually responsible for at least half of greenhouse gas emissions worldwide. The authors of this report aren't animal rights activists; they're former and current environmental advisors to the World Bank.

In 2006, geophysicists from the University of Chicago published a study concluding that switching from a standard American diet to a vegan one for one year would prevent 1.5 tons of carbon dioxide emissions from entering the atmosphere, which is more than the amount you'd save by switching from a normal car to a hybrid.

Last year, Rajendra Pachauri, the chair of the Nobel Prize-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, pleaded with the public, "Please eat less meat—meat is a very carbon-intensive commodity." When you've got the top man of the world's most important international agency dealing with most serious environmental threat of our time telling us to eat less meat, I think we should probably pay attention.

But animal agriculture isn't just the leading contributor to climate change worldwide, it's also a leading culprit behind pesticide & antibiotic use, soil erosion, deforestation, and water pollution. That United Nations FAO report identified the livestock sector as "one of the top two or three most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems, at every scale from local to global."

Let's go into the other ways that meat and dairy are inefficient and polluting.

In order to get one pound of beef, you have to feed a steer six to ten pounds of grain...

...which also means that much more water is used because you have to irrigate all that grain...and even organic cows drink 50 gallons of water or more per day.

It's not just what goes into the farm animals that's a problem, it's also what comes out. For example, hogs in North Carolina produce 10 times more fecal waste than people do in North Carolina each day.

And all that poo has to go somewhere. Often, it's stored in huge open-air sewage pits called "lagoons." As these fill up, the waste is sprayed onto fields. Unfortunately, the lagoons are prone to leaks and spills, and waste from the sprayed fields runs off into lakes and streams, and contaminates groundwater. I think that officially qualifies as "grody to the max."

A 2006 study reported in the journal *Science* claims that a third of the

ocean's species are already in collapse, and if current trends continue, by 2048 all of the ocean's species will be in collapse.

In the same way that we have industrialized land animal farming, we've also industrialized fishing. You've got huge nets that are acres wide, lines with hooks that can be 50 miles long, and tons of gear dragging along the ocean floor, obliterating coral and flattening natural landscape that provides essential habitat for many species. Unfortunately, they snag non-target species too. Fishermen discard 80-90 percent of what they catch worldwide.

Of the ocean fish that are kept, a percentage ends up in fish farms as feed. For every pound of farmed fish produced worldwide, several pounds of marine life may have to be caught and killed.

Right now the world population is 6.8 billion. By 2050, the population will reach over 9 billion, according to the UN. "If everyone adopted a vegetarian diet and no food were wasted, current [food] production would theoretically feed 10 billion people." That's what the Population Reference Bureau says, anyway. Unfortunately, the trend in the developing world, where most of our population growth comes from, is to eat more like Americans: *more* meat and *more* dairy. According to the World Wildlife Fund, if the whole world lived at general consumption levels of Americans, we'd need 3-5 more planet earths.

Because we're killing the planet with our growing meat and dairy habit, I would suggest that it has now become evolutionarily advantageous for us as a species for those of us in developing countries who have access to healthy plant foods year-round to adopt a plant-based diet.

One forward-thinker of the past century, Albert Einstein, became vegetarian at the end of his life. He is quoted as having said: "Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet. "

"Vegetarian diet?" you say. "Eating less meat--I get it--but eating none? That's just not healthy. Where would you get your protein?" Let me clarify: the protein thing is a myth. Most Americans get way too much protein. I tracked my protein for 3 weeks just for fun and I found that I, as a vegan who eats no animal products at all, consume about 60 grams of protein a day. A woman my age only needs about 45. And I'm actually pretty strong and active. I work out, I run & swim. Loads of athletes excel without protein from meat or any animal products at all. Olympic gold medal winner Carl Lewis' best athletic performances came after he eliminated all animal products from his diet. So why do we cling to this idea of animal protein being so necessary? Partly, it has to do with culture. Dr. Milton Mills, Associate Director of Preventative Medicine at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine says that, "once we decide something is necessary or desirable, we enshrine it as a cultural value. Once it becomes part of our culture, it doesn't really matter whether it's necessary or important for survival—we'll do it anyway

because we consider it to be necessary and important.” I think we also partly cling to the idea of animal flesh being superior because of outdated science. When Frances Moore Lappe’s groundbreaking book “Diet for a Small Planet” came out in the 1970s the common thinking at the time was that vegetarians had to combine plant foods in a certain way to get the adequate protein and amino acids, but the science on plant-based diet since then has evolved and is much more robust, and we know that’s no longer the case. In fact, the American Dietetic Association, which is the nation’s largest organization of food and nutrition professionals, has had positive things to say about plant-based diets for years, and they strengthened their position even more this year. They say that “... appropriately planned vegetarian diets, including total vegetarian or vegan diets, are healthful, nutritionally adequate and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases.”

That’s right—recent studies have shown that healthy vegan diets help prevent and sometimes even reverse our deadliest diseases. For example, vegans have a 26% lower chance of dying from America’s #1 killer, heart disease. Recent studies have also shown that a healthy, low-fat vegan diet can not only prevent diabetes but even treat it better than the American Diabetic Association diet and common medications.

Of course, there can be unhealthy vegan and vegetarian diets, as there can be unhealthy omnivorous diets, but the point is that science is telling us that healthy veg diets seem to have advantages over healthy omnivorous diets.

But I doubt you came to church today to hear about protein and heart disease. You wanna talk about UU stuff...deep stuff...interconnected web of life stuff. So I shall now read another passage from Will Tuttle’s book, *The World Peace Diet*:

“By placing humans at the top of the planet’s food chain, our culture has historically perpetuated a particular worldview that requires from its members a reduction of essential feelings and awareness—and it is this process of desensitization that we must understand if we would comprehend the underlying causes of oppression, exploitation, and spiritual disconnectedness. When we practice eating for spiritual health and social harmony, we practice making certain essential connections that our culturally induced food rituals normally require us to block from awareness. This practice is an essential prerequisite for evolving to a state of consciousness where peace and freedom are possible.”

In that passage, Will Tuttle mentions humans being placed at the top of the food chain. Why are we there? In the early history of our species—prehistory, I suppose—we were more in the middle of the food chain. We hunted and were hunted, were both predator and prey. We had a more complex relationship with animals, an egalitarian one even. Then something happened. I like the way award-winning author Jonathan Safran Foer, author of the award-winning book-turned-film *Everything Is Illuminated*, discusses domestication of farm animals in his new book, *Eating Animals*: “A common trope, ancient and modern, describes domestication as a process of coevolution between human and animals we have named chickens cows, pigs, and so forth: we’ll protect you, arrange food for you, etc., and in turn, your labor will be harnessed, your milk and eggs taken,

and at times, you will be killed and eaten. Life in the wild isn't a party, the logic goes—nature is cruel—so this is a good deal.” Foer calls this “the post-Darwinian version of the ancient myth of animal consent” which, he says, “is offered by ranchers in defense of the violence that is part of their profession and makes appearances in agricultural school curricula. Propping up the story,” he explains, “is the idea that the interests of the species and those of individuals often conflict, but if there were no species, there would be no individuals. If humankind went vegan, the logic goes, there would be no more farmed animals (which isn't quite right, as there are already dozens of breeds of chickens and pigs that are ‘ornamental,’ or raised for companionship, and other would be kept around to fertilize crops). The animals, in effect, want us to farm them. They prefer it this way.”

Does this reasoning sound familiar? It sounds a bit like the justification used for every form of oppression and violence towards people whether towards women or slaves, who were deemed incapable of looking after themselves. Interestingly, the same parts of the world where animals were first domesticated, branded, shackled and traded, were also the places where people were first shackled and traded. Once we erect a mental barrier between “us” and “them,” no matter who “they” are, anything is justifiable. And history tells us that when one group of people starts referring to another group of people as any kind of animals, some bad stuff is gonna go down. Germans referred to Jews as rats, worms, and many other “lesser beings” for years if not centuries before the Holocaust. I like to refer to this process as “othering.” It's saying you are different/other, therefore you are less than, therefore I can do whatever I want with you.

But it is true that animals are different than us in many ways. I like the way Foer puts it: “Humans are the only animals that have children on purpose, keep in touch (or don't), care about birthdays, waste and lose time, brush their teeth, feel nostalgic, scrub stains, have religions and political parties and laws, wear keepsakes, apologize years after an offense, whisper, fear themselves, interpret dreams, hide their genitalia, shave, bury time capsules, and can choose not to eat something for reasons of conscience.”

In order to justify our violence towards animals, we tell ourselves two conflicting stories: that they are not like us, therefore we can do what we want to them because they don't suffer like we do, or are as smart as us, etc. But then we say, hey, we *are* like them because we're in this food chain too, so we get to be violent like they are and kill other animals. But here's the thing: just because animals do something doesn't mean it's deemed acceptable in human culture to do the same. Dogs will sniff crotches during introductions, hamsters will eat their young, and dominant male gorillas will commit infanticide if a female they consider desirable has a baby by another male. In human culture, it is not cool to sniff crotches, eat newborns or kill off step-children.

The other story we tell ourselves is that farm animals don't suffer. I told myself that story for years. And then I went to a film screening at my church, 4<sup>th</sup> U in Manhattan, which was sponsored by our chapter of UFETA, and learned about the horrors of factory farming. I walked out a vegetarian. In the next two months I read that egg-laying hens are crowded in wire cages with this much space (hold up paper) and no way to spread their wings. Even so-called “organic, free-range” hens come from hatcheries where the

unwanted baby male chicks are ground up alive in turbines or suffocated in trash bags because they're not the breed of chicken that will grow large quickly enough to be raised for meat. I learned that organic, free-range chickens have no humane slaughter laws to protect them. I learned that veal calves are by-products of yes, even the organic dairy industry and that dairy cows are sent to slaughter after about four years anyway. I could no longer in good conscience consume animal products. I went from a veal schnitzel-eater to a vegan animal advocate in three months. Now, strangely, *I'm* the person at church who is trying to open minds and hearts to animals.

I wish somebody had talked to me about it. The truth is, I never had to think about it, I was so far removed from it...even in my hometown in Indiana, where my high school had the largest chapter of the FFA—Future Farmers of America—in the entire state. I've since learned that if I drive about an hour in any direction from my childhood home, I could hit any one of 14 factory farms. But these farms don't have a big black skull and crossbones on the sign out front; they just look like big warehouses and belong to hardworking families who are probably struggling to fulfill their contract obligations with large corporations such as Smithfield or Perdue. I probably mingled with these farmers' kids and grandkids on the playgrounds, but I never saw the pigs, chickens, or cows on the farms, I certainly never went to a slaughterhouse, and I never thought twice about eating pork, chicken, and beef, the names we give chopped-up animals that allow us to transform them in our minds from *someone* into *something*.

As Foer points out, “The problem posed by meat has become an abstract one: there is no individual animal, no singular look of joy or suffering, no wagging tail, and no scream. The philosopher Elaine Scarry has observed that ‘beauty always take place in the particular. Cruelty, on the other hand, prefers abstraction.’ Some have tried to resolve this gap by hunting or butchering an animal themselves, as if those experiences might somehow legitimize the endeavor of eating animals. This is very silly. Murdering someone would surely prove that you are capable of killing, but it wouldn't be the most reasonable way to understand why you should or shouldn't do it. Killing an animal oneself is more often than not a way to forget the problem while pretending to remember. This is perhaps more harmful than ignorance. It's always possible to wake someone from sleep, but no amount of noise will wake someone who is pretending to be asleep.”

When I read that passage by Foer, I thought about our grandparents. In his book, he tells us the story of how his grandmother survived the Holocaust on her own by her own resourcefulness, stealing food and running from the Nazis. I thought of my grandfather, who was a Nazi and a hunter. He was a hunting rifle salesman by trade, in fact. He used to go hunting with the last king of Saxony. He was Germany's sharp shooting champion of 1932.

He was a wonderful father, a doting husband, a self-professed animal lover, and, according to him, not anti-Semitic, though he sold hunting rifles to Nazi officers at labor camps. I never knew him—he died before I was born—but when I think of him, I feel a mix of love and shame. He was a good family man, and he was a product of his time, but as Foer says, no amount of noise will wake someone who is pretending to be asleep. I

wonder what he would think of the granddaughter he never met, a vegan animal advocate who is married to a Jew. Perhaps also love and shame? Who knows. We change, we adapt, we evolve.

I think love and shame are what a lot of humans feel when it comes to the animals we eat. To quote Foer one last time: “Silently, the animal catches our glance. The animal looks at us, and whether we look away (from the animal, our plate, our concern, ourselves) or not, we are exposed. Whether we change our lives or do nothing, we have responded. To do nothing is to do something.”

I’m really glad to be here this morning, having this important, yet difficult and emotional conversation, as so many congregations are having. During our discussion, I hope we can find a way to talk about this issue that doesn’t involve absolutes. Realities aren’t absolute. Even organic vegan environmentalists who compost cause harm to the planet and animals. Nobody’s perfect. I don’t believe in perfection; I believe in progress. And I believe in the power of change, however that may look for you. If you’re interested in receiving practical information on how to transition to a more plant-based diet, I’d love to have your email address. I started a free email coaching program called Vegan at Heart that’s geared towards people who consider themselves vegans at heart but not necessarily in practice. You receive one email a day for 30 days with a helpful tip or resource, and then after the first month, just one email a week. There’s no preaching involved, I promise. I got that out of my system today.

I’d like to end with a thought from Will Tuttle:

“The song of the new mythos that yearns to be born through us requires our spirits to be loving and alive enough to hear and recognize the pain we are causing through our obsolete food orientation. We are called to allow our innate mercy and kindness to shine forth and to confront the indoctrinated assumptions that promote cruelty. While we are granted varying degrees of privilege depending on our species, race, class and gender, we are all harmed when any is harmed; suffering is ultimately completely interconnected because we are all interconnected, and socially constructed privilege only serves to disconnect us from this truth of our interdependence.[...] The song of our necessary evolution and awakening is calling. Achieving the deeper understanding this song requires lies in uncovering connections and relationships that have been hidden or chronically ignored. A journey is required, and *this* is the adventure of discovery that beckons.”

Cool beans.