

A Life Worth the Work

Why the reason has to be bigger than the number.

The last chapter lived inside my head. This one lives in my kitchen, in my grocery cart, at restaurant tables, and at my sister-in-law's dinner. I spent eight chapters telling you how I think about this. Now I am going to show you, in plain daylight, exactly how I live - what I put into my body on an ordinary Tuesday, where I buy it, how I cook it, and how I carry it out into a world that is not built for the way I eat.

This is the chapter where you take notes. I mean that. Everything before this was the why. This is the what and the how, and I am going to be specific, because the specifics are where most people get lost. They agree with the idea, then starve, standing in front of an open refrigerator because nobody ever told them what a day actually looks like. So here is my day, and my decade, laid out on the counter for you to pick through.

But I want to put one thing first, because it is the whole point of the chapter and the reason for its name. What I am about to describe is not a diet. A diet is something you survive. This is a thing I enjoy. I built it slowly; I bent it to

fit a life I actually want to live, and I would happily eat this way for the rest of my days - which, God willing, is a long time yet. That is the test of the whole thing. Not whether you can grit your teeth through thirty days, but whether you have built something worth keeping. A life, not a sentence. A life worth the work.

The Piece of Paper That Changed My Plate

In September of 2017, I was stuck. I had come a long way by then, but I had been parked at 210 pounds for months, and I could not budge the number. I was still walking every day, walking faster every day, hiking, doing all the things I had taught myself to do. But I was still eating the way I had eaten my whole life. I was a carnivore, and I had been a carnivore since I was a boy. Steak, chicken, fish, cheese, butter, ice cream - the whole standard American table. And I asked, out loud, for help. I did not know what the next move would be.

The next move walked in the door in my wife's hand, and it was a piece of paper. Debbie had been going to a women's boot camp, and every year they ran a program with a name that made me smile - the Little Black Dress program. The pitch was exactly what it sounded like: drop the last five or ten pounds and fit into the dress for the holidays. It cost twenty-five dollars. For your twenty-five dollars, you got a

full month of meal plans, shopping lists, and recipes. A stack of photocopies, really. And when you actually read the stack, there was no philosophy in it, no preaching, no manifesto. Just: here is breakfast, here is lunch, here is dinner, every day for thirty days. And every single day of it was vegan.

I did not know it yet, but the trainers behind that program had been plant-based for fifteen to seventeen years. It had honestly never once crossed my mind that I would eat that way. So, I did what I always do. I sat down and looked into it - not for long, I will be honest; it took me less than an hour - and what I found made the decision for me.

Here is what I learned, and I am giving it to you the way it came to me, as a salesman and not a scientist. The fat in animal products is a different animal from the fat in plants. Yes, an avocado is fatty - eat enough of them, and you will gain weight - but it is a different kind of fat than the kind that sits in a T-bone. And it was not just fat. It was protein. I found a film called Forks Over Knives, and it walked me through what convinced me: a protein called casein, the one in milk, cheese, and the rest of it. What I took away from that film was that, in their telling, casein feeds cancer growth. Now, I am not a doctor, and I am not going to argue the science with you. I am telling you what I heard and how it landed on a man with cancer throughout his

family tree. It landed hard.

So, I added it up. More fat, the wrong kinds of fat, a protein that frightened me, and a wife holding a thirty-day plan that cost twenty-five dollars. Less than an hour, and I thought: this is a smart thing to try. Debbie and I committed together, that fast. And the very next night we came home, we opened the pantry, the refrigerator, the freezer, and we went through the whole house. Everything that came from an animal or from an animal product - the meat, the cheese, the milk, the butter, the ice cream - we pulled it out, gave it away, and it was gone. We did not ease into it. We cleared the decks.

I did not study this for a month and agonize over it. I looked at it for under an hour, I saw enough to convince me, and I cleared my whole kitchen out that same night. The decision is fast. Living is the work. Do not confuse the two, and do not wait to feel ready - you build readiness by starting.

The rule they gave me for what counted as off-limits I have never forgotten, because it is simple enough to carry in your pocket: I will not eat anything that has a mother or a face. People love to test it. What about a clam? A clam came from another clam; it had a mother, and it had a face - you just cannot see it. It is an animal. Anything that is an

animal or comes from an animal is out. Butter, milk, ice cream, cheese - those are products made from animal-derived ingredients. If it has a mother or a face. That one sentence answered ninety-nine questions before anyone could ask them.

There is exactly one place I bend that rule, and I will own it: honey. Honey is not vegan - a bee is a living creature, and honey is, to put it politely, something a bee makes and brings back up; it's basically bee vomit. I know that sounds terrible, and it is, just not the way you might think. Bees have a special "honey stomach" that stores nectar, and they regurgitate it from there, not from their actual stomachs; no bee stomach acids in honey. I know what it is. I use a little of it anyway, sparingly, mostly to sweeten a cup of tea. I am telling you about my one exception so you understand that this is real life, with a real person living it, not a set of commandments carved in stone. You are allowed to be a human being about this.

Can't Versus Won't

The food was the easy part. The people were the interesting part. Because when you change how you eat in front of people who love you, you quickly find that, for many of them, food is love - and you have just told them you no longer want their love on a plate. That is not how they hear

it, but that is how it lands.

My best friends of more than forty years, Nancy and Smitty, are the warmest entertainers you will ever meet. Twenty people in the house in an instant, the whole neighborhood, and Nancy feeding all of them. So, the first time we showed up after going vegan, I came loaded - I brought my own blender in our luggage, ingredients, and vegan burritos and tacos, and made a whole Mexican spread for everybody, because I knew exactly what Nancy was going to do. And then we told her. We told her we would no longer be eating chicken, fish, steak, her potato salad, her butter, or her ice cream. And it blew the top of her head off.

Here is the part that matters, the part that is really this whole book in one small kitchen argument. Nancy said, "You mean you can't eat the food I make for you anymore?" And I said, "No. We can eat it. We just won't." And that one statement is what set her off. Why won't you eat my food?

It was never that I can't. Of course I can. I can eat anything I want; I have a mouth and a free hand. It is that I won't. "Can't" is a cage somebody else locks you in. "Won't" is a decision you make standing up. Every time you say, "I can't have that," you sound deprived, and you feel

deprived. Say "I don't" or "I won't," and you are the one holding the wheel.

My kids were fine with it. My in-laws were fine with it. Forty years of friendship with Nancy and Smitty survived it, although for the first year we brought our own food every single time we visited, and to this day Smitty thinks I am wrong and stays a happy carnivore. We agreed to disagree, and that is allowed too. The world mostly just gets confused, not angry. Say "vegan" to some people, and you may as well be speaking Martian. They will hand you honey, hand you cheese, hand you ice cream, with the kindest intentions on earth. You learn to explain it once, gently, and move on.

The First Meal Out, and the Lesson Inside It

You want to know how my very first meal out in the world as a vegan went? It went badly, and I tell the story on purpose, because the lesson in it has saved me a thousand times since.

I had an old friend named Jack, my father's age. Every week I took Jack shopping - shopping was his favorite sport - and afterward he liked to buy me a meal. On one particular day, we went, and it happened to be the very first day of my vegan life. I figured I was safe. What restaurant does not have a salad? What restaurant does not have a

baked potato? There is always something. Nope. Jack took me to a little greasy-spoon breakfast joint he loved. Bacon, eggs, buttermilk pancakes, waffles, butter, cream. No potatoes. No salad. The single best thing I could find on that whole menu, on the first day of the rest of my eating life, was buttermilk pancakes. So, my first word as a vegan, my first bite, was built around butter. I left the butter off, drowned them in syrup, and drank iced tea. That was my grand vegan debut.

And it taught me the rule I have never once broken since: never assume. From that day to this, I look at the menu before I walk through the door. Everybody has a website or a menu in a window that you can see from outside. It takes thirty seconds. Is there anything here I will eat? Two or three things are plenty. I am going for one meal, not a tour. But I look, every single time, and I have never been caught flat again. From that embarrassing plate of pancakes to today, I have not strayed from plant-based eating once. Not one time. Everything has been plants.

The flip side of that lesson is a happy one: a good restaurant will take wonderful care of you, but only if you ask. Not a chain - a McDonald's will not help you - but walk into a decent, privately owned neighborhood place, tell the server you are vegan, explain what that means, and ask how they prepare things. They are almost always

honest about it, and the best ones send the chef out to the table. What would you like? We ate off-menu meals in restaurant after restaurant, beautiful food, made special, just because we asked. And here is the thing: you do not have to be vegan to do that. Anybody can ask. You would be amazed at what a chef will make for a guest who simply asks. If you have a particular dietary requirement, speak up for yourself. People are kind and willing to do what they can to make you happy, especially in restaurants. They want you to come back again on another day.

What an Ordinary Day Actually Looks Like

So let me hand you the day. Not a holiday, not a special occasion - a plain weekday, the kind I have lived a few thousand times now, because it is very nearly the same every single day, and the sameness is the secret.

I get up, I do my training, and I make a smoothie. One smoothie, every morning. Mine has gotten simpler over the years, on purpose, because it does not need to be complicated - it needs to hit certain marks: enough protein, enough water, a few things that are good for me. I will give you the whole recipe because people always ask. I start with two cups of flax milk with added protein - flax, not nut milk - because nut milk is sneaky-high in fat and calories and has almost no protein, while two cups of this

flax milk give me 15 grams of protein for about 120 calories. To that, I add two cups of water. Because I had a small stroke - a TIA - I add a tablespoon of turmeric and a quarter teaspoon of black pepper for my brain; the pepper helps the body's uptake of what is in the turmeric, and you cannot taste either one. Then, two tablespoons of flaxseed meal, two tablespoons of chia seeds, and two scoops of a vegan, sugar-free, high-protein powder called OWYN - "only what you need." I blend all that, then add two cups of a frozen cherry-berry-kale blend, mostly kale with dark cherries and berries for the antioxidants and a natural sweetness, no sugar anywhere in it. Blend it smoothly. I use a high-speed blender, and it makes six cups - forty-eight ounces - that I pour into an insulated mug and carry to work.

PREVIEW ENDS HERE

This free preview covers the first 10 pages of the chapter. The rest is in the book. To order Volume II - From 310 to Thriving, email metabojoe@gmail.com.