

# An EVEN exclusive interview –

with

## Dale Lugenbehl

Educator, Author, Builder

*and*

## Sandy Aldridge

Environmental Activist, Gardener

*For more than 35 years **Dale Lugenbehl** has been an author, community educator, and a college and university teacher—teaching western and eastern philosophy, and meditation. Since 1994, he has been teaching in the Philosophy Department at Lane Community College. He is also the Environmental Editor for American Vegan magazine, and Co-Director of [Ahimsa Acres](#), a nonprofit educational center in Cottage Grove Oregon founded in 1995. He has been vegan for 27 years.*

***Sandy Aldridge Lugenbehl**, Co-Director of Ahimsa Acres, former sociology instructor at Lane Community College, has long been interested in living more simply "so that others may simply live."*

*She and her partner, Dale, have built their own home and grow 75-80% of the food that they eat. Additionally they continue to experiment with food preservation that uses as little energy as possible—including an above-ground root cellar, storage of certain crops in the soil, and sun drying.*

*Other interests include giving presentations on living more lightly, how one's food choices impact the environment, and the connections between peace and sustainability*

*Dale and Sandy veganically grow most of their food and make extensive use of solar, geothermal, and gravity energy, as well as rainwater catchment systems for garden and orchard irrigation at their **Ahimsa Acres** homestead outside of Cottage Grove, Oregon. They also regularly host interns drawn from the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF) program, and conduct tours periodically of Ahimsa Acres to help people learn to live more sustainably.*



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

**Dale:** When I was about 23, I was interested in ethics and political philosophy, particularly human rights, and the question occurred to me: *why don't nonhumans have rights, too?* I decided to try vegetarianism. However, I did not really educate myself about how to eat this way. I simply dropped meat out of my diet and didn't replace it with anything else. Since I felt tired and hungry all the time, I went back to eating meat.

A few years later I took a class in graduate school that was devoted to the ethics of how we should treat other species. I read **Peter Singer's** *Animal Liberation* and I realized what he was saying was absolutely right, and I decided that there was no way I could continue to eat meat. I stopped all at once and it was easy this time (reading **Frances Moore Lappe's** *Diet for a Small Planet* was a definite help).

However, I made the mistake of replacing the meat I was eating with cheese, not realizing that this was just as bad for my health and also bad from the standpoint of animal suffering and environmental damage.

About 12 years later Sandy got me to read John Robbins' *Diet for a New America* and the information about the environment and the dairy and egg industries made it clear that I needed to become vegan. It's felt right ever since and has been a very easy way to live.

**Sandy:** At the request of a friend back in 1988, I read John Robbins' *Diet for a New America*. The first vegetarian I had ever met was Dale but I quite deliberately never asked him why. I think I was afraid to know because I might have to change the way I lived.

Fortunately my friend **Trisha** had no compunction about pushing me and just kept after me until I actually read the book. I took her book home, read half of it, and then bought my own. When I got to the part on the environment, I was blown away, and thought *I'm not doing that any more*.

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

**Dale:** Peter Singer. I read the essay "All Animals Are Equal" in college.

I couldn't get around the fact that eating animals meant causing enormous suffering and death just so

I could satisfy a taste preference—it seemed like such a trivial reason. I just couldn't do it anymore.

Later on I learned about all the other negative impacts of eating and using animal products: environmental damage, resource depletion, world hunger, and wars over scarce resources, because it is so wasteful to give most of our crops---and a huge chunk of our water and fossil fuel consumption---to raising animals for food.

**Sandy:** My friend, **Trisha Harrington**, was the catalyst. Once I had read *Diet for a New America*, I told Dale that I wasn't going to stop with vegetarianism, and why. At that point his support was immediate; he and I went vegan together.

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

**Dale:** It's important to carefully pick your spots to share your truth—if someone seems curious and interested and a bit open, that's the time to share some information. It's also important to be careful not to overload people with information—allow them time to process a new way of looking at things, and be gentle and non-blaming with them. So start by giving them a small amount of information, watch carefully how they respond, and then decide whether it makes sense to offer them a little more or to wait.

Always “live your truth” in your own life—  
our actions in the world really do have an effect on  
other people and how they behave. We may not  
always see this impact, but it does happen.

I once had a student named Josh who was taking a philosophy class I was teaching [Contemporary Moral Issues] and we had just finished spending about two weeks of class time on the issue of treatment of other species and our personal food choices. He told me a story after class.

He was going through the lunch line at the College cafeteria and was going to have the chicken stir-fry. However, just before it was his turn to order, the student in front of him in line ordered the tempeh stir-fry. Josh had been thinking of trying this instead of the chicken and he now thought to himself, “The guy ahead of me is having the tempeh stir-fry, I’m going to do that today, too.” To his surprise, he found out he really liked it and was going to try more vegan foods.

Josh doesn’t know who the student was who was in front of him in line—never even saw his face—and yet that student had a profound impact on Josh’s life: an impact that that other student knows nothing about. He didn’t even know Josh was there and was not trying to influence him, but his behavior moved Josh to make a different and life-changing choice.

**Sandy:** Become very well informed so that you are able to share vital information with anyone who is interested. Be sure that you actually know what you're talking about and are not simply over-emotional and judgmental. Nothing turns people off more quickly than feeling that they are not being respected.

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

**Dale:** They build it up in their heads as being this hugely difficult and burdensome thing. People also worry about "fitting in" socially and are concerned that other people will think they are weird or "no fun." What is really needed is to just DO IT (try it) for 30 days and see how easy it is and how good it feels.

Additionally, people often don't realize that they are not alone. There are many great resources available to help someone change: books, videos, websites, local organizations, support groups. Start by contacting [EVEN](#) and looking at internet links and asking for recommendations for further information, and very quickly one source of help will lead to another and another. Before long, you will have a strong support network in place! So many resources are available nowadays.

**Sandy:** There are probably several things. It's swimming against the stream. Many people find it very frightening to be seen as "different." It's also unfamiliar territory.

Many people think they will need to learn a whole new way of eating and cooking. What's wonderful is that it can actually be easier.

We don't feel we have to have some fancy cookbook with 15-20 items in each recipe. And cleanup is a breeze!

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

**Dale:** That it is expensive, that cooking vegan is a lot of extra work. Also, that changing to a vegan diet is somehow terribly difficult to do. Learning how to be vegan takes a bit of extra thought and work only in the beginning, but that's temporary, and can be viewed as a great adventure! I find being vegan very easy.

**Sandy:** Some people seem to think that eating fish or chicken (or eggs), or wearing leather can be a part of living a vegan lifestyle. Clearly that is not the case because all of these products come from animals.

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

**Dale:** Maybe the belief that I needed animal protein (and lots of protein in general) to be strong and healthy and successful in athletics. I went out of my way to eat much larger amounts of animal products because of this. Somehow I came to believe that the main nutrient of any value in food was protein.

Now my concern is definitely more about avoiding getting too *much* protein. I remember reading as a young person about studies showing that rats that were fed large amounts of protein grew bigger and stronger than other rats. What I *didn't* know then was that those same studies also showed that the high protein rats were sicker and didn't live nearly as long!

**Sandy:** *Wishing* to change things isn't something I do. If there is some piece of thinking that isn't serving me, what I want to do is to actually change it. From that perspective I can tell you that I've definitely changed some of my childhood thinking. One of the big ones is the idea that it's not okay to be different.

I was certainly taught that I "should" always "fit in"—that it's not safe to "rock the boat" or "be noticed." That just doesn't make sense to me any longer.

It's very important to me to be true to my own ideals—to behave in an authentic fashion.

So far, the consequences of this have been uniformly good.



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

**Dale:** Be patient with yourself. There is a process of learning and adjustment. Give yourself a lot of credit for what you are doing for your health, the planet, climate change, and the other species of this Earth. It's all interconnected.

It's also important to remember that you do not have to justify your choice to be vegan to anyone. You don't need anyone's agreement or permission to make this important change.

Additionally, many people find it works better to make a significant change all at once (making a clean break) rather than trying to cut back a bit at a time. Cutting back on something means I am still doing it, and this serves to maintain my taste for it.

There is a tendency to think that what tastes good to us is fixed and unchangeable; however, this is not actually true. If I stop consuming certain products altogether, my taste will over time change and it will be much easier for me to stay with how I want to eat—the old foods simply no longer taste good to me, and the new foods taste wonderful.

Also, merely cutting back on something frequently does not change anything *enough* for me to actually experience any *benefits* from having

made the change (though I do often notice what I have *given up* in changing).

It's very much like smoking two packs of cigarettes a day (40 cigarettes) and cutting back 10%--you would still be smoking 36 cigarettes. You gave up four cigarettes (and may miss them), but you would feel just as bad physically as you did before you cut back. Thus it would be very easy for you to conclude that what you were doing wasn't worth it.

On the other hand, if you quit smoking entirely, you would almost immediately begin to experience dramatic improvements in how you feel, and thus find motivation to continue with what you are doing.

The same is true with getting animal products and other unhealthy foods out of our diet—getting 10% of the cholesterol and saturated fat out of what you eat is unlikely to change how you actually feel, but getting ALL of it out will make a huge difference.

Sweeping changes disrupt our old routines and tend to break ingrained patterns of behavior.

And lastly, it really helps to have a support network of likeminded people, as does minimizing time spent with people who say you can't succeed or who try to talk you out of it.

**Sandy:** If I were mentoring a new vegetarian or vegan I would simply say to them: Congratulations!! You've really figured out some important things early. You're way ahead of where I was at your age. Now just enjoy the process and continue to be curious, to question things, and to live your ideals😊

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

**Dale:** There are so many wonderful vegan foods that I love, I don't really have a favorite meal. We grow in our garden and orchard about 80% of the food we eat. Each time of the year has its own special food to enjoy. The variety is almost endless. I do like spicy foods and I love whole foods just the way they are: fresh fruit, nuts and seeds, steamed broccoli and carrots, sweet potatoes, peas... the list is a long one!

**Sandy:** Another tough one to answer! There are a lot of things that I like but what makes healthy veganism work for me is its simplicity. I just stick to whole, plant-based foods as little processed as possible (and it is possible!!!). Favorites center around whole grains, fresh, in-season vegetables and fruits, beans, and nuts and seeds. We make large pots of soup or beans which can be eaten over several days or frozen in meal-sized containers for future use.

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

**Dale:** If you really commit to the "big picture" of veganism, it creates a wonderful sense of wholeness and acting with integrity. War, world hunger, animal suffering, resource depletion, pollution, climate change...they're all interrelated and personal food choices are a huge part of it.

**Sandy:** Knowing that I'm being true to my beliefs.

There's real peace in living with integrity.

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

**Dale:** I believe veganism is an irresistible force. The truth always wins out in the end, and through our actions we can make that happen sooner rather than later. I have seen huge changes during my lifetime in the shift toward veganism.

I believe veganism is an irresistible force.

The Victory Gardens movement during World War II is an inspiring bit of history. People realized the necessity of providing some of their food for themselves and, by 1943, at least sixty percent of the population of this country was involved in growing food in local gardens. These gardens produced forty percent of all the vegetable produce that was consumed in the nation. When people see clearly the genuine *necessity* of changing, their behavior can change on a very large scale and change in just a few short years.

Once people know the truth about the importance of changing to vegan foods, they will change, and the change can happen quite rapidly.

**Sandy:** I don't think that humankind will be a part of the world much longer if veganism doesn't become the norm—and VERY soon!!!