



Peter Egan

and the Meaning of Life

From humble beginnings, Peter Egan became one of the UK's finest actors and later, a staunch animal activist. He talks to Juliet Gellatley, founder of Viva!, about his fascinating road of discovery

On a cold, clear evening two years ago, the pig industry presented its annual awards at a London hotel. I stood outside with actor Peter Egan, projecting gigantic images from Hogwood pig farm on to a wall. He spoke to camera: "It's absolutely appalling to have awards for such a cruel industry. I support everything Viva! is doing. To be a vegan is the most exciting and creative way of living – so become a vegan!"

Little wonder I'm a big fan of this guy – he is a genuinely lovely person with a massive heart, who is on a mission for the animals. He has used his status as a well-respected actor to force some grisly issues into the spotlight. And he walks the walk in a way that most don't.

So where did his journey to veganism begin?

"I'm one of those people who suffered from ignorance much of my life. I believed the happy pictures of animals and didn't question it until my late 50's, which I regret hugely.

"My wife Myra and I started rescuing dogs and that flicked the switch to other animal welfare issues. But it was a slow awakening until we rescued DJ. He was a spaniel-collie cross and I called him DJ because he had a white bib and a black coat like a dinner jacket. He reached my soul and was my gatekeeper who opened the door to animal welfare, which then led me through the most important door, animal rights.

"I saw the world through DJ's eyes. I saw all the other animals that are abused. So, about 10 years ago, I

started campaigning to protect dogs from abandonment and cruelty and that led me to my being asked by Jill Robinson, the founder of Animals Asia, one of the most inspiring people I've ever met, if I would visit China and help expose the deep horrors of bears farmed for bile."

Over 20,000 bears – mainly moon bears but also sun bears and brown bears – are held in captivity on farms in Asia to have bile painfully extracted from their gall bladders. Most are kept in cramped cages, some so small that they are unable to turn around or even stand.

"It was heartbreaking to think a bear can live for 30 years in those cages and their bile extracted daily. It's horrible.

"I was edging closer to vegetarianism and then I watched Earthlings and was gobsmacked – I had no idea that the problem was so enormous. I remember my wife came into the room as the film was finishing. 'What's the matter with you? You look like something terrible has happened'. I said, it has and I'm never going to eat meat again. And I haven't! But I still ate fish!

"I was then told about the fascinating lives of lobsters and it dawned on me that fish and other sea animals have their own amazing lives and I stopped wanting to eat them. Last for me was cheese and chocolate. I did reduce them and then was asked to do Veganuary in 2016 and was happy to publicly go vegan. My only regret is not doing it earlier – and that's my very messy journey!"



Not so much messy as a typical evolution. Viva!'s recent survey of 3,000 people showed that 86 per cent of vegans were first vegetarian. It shows how we are conditioned to eat certain animals and breaking free can be instantaneous but more likely gradual.

I put it to Peter that he would probably never have eaten meat if schools told children the truth; why it is vital to nurture love for our planet and all life. How all the animals eaten across the globe want happy lives, to play, have fun and be free. How manifestly disgusting it is to lock animals away and take their young lives for a slab of flesh. And imagine schools running fun vegan cookery lessons so you leave a superb chef! What a different world we would mould.

Instead, we are ripping the heart out of our planet and have immersed ourselves in an orgy of death. Peter agrees and talks with a deeply-moving sincerity:

“Our desire for flesh of the innocents seems insatiable and we are great at creating smokescreens to justify our cruelty. We slaughter 50 billion farmed animals yearly so that six billion carnivores can eat them. We slaughter endangered species in the disgusting world of trophy hunting under the guise of conservation. We watch as foxes are ripped apart or bulls tortured to death under the guise of culture and tradition.

“Humans are very strange. We are waging war on every species on the planet and we do it with the belief that it is our right. We accept that elephants, the most stoic and gentle creatures, can have their spirit broken by brutal beatings in the horrible business of Phajaan, the Asian practice of breaking a young elephant's spirit so they are submissive to humans. Why? So that tourists can ride on their backs or visit them in temples where they stand for hours on

the concrete floors where people seek blessings from a broken giant”.

In March this year, Peter put himself through a terrible ordeal when he filmed the plight of dogs killed for meat in Indonesian markets for Change for Animals. He recounted his experience with a controlled passion that I recognised well:

“There were 10 dogs in four cages awaiting their turn. We could rescue only four so chose the youngest – the only way we could rationalise it. There was one big, older dog whose face I will never forget. He wouldn't look at me... In rescue shelters, dogs rush to the front of the cage to make contact but these dogs were traumatised, with blood on their faces from witnessing their companions being slaughtered in the most disgusting manner. It exasperates and angers me – why can't people see the cruelty they are creating?”

“Going to that market enabled me to publicise the trade and my piece on Sky News Online had millions of views. It has to be seen to stop it, just as Viva! exposes cruelty in the UK. If you didn't have your amazing undercover work, people would live in blissful ignorance, just as I once did”.

Peter has a passion for all life and a special place for dogs in his heart. In fact, it was his work with Saving Suffering Strays (SSS) in Sarajevo, with an extraordinary woman called Milena Malesevic, that led me to homing the noble wolf, Pablo, and bonkers fun-pup Lily. What a joy to share my life with them!

Peter Egan has the perfect theatre actor's voice – deep and rich with impeccable pronunciation. “A bit posh, you mean...?” he asks.

Well, yes! In fact, his accent belies his upbringing.

“My background is totally working class,

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my education was secondary modern and I failed my 11 plus so left school at 15. My mother was a char and my father was a painter and decorator who then educated himself to become a quantity surveyor. Drink totally controlled his life and as a consequence he was an unhappy man and we were an unhappy family. I did not go to public school or university and I'm not upper class. I'm like Frankenstein – I've been created. I created myself! I'm my own Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

What did he do for a living? "I was a mortuary porter but it was a dead end job!", he says with a straight face. Peter decided to become a film extra but didn't get a single part but it did lead to him answering an ad in the *Stage* for help with the Ladbroke Grove amateur theatre group.

"They forced me to audition for *Romanoff and Juliet* and I asked 'What's an audition?' There was an American character in the play, and the only actor I was familiar with was Marlon Brando. I did this terrible, mumbling impersonation and the director's mouth dropped open as if to say, what the f*** have we got here?! I didn't get the part but they let me help with stage management and design".

At the tender age of 16, Peter played a small comedy part in *Arsenic and Old Lace* and became utterly fascinated by theatre – he was hooked.

"At 17, I made one of the best decisions of my life and auditioned for the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts (RADA) and was accepted".

Since then, Peter's bio is impressive, with many TV serials to his credit – the sex-and-cinema-obsessed Seth Starkadder in BBC's *Cold Comfort Farm*; the acid-throwing gangster, Hogarth, in the controversial Granada TV series, *Big Breadwinner Hog* and many others. Later, he took the starring role as John Everett Millais in the BBC's *The Love School* and as Oscar Wilde in the serial *Lillie*. More recently, he played Hugh 'Shrimpie' MacClare in ITV's *Downton Abbey*. One of his favourite roles was as Magnus Pym in the BBC dramatisation of John le Carré's *A Perfect Spy*.

"I loved the first comedy series I ever did which has become a classic, *Ever Decreasing Circles*. It was magical because Richard Briers was a fabulous person to work with. It was very funny and Ricky Gervais' favourite comedy series ever, which I think is quite a compliment. It's repeated all the time and I'm amazed when young people recognise me from it!"

Peter has won five awards, including BAFTA's highly esteemed Most Promising Newcomer back in 1973 – playing Captain Hugh Cantrip in the film *The Hireling*. The morning after he got the award, he was offered a film by Disney, *The Land That Time Forgot*, playing a German U-boat Captain.

"I thought it was terrible so I turned it down – and I didn't get offered another film for seven years!" But he did work with the most prestigious companies such as The Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre. His favourite theatre role? Hamlet!

Despite his huge success, it is in the last 15 years that Peter says he has found his true calling.

"I now more fully understand why I'm on this planet. I've had an incredibly fortunate life; born into poverty but becoming a professional actor when I was 20. I've never been an international star but I have been acting successfully for 53 years. But for 40 of those years I didn't really know why I was here.

We are proud to announce that Peter has agreed to become a Patron of Viva!. Peter says: "I'm honoured to become a patron. Viva! is at the forefront of the vegan revolution, investigating animal cruelty, launching campaign after campaign and tirelessly promoting the enormous benefits of change".



"Even after a huge success I would still feel... what's all that about? I thought I was looking for more success but really, I think my subconscious was saying there's got to be more than this – why are you on this planet? And maybe being brought up as a Roman Catholic – born into 'mortal sin' – you carry an abiding cloud of guilt with you throughout life. It's only when you blow that away that you realise life is about something else.

"Since then, I've dedicated my life to raising awareness of the enormous destructive problems facing our planet and all its species. I now understand why I'm here and I've never felt happier, because I know what I'm doing. I'm pleased to say that having reached the grand age of 72, life has never had more meaning for me".

Peter is acutely aware of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warning that we have about 11 years in which to limit catastrophic climate change. Will people switch to veganism *en masse* in time?

"I remember resisting wearing seatbelts. I used to refuse to go to people's houses if I couldn't smoke. Cinemas and pubs were filled with fog and it's hard to believe that people smoked on planes! I stopped smoking when I was 50 – change can happen quickly".

I point out that those behavioural shifts happened partly due to changes in the law. Does Peter see a time when animal products will be banned?

"Eating animals is not sustainable so I think laws will be implemented. Not only are we the most destructive species, we are also the most adaptable, the most inventive and have an extraordinary ability to survive. We're at the end of the beginning of change and veganism is growing exponentially.

"There's going to be major changes in the next 15 years. Apart from the die-hard idiots, humans are very savvy and once we get our heads into saving our world... Will it be solved in that time? I'm not sure but I think it will be by the middle of this century".

I'm honoured that Peter agreed to be a patron of Viva!. "Viva! is at the forefront of the vegan revolution, investigating animal cruelty, launching campaign after campaign and tirelessly promoting the enormous benefits of change".