The Tipping Point  
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The phrase "tipping point" actually has two definitions, the first being, according to Merriam Webster, "the critical point in a situation, process, or system beyond which a significant and often unstoppable effect or change takes place". This is the phrase that is bandied about whenever the conversation turns to climate change, because everyone wants to know when we will have reached the point of no return, where we cannot undo the damage we have done and Mankind is Doomed. On a brighter note, there is a second Tipping Point, identified by Malcolm Gladwell in his eponymous book as "that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire."

I would like to suggest that the latter tipping point, applied to veganism, could help us earthlings avert the first tipping point, entailing irreversible climate change and mass extinctions. The Live Earth official handbook says that not eating meat is the "single most effective thing you can do" to reduce your climate change impact. 1 This sentiment was echoed in a 2010 UN report that called for a global shift towards a vegan diet to save the world from hunger, fuel poverty and the worst impacts of climate change. 2

So, given what a staggering positive impact widespread adoption of a plant-based diet would have, what is stopping us? Is it our psychological belief that eating meat is natural, necessary, and normal—what Melanie Joy has dubbed "Carnism"?  

I adopted a vegetarian diet when I was middle aged, and about seven years later I became vegan. I realize now that becoming vegetarian was a psychological process. For me, the trigger was a street fair on Sainte-Catherine street here in Montréal one fine summer day, when I saw a kiosk with a banner that said, "You can't be an Environmentalist and Eat Meat". Affronted (because then as now I considered myself an environmentalist), I strode over to debate with the students manning the kiosk. I was surprised to learn about the extent to which industrial meat production contributed to pollution and to climate change. A few weeks later, I decided to go veg—but with many provisos: I would still eat meat when eating out and at Christmas and Thanksgiving, I would still eat fish... To my surprise, once I began my vegetarian regime, meat and fish began to look distasteful to me.

My transition to veganism, although it occurred a few years later, was an inevitable outcome of this mental awakening. One day a Facebook friend sent me a link that described how male baby chicks are ground up alive in devices known as macerators. I was certain that this could not be true of the chicken production at the source of my eggs, since I was eating only organic, free range eggs—yet, upon investigation, I was surprised to find that organic egg farms also entailed the killing of 50% of all the chicks that are born. It took me a few weeks of hesitation, but then one day as I was idly mulling over the idea of giving up eggs, and thinking for the umteenth time yeah, but I really like eggs, the manifest speciousness of my own attitude hit me—I was willing to be responsible for all those deaths of innocent creatures, a moral catastrophe—just because I liked the taste of eggs? I decided then and there never to buy another egg. A similar scenario played itself out a month later over dairy products, and I became fully vegan. These days, each time I read something about the horrific animal abuse that is endemic to industrial agriculture, I shudder to think that I ate meat for so long.
Earlier this year I attended the Students for Critical Animal Studies (SCAS) conference, where the entire audience was vegan, and I noticed there was a distinct demographic factor to veganism. Young people seem to adopt veganism more willingly and for compassionate reasons compared to their parents' and grandparents' cohort, whereas older folks seem to prefer a more measured approach, eating less meat than before perhaps but balking at vegetarianism or veganism.

There was a speaker at the SCAS event that I remember well. He was a university professor of political philosophy and ethics who spoke passionately about the immediate need for widespread "existential" transformation of our relationship to other animals. He was a fabulous panelist, and yet, I couldn't help noticing as he spoke that 1) he did not seem to have a plan about how such a transformation could occur and 2) there was an underlying despair to his discourse. For example, he mentioned that he regularly discussed veganism with his students, and that, on average, two or three of them might go veg at the end of semester—which, perversely, just added to his sense of hopelessness, because he focused on all the others whom he had failed to convince, and he felt that humanity was living on borrowed time. In the question period, this professor also referred to the growing interest in meat alternatives and flexitarianism as examples of "moral relativism". I would disagree with him on that—I see this trend as part of a social dynamic that is evidence of society's growing unease with Carnism, and as part of a process. And I think that the transformation he is awaiting is already underway.

The thing is, there is an aspect of mystery about social epidemics. It is very hard to predict them, or even to reverse-engineer the progression of social epidemics that have occurred. Malcolm Galdwell's book *The Tipping Point* is full of retail industry examples, but I can think of a few examples of my own. Take the 2011 Canadian federal election: Elections are an easy-to-analyze kind of anomaly that are akin to social epidemics, except they are mandated and scheduled, the media and popular campaign blitz occurs, and then a change is enforced through the actual voting process.

In 2011, you may recall, public opinion massively and somewhat mysteriously did an about-face to elect the New Democratic Party as the official opposition for the first time in the history of our country. This outcome bore all the marks of a social epidemic as defined by Gladwell—it was unpredictable and sudden, and--while few would dispute that Layton and his troops had been doggedly building the NDP ‘brand’ for many years--that the orange wave, like so many other social epidemics, was triggered by a small event. Personally, I think they key event was the televised debate, in which the other party leaders, particularly Duceppe, who subsequently crashed and burned, came across as smug and arrogant, while Layton was warm, unassuming and refreshingly respectful in his interactions with his opponents.

So what would it take for Carnism to go through the same social transformation that occurred with smoking, which went from being uber-cool (this in times when people didn't even use the word *cool*) to being an embarrassing addiction associated with bad smells, halitosis and a compulsion to huddle outside coatless in sub-zero weather? At the moment, only 5% of Americans are vegetarian or vegan. Estimates place the Canadian cohort at between 4 and 10% of the population. Hmm... moving slaughterhouses into urban centers—or vice-versa—would certainly work, and in fact some speculate that this was the reason behind the recent closure of the Quality Meat Packers in Toronto. But that's not practical.
Other factors are at play here, however. A recent article on the rising costs of meat\(^6\) pointed to: fewer farmers and high production costs for starters (it is costly to feed corn to cattle, who in turn eat the cow, when one could simply feed corn directly to consumers). The same article also mentions, rather obliquely, that "a lot of laws" make it harder and harder for farmers to raise livestock—this is likely a referral to new animal rights laws, such as the recent law banning the use of gestation crates for pork farmers, who will likely have to restructure their facilities, making them more spacious. This new law was introduced thanks to the efforts of animal rights activists whose campaigns forced people and politicians to confront the cruelty of confining a large sow—an animal with more intelligence than a dog—to a metal crate so small that she could barely move, for months on end, where she would be repeatedly inseminated and give birth, never actually interacting with her progeny and indeed never even able to turn around.

Perhaps we just need to trust in the power of activists—through social media and other means--and the media in general, to continue to force us to face up to animal mistreatment until laws change, consumers balk at higher prices, the middle class starts to change its habits, step by step, repudiated hamburger by repudiated hamburger, as disturbing images keep chipping away at the ivory tower of our denial until one day—Shazam!—veganism is the new black.

I just hope it happens in time, before that other tipping point.

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1Read more: http://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/global-warming/#ixzz319a4Agqa
2 http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2010/jun/02/un-report-meat-free-diet3