

## **EVEN Interview with** **Jo Stepaniak**

**Author, Editor, Mediator**

*Jo Stepaniak, MEd, has been involved with vegetarian and vegan-related issues for nearly five decades. She is the author or coauthor of seventeen books on compassionate living and vegan cuisine and a contributing author to many other books and national publications. She is also the editorial director for Book Publishing Company, a vegan publishing house, and is a community and victim-offender mediator and international business dispute-resolution specialist.*



**EVEN: How did veganism become part of your life?**

**JS:** Although I had been a vegetarian for many years, there seemed to be a missing piece. After I got married, my husband and I talked about eliminating dairy products and eggs from our diets and making our lifestyles even more animal-friendly. Because we both had ethical motivations for our vegetarianism, becoming vegan seemed like a logical move. However, that was thirty-three years ago, and we were only remotely aware of something called “veganism” (which we had no idea how to pronounce) and weren’t sure how to go about practicing it “correctly.”

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

**JS:** I became a vegetarian as a young child, at a time when it was very unpopular, no books were available on the subject, soymilk and tofu were unheard of, and I knew of no other vegetarians. My motivation was based solely on what was imprinted on my heart: that it was wrong to kill animals for food.

I did not know how to be a “perfect” vegetarian, as there were no role models for me to emulate. I was not aware at that time of any “famous” vegetarians or historical figures who had practiced vegetarianism. Later, when the first few vegetarian cookbooks slipped into the mainstream, I discovered that I was not alone. However, these books were all about cooking and had nothing to say beyond diet.

There was a continual nagging at my heart that there had to be something more—a lifestyle that would incorporate my peaceful diet but go further. There was a part of me

that wanted to eliminate dairy products and eggs from my repertoire, but they were integral to the types of dishes I was used to, and I wasn't sure I would get all the nutrition I needed as a vegetarian if I cut out these "important food groups." Still, the desire to stop eating these items nagged at me.

I do not recall where I first heard the word "vegan" or found out what it meant. My awareness of it was almost telepathic. Again, my heart spoke to me, as it had when I first became vegetarian. And when my husband said he would give veganism a try, too, I knew we were ready. Because we did not know any other vegans, we stumbled along as best we could on our own, and I did a whole lot of experimenting in the kitchen.

So, there really wasn't any single person who influenced me directly. It was just my muse, I suppose.

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

**JS:** If you want to be a political activist, you will need a group behind you for support, encouragement, credibility, and motivation. You can start your own group, but as there are already so many excellent organizations, I would suggest finding one that appeals to your interests, values, and strengths. There are many different ways to be an activist, though—through financial support, direct action, or simply educating those in your community or the people close to you. While the term "activist" may seem daunting, I believe that vegans are "accidental activists" just by choosing to be vegan. We become instant role models and public examples of what it is to be vegan by virtue of our choice, even if we don't actively engage in campaigning for veganism. However, if someone wants to take on a more assertive role, I suggest evaluating your motives and being aware of whether your decision is based on ego (a desire to be noticed), rebelliousness (a desire to be different), compassion (a desire to minimize suffering), or social justice (a desire for all to be safe, cared for, and free). Once you understand your interests and objectives, you'll be clearer about where you fit, what you should do, and how to proceed.

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

**JS:** Many people tend to over-think veganism, expecting the world to bend to their will overnight or expecting themselves to adhere to some impossible standard of vegan perfection. We can all relax in our veganism, without putting pressure on ourselves or others to be flawless. We can also accept the world as it is right now, without anger or self-righteousness, while simultaneously working for the change we want to see in the world. Veganism isn't difficult. But we make it hard for ourselves by having unrealistic expectations. The more we loosen our mental grip and our need to constantly prove

ourselves right to everyone who disagrees with us, the more our ideas will flow and the more those around us will be attracted to and interested in our message.

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

**JS:** There are many ideas about veganism that I think are misunderstood, so it's hard to pick just one. For starters, many people believe that veganism is solely about diet, or health, or losing weight, or living longer, or being more beautiful, and the integral ethical aspects are shunted to the sidelines. There is also a perception that vegans are angry and deprived, and that vegan food is bland, tasteless, and boring. Another false perception is that being vegan is difficult. None of these is true, of course, but the myths seem to precede us.

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

**JS:** I'm not sure I want to get into the arena of regrets, as I have lived long enough to have far too many of them.

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

**JS:** I encourage everyone who is interested in veganism to jump in and do it. Don't wait for the "right time," as that time will never come. But also read, be informed, and don't go about it haphazardly or naively. Know the reasons for your decision. The more you are aware about why you are choosing to be vegan, the more your veganism will become an integral part of who you are, not just what you do.

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

**JS:** I am a kale-aholic. I love kale (and collard greens) prepared in every way imaginable. Leafy greens, including those with "bite," like arugula, are on my list of favorite foods. I also love beans of every kind and color, especially heirloom beans, and colorful vegetables, like winter squashes, carrots, and beets. And spices and fresh herbs—they make every food sing. And heat—I enjoy the kick of chiles and pungent seasonings. Oh, and let's not forget about nuts and seeds. In other words, I find all vegan foods irresistible. I used to tell my sister that I would be happy to skip dessert so I

could have more of the good stuff. She asked, "What else could be the good stuff?" I said, "Vegetables!" Yeah, I was a bit of an unusual kid.

**EVEN: What one thing makes veganism worthwhile for you?**

**JS:** Knowing that I am living my ethics as fully as I am able gives me peace of mind and feeds my spirit. Being vegan is an absolutely crucial part of my spiritual existence.

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

**JS:** Veganism has become a worldwide phenomenon, and there is no stopping it. Today's technology has closed the information gap among people around the world, ensuring that the future of veganism will only get brighter and brighter.

