

—an **EVEN** exclusive interview —



with

Gary Kowalski

**Author, Activist,
Theologian**

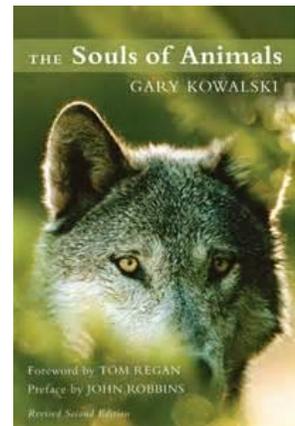
*Reverend Gary Kowalski is the author of books on spirituality, animals, history and science including **Goodbye Friend: Healing***

Wisdom for Anyone Who Has Ever Lost a Pet *and* **The Souls**

of Animals, volumes that have been translated into Chinese, Hungarian, Korean, Japanese, Spanish, German and French. A graduate of Harvard College and the Harvard Divinity School, he currently serves as minister of the Unitarian Congregation of Taos, New Mexico. He is a past president of the Unitarian



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[For a complete list of titles or to contact him, visit his website at kowalskibooks.com]



Exclusive EVEN Interview with Gary Kowalski, April 2016

EVEN: How did veganism become part of your life?

It was both sudden and gradual. I had a kind of religious awakening in my early thirties when I first heard the story about Koko and her kitten. Koko is a female lowland gorilla who has been part of the world's longest ongoing study in communicating with other Great Apes. When she received a kitten for her birthday, the gorilla was enchanted. But then her little cat was accidentally killed by a car, and Koko was devastated.



Supposedly, one of her trainers tried to determine how much Koko understood about the incident. “Why do gorillas die?” she signed. Koko fingered back, “Trouble, old.” “Where do gorillas go when they die?” to which Koko replied, “Comfortable, hole (like a hole in the ground), goodbye (with gesture of blowing a kiss of farewell). “How do gorillas feel when they die? Happy, sad, afraid?” Koko responded by placing her head on her hand in the sign for “Sleep.”

I was already an ordained minister at this point. I'd finished seminary. I was supposed to be a pastor, helping others face loss and deal with adversity. But personally, at that particular juncture, I was struggling with the death of my granddad, and really didn't know where to find a lot of comfort. Because issues of meaning and how to face the end of life with strength and courage aren't the kind of questions where you can learn the answers in school, even in a divinity school. You have to work it out for yourself.

Something about Koko's story opened my heart in a very healing way. I felt as though, while I had lost a dear member of my immediate family, I had gained entrance to a much larger family.

I understood that my own private load of anguish and grief was not private at all, but part of a bigger drama, that included me and Koko and the kitten and a multitude of living, loving, suffering, and perishing creatures who share our planet.

Koko helped me understand how we are all baffled by the mysteries of birth and death, all alike treasuring the blessings of intimacy and companionship, caught up together in the mutuality of joy and tears.

It started me thinking. How different are we humans from other animals, really? That was the genesis of my first book, *The Souls of Animals*, which explored the psychic, emotional and spiritual depths we share in common with other earthlings. It was also the beginning of my journey toward becoming a vegan, though that process took many years.

EVEN: Who was an influential person in your life earlier on that led you to veganism?

My daughter, Holly. My wife and I raised both our kids to be vegetarians. We even had chickens in a homemade coop in our tiny backyard, because I knew you couldn't trust anything store bought to be truly free range, or whatever. Plus, it was fun.

I don't condemn anyone who is honestly trying to live and eat consciously and compassionately. But by the time Holly hit high school, she had had enough with vegetarianism. She was unbending in defense of animals. And I had always known she was right in principle.

I think it is often the young people who have to lead and teach the older generation.

When I was President of Unitarian Universalists for Ethical Treatment of Animals, our denomination's cage-rattling advocacy group, I found it was often the teens who were out ahead, whether the issues were climate change or gender equality, or any of the overlapping oppressions of women, minorities, animals and the environment.

EVEN: What advice would you give to a vegan advocate wanting to become more of an activist?

For years I was involved with the Green Mountain Animal Defenders, a statewide ruckus in Vermont. Not all the participants were vegans, but I liked the fact that our actions were local. We could see results. We formed a coalition with local vets, animal control officers, and clergy, for example, that successfully passed a municipal ordinance banning elephant acts and other circus stunts with bears or big cats from performing in our town. We took on rodeos, animal experimentation, trapping and a whole range of issues. So my advice would be to focus on what's close at hand and be ready to build bridges to groups who may not entirely share your values, but might be temporary allies.

EVEN: What do you think makes veganism hard for people?

What we eat is so intertwined with family tradition, holidays, religion and culture. The Fourth of July means hot dogs. Thanksgiving means turkey. Easter means ham. Food is not just a source of nourishment. It is also a source of comfort, comradeship and connection to our in-group. Of course, patriotism actually has very little to do with mystery meat, pink slime or whatever is really inside a wiener. But it takes a high degree of resolve to separate the core ritual of giving thanks from the Norman Rockwell trappings of white meat on a white tablecloth surrounded by white people.

We have been enculturated to follow the customs of our folk---both authentic customs and those cleverly marketed by agribusiness to encourage ever greater consumption of highly-processed animal protein.

So all change is hard. But dietary changes are doubly so.

EVEN: What, in your opinion, is the most misunderstood idea about veganism?

I get sick of being asked, “Where do you get your protein?” I have a pet peeve about people who wonder, “Don’t plants have feelings, too?” And I lose patience when, after explaining that I don’t eat meat, eggs or dairy, somebody will ask, “How about chicken?”

Then too I get tired of the lame moral reasoning: “Sharks are flesh eaters. Why should we be any different?” Well, I don’t eat shark, but I have never considered Great Whites to be my spiritual guides or ethical exemplars. Often it seems to me that carnivores are at higher risk of deliberate stupidity. Perhaps the cerebral arteries get clogged, or maybe it is the prions.

EVEN: What one thing from your thinking in childhood do you wish you could change?

Many people have transforming relations with animals as youngsters. **Konrad Lorenz**, the great grandfather of modern animal science, recounts how his boyhood home in Austria was filled with critters: not just the predictable dachshunds, but more unusual companions like a mole, a crocodile and a lemur (which was in the bad habit of stealing cigarettes from houseguests and smoking them).

But his favorite was a duckling. He and his best friend, Gretel, liked to romp in the wetlands of the nearby Danube, fully expecting the baby ducks to follow them through the marshes just as they would track their own feathered parents.

Without realizing it, he had stumbled across the discovery that would later win him fame and a Nobel Prize in Physiology---the existence of imprinting in waterfowl.

Not only were the birds imprinting on him, he was also imprinting on the ducks, with a fascination that would last a lifetime.

I wish that as a child I had formative experiences of that kind.

We seem to be born with an innate feeling of kinship with other living creatures, what Harvard biologist, **E. O. Wilson**, calls “biophilia.” **Robert Van de Castle**, a psychiatrist at the University of Virginia who studies dreams, documents that young children have an inborn menagerie inside their heads. Pre-schoolers receive almost nightly visitations from lions, tigers, bears and other fearsome beasts. Then as we age and approach adolescence, the images become domesticated. We dream of dogs and ponies. By the time we are adults, animals appear very rarely in our unconscious minds. That primordial, psychic connection is attenuated.

But we are born to be with animals--not in a relation of mastery, but as playmates, soulmates, and mindmates.

Kinship with other species is our birthright.

EVEN: If you were to mentor a younger person today, what guidance might you offer? What encouraging words might you share with a newbie?

Attaining perfect non-violence or a state of absolute moral purity is an impossibility, in my opinion. I try to minimize the damage and destruction I inflict on the world, but don't kid myself.

Exploitation of the land, the water, the air, is hard to avoid. We are all culpable. Life exists at the expense of other life.

So don't be doctrinaire or slavish about your diet. Don't become too obsessive about shoulds and don'ts. Do your best. Enjoy. Eat well, be well and love everyone, whether they happen to be furry, feathered, or hairless like us.

As a spiritual discipline, a plant-based diet is ideally an expression of life's affirmation, not its negation.

EVEN: Do you have a favorite vegan meal or food you can tell us about that really makes veganism work for you?

Tonight we are having vegetable biryani, an Indian dish. We do a lot of stir-fries. Pasta and pizza are often on the dinner menu, while tofu scrambles, oatmeal, pancakes with fruit and maple syrup,



smoothies and other easy-to-fix dishes frequently appear at the breakfast table.



Like most people, my wife and I get into ruts. Last week, I prepared a new Vietnamese noodle dish that was really yummy. All I had to do was look up the basic ingredients for a marinade on the internet: sherry, soy sauce and a little sweetener did the trick. Yet you do have to make that extra little bit of effort to stay fresh.

EVEN: What one thing makes veganism worthwhile for you?

Vegans are the real environmentalists. Yes, I feel strongly about the plight of domestic livestock and the brutal conditions that prevail in modern farming. But I am even more passionate knowing that industrial animal agriculture is the major driver of global warming, which is putting whole classes and genera of living beings in danger of extinction.

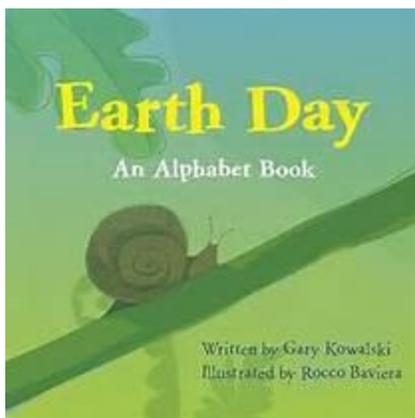
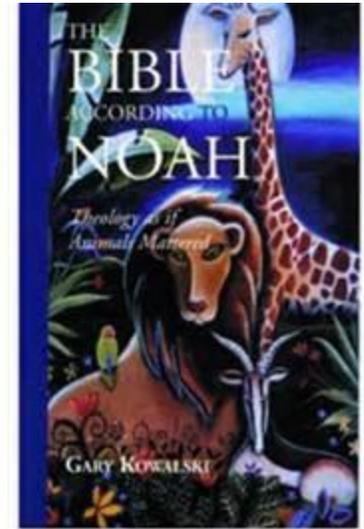
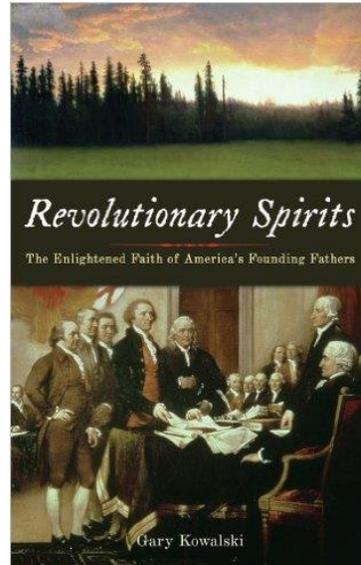
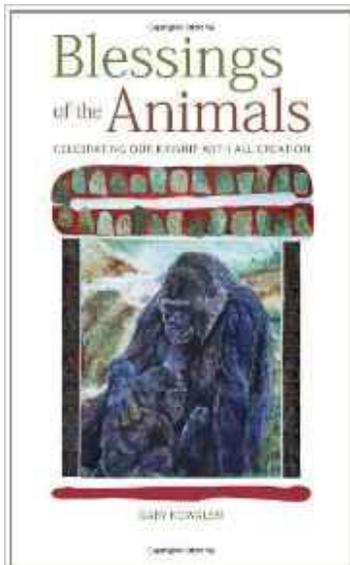
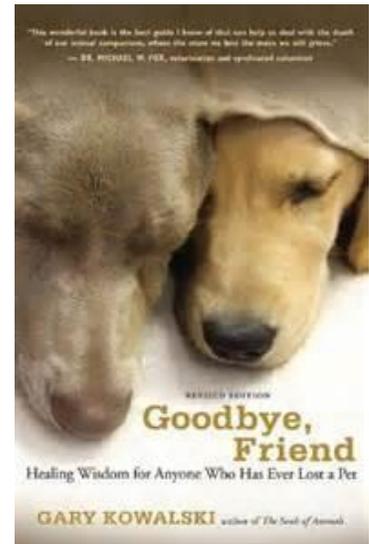
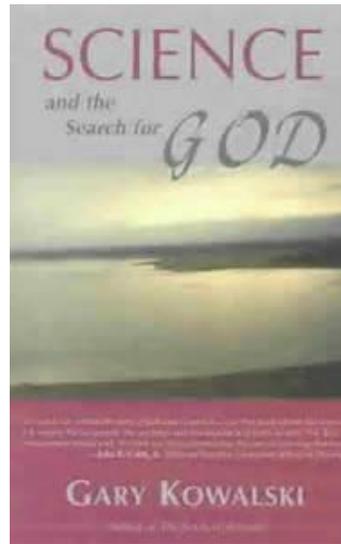
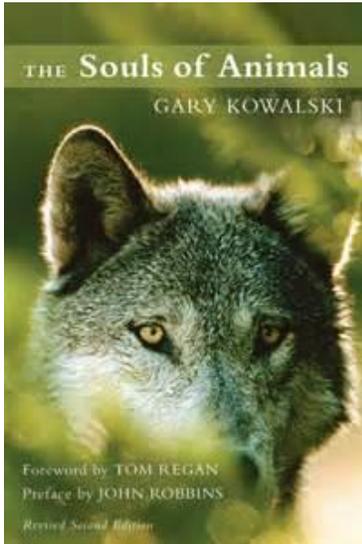
So indeed, I have installed solar panels on my roof to reduce my carbon footprint.

But I can have an even bigger impact on creating a habitable world simply by what I put on my plate.

EVEN: Any opinion or insight on the future of veganism in today's world?

Progress can appear frustratingly slow. Teachable moments seem rare. But I have seen veganism and concern for animals move from the fringe into the mainstream in my lifetime. Short term, I am a pessimist. But long term, we have logic, science, and morality on our side.

Ideas are powerful things.
And the insight that other species are beings like ourselves
---different but not inferior, and that they deserve to be
treated with consideration and respect---
is an idea whose time has come.



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