



**Our Hen House**  
CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS  
a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization

## Interview with Charles Siebert

By OUR HEN HOUSE

Published July 26, 2014

*Following is a transcript of an interview with **CHARLES SIEBERT** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 237.*

ALESSANDRA: Next up in TV show highlights, we'll feature Charles Siebert, a journalist and author who's reaching mainstream audiences with stories powerful enough to change the way people see animals and their attitudes about how animals should be treated. In addition to writing for the *New York Times* Sunday magazine, Charles is the author of *The Wauchula Woods Accord: Toward a New Understanding of Animals*.

JASMIN: It's such a pleasure to welcome Charles Siebert to Our Hen House today. Welcome to Our Hen House, Charles.

CHARLES: Thanks for having me.

JASMIN: It's such an honor to have you. We are such fans of your work. And I know that you are also from Brooklyn, born and bred here, and you live here now. Is that right?

CHARLES: Brooklyn hospital right around the corner, and so every time I pass it now I look over. My father actually commemorated the birth of each of us at Junior's with an ice cream soda and a burger, so the whole place is so in my genes.

JASMIN: We should have a soy ice cream sundae and a veggie burger in honor of your being here and also of the amazing work you do to bring animals to the forefront in the mainstream media, because you're doing that, Charles, like nobody else is. And one of the remarkable things about the way you write about animals is that you seem to be making a serious attempt to understand the animal mind, not only to show their intelligence but also their vulnerability. I'm just wondering, is this a struggle, to get into an animal's head?

CHARLES: Yeah, like remembering the old Medieval maps, "Dragons dwell here. Fear to tread" kind of thing. This is what it was with animal intelligence. How could we possibly parse their brains or begin to without being accused of anthropomorphism? And the irony is that there was a period where early science, Darwin, was fearless to tread into that area and in fact devoted the last book of his life to that, the emotional life of animals. It's not the exact title, but anyway you could look it up. But as science began to evolve, there was an interesting seesaw thing that happened, which is that we got shy about conjecturing about animals because under B.F. Skinner and the behaviorists, it was, we can't even know what

you or I are thinking, everything's subjective. How dare any of us talk about what an elephant might be thinking, what an elephant day or a chimp day might be?

The thing that's allowed, literally allowed me to venture -- I began as a poet and that's all I wrote was poetry. But now you can make metaphoric leaps into this parallel complexity of animals. Why? Because of science. Because we now have neuronal studies of elephant brains, for example, that show their neurons stunt as a response to stress in the same way that human neurons do. In other words, elephants -- that's kind of a bulletin to me. Elephants suffer post-traumatic stress. What does that mean? And they suffer it for the very same societal breakdowns that humans incur? Like, in other words, if an elephant's not raised closely to its mother and doesn't have an attachment mechanism, same thing happens to that brain that happens to a child who's ignored and not reared in the normal, loving and consoling way.

So you read stuff like that, you don't have to say a word. It's not like you're arguing for anything. It's just like, you tell that story and you let people process that. And that's what all my writing's been about. It's with animals, I shut up. I just present the story and then go, here, how does this make you feel now? Does this make us more uncomfortable? Because when you know this about a creature like a chimpanzee or an elephant, are you now a little nervous about the fact that we have this animal in confinement?

MARIANN: We were so fascinated by the recent article you wrote, the cover story of the *New York Times* magazine about Steve Wise's work with the Nonhuman Rights Project. And of course Steve is bringing litigation, he started in New York but he'll be bringing litigation all over the country that is representing animals. He started with chimpanzees and really trying to establish, not that they have human rights, but that they have the ability to go into court and assert the rights they do have. And these are animals that are intelligent, they're autonomous, they can make their own decisions and they have the right to do that. Groundbreaking litigation, and I'm so excited it was on the cover story of the *New York Times* magazine.

CHARLES: He's really upsetting the whole ethos by saying -- and maybe people say he's overreaching -- "I want a human right for an animal" and that's a blurring of the lines. But the bottom line about Steven Wise is -- this is why we meshed and became friends -- he's using the same science that I use to write my stories, he's using it in court and saying how do we deal with this? 'Cause it's new knowledge now, we're in a new place. So, but that's the longwinded answer to your question, which is I couldn't write this stuff now if it weren't for the science and Steven Wise couldn't be prosecuting these cases if it weren't for the science.

MARIANN: I totally agree with you, but there's something so sad about that, that we went so awry in behaviorism and thinking that we had to prove that these animals could feel. Sometimes we do need to trust our intuition, and I think animals is a place where that's true. But we should have trusted our intuition, but we didn't, and it turns out the science has now come around to support all of these things that we sensed were true about animals.

CHARLES: No, that's very well put. Intuition being borne out, this is the very sad thing about us as the dominant species, that we're coming to these understandings so late, with all these creatures really on the brink. So it's almost like in our frame of reference, we had to destroy them to know them, or nearly destroy them, which is a horrible dynamic. But that's

how it's come. For years it was fine. I was a kid in Brooklyn, I went to the Inner City Zoo. I probably developed my early fascination by being the kid who just sat in the Brooklyn Prospect Park Zoo staring at the chimp overlook. And that's about empathy and wonder just like, what is behind there? There's me. I know there's a me in there or they're there. And that kind of connection is developed. But that's what's really sad about our ark. Here we are at the cusp now of an endgame with animals. Think of elephants, think of chimps. There's not much time, there's not much space left. So look, any understanding is not -- it's a little too late, you might say, but anything is welcome at this point.

MARIANN: I think it's gonna explode.

CHARLES: I think it is exploding and you can -- like, Steve Wise is the perfect example. But remember too it took the *New York Times* three proposals from me to accept this story.

MARIANN: Wow, but they did.

CHARLES: No, they didn't want it, but then they did.

MARIANN: Good for you. What would we do without you?

CHARLES: I just pushed it because this is the first time in my life I've ever followed a prospective subject and paid out of my own pocket to follow him because usually it's an expense account. But I just said, "No, no, no, what this guy's doing is cutting edge." Whatever you think about it, it's so out there and probably ahead of its time and very fraught analogies being drawn between slavery, between women who couldn't get the vote, people are so offended about that. But his point is, I'm not equating that to that. I'm saying, do you believe, judge -- whatever judge who may finally side -- do you believe that this entity has enough individuality, will, intention, anticipation of future, the ability to even know that they're gonna be in jail again tomorrow? Which chimps have. That's not conjecture anymore, that's been shown. So how do we feel about that? And people go, "More animal protection laws." But Steven's answer is, guess what, there are creatures like this that it's okay to keep them in zoos and it's okay to keep an orca at SeaWorld. They make tens of millions of dollars off of them.

MARIANN: And it's never gonna be against the law. We have to recognize that they have rights. There's just no way around it.

CHARLES: And it's perception. These animals, as I always say, they're twice imprisoned, once by the bars or the pools they're in, and twice by our perception. We have bars in front of our eyes when we look at animals. I'm writing an essay now, "Why Can't We See Animals?" and it's because the first thing we do when we look at a non-us is go, "Oh, poor you, you're almost us."

MARIANN: I love that. I can't wait to read this. Totally.

CHARLES: There's a kind of built-in hierarchical structure in our brains, and so now we're going, "You're not us so we're gonna put you in a cage and just stare at you for a while" and have even -- look, some of the best poetry I loved was Rilke. And he would sit at the Jardin des Plantes in France and stare at animals and write really moving poems. And there was a deep sadness in what he was thinking, but now, I think if Rilke knew what we knew now when he wrote, it would be even -- I'd love to read that.

JASMIN: But how do you get people to care? You're discussing these issues that people have their own kind of confinement systems in their brain. How do you get past that? How do you make people want to read about nonhuman rights?

MARIANN: You do it.

JASMIN: Yeah, he does it, I just want to know --

MARIANN: So tell us how!

JASMIN: Yeah, what is it?

CHARLES: "What's your secret?!" No, I really do think shutting up -- I think there's a weird principle that happens, not that I -- I'm not fully on board with some of the more strident efforts to reverse some of our -- but I have found as a writer telling stories like the ones about the elephants whose societies, cultures have been broken down by our activities, and then let the parallels speak. And then suddenly you're getting letters from not just animal rights people, you're getting letters from politicians. Now, of course it always goes back to us. People go, "Oh, you see? Let's use the elephant example to rear our kids better in inner city London" or whatever. And a lot of that stuff happens.

But the basic answer to your question is, and it's also the answer to the question of those who say, when you write about this stuff, "Really? Don't we have a lot more problems in this world than focusing on these animals when the human animal --" and my point, that's not original, is this is about empathy. And the extension of empathy and understanding is good for us and all species. So this is what it is, it's the -- but as we know too of human brain studies, some people have less empathy. Some people have regions of their empathic regions of their brain that don't have the neuronal development. And that can be stunted by upbringing. So another corollary to the stuff I've been writing on the animal cruelty syndrome, a piece I wrote, I was fascinated because that got me into this whole area of therapy for kids who have been through a really hard time or didn't get the attachment mechanism we were talking about.

MARIANN: I love that piece. Can you really explain what happens to kids when they witness animal cruelty? 'Cause I thought that piece was so enlightening about it.

CHARLES: It varies brain to brain, right? We're all so different. But it stunts, it blunts.

MARIANN: Fascinating.

CHARLES: If you've seen your sister get beat up and you've been beat up, if there's a cruel, unempathic parent -- non-empathic I guess would be the word, they've found with kids like this, that doing things like taking them, actually just meditating, sitting and thinking about beyond their own brain actually grows the neurons in that region of the brain. Our brains are very plastic, protean, I mean they're very, very -- but also one of the things I love most, really traumatized kids who will not listen to another human being lecture them about, "This is what you're doing wrong, this is what you need to do," you put them with a Mustang who's kicking and that kid usually has this incredible bond and you know what it is? This is something that could kick his ass and is so much more powerful. But -- and there's no scolding, it's just power versus another kind of power, human teenager with all those hormones. And it's the most therapeutic thing on the planet.

MARIANN: I totally understand that because there are times that I just can't tolerate people but I can always tolerate an animal, even if they're being awful. It's seamless, the connection.

CHARLES: No, that's the other thing. People say, "Why'd you get into all these stories, especially a kid from Brooklyn?" I go, "Animals don't talk back as much. They're an easy interview."

MARIANN: That's true.

JASMIN: But it actually is a great question. You're such a wonderful writer and you have such an interesting background. Let's take a step back. What is it that initially drew you as a writer to write about animals?

CHARLES: I guess I could harken back to that early childhood zoo kind of thing in the city. Like, it seems so weird to invoke that, but what other access could I have had?

MARIANN: Especially in those days when you didn't really experience them in any other way.

CHARLES: Right. I just don't know. These are the vagaries. I'm actually -- the book I'm working on now is going to be about animal personality, which means us included. Where does personality come from? And it's a fascinating subject. I wrote a piece about it years ago and then it just sat there on my shelf, and now I just started to tap into it again because it comes down to the fact that personality is -- what is personality? Why are you like you, you like you, me like me? And it turns out that the tenets, the underpinnings, the raw stuff of personality is of course throughout the animal phylum. It's there. There are shy fruit flies and there are bold fruit flies.

MARIANN: Yeah, even among animals there's not -- there's just those we don't think of as sophisticated.

CHARLES: Yeah. You don't have a mind to even think with.

JASMIN: Well, you wrote *Angus*.

CHARLES: A novel.

JASMIN: *Angus* is one of our favorites from the dog's point of view. How do you even just jump into the dog's point of view?

CHARLES: Well, that was a sad day in my editor's mind when I called her up and said I'm doing it from the dog's point of view.

JASMIN: No, well, that's your only -- is that your only novel that you've written, or...?

CHARLES: Yeah, I've written a bunch of poetry and then a novel and then the rest are these memoirs. I think the answer to your question though is like, I knew -- this gets to family, and as the middle child of seven kids, and I know this could be a cliché, but I was always the one that kind of had like a foot in it and a foot outside of it, like I was always observing from afar kind of thing. And to me animals were a way to dive into just a parallel world and so, like I said, I was the kid in the ape house. Everyone else had left, my parents

had gone off and I'm like just what -- I just used to like to go there. And I got away from it for a long time. I wasn't writing about animals, really. I was writing about nature versus city a lot, and then one day a *New York Times* editor said -- I wrote a book about the heart. I was obsessed with the heart and I went on a heart harvest for a woman who ended up getting that heart for a transplant, and I was the first journalist who was allowed to go on a heart harvest. So I wrote all this stuff about the heart and one book about the heart, and then my editor at the time said, "Why don't you do what you've done for the heart for the brain?" And I went, oh no. Like, now he wants me to write about consciousness. So I was so nervous about that because that is a subject that's stumped far greater minds than mine.

MARIANN: No, it's a tough one. I'm not sure we really get that one.

CHARLES: Exactly. But this is what's funny, this is how I chickened out. I said, rather than write about consciousness, human consciousness, I said I'd just write a piece about chimps being put in a retirement home, Chimp Haven. I said, let's do a story about these chimps who've been pressed into medical research, and now because it was shown that it was a folly to think chimps could help us with AIDS, they're now being retired under Bill Clinton's last act of his presidency. I love that, that it was the Chimp Act that released these chimps. So I started to hang out with these chimps and then other chimps in retirement. And so the piece that was supposed to be about human consciousness became "Planet of the Retired Apes" as they called it kind of unfortunately, and even more unfortunately they went out and got a real chimp and put it on the cover, which was not -- but I had no say in that. But anyway that's what started this. From there it went to animal personality, from animal personality to the elephant crackup, from elephants to whales, to whales to animal cruelty. And it's like I can't stop.

MARIANN: And I like that it's come back to chimps and you're writing about Steve Wise because it really may be a big change.

JASMIN: You are just doing such tremendous work for shedding light on these issues and kind of getting people to think about them in new ways and we're so grateful to that.

MARIANN: Can we talk for six more hours?

CHARLES: Let's go.

JASMIN: Yeah, let's just pretend that we're continuing with the show. Get you some more coffee. Coffee! Anyway, Charles, thank you so much for coming to visit Our Hen House and for sharing your story and your wisdom with us.