

ONE-ON-ONE with alice walker

The Pulitzer Prize-winning author shines a light on the treatment of animals

BY NICOLE GREGORY

Alice Walker's best-selling, Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Color Purple*, inspired not only a film but more recently a Broadway musical. In that novel, as in her various books of fiction, poetry, and essays, Walker, 64, gives voice to the oppressed and undervalued. The compassion she expresses in her work also shows in her feeling for animals—a poem she contributed to a PETA campaign targeting Kentucky Fried Chicken asks its CEO to imagine he's a chicken suffering on a factory farm. Walker's newest book, for children, is *Why War Is Never a Good Idea*.

Q: Why did you stop eating beef?

When I was a little girl in Georgia, my whole family worked on a dairy farm. Mornings and afternoons, we brought the cows to the barn to be milked. One cow, Suki, once hid with her calf, way in a bush. When my brothers finally found her, Suki fought them—she was protecting her calf. They laughed at her, and their lack of feeling for how she wanted to keep her calf safe surprised me. I've never been able to eat cows' meat since. I tried, because steak was always offered as the best food you could get. But it always had the taste of Suki. I identified with the calf, and with the cow as mother.



Was it an immediate, lifelong commitment?

No, I went on to eat meat. I loved bacon. We were farmers, so we depended on the animals we raised, including pigs. Even now, when I have a lapse, it's often a strong craving for pork sausage.

How would you describe your diet now?

I have a substantial garden, and I eat from it. And I do eat fish and eggs. These days, on some cartons, you see that the chickens who laid the eggs weren't caged. It's helpful.

What's growing in your garden?

What *isn't* growing! Beans, potatoes, corn, tomatoes, artichokes, eggplant, chard, collards. I work in my garden whenever I can, usually early in the morning before it gets hot, or in the evening. It's so lovely.

Do you see a relationship between vegetarianism and spirituality?

I find it difficult to feel responsible for the suffering of others. That's why I find war so hard to bear. It's the same with animals: I feel the less harm I do, the lighter my heart. I love a light heart. And when I know I'm causing suffering, I feel the heaviness of it. It's a physical pain. So it's self-interest that I don't want to cause harm.

If I'm eating food I know was a creature in a cage, it brings up memories of segregation and the stories from my ancestors, of being in captivity and denied their personalities, their true beings. Animals were not made for us, or our use. They

have their own use, which is just being who they are.

Years ago, when I was traveling in a van while visiting the Serengeti, I felt so happy to see the sign "Elephants have the right of way." They amble along the road, and people like me in vans just wait. That seems so right to me. It's almost unimaginable that humans can hunt such creatures down.

As passionate as you are about animals, you don't seem judgmental about people who eat meat.

There was a period when I was truly hard core: no meat, no leather belts, the whole thing. Six or seven months into it, I went to Nicaragua—this was in the '80s, when the *contras* [counterrevolutionaries] were carrying out attacks against the Sandinista government. I just assumed I could eat rice and beans. But at that time, the people had no food; they were pretty near starvation. What they did humbly offer were their very scrawny animals. I had a moment of consciousness about the privilege I'd enjoyed—to choose what I ate. I learned to have a lot of humility about the choices available to me. It was a great liberation. I became a lot less strict in some ways.

So no, I'm not judgmental. You can do what you do as an example, and then it's up to each person—it's their journey.

Los Angeles-based writer Nicole Gregory is an eclectic reader and an admirer of Alice Walker's many and varied books. ■