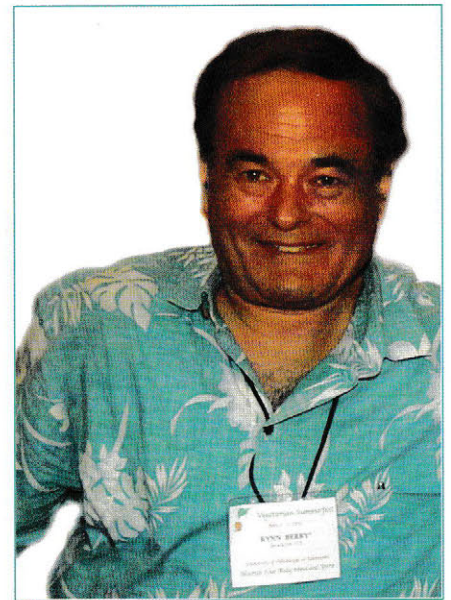


A TRIBUTE TO RYNN BERRY, JR.

by Mark Mathew Braunstein (1945-2014)



Rynn Berry, a vegetarian since 1964, embraced veganism in 1981, when few people knew the word or its tenets. Hoping to remedy veganism's minority status within the ranks of vegetarianism, he devoted his life to chronicling the histories and to teaching the philosophies of both.

In pursuit of those lofty goals, Rynn Berry was a writer and lecturer, an athlete and aesthete, a researcher and scholar, a reader and translator of Latin and Ancient Greek, the historical advisor to the North American Vegetarian Society (NAVS) and speaker for 26 consecutive years at its Vegetarian Summerfests. In addition to his perennial talks charting the history of vegetarianism and encapsulating the biographies of noteworthy vegetarians, he also scripted short plays in which members of the Summerfest audience brought to life such luminaries as Leonardo da Vinci and Pythagoras.

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But don't go poking around the Internet looking for Rynn's writings. Google will point you virtually nowhere. Rynn conceived no windbag's website nor braggart's blog, his Facebook profile is nearly a blank page and he seldom resorted to e-mail. With his uniquely cursive calligraphy, he handwrote most of his correspondence.

Conducting research for his books, Rynn read the dead, but interviewed the living. Kitchen tables turned, New Vegan Age's Tom Epler recently interviewed Rynn. An interviewee's answers can be only as good as the interviewer's questions, and Tom asked all the right questions. Rynn's answers are insightful and eloquent, and are the closest likeness you will find on the web to Rynn's writings. The interview is posted at: <http://newveganage.blogspot.com.br/2013/06/interview-author-and-vegan-champion.html>.

If Rynn shunned the Internet, it was because he hailed from the Socratic school of pedagogy. Notoriety on the web sometimes can go too viral, while for Rynn no audience was too small. Following in the footsteps of Walt Whitman who peddled his poetry on the street corners of Manhattan, Rynn engaged passers-by in conversation at farmers markets, passively selling his books while stridently espousing the virtues of veganism.

New York urbanites know Rynn best for his *Vegan Guide to NYC*, now in its 20th edition. Rynn was a raw foodist at home, and a fruitarian at heart, but to review restaurants for his guide he strayed widely from the uncooked path. He sampled the city's abundance of vegan



Rynn Berry is served vegan fare by chef Cathi DiCoco at Vegetarian Summerfest 2008.

delicacies, ranging from conventional but affordable tofu cheesecake at Angelica's to exotic but expensive saffron cashew wild mushroom hand-stuffed whole grain ravioli at Candle Café.

Those of us who live outside the NYC metro area can equally relish Rynn's other books, most notably *Famous Vegetarians & Their Favorite Recipes*, a biographical history that spans three millennia, and *Food for the Gods: Vegetarianism & the World's Religions*. He loved veg food and loved writing about veg food and loved writing about other writers who loved veg food. Among his favorite writers were Leo Tolstoy, Percy Shelley and George Bernard Shaw. Not coincidentally, they were vegetarians and, in addition to their novels, poems and plays, all three wrote essays promoting their pioneering diets. Indeed, Rynn credited Shaw for converting him into a vegetarian. Shelley's writings on the raw food diet influenced Rynn, too.

During one NAVS Summerfest, Rynn lectured about Shelley's life as a vegetarian and concluded with Shelley's death as a drowning victim. The audience was small and informal, so someone asked in jest if Shelley had been skinny-dipping. "I don't know," Rynn quipped, "But his body was naked when it washed ashore."

Our deaths provide punctuation to our lives, sometimes with conclusive periods, sometimes with question marks, sometimes with exclamation marks. Rynn was an avid runner. He twice completed the NYC marathon and recently participated regularly in track meets in Brazil, as their summers heat up when NYC winters freeze up. Two days before he was scheduled to embark on a flight to Brazil where he often was a speaker at an animal rights annual conference, he went for a routine run in Prospect Park near his Brooklyn home. On that fateful bitterly cold day in late December, Rynn suffered cardiac arrest and collapsed in his tracks.

For several days, the name of the hospitalized "Prospect Park Jogger" was unknown. The only clues in his pockets were keys and an asthma inhaler. (Winter runners with asthma are at high risk of cardiac arrest because extremely cold air constricts the lungs' passages, which strains breathing, which in turn strains the heart.) Ironically, the biographer was stripped of any identity of his own. In essence, his body was naked when it washed ashore.

Still more ironic, the soft-spoken gentleman of quiet demeanor who never hired a literary agent or publicist and who never queued up for media attention, now was under the spotlights of police and in the flashes of cameras. In a campaign to identify their comatose comrade on life support, local runners' clubs circulated photos of the "Prospect Park Jogger." The news media, including The New York Times, took note. His death shined a light on his life...and, intrinsic to Rynn, also upon his books and upon the vegan diet that his books championed.

History (and biography) is not the record of what has happened, but of what has been written about what has happened. If no one writes it, then history vanishes. Who next among the living will take up the pen and step up to the plate? ▶



MARK MATHEW BRAUNSTEIN, is a longtime friend of Rynn and longtime contributor to *Vegetarian Voice*, is the author of three books on veganism, including *Radical Vegetarianism*, which upon reading it in 1982 inspired Rynn to contact Mark.