

Veganism—the New Children’s Crusade



Oslo, Norway – September 21, 2014: A sign reads, “There Is No Planet B”, as parents carry children among thousands marching through central Oslo, Norway, to support action on global climate change.

In the year 1212, legend has it that a 12-year-old shepherd boy named Philip Cloyes, claiming to bear a letter from Jesus to the King of France, led tens of thousands of children to the Holy Land in what has been termed the Children’s Crusade. Unlike previous Crusades which sought to wrest the Holy Land from Muslim control by force of arms, the youthful throng “bore crosses, banners and an optimistic assumption that once they got to the Holy Land, they could convert Muslims with persuasion and divine intervention.”

The children, imbued with religious fervor, were oblivious to the hazards of their journey. Many succumbed to disease and starvation; others were sold into slavery. By all accounts, the Children’s Crusade was a disaster.

Fast-forward to 2019, a charismatic 16 year old, Greta Thunberg, is entralling young audiences with scientific predictions of imminent climate apocalypse. She has vowed adherence to a vegan diet to help save the planet and urged her fans to follow suit. She persuaded her family to sign on to a meatless diet. She has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and has received many accolades from climate change and animal rights activists. (Source)

Last week she addressed the UN at their annual meeting in New York: “You are failing us, but young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you.”

Many of today’s kids believe that the end of the world is nigh; it reminds me of when we Baby Boomers underwent nuclear attack drills in elementary school. We were ordered to face away from the windows and get under our desks when the sirens issued a few seconds warning!

I’ll be the first to admit that if I were 16 today, I’d be out marching with my fellow high school students, who recently earned a day off from school to join international climate change protests.

In my 20s, I was a Macrobiotic vegan, eagerly proselytizing the benefits of a diet free of toxic animal protein. I was convinced that, by eschewing meat products, even fish, dairy and eggs, I was safeguarding my health and protecting the planet. That was in the 1970s.

But, while I’m still an ardent environmentalist, concerned over the ravages of pollution and the decline of worldwide ecosystems, with maturity I’ve adopted a more

nuanced approach to diet.

As the Proverb goes: “Out of the mouths of babes”. They are the custodians of the consciences that we adults have compromised in an inevitable hardscrabble struggle with life’s exigencies. We look to youth to remind us of our vitiated idealism.

But there’s a peculiarity of the teenage brain: According to Stanford Children’s Health, “the rational part of a teen’s brain isn’t fully developed and won’t be until age 25 or so.”

Adults think with the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with judgment and rational problem-solving. The adolescent brain is wired differently. Decision-making emanates from the emotional part of the brain—the amygdala.

That’s why kids seem so volatile. They view life in stark black and white terms. Subtle distinctions are blurred in a rush toward moral certainty.

It explains why gang membership can so easily turn children into obedient stone-cold killers. It’s why dictators from time immemorial have exploited the certitude of adolescents to form fanatical legions like the Hitler Youth and Mao’s Red Guards. When was the last time you heard of an elderly suicide bomber?

My teenage brain was exquisitely tuned to poetry and music. I thrilled to *The Doors’* Jim Morrison’s screed:

*“What have they done to the earth?
What have they done to our fair sister?
Ravaged and plundered and ripped her and bit her
Stuck her with knives in the side of the dawn
And tied her with fences and dragged her down.”*

That was in 1968.

But this is not a rational basis for drawing conclusions about the optimal human diet. Numerous studies are linking vegetarian and vegan diets to a higher incidence of depression, which may add to the woes of youngsters already afflicted with epidemic levels of mood disorders and suicide.

And while ultra-processed foods are wasteful of resources and undoubtedly harmful to human health, legitimate questions have arisen as to the health benefits of cholesterol and saturated fat avoidance.

Now a burgeoning movement of sustainable animal husbandry promises to reconcile meat consumption with environmental responsibility.

By analogy, just as predators lined the route of idealistic Children’s Crusaders, greedy corporate and political entities are eager to co-opt Greta Thunberg’s pure message. Attend a climate rally and score an Impossible Burger at BK on the way home; acquiesce to GMO agriculture “to feed the planet”; vote to impose regressive “meat taxes” to penalize those non-adherent to the new orthodoxy.

So, while we want to heed Greta Thunberg’s appeal to our numbed adult consciences, let’s harness our mature rational brains to bring about sustainable changes that conform to scientific evidence about our true nutritional needs.