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

Joan Zacharias

Henry Spira, Coordinator of Animal Rights International, is considered by many to be one of the most effective animal activists around. "Through his work," remarked Peter Singer, author of Animal Liberation, "millions of animals have escaped acute pain and suffering ..." In Part One (Satya 2:1), Spira discussed his evolution to animal advocacy and his ongoing campaign on behalf of farm animals. In Part Two, the focus is on Spira's strategy; developed over a half century of struggle in the trade union, civil rights and animal rights movements.

Q: You've been active in many different movements for a long time. From your own experience, how is change really made?

A: It happens a little bit at a time. Many of us are in the animal movement because we identify with the animals who are suffering. Similarly, in politics, I feel it's necessary to be able to look at the situation from the perspective of those you are talking with.

In our campaign which focused on research and testing, we amplified suggestions from the scientific community itself. This helped create a loop of scientific superstars who agreed that it was time to reassess traditional practices. After the scientific community heard the same message from a hundred different sources, it quietly became part of the mainstream.

Q: What's wrong with the all-or-nothing approach? The atrocities against animals seem to cry out for such an abolitionist approach.

A: Sometimes this is phrased as, "If humans were vivisected, would you ask for abolition or for bigger cages?" -- with the all-or-nothings presenting themselves as saints while castigating others as sinners.

But remember, the first law of effective activism is: stay in touch with reality. And the reality is that seven and a half billion non-human animals, not humans, are being raised on farms every year for dinner. For as long as they remain edibles it's both futile and counterproductive to engage in the blustering bravado of: abolition now!

The animal victims can't afford this self-righteous, moralistic stance of all-or-nothing, because so far it's led to nothing. For 100 years people hollered "abolish vivisection!" while the number of animals in labs kept skyrocketing. Reduction came about as a result of campaigns to promote alternatives. If you go for all-or-nothing, it's a good way to get applause, but it's not a good way to make progress. I don't think that the suffering animals are well-served by the self-indulgence of the politically correct.

Progress is made stepwise, incrementally. You can have ideals, but, in practical terms, what are you going to do today? What are you going to do tomorrow? You need a program that makes sense in order to move ahead.

Q: Critics accuse you of compromising with injustice – "hobnobbing in the halls, with the enemy." How do you respond?

A: For us, dialoguing with the other side has produced tangible results. When you suggest alternatives that are doable, workable and that lead to progress, and where everybody can come out a winner, then you get change that's a great deal more enduring because it's not begrudging.

I think you always need to start off with dialogue because if you start off with bashing, then it looks like you're looking to fight and not looking to solve problems. The point is to look at issues as problems with solutions, try to figure out solutions, and move ahead. But, where no action is forthcoming, we've been tough and relentless.

Q: You've said that you look to turn walls into stepping stones of cooperation. But what about when it's not in someone's best interests to cooperate, such as Frank Perdue (media-hungry CEO of Perdue Farms, the nation's fourth largest poultry processor)?

A: Most of the time rational discussion does succeed. Sometimes they jerk us around, but you can still see that over the long haul they're going to be responsive. In the case of Perdue, he didn't even think there was a problem, never mind being responsive. But even with Perdue, it was good strategy to attempt to communicate with him, because when we launched our public awareness campaign, we could legitimately say that Perdue forced us into it. And this negative campaign has probably been very useful in our farm animal initiatives. It reminded those whom we contacted that while we'd rather engage in productive dialogue, we were capable of harming their public image.

How To Make A Difference

Do's and Don'ts from Henry Spira

Do...

- Stay in touch with reality
- Choose targets carefully
- Check your facts
- Accentuate the positive
- Tackle issues one at a time
- Note divisions within the other side
- Keep your organization free from bureaucracy

Don't...

- Be personally hostile to adversaries
- Focus on people's intentions or motives
- Focus exclusively on legislation.

Q: How do you respond to those people who say, "We've got all these human problems. Don't you have anything better to do with your time than worry about animals?"

A: It defies common sense to make it appear that you've got a limited amount of compassion -- that if you use it for the animals then you don't have it for the humans. I think compassion is such that the more you use it, the more of it you have. Once we start excluding certain living; feeling beings from the circle of compassion, the easier it becomes to exclude others as well.

When we see seven billion animals who never have a good day in their lives, and we're the ones responsible for this happening to them, then I think one figures that there's nothing else one can do but fight in their defense. This does not preclude people from also getting involved in fighting for other vulnerable folks. The big difference with nonhuman animals is that they're incapable of organizing in their own defense. We're the ones who have to do it for them.

Q: How are animal rights and human social progress linked?

A: Any fight for rights, whether it's for human or nonhuman animals, is part of a whole tableau of people willing to speak out in defense of the rights of others, particularly those who are weaker than themselves. People will come to the fight for justice by many different roads.

Q: Why hasn't the Left gotten itself involved in this?

A: There is the old leftist view, which has never been updated, that progress requires that we dominate nature, and other animals are considered part of that nature.

Actually, it's rather ironic since leftist theoreticians maintain that ideologies often times serve to justify oppression. The way it works is that those on top convince themselves that "the other" is somehow different and less than us -- as with slavery, or the napalming of the Vietnamese people. Similarly, if a society feels that we need to eat dead animals, then we define ourselves by creating an unbridgeable gap between us and them.

It would seem to me that a rational leftist would recognize that the ultimate in exploitation and domination and treating living beings as mere objects for profit is nowhere seen in a purer form than in our relation to animals raised for food.

Q: What advice would you give someone who wants to make a difference, but doesn't know where to start?

A: You probably want to select what you're comfortable doing, be it big or small. How much time do you have? What resources are available to you? What are your personal skills, people skills, writing skills? Do you have a talent for organizing protests or for street theatre? Anything that makes a difference is valid on its own merits. Droplets turn into streams that can finally turn into tidal waves of change.

Get involved in something that's right for you. Something that's doable, where you can achieve planned results. You gain confidence by doing. It's good to be impatient with injustice, but you need to be patient with yourself. Start off by writing a letter to the editor, encourage school and company cafeterias to offer more vegetarian options, ask your library to carry Animal Liberation and other books dealing with animal protection. Call or write your favorite media personality and ask them to tell the "meat is misery" story.

It's also important to enjoy what you're doing. That way you're going to be more effective.

Q: Are you satisfied with your life?

A: Yes. Some things I would do differently, but by and large I'm comfortable with what I'm doing with my life. And I enjoy it, too. It's exciting, interesting, and I generally feel that I'm doing the best I can. I think that activism is a lifestyle that more people should consider.

I'm not encouraging people to carve out careers for themselves within the animal movement. I earned my living as a teacher while coordinating campaigns that stopped experiments at the Museum of Natural History and pressured Revlon into funding alternatives to animal testing. People can make a lot more time than they imagine once they realize that they can get results.

It's energizing to be involved in an initiative that one feels is worthwhile. Working on it, planning it out and then all of a sudden seeing the pieces come together – it creates an enormous feeling of satisfaction. And you feel better about yourself. I don't think that somebody who spends their energies trying to make a difference in the world ends up in therapy.

I think most of us want to be able to look back and figure that, hey, we've done something useful with our lives and, as my current cliché goes, done more than consume products and generate garbage.

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