

299 | Grounds for Peace | Can Peace Begin on our Plates? | Georgia and Ryan Comins
Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 0:18

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Joey Williams 0:34

Hello and welcome to Project Zion: The Restoration Caffeinated. Grounds for Peace is a new international podcast that comes from the work of peaceprojects.eu. In this series, we are asking what are the grounds, you might say the foundations for a new peaceful humanity? I am your host Joey Williams, member of the Community of Christ European Peace and Justice Team and Mission Center President for the Western Europe Mission Center. According to Steve Veazey, President of Community of Christ, "No matter where we start from as individuals are calling our purpose as a human species is to be a peaceful humanity. The phrase peaceful humanity is another way of saying Zion, God's vision or dream for the world." Today, our guests are Ryan and Georgia Comins who have just done a webinar for us on non-violence and what we eat. In their webinar session, they helped answer the question, "Can peace begin on our plates?" and I have to say they did a great job. Georgia has a love for literature and has recently finished a four-year degree in English literature. She's now pursuing her master's. Ryan graduated with a degree in theology and religious studies, and soon we'll be starting a new job teaching philosophy and religion. Both Georgia and Ryan have been living a plant based lifestyle for four years. So Georgia and Ryan, welcome! It is so good to have you with us.

Ryan Comins 2:10

Thank you so much for having us, Joey.

Georgia Comins 2:12

Yeah.

Joey Williams 2:15

Can you tell us just a little bit about yourselves, I gave a little talk about your education, but tell us where you're from and where you're living now and what you're doing?

Georgia Comins 2:24

I'm Georgia, and I'm from England from the north of England. And I had never lived outside of that. Not really, outside of specifically Cheshire where I grew up either until I met this guy. And suddenly when we moved to Cambridge, we studied there, moved around loads of places, and then moved to London more recently, which was a very big culture shock for me at first. I remember the first I went on the trains to London with Ryan and I got off the train and it was like, just huge. And I was like, I feel like I'm in another country like this is just insane. Like, why do you need a shopping center in a train station? Like you just you don't need that. That's just insane and ridiculous.

Joey Williams 3:14
Yeah, London's huge.

Georgia Comins 3:16
Yeah, yeah. compared to where I grew up anyway.

Ryan Comins 3:21
So I come originally from Kent in southeast of England. What I grew up I lived in various places, including Australia and North Wales. I met Georgia. We got married and moved to Cambridge. I did a degree in theology and Religious Studies at the University of Cambridge, followed by a postgraduate teacher training qualification, which has been very bizarre during the lockdown because I haven't actually been physically in schools. But that's still been a wonderful experience. And now we recently moved to London as Georgia said, I'm starting a new job in a week's time.

Joey Williams 3:56
Wonderful. Thank you guys. So you recently did a webinar for us. And the topic of the webinar was non violence and what we eat. And you answered this question, "Can peace begin on our plates?" And I actually want to start kind of at the end of that webinar, because I asked you a question. And I mentioned that there were people who are always looking for rules, right? In what they eat and what they put on their plates. Can I eat this or can I not eat that then becoming a vegan or a vegetarian? You know, is this all a rule based thing? Is it just things that you should or shouldn't eat? Or is it a little more principle based? And I really liked it because you gave us five different principles. So if you don't mind, would you mention what those five principles are in heading towards a vegan or a vegetarian lifestyle?

Ryan Comins 4:59
Sure so the first thing to say is that I would also encourage people to reflect on their own principles and come up with their own list of what their values are and what guides their food choices. But these are my five principles. That have helped me to move in that direction. So the first is knowledge and education. This empowers you to make informed choices. So abuse and exploitation in our food system goes unchecked, because so many people are not aware of where their food is coming from, or what's been involved in actually bringing into that table. So the first principle is knowledge. I think the solution is about education and becoming informed about where your food is coming from. The second principle is compassion because I think when you know about the suffering that animals experience on factory farms and the abuse and the exploitation of slaughterhouse workers, the risks that factory farms post about public health, compassion is then the sort of motivation force that guides you to make those changes to try and reduce some of that suffering as far as you can through your food choices. The third principle for me is courage because food is such a large part of our lives part of our culture. And it's so easy to fall into habits that we've grown up with from when we were a child, that then become really deeply entrenched. And it takes courage to look honestly at what we're eating the reality of it, the impact that our food choices make, and then to make those changes where necessary. The fourth one for me is self care. And I think this is important because it helps us

sustain the changes that we make. So I tried to make food choices that helped me to support my physical and my mental well being. This is important in its own right, because we're all worth taking care of. But it also means you're less likely to burn out or give up on the changes that you make and feel disheartened. And then finally, for me and important principle is citizenship. So I think that peace can begin on my plate, but it shouldn't. And so citizenship is this idea of taking what you've learned and sharing it with others because one individual's food choice is not going to change the entire food system. It requires kind of collective action, which makes it important for us to speak to others to raise awareness, and even to raise issues with public officials and things like that.

Joey Williams 7:21

Great. So knowledge, compassion, courage, self care, and citizenship. Let's go back to knowledge. Tell me how do we gain this knowledge? where are some sources where people can gain more knowledge?

Ryan Comins 7:37

So there's an abundance of information out there and abundance of sources that people can turn to to find knowledge about their food and where it comes from. Even a simple sort of Google search will pull up an awful lot of information. There's several documentaries as well. Obviously, it's important always to be to think critically about the quality and the of the research that's gone into them. Also, I would say, looking at food labels can be helpful because often we're not aware of how prevalent animal products are in our society and throughout our food system. So looking at some of the products that we consume on a daily basis, looking at the back of the labels, and actually seeing how many things milk powder, for instance, is included in things that you wouldn't suspect. So that's that's a starting point. But it's not an ending point. It's a lifelong journey.

Joey Williams 8:26

Yeah, great. And in the webinar, you talked about Food, Inc. And that was one of my first ones too, I think, I don't know when that came out. But I remember seeing it at a 2008 Film Festival in Columbia, Missouri, at the University of Missouri, and I remember how impactful that was, for me, kind of on my journey of what's on our plates. And you mentioned that in the webinar, as well as kind of a starting point where you saw that film and that documentary and thought, whoa, you know, what's going on and how are we treating the animals that we are putting on our plates,

Ryan Comins 8:58

Absolutely it's very impactful In the UK, as well, there is a documentary film called Land of Hope and Glory, which just consists of footage that has just been taken from slaughterhouses. And it's just a compilation of that footage, it's hard hitting so it may not be for everybody. But certainly if you want to really kind of get to grips with where your food is coming from, that's another thing to check out.

Georgia Comins 9:23

I think as well even if you don't feel, you know, like sort of quite prepared to, you know, watch graphics slaughter house footage, you know, to see the kind of conditions that are on factory farm and I think you can almost sort of do it by taking a more hypothetical approach to it. You know, that was kind of my experience where there anyway, I mean, I mentioned in the webinar that I watched a speech by Gary Yourofsky and I you know, he's a he's a controversial guy and I definitely don't agree with maybe even a lot that he's done on all sides, but you know, that speech definitely made an impact on me and I I didn't watch any kind of have footage of animals being abused or slaughtered. You know, that speech just kind of made me question like, you know, what would a good slaughter look like? You know what I mean? Like this, this kind of idea of you can show me all the footage in the world of the most horrendous animal abuse out there. And you know, something that we realized a lot when we were doing street activism and talking to people on the street is they would say, well, you know, they'd see the footage, and they'd say, "Well, this is just some bad thoughts." But I think then we would often kind of respond with the questions that in a way of, you know, what, what would it look like if it was being done good? Like, how do you compassionately kill? How do you slaughter an animal in a way that is palatable? You know, and that and that would be okay to be seen on the footage. And that wouldn't make us kind of have this like, Oh, no, that's horrible. I don't want to see that. You know, what would nonviolent slaughter look like? You know, even if the end goal is for food, what would actually look like? I think that can be a good question to ask.

Joey Williams 11:02

Yeah. And that compassion is the second principle that you've mentioned. So both of you have kind of given these brain type of answers that it's about based on the knowledge or based on asking a question, a hypothetical question. What about experience? What about the emotions that are involved in that or you want to talk a little more about the compassionate side?

Ryan Comins 11:25

Absolutely. I think that especially in our modern industrialized world, where people are often very disconnected from nature and from animals, and we often don't have as many of the same experiences growing up as maybe people would have done 50 or 100 years ago, and sometimes it's quite difficult to empathize with an animal that looks so different. So I think developing that compassion involves learning more about the animals. What do we know about the emotions of animals experience? And that, to me was very eye opening, realizing that animals that look so different and I've never you can't have a conversation with them and yet they still experienced pleasure, pain and often much more complex emotions than that is a foundation for empathy.

Joey Williams 12:16

I've even seen these like kind of cut out cows that people take around in the and then they have like these rubber utters the kids can play with because kids in cities especially have maybe never seen a cow never even got out of their city and actually touched physically, a cow to have any empathy at all and what it is that eventually might be on their plates. Georgia, did you have anything to add to that?

Georgia Comins 12:44

I think with me, one of the key moments I mean, I already had the compassion for the animals by this point. But I think that a point where it became undeniable For me it was when we went to our first slaughterhouse vigil, and because that was just such an incredible You know, powerful kind of moment emotionally, it was so draining, like we both came back just, I don't know, not even crying. We were just like, just so empty, you know, like, we were just like, how can that be that much pain and cruelty just on one truck in one small little town in England, you know? And then when you think of the scale that this is actually on, it was just kind of such a hard hitting kind of moment for us because when you're at these vigils, you can't help but connect with the animals that you're looking into the eyes of I mean, you know, the eyes are a window into the soul and, you know, we like to say and stuff and when you're when you're face to face with a, a young chick that is about to be taken to slaughter. You know, you can argue back and forth about whether we're right in saying that they know or that they have an understanding or anything at all like that, but I definitely felt when I was there that they were some of the smartest eyes I've ever seen. And maybe I was reading too much emotion into it, but I really connected with the chickens in that truck. And it was, honestly one of the most heartbreaking things I've ever seen was to then have the truck drive off and then come back out empty. It was absolutely soul destroying, and I'll be honest, it was horrendous. And so I think for me, that was when the compassion element became, you know, solidified was because I was face to face with it. Before then it was like a hypothetical thing, the knowledge element, like I was saying, but in that moment, I was face to face, you know, I could smell them. I could see them.

Joey Williams 14:36

Yeah, and you were describing in the webinar that these vigils are pretty much planned activities, even with the slaughterhouses that they inform other slaughterhouses, that many people are going to show up, and they're going to stop the trucks as they go into the slaughterhouse or the place where they're going to be killed. And then it's kind of a moment to have a vigil to have a moment of silence are a moment of appreciation of their lives before they then go on in their Is there any more you want to add to that experience?

Georgia Comins 15:08

I think for me specifically, I always considered it, I think I mentioned the webinar, I considered it my way of going to pay a bit of final respect to the animal because, I mean, yeah, I've seen the footage from slaughterhouses a lot of the time at least, they're not given that kind of respect in their final moments. You know, just kind of being able to take that moment and to look them in the eye and see them as an individual. Okay, not a human and maybe not in any way comparable to a human but an individual, nonetheless, that has a preference for life and has experienced some range of emotions and mental, you know, capacity and things and that was, yeah, very powerful. I know that, you know, sometimes we have, you know, disagreements with you know, the slaughterhouses or the truck drivers. I remember one time they were they pulled up for the two minutes sort of silence But he was playing loud, like sort of music, kind of like dance music or in and out on the radio. And that really, you know, it really annoyed me upset me. And I remember like, I went to him and I was like, Can you turn that off, please? Like

we're trying to have just like a last little bit of respect to these animals. And I was like, you know, I was quite like, irritated by him at the time. But then as I took a step back, I was like, I mean, of course, he's not going to do that. Because if he, I mean, this month transports thousands of chickens a day, if he gave every single chicken, individual attention, he wouldn't get paid. You wouldn't get any job, you'd be filled with PTSD and horror, because it is it's horrible.

Ryan Comins 16:40

For many of the workers lost houses that desensitization is a coping mechanism. Because if you when you allow yourself to feel that compassion, that empathy, there's no way psychologically that you can continue to do what slaughterhouse workers are required to do. It requires that not do sensitization about disconnection from, from seeing the animal as a living and conscious being.

Georgia Comins 17:07

Yeah, and I mean, I can attach to that, because I've got lots of family members that have worked in the industry, you know, as a butcher or in an actual slaughterhouse. And, you know, they're not vegan or vegetarian or anything, but they all acknowledge that when they first went in there, it was horrible. And they were really, really disturbed by, you know, the dying animals or the big, you know, chunks of meat hanging up in the butcher. So I think this is something that we can, I don't think that we should shy away from, you know, talking about because it's important both to the animals and the workers. I don't think it's fair to expect people to desensitize themselves in that way to something like that.

Joey Williams 17:44

Yeah, how interesting, Ryan, you just talked about the sensitization and so how it's necessary in this type of environment, to do that to be able to continue to do that type of job. And yet, we've just mentioned doing a vigil could be way to sensitize ourselves to become more compassionate as we look at this topic and what it means for us emotionally, but also to see and really experience what these animals are going through. The next step in your principles is courage. And so could you tell us about courage and how maybe it's been difficult for you with either family members or out there in the world to have courage and your principled approach to veganism?

Ryan Comins 18:32

I think courage was most important in the very earliest stages of my journey when I was trying to decide whether to become vegetarian, actually, so I didn't go vegetarian straight away. I when I was 14, I sort of, I spoke about it a bit in the webinar, but I watched documentary that made me think a lot about meats and the and the food industry, the animal agriculture industry, but I didn't go vegetarian straight away. And part of the reason was that my family's culture was very, very not just heavily based around animal products and our diet, but almost sort of ridiculed or or poke gentle fun at sort of the idea of vegetarianism. And so the thought of kind of standing up and saying, No, I'm going to be a vegetarian against that kind of social pressure was very scary in a way. And so it did take a lot of courage to actually make that

decision and say, No, I think this is wrong. And I'm not going to I'm not going to be a part of eating meat anymore. And then the steps along the way, in a way I find each step becomes easier. And it's easier, you're kind of conviction grows, the more that you find yourself, articulating to others, why you're doing what you're doing, the more the strength of your own conviction grows, and then the courage is still required, but it's not as scary anymore.

Georgia Comins 19:59

Yeah, I think that's a difference in our personality, isn't it as well because (laughs). No, because I think you know where I'm going with this is just that I'm very, we always joke and say I'm a very all or nothing person, you know, if I sort of learned something, like resonate with something I'm like, that's it. I'm doing that. And I think that that's kind of what happened with me veganism so I, I honestly like, you know, I understand that takes a lot of courage for many people. But I never felt like it took a lot of courage for me, like, I remember I used to feel like such an imposter when people would say to me, like, oh, but it must be really hard for you to have gone like vegan or whatever. And I was always like, no, like, I don't know, it was just, I think because I quite enjoyed it in a way. I'm kind of that person. I was like, Yeah, I get to be that kind of like spicy, irritating person. That gets to be like, Oh, I don't need that. Not from a place of thinking that I was better than other people. But I just I always enjoy being different and contrary, you know, and kind of different and going against society in that way.

Joey Williams 21:11

Yeah. And what I'm hearing from both of you is that it really seems to be a question about identity. And Ryan, it seems that for you, it took some steps for it to really integrate itself into a part of your identity. And that requires some courage. And it sounds like you Georgia, your courage comes at the beginning that you you kind of claim this new identity, and then carry it already with courage. So I think it might be a question about identity and how easy it is, once you've decided this is who I am, the world should accept me as I am. And then you have that identity and you can continue to move forward in that way. Let's talk a little bit about self care. Because you said we don't want to get burnt out, you know, and so that's a really important principle to have self care. What are some ways that you guys have both taken care of yourselves on your journey of veganism?

Georgia Comins 22:07

I think the main one for me was whenever we very quickly learned that whenever we'd gone to a vigil when we come back, we have to watch happy animal videos. And which maybe sounds quite childish, but literally, you would go and see like, you know, the chickens outside the slaughterhouse and then come back and look up funny chicken videos or cute chicken videos, and have like some yummy vegan snacks and stuff like biscuits and things, which maybe isn't the healthiest form of self care, but it was just kind of like, you know, letting off steam after such a heavy, emotional, emotionally charged kind of day.

Ryan Comins 22:43

I would second that and also in addition to that, I think it's important not to be overly restrictive with the way that you eat. Especially if you decide to go fully vegan, you already cutting out

certain food groups which form a very large part of a standard western diet. There's some people that are tempted to go even further and maybe cut out lots of other foods as well. And for them even more restrictive diet. And I'm not saying that that is never a good idea because people might have specific medical conditions or nutritional needs or something like that, but generally speaking, I've found from other people that I've seen and spoken with that that can often be a recipe for both becoming mentally fatigued as it becomes increasingly difficult to find food that you can eat. But also, you can run into nutritional difficulties as well when you're severely restricting the foods that you eat. So I say, absolutely, you can eat a wide variety of plant based foods and eat them in abundance.

Joey Williams 23:49

It's that outside perspective of someone else that sometimes can be a real put down as you're trying to change, make changes to your diet. And so you tell someone all of a sudden, you're vegetarian or you're vegan, or you're a pescetarian. And if they see you eat a piece of chicken, when you say you're pescetarian, all of a sudden, it's like, it's like you've done everything wrong, and you can't go back. Now I saw you eat a piece of chickens. And now you just need to eat chicken. I know that people have, maybe this goes back to that courage question, but I think it's also a matter of self care, to be aware that people are probably going to really have a critical eye, especially people who are not looking at their own diet or what's on their plates, but are looking at what you've just said that you are and then they want to either poke holes or they went to look at that and say, Oh, he doesn't or she doesn't really follow that diet completely.

Georgia Comins 24:43

Yeah, and I think as well a big thing that I'm so passionate about, if you like within sort of vegan and plant based eating, is I really dislike how it's come to be associated with kind of a diet and weight loss and you know, and all these kind of things because I think it can so, so quickly turn toxic. An example of this in particular that I'm thinking of is when I was doing my undergraduate degree, and they offered, you know, when I was really grateful for it, they offered them vegan options in the canteen. But one thing I noticed was that the vegan option if I was getting a sandwich, so it was always labeled as oh, on the 300 calories, or, you know, Weight Watchers friendly and things like this. And I think like most people, you know, I've had issues in the past with the way I look and feel about myself and, you know, it's, it's not it's not good or healthy, I think, to be equating veganism or vegetarian or anything, just solely with a kind of diet culture. You know, and I really dislike the fact it's come to be associated with that, like I, I don't avoid meat because I want to lose weight. So if I'm buying lunch while I'm out, I don't want to have a kind of calorie count, you know, shoved down my throat and I think that that can be an issue if there's not the kind of self care element within veganism because it's just common out there for it to be kind of put across in that way to you.

Joey Williams 26:05

Yeah, and what we, what we actually can put on our plates, maybe even the new stereotype. People are being very critical about what other people are putting on their plates. And Ryan, you talked in the webinar about, you know, the Western diet and obviously, there's a market that plays to that diet. Greasier here foods, animal based foods, then people with more money,

or more economic possibilities might then be able to live a more plant based diet because they have more variety, but it's going to be costly. Yeah, has that been your experience as well?

Georgia Comins 26:41

Yeah, definitely. Sorry. I'm really like passionate about all the whole sort of class element in veganism and plant based diets like you know, I mean, you can go and get like, you know, fish and chips for like five pounds here. But if you were to go and get like, you know, fruits and vegetables and beans and things or tofu, it's a lot more expensive. And that is so wrong because factory farm cheap meat is just so much more readily available and cheaper and more accessible. And then it's um, it's actually one thing that I find quite irritating about a lot of the vegan activism is currently being done as well it kind of places this burden on you know, you need to avoid this and you need to do that without recognizing the fact that you're placing the burden on some of the most vulnerable in our society that aren't going to be able to afford to do that under the kind of current structure of things organic free range meats is on like two or three times the price of you know, factory farmed meat and stuff plant based foods on top of that, but for healthy options anyway is you know, maybe even more I'm not quite sure but something that definitely really kind of bothers me about that element. I don't know whether you see a similar kind of thing.

Ryan Comins 27:58

I would agree with that. I think Very often you can eat plant based foods on on a budget. But they're not always the the options that are available to you are generally directed if you're if you're on a budget, and I yeah, I'm also uncomfortable with judging people who on a lower income and can't afford maybe to to eat a fully plant based diet. I think those of us who can who have options have a responsibility to choose wisely and to answer choose with compassion. But I think we also have to recognize that for some people, that's not their reality, they don't have those options.

Georgia Comins 28:40

But I think that's an issue even within an omnivore diet as well, isn't it because they're kind of globally screwed in a way you can't afford good quality meat and you can't afford good quality plant based options. So you know, we have a massive problem with factory farming but one of the reasons why I think is so big is because for a lot of the population that's all they can afford. Yeah, I mean, maybe we don't want to turn it into a whole class thing. But yeah, you know, I definitely, yeah, it's something that I'm really passionate about and drives me crazy whenever I think about it, especially having come from the north as well, which I inject into conversation all the time with this. But it is so relevant as well, because there is a massive divide in the wealth between the two parts. And, and when I'm in London, you know, plant based options are just, you know, that everywhere, I can walk in anywhere and get a vegan version of everything. You can't get that in small towns in the north of England. It's a big problem.

Joey Williams 29:33

Thank you. Let's talk a little bit about the last principle which is citizenship. Tell me more about that. Is this this idea of coming together and how do we not create second class citizens?

Ryan Comins 29:47

Yeah, I for me citizenship links in quite nicely actually into what George was just saying. Individuals have the responsibility to make responsible choices, but we also need to create as as a different system. And that requires cooperation. And collective effort is not something that an individual can do by themselves. And it links to self care as well. Because putting that burden on yourself to try and eat in a way that is completely cruelty free and has no kind of environmental problems whatsoever is extremely difficult. So for me citizenship is about sharing with others, what we learn, and raising awareness about the issues. For me it involved becoming involved in certain forms of activism. But it doesn't have to be for everybody. It can just be kind of conversations that you have with family and friends. And also considering these issues when it comes time to vote for elected officials. And if you see a petition, things like that, I think just being willing to talk with others and to try and work collaboratively to make a fairer and better food system.

Joey Williams 30:56

Georgia, you said something in the webinar that really is stuck with me. In fact, throughout the webinar, I wanted to stop you to talk a little bit more about it. You were talking about your wedding day. And this is the day you went vegan, right? This is the day you decided I'm going to be vegan on my wedding day.

Georgia Comins 31:14

I made the decision to go vegan on my wedding day. But that was brought on by the fact that I've wanted to go vegan for a couple of months before that, but I was still living at home. I mean, those sort of backgrounds. This obviously is that we were both raised Mormon and got married very young. It's not an uncommon thing in Mormonism. And so obviously that meant that I wasn't leaving home until I was married age 18 so I made the kind of pledge to myself I kind of commitment as you know, the minute it becomes feasible for me to be a vegan, and I will do it because until that point, I was living at home and was you know, really busy working and at school and my mom was the one that was doing most of the food shopping and I thought it would be unfair of me to expect her to not only buy all their food, but afford expensive and mock meats and stuff like this for me. So in my mind, I was like, you know, in order to combine my compassion and my kind of beliefs around this, I need to do it as soon as it is feasible for me to. And so in my mind, I was like, yep, well, that's the day that I move out, then the day that I leave home is the day when I go vegan. And that just so happened to be my wedding day. So yeah, we got there and I just didn't eat any of the food. And I think that people were like, Oh, she's just been, you know, a typical bride, like not wanting to eat much and everything in front of everyone. But now there was just very little. We just, I think I just ended up with a little bit of salad.

Joey Williams 32:43

You said in the webinar that you had a lot of pride that day, though, and you kind of were looking around with a little bit of disdain on everyone else. And this is where that phrase came that you said, You said you hadn't quite learned or understood about nuanced perspective in

terms of what people eat. So tell us a little more about your journey to discovering nuanced perspective and how it's helped you, maybe not have an attitude of I'm better than you because I'm vegan.

Georgia Comins 33:14

Yeah. The nuanced perspective that I later developed was that I understood at last, that it's not possible for everybody to be vegan. At that point, I was very much sold on the idea from like vegan activists that I mentioned, like Gary Yourofsky, that it's 100% possible to everyone like, you know, it's just it's the healthiest thing, it's the best diet, do it, no problems. No matter what you eat, you're going to be fine. And so with that idea in my mind, and then knowing about all the suffering that went into animal foods, I was just kind of like, Well, why aren't you all going vegan? It's, it's so easy. There's nothing at all to consider like, so that was kind of what I meant by disdain was not so much for people as individuals but more just a frustration of like, it's totally possible and fine to be vegan. Why don't you all doing it already?

Joey Williams 34:02

I think it goes back to this question of courage as well that we were talking about you already had that courage to give yourself new identity. And you're probably asking, why can't everyone re-identify themselves as vegan?

Georgia Comins 34:13

Yeah, I think it was, you know, it's a classic that I mean, a lot of people like to make out that, you know, it's just a it's just a vegan thing, that kind of attitude. And I'm like, no, it's the same no matter what if you got a reformed alcoholic, a reformed smoker, a convert to a new religion, like literally anything, you will be so passionate about it in the beginning, that you're going to want to tell everyone about it. And you're gonna think it's the greatest thing ever that you've discovered. And it's sort of no different with veganism and and what changed my mind on it was just growing up, like, you know, there's no big secret towards developing more that nuanced perspective. It's just a case of, you know, learning more that it's not possible health wise for everyone and that there are some people that maybe can't be 100% Vegan, you know when so because you don't know everyone's individual situation, I can't then tell someone you know, you need to go vegan, it's going to be the best thing for you. Because I just simply don't know. So I think the nuanced perspective came from just recognizing that I don't know everything. You know, I don't, I don't begrudge myself for having that because I think if anyone says they haven't had a faith like that, you know, they're lying. And we've all done it as humans, especially when you're 18. Yeah, like, it's everyone, everyone has things like that. I think. I think the context of my disdain in that moment came from a newly awakened realization of how much suffering humans have inflicted on animals. And when you first learn that, it's very difficult to remember to have compassion for the humans in those situations as well. Because, you know, you see people eating a steak and all I could see was a cow that was killed in a brutal way. And that was where it sort of came from.

Joey Williams 35:59

And so as we gain more experience and more knowledge, we gain more perspective, those nuanced perspectives that you mentioned.

Georgia Comins 36:07
Definitely.

Joey Williams 36:09

Ryan, you mentioned that it took you about two years to move from simple meat reduction to vegetarianism. And then you said that it took three more years before you decided to become a vegan or on your journey to becoming a vegan. Can you talk a little bit about some of the details of your transition? What were some of the key moments or learnings that helped bring you further on your journey to veganism and even animal activism?

Ryan Comins 36:38

Sure, so I was 14 when I saw the documentary that you mentioned earlier Food Inc. and that opened my eyes first to some of the problems with corporate farming. I didn't go vegetarian then I was put off fast food, especially sort of large fast food chains because that documentary focus quite a little bit on on those companies. So I stopped eating my places like McDonald's, KFC places that I knew from that documentary, were involved in stuff that just, it really put me off. I wasn't comfortable with it. And then it kind of it stayed in my mind. And I kept thinking about it. And I kept the question that I kept going back to was sort of what gives me the right to take away an animal's life if I don't need to. And I didn't know very much about nutrition. I never really sort of studied anything like that growing up. And so the question that it raised in my mind was, Well, I mean, do we actually need to eat meat to be healthy because that was kind of what I'd always believe growing up was the you need meat in order to be healthy. So um, I did some research and also around that time, I started speaking to Georgia, who had been studying a little bit about food nutrition, just as part school and stuff. And we were talking about how I learned pretty quickly that meat is not a necessary part of a diet. You can get everything single nutrient that the human body needs without meat. And so then to me, it seemed quite obvious. I was like, Well, I mean, why on earth would I take away an animal's life if I don't need to for food? So I had that that sort of inner realization, but then I was thinking, Oh, I I don't know if I can have the courage to take that step and and to tell my family about that. At the time I was living at home, we It was a single parent family, we didn't have an awful lot of money. And I felt like it would be imposing an additional financial burden on my mom to kind of, you know, sort of cater for a special way of eating, but but I still really had this feeling that I wanted to be vegetarian. And then when I was 16, I had kidney stones, which is very unusual for the age that I was, and I went to hospital and the doctors informed me that one of the foods or food groups that can elevate your risk of kidney stones to a certain degree was meat and dairy an animal products. So to me, I was like, Okay, well, this is my moment. But this is the time when I can go vegetarian and, and it was easy to explain to my family because I had sort of two reasons I was like, Look, not only do I feel that this is unethical, but also is possibly contributed to this this health problem that I've been experiencing. So yeah, that was my journey to vegetarianism, that over the next couple of years, I became more open and a bit stronger in my conviction that we didn't need to eat animals and that for it was wrong, it was

unnecessary. I also began to learn more about the links between the dairy industry and the environment and some of the environmental impacts of the dairy industry. And because I cared about the environment, I decided that I wanted to try and reduce my dairy consumption. And then it was it was actually Georgia who had quite a large impact on me finally making the decision to go fully vegan. So I watched this speech that she mentioned by Gary Yourofsky called the greatest speech you will ever hear. I was like, you need to watch. Yeah, I watched that. I also watched a few other kind of documentaries and videos did a little bit more research and learned more about what actually goes on the abuse and the exploitation of cows and chickens in the dairy industry and the egg industry. And I decided that I could no longer really sort of support that in good conscience. So I decided to go vegan. And then there's like, some sort of opposition from my family members. Not huge, but they just kind of, you know, made fun of me a little bit and stuff. But in response to that sort of opposition, my views became stronger. And a couple of years later, we went on the official animal rights march in London, which was looking back that was sort of the start of me becoming more involved in vegan activism, because it was such a powerful experience to just be walking in marching with thousands of people who felt the same way. Before that I'd always felt that kind of like, a bit odd. like nobody else really seemed to have a problem with it. agricultural, anything like that it always felt a bit like I was the odd one out going on that march was a powerful experience. And then I became more involved in all the forms of animal activism after that.

Joey Williams 41:10

Thanks for sharing both of your journeys. A little bit more about that. It gives me some insight and I think our listeners will really enjoy hearing a little bit more about your personal convictions, but also some of the struggles and you know, that being made fun of it goes back to that courage question, because I do think that people take a lot of rap when they decide to make a change in their eating habits. So you were very clear both of you in your presentation, that this is important to you politically, economically, socio culturally, and definitely environmentally. But Georgia, you just kind of talked about a conversion experience. You talked about this moment where things changed and, and in the religious sphere, we talk about a metanoia, a conversion, this reorienting of ourselves that is often rooted in an identity of Christ. And I just want to ask, Is there any type of spiritual or religious identity that has been important to you in terms of veganism or a journey towards veganism?

Georgia Comins 42:22

Um, I think, you know, there definitely has been for quite a while I practiced witchcraft, based off of my sort of experience with veganism, specifically, you know, Wiccan. And the bit that drew me to that was there was a line from the Wiccan read, which was on it harm none, do what you will. And I love the fact that the whole sort of focus of that and the idea behind it was that you know, whatever it is that you do, just make sure it's not harming someone. And that really resonated with me. You know, I think, yeah, that informed my decision to start practicing that for about, about a year and a half, yeah, about a year and a half. So that, you know, definitely has done in the past. I think I moved away from that after a while, you know, that could be a whole other conversation itself. These days, I don't know if I'd use the word spiritual, maybe kind of philosophical or moral questions of ethics. I don't know, something like that. But

I think definitely at different parts in my journey, it's had roots in spirituality. I mean, you know, being raised Mormon as well, obviously, there was the element of the word of wisdom and reading in the Bible, like Genesis, I remember, when we first got married, we've had a big conversation about how we felt that the world was declared good by God when they were living in the garden. And if there was no kind of like, bloodshed and things would they have been eating animals and, you know, like, so I think definitely the past has been informed by that for me. Would you agree with that? I don't know?

Ryan Comins 43:58

Yeah, definitely. As Georgia said, throughout my childhood, I was a, I was a devout Mormon, the same as Georgia was throughout her childhood. And often after praying, especially I remember some experiences when I was living in Australia, I would pray about things. And then I remember opening my eyes after praying, and I'd look at the garden where we lived. And there it was, it was a beautiful garden, and there were loads of birds that would that would be there and everything. And I just remember several times after I after I would be praying, and having this sort of distinct impression, when I'd open my eyes that I just didn't want to cause any harm or suffering to to these animals. And even more specifically, I remember thinking, I don't want to take away their life. And, in fact, those experiences also laid the foundation for just my later convictions around peace and non violence more generally, so that they're very closely intertwined for me. Now, my spiritual and religious beliefs have changed a lot. And they changed several times in the intervening almost 10 years. And most of this specific kind of theology and worldviews that I had and was raised with has completely gone away. But I do, I do think that some of the values that I approach food with could be could be seen as spiritual, I'd use the word spiritual to describe them. So I believe in the importance of mindfulness, of being aware of what we're eating, I believe that all lives are interconnected, and that we have far more in common with other species of animals and other forms of life than we have differences. I believe that we share this world with other forms of life, that it doesn't just belong to us that it's not exclusive to us. That's a quotation, this or a phrase that sometimes used in the vegan movement of animals are here with us, not for us. And I, I do believe that and I think when I when I tried to live by those values, which I think are spiritual values, it leads me to look at what I'm eating and whether that aligns with those values and beliefs.

Joey Williams 46:06

I really appreciate your honest responses here. You know and Community of Christ, we have this church seal, which is a lion and a lamb and a child all kind of lying together and in the same in the same picture, one not ravaging over the other. This comes out of Isaiah 11, verses six through nine, where this talks about a lion and a bear and a cow and, and they're all vegetarian. It says that they shall not hurt or destroy in all of my holy mountain. And so for the restoration movement, Zion is this idea of returning to non violence in creation. And this may include our diets as well. So let's talk a little bit more about some of the spiritual and some of the theological implications of what's on our plate. And let's go to Doctrine and Covenants 86:2b where it says, flesh also a beast and of the fowls of the air I the LORD hath ordained for the use of man with thanksgiving. Nevertheless, they are to be used sparingly, and it is pleasing unto me that they should not be used only in the times of winter or of cold, or famine. It seems that

these words of wisdom are helpful at the beginning of both of your journeys, as you were both raised in the Mormon faith. Can you talk more about that influence? And was this part of your personal faith? Or is it something that's taught a lot in the Mormon tradition?

Georgia Comins 47:42

I remember I took the word of wisdom very seriously, in that regard. I remember getting into sort of like, you know, friendly conversations though arguments maybe about the Word of Wisdom because it says you know, accepting, you know, times of famine. And I remember thinking like, but we're not in a time of famine, we live in the UK. And we go on we buy on me in plastic in a supermarket like this doesn't, this doesn't count as a time of famine or a time of need. And I remember thinking that quite strongly, even when I was, you know, younger of like, you know, this just doesn't, it doesn't make sense. And I think mainly because the word of wisdom, especially those verses, was often used like against those by some, you know, Mormons at the time, it would be like our Heavenly Father, like ordained animals to be eaten fails. And we would always kind of be like, yeah, in times of famine. You know, that's not you don't live in like that. Now. You know, you're not. Yeah, a favorite response I've heard by a vegan activist I like was that Yeah, you're not Bear Grylls out there hunting it yourself in the middle of like a desert. You know, you. You go down the supermarket and you buy bacon and you're making a sandwich like you know, it's not it's not a survival instinct. And so I think it definitely had a big impact for me in that regard. Definitely shaped my beliefs on that and kind of my understanding of when I would deem it necessary to eat meat and things.

Ryan Comins 49:16

Something that I find very interesting is actually the warning against frequent meat eating in the Word of Wisdom is repeated twice because it also then two verses later says, These have God made for the use of man only in times of famine and excess of hunger. So it's repeated and and I just feel that. I think partly it comes down to what we were saying at the beginning of the podcast about this tension between rules based approaches versus principle based approaches. And I think the moment approach the word of wisdom, or at least the style of Mormonism that I was raised in and that I followed was very rules based, and like very clear boundaries. And so people would, including myself, when I was younger, would read the word witness say, oh, meat is not totally prohibited, therefore it's fine. But I think if we if we take a more principle based reading of it, the emphasis the overriding principle seems to be that these products should be limited to extreme or unusual circumstances. So it talks about famine, excess of hunger, it talks about winter, these times when there's not an abundance of plant food around. And that just doesn't apply to well certainly doesn't apply to my life. I'm not saying it, there are definitely places in the world where people are living through famines and where they don't have choices. And I have no judgment at all for people in those situations. But certainly for me, and um, for a lot of people, and you know, in our circles, they do have a choice. And I think the main kind of principal emphasis in in that second, the Doctrine and Covenants as I read it, is that when we have those choices, we should choose to limit on the consumption.

Georgia Comins 50:53

Interestingly, as well something that I would like to add because it's just come back to me now, is that a couple of years actually Well, while after we'd left the church as well, quite a few people that we'd known as Mormons had actually gone plant based, or like some of them even fully sort of vegan. Since, what might my own Bishop did? Yeah, you know, and, you know, several other people as well, you know, one thing that was interesting is, we've then heard them now when we've spoken to them since talking about the Word of Wisdom, and saying how now they read it as a sort of a mandate almost, maybe that's too strong of a word, but kind of like, you know, a suggestion

Joey Williams 51:36
Encouragement?

Georgia Comins 51:36
Yeah an encouragement. That's it. Yeah. benefit of being with our teacher for doing this. But yeah, like an encouragement to sort of do it. And I just find that so interesting, because a lot of it is people that at one point, were like, no, the word of wisdom means that we can eat meat. And you know, so yeah, to be fair to moments, I don't seem to be much more kind of grow in discussion about this topic, in that in those communities as well using the Word of Wisdom.

Joey Williams 52:03
Well, I see both of your journeys as a spiritual journey on its way to you know, veganism. But I also see it as a spiritual practice. I mean, it's, as you said, you have to have self care. There's daily practice that you have to do in living this type of lifestyle. Would you consider that to be true is one of my questions? And then Are there other practices that go well along with this that help you on this question of what's on my plate? Are there other spiritual practices or practices that you're involved in or that you've heard of that are important to this question of non violence and what we eat?

Ryan Comins 52:45
I think that can be a close link between mindfulness forms of mindfulness meditation and food. I know that there's a very quite well established well known practice of mindful eating where you focus on the experience of what you're eating. And I think that can be combined as well with awareness of what has gone into the food that you're eating as well. And I think that can take different forms for different people. I think for people who, for people who pray before that meal, and then say grace and things like that, I think that can be a wonderful opportunity to reflect on what's been involved in bringing the food to the table, and also to reflect on what we can do as individuals in our food choices to try and help move to a more peaceful and and non violent world.

Joey Williams 53:36
I've actually noticed a big shift in some of the practice of prayer. So when I was younger, it seemed that the focus was on what a blessing all of this abundance for us. And now when people pray, a lot of people spend a lot more time remembering who brought the food to our table who actually cultivated that food and got it to our plates. And also people remember

some of the abuses and things that are happening to workers that are helping to bring the food that's actually on our plate. So I know it's influenced even the practice of prayer that I practice and then other Christians around the world and other traditions as well. Practice.

Josh Mangelson 54:27

Thanks for listening to Project Zion Podcast, subscribe to our podcast on Apple podcast, Stitcher, or whatever podcast streaming service you use. And while you're there, give us a five star rating. projects I am podcast is sponsored by Latter-day Seeker Ministries of Community of Christ. The views and opinions expressed in this episode are of those speaking and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of Latter-day Seeker Ministries or Community of Christ. Music has been graciously provided by Dave Heinze.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>