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Making a Difference: Part One: An Interview with Henry Spira

Joan Zacharias

Henry Spira is Coordinator of Animal Rights International. An activist for more than 50 years, he has fought for union democracy in the maritime industry, marched for civil rights and won major battles to reduce animal suffering. He was instrumental in persuading Revlon to stop testing cosmetics on animals and has convinced major companies like Procter & Gamble to invest millions in research for alternatives to animal testing. In recent years he has focused on the plight of seven billion farm animals, including a successful campaign to get the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to end its policy of face-branding steers imported from Mexico.

Q: Henry, what made you become an activist?

A: While I was growing up I was farmed out to a variety of relatives in a variety of countries and with a variety of outlooks. This probably encouraged independence and, later, a willingness to question authority.

I remember my first dream was to liberate all birds from their cages. Later on, when I was about 12, we lived in Panama and I accompanied a couple of pistol-packing rent collectors through the slums. I knew their boss, the landlord, who lived in palatial affluence and I felt it was terribly wrong. But at the time, there wasn't anything I could do about it.

This was also the period of the Holocaust. There were lots of people who could do something about that, but they didn't. They only expressed the right sentiments -- much like our current politically correct do-nothings.

These sorts of personal and political experiences may well have turned me into an activist who wants to make a difference where it matters. And to me, what defines an activist is going beyond the words and sentiments, turning words into productive action that leads to results.

Q: There are all kinds of injustices in the world. How did you end up working on animal rights issues and why did you select the farm animal issue?

A: For most of my life I've been active in human rights campaigns including the movements for trade union democracy and for civil rights. Animal rights, for me, was nothing more than a logical extension of these concerns.

For almost two decades we successfully promoted alternatives to the use of lab animals. But however you look at this progress, it did not impact on 95% of all animal suffering – the seven and a half billion farm animals raised for dinners every year. A few years ago we began to plan how we could adapt the earlier strategies to the farm animal arena.

Q: Why did you become a vegetarian?

A: Way back when I was a kid, my grandparents had a cow's tongue hanging in the kitchen, waiting to be cooked. It just totally grossed me out and I never ate tongue again. Later on when I worked in

Guinea, I was invited to an event in the countryside where. I played with a sheep in the grass. Then, at the dinner, the centerpiece was a whole roasted sheep waiting to be carved up. Playing with one and imagining eating another shook me up and I never ate lamb from then on. Years later I was given a cat. Caressing my feline friend while sticking a knife and fork into another animal made me question and made me think. Then I read Peter Singer's essay, *Animal Liberation*, and it all came together. The discomfort started way back, but it took a long time for my lifestyle to reflect my feelings and for me to realize that animals are not edibles. I think that for many of us, change is a gradual process.

Q: Tell us about the work you're doing on the farm animal issue.

A: We're working on a number of fronts. One of them is the USDA, which has enormous influence. We've established good rapport with them. They take us seriously and recognize that we're out to solve problems and are not just looking for a fight, but they also know that we're capable of conducting a public awareness campaign, as we did on face-branding. The enormous outpouring of public concern in connection with the face-branding campaign made it possible for people at the USDA, many of whom were themselves concerned, to begin to reassess current practices in animal agriculture.

Another front is the corporate sector. McDonald's is now demanding that its suppliers abide by humane standards and submit a compliance statement every year. We're beginning to set the pace for the corporate sector -- they know they need to get involved in setting standards for suppliers. Now we're talking to PepsiCo (KFC), Campbell's Soup, Heinz and others, trying to get them to set standards and also to place the whole issue of animal well-being on the agenda.

At the same time, we've also produced some generic ads that have run in a variety of places, and we're going to do more that will be addressed to the mainstream public, basically suggesting that there's misery in meat, and that for the sake of your health, the animals' health and environmental health, go meatless or eat less meat -- it's just a win-win situation across the board. We also try to encourage major animal organizations to place more emphasis on the farm animal well-being front.

How To Make A Difference: Henry Spira's "Three R's"

Replace – Switch to a meatless diet. Replace meat with fruits, vegetables, grains and beans.

Reduce – If you aren't ready to commit to a meatless diet, reduce the number of animals you eat.

Refine – As long as people continue to eat animals, recognize that they are living creatures and pressure industry and government to reduce their suffering.

Q: Why are these companies suddenly so willing to take measures to reduce animal suffering?

A: The fact that McDonald's set standards for its suppliers was not necessarily because McDonald's suddenly became more sensitive to farm animal misery. What they did become sensitive to is the public's concern with this issue. When I talk to any corporate type, the USDA, or whoever; I

just say the fact that we're suggesting something doesn't have to concern you at all. It's just that when we suggest something where we're in sync with the public and you're not, that's when you should start worrying. I don't think that animal agriculture today is in sync with what the public wants. But, the public doesn't know what's going on. So, isn't it our duty to let the public know what's going on? The reason the American Meat Institute put out humane guidelines a few years ago and that everyone we contacted switched over from shackling and hoisting to an upright restrainer system was because they figured their practices were indefensible in public debate.

Q: You've said that you work in an incremental fashion, one step at a time, and that the further you go, the further in the distance you can see. Looking far ahead, what do you see?

A: I see a coming together of the many movements promoting non-violence and defending the vulnerable. For too long people have viewed the earth and everything on it as something to be exploited without limits. Now, many of us are beginning to recognize that our planet is not just a quarry to be pillaged and then refilled with garbage. This provides us with an incentive to promote a practical universal ethic -- among these, that it's wrong to harm others who, like us, want to avoid pain and get some pleasure out of life.

It seems to me that common sense suggests that our society will be upgraded by shifting from greed and macho violence to doing the least harm and the most good to other humans, to other animals and our fragile environment.

An immediate opportunity is encouraging meat to go the way of tobacco, from fashionable to pariah. I see McVeggies as tomorrow's premier fast food chain.

Q: Do you think you've seen a sea change in your lifetime?

A: I think there's been a revolution in our attitude toward animal suffering. It's totally remarkable that one book, in a couple of decades, has changed our outlook and even our behavior toward non-human animals. But if there hadn't been an *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer, then I think the same thing might have happened, just more slowly. Once all humans are considered within the circle of our concern, it's just inevitable and natural that the next expansion would be toward non-human animals.

Q: You've been at this for a long time, Henry, and the problems are enormous. What keeps you going? Do you ever get tired of trying?

A: No matter how big the problems have been, we've always been able to move forward. It's crucial to have a long-term perspective. Looking back over the past 20 years, I see progress that we've helped achieve. And when a particular initiative causes much frustration, I keep looking at the big picture while pushing obstacles out of the way. And there's nothing more energizing than making a difference.

I think that to be effective, you must enjoy what you're doing. To feel that there's nothing in the world that you'd rather do. That you find it personally fulfilling and it gives meaning to your life. It's a lifestyle where everything is sorted out from the perspective of "what difference does it make?" Where you're not concerned with appearances, popularity, material possessions, social status and trappings of power. You are concerned with results that will endure.

Still, it's been said that we don't live by politics alone. Personally, I also get much pleasure from Nina, my playful feline companion. And I walk in parks and, when I can, hike along the seashore. For me, being in contact with nature is like recharging one's batteries. Which is why I was so comfortable working some 11 years aboard merchant ships oftentimes surrounded by nothing but the seas.

Q: What's your vision?

A: I'd like to see a world with no violence, no exploitation and no domination, where we live in harmony with other humans, other animals and the environment. But the need is not for grandiose dreams but for careful attention to the real world followed up with action. Because dreaming or even planning won't get us there. As my favorite button proclaims, "wearing buttons is not enough."

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