



Our Hen House

CHANGE THE WORLD FOR ANIMALS

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Interview with Matt Ball

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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Following is a transcript of an interview with **MATT BALL** conducted by **JASMIN SINGER** and **MARIANN SULLIVAN** of [Our Hen House](#), for the [Our Hen House podcast](#). The interview aired on Episode 232.

JASMIN: Matt Ball cofounded Vegan Outreach and served as the group's executive director for more than 20 years, building the organization into a leading animal advocacy charity with many thousands of active members around the world. Under his leadership, activists distributed more than 22 million booklets exposing the treatment of farmed animals and promoting compassionate, thoughtful living. A globally recognized authority on animal advocacy, factory farming, vegetarian diets, and applied ethics, Matt is also the author of many essays and several books, including *The Animal Activist's Handbook* and most recently *The Accidental Activist*.

Welcome to Our Hen House, Matt.

MATT: It's an honor to be back with you.

JASMIN: It's so exciting to talk to you. We are such big fans of all that you do, as you know, and I'm thrilled about your book, *The Accidental Activist*. First of all, what does that mean? It's such a compelling title. What do you mean by *The Accidental Activist*?

MATT: Well, I never meant to be an activist. People have kind of a stereotypical view of the personality of an activist, and that's not me. By nature, not politically but by nature, I'm very conservative, and I'm an engineer by training and by inclination as well. And you never think of engineers really as activists. Being involved in anything to do with social change was never something that I had considered or believed in or really cared about. I wasn't political growing up. And then my freshman year of college I met a vegetarian, and life kind of took me on an entirely different path than I had planned up to that point. And it was all because of the room draw at the dorm. If the room draw had gone differently, my life would have been completely and utterly different. And so it was just by accident that my life has taken this path.

JASMIN: That's so interesting. And I think that everyone listening to this can resonate with that because if people are listening to this then they probably care about animals, and we can all pinpoint that moment that things took a different turn. And I just was talking to you before we started recording about the fact that people who would generally listen to our podcast are folks who already are enlightened at least somewhat to animal issues and really kind of want to take the next step. And as I said to you before we started recording, I just so strongly encourage our listeners to get a copy of *The Accidental Activist*, which is

coming out in mid-June but is available for preorder already and it's through Lantern. And I just can't stress enough that Matt, you really come from a place of understanding that we're not all born with a protest sign in our hand. And sometimes, as you just said so eloquently, life just happens and we wind up caring about these issues and we wind up realizing that this is our path in life whether we expected it or not, to speak up for those who are less lucky, be they animals or somebody else. So can you give us a snapshot of where you think the movement to reduce suffering is right now as opposed to 10 years ago?

MATT: Sure. I can even go back 20 years ago or even a little further than that when I first met my roommate who was a vegetarian. In 1995 the British magazine *The Economist* did a cover story on animal issues. They did a lead editorial and they did an actual story, and they talked about how in the UK the focus of animal advocacy tended to be more on food animal issues and vegetarianism, but in the United States it focused more on vivisection and fur. And when I got started in activism, I did a lot of fur protests and vivisection protests, especially at Procter & Gamble. I was at the University of Cincinnati and Procter & Gamble's world headquarters is in Cincinnati, and so I was kind of the stereotype of what *The Economist* had been saying about the movement. It was only over time that I and friends started to realize that the vast majority of animals that suffer and die in the United States every year are those that are killed for food. And to be able to make a difference for these animals people just had to make a change in their life. You didn't have to pass a law, you didn't have to change the government, you didn't have to change the policy of a major multinational corporation. But at the time we were starting to come to these realizations there was very little activism along these lines. Bruce Friedrich, who was the coauthor with me on my first book, said that when he started People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, only 1% of their grassroots budget went to vegetarian promotion. So I think *The Economist* was pretty right on with the fact that it was very focused on fur and vivisection.

And things have pretty much changed 180 degrees now. And now even the Humane Society of the United States has a major farmed animals campaign and there are all sorts of grassroots organizations that are focused on farmed animal issues and promoting vegetarianism and doing it at the grassroots level, and doing it at a large level with getting lots of national media or television commercials or ads to get a lot of views or handing out millions of booklets or advertising on the internet to get tens of thousands of views of videos every month. So it's been a complete change in focus and we've started to see the results of this in the numbers of animals being killed in the United States has now been going down since 2006. So it's really been an amazing and very encouraging change in focus.

JASMIN: That's so exciting to hear, especially from someone like you who's really been extremely involved for a very long time. And this is kind of a silly story but I kept thinking about it. As our listeners know and I think you know, we watch cartoons in the morning. And we were watching *The Wild Thornberrys* which we've spoken about before, and it's like cartoon characters who are part of a nature show with their family, and so there's a lot of animal rights issues that come up. And this morning we were watching it and they were serving this kind of hamburger that was made out of a rat, and then they showed the rat walking around. And we were like, "ew, horrible, I hate when that happens even in a cartoon!" And Mariann said, "This show was made over 10 years ago," like the late '90s I think, which, wow, is more like almost I guess 15 years ago now. Mariann said, "I bet if they made this now they wouldn't have included that scene. They would have had more of a consciousness about it." So I mean obviously I'm giving a ridiculous example, but it is

illustrating your point that things have definitely changed. Now with that in mind, where do you expect it to be in 10 years from now?

MATT: In 10 years from now... In the past 10 years, maybe the past 5 years, I think the mechanism has been put in place that we have the pieces in place now. We have grassroots advocacy from handing out booklets and showing videos and humane education and providing food samples and television commercials. And then we have corporate campaigns to create reforms at the corporate level, and we have companies that are starting to respond to consumer demand. Chipotle is the most obvious example with their sofritas going nationwide because they're selling so well. And then you have companies like Hampton Creek Foods and Beyond Meat producing amazing products out there that appeal to meat eaters and not just longtime vegans. So I think that the mechanism is in place, the work on the demand side and the work on the supply side, and this will just keep accelerating. As there are more people exploring vegetarian and vegan options, then there will be more companies supplying these options and the more companies that are supplying these options, the better they'll be, the cheaper they'll be, the more widespread they'll be, making it easier for more and more people to explore vegetarian choices. And I think it's just gonna keep snowballing and snowballing and snowballing.

MARIANN: Yeah, I have to agree with you. I think that there's a lot of things in place now that can really lead to significant change. And I want to go back to your book a little bit because I think that the things that we've been talking about, what's been happening in the last 10 years and what's likely to happen in the next 10 years, are really covered on a very personal level in this book. Can you tell us a little bit about the essays in *The Accidental Activist* and the kind of range and how they've changed over the years?

MATT: Sure. Just to step back a little bit, when Bruce and I wrote *The Animal Activist's Handbook* a few years ago, we wanted to make a very formal book or more like a textbook, a linear argument of why care about animals and then what to do about it specifically. But my wife, Anne Green, she wanted something different, she wanted something completely different this time. She wanted something that is, as you say, more personal and that covers a wider range of time to get to show different perspectives and how things have changed. So she wanted to take the essays that I've written over the past couple decades and put them in a book and then group them by subject. So we did that, and because there's a saying that there's a power of narrative, that human minds really respond to stories. We don't respond so much to facts, we don't respond so much to abstractions, but we respond to stories. And I've made a lot of mistakes, shall we say, in my activist career, and I think that telling the stories of these mistakes can help people not make these mistakes and understand that other people have made mistakes or other people have felt frustrated or other people have felt as though there's no hope in the face of all this cruelty in the world. But in the end I think the perspective I've gained over 20 something years is that we are in a very good place, we are making a lot of progress compared to 20 years ago, that I think ultimately the book has a very positive message in the end even though it cuts back in time to when I wasn't so positive, when I wasn't very optimistic about things. I think that showing the range, so this is the point that Anne made, is that if you show the range of what you've gone through in 20 something years, that this will resonate with people, people who are just getting involved and they feel frustrated or people who are just getting involved or have been involved for a few years and feel like nothing is changing, that if they can see what I've

gone through over the past couple decades that they will be more encouraged to take a longer view and thus be able to be active in a positive way for a longer period of time.

JASMIN: Another thing that we constantly talk about on the podcast and I just think we always will is what we should do with the word “vegan,” because we tend to not always see eye to eye with other advocates about that. And actually, saying that has the big caveat for me that I don’t think they’re wrong or I’m right. I just think that there’s a variety of ways of looking at it and I think that they all have legitimacy. I want to know your thoughts on the word “vegan.” I want to know if you think it should apply to food or people, and I’d like to know if you think it’s useful or too exclusionary.

MATT: That’s a great question and we could have an entire daylong seminar on this, and if you ask 20 vegans you’re gonna get 20 different answers. And I think the short answer is it depends on the audience. If you’re talking to a certain audience I think the word “vegan” intrigues people, and if you’re talking to people today it’s different than talking to people 20 years ago. 20 years ago very few people knew what the word “vegan” was and when people used the word “vegan,” it was just used as a joke. The most I would ever see the word “vegan” 20 years ago were in comic strips. Bloom County Foxtrot once used it as what this kid was going to do to rebel against his parents.

But now “vegan” has a different connotation to it, it has a different backstory to it because we have famous people who are vegan, or famous people with whom the word “vegan” is associated. We have Ellen DeGeneres, we have Bill Clinton, we have various sports stars and the like. And so when people hear the word “vegan” now it’s completely different than it was 20 years ago. And if you are talking, say, at a liberal arts college or a relatively progressive college, the word “vegan” is something that’s not foreign to them. They have friends who are vegan, they see “vegan” in the cafeteria, they see food labeled “vegan” in the cafeteria every day. So I think that that is different than, say, speaking to Future Farmers of America, which I’ve done as well, or if you’re speaking to a middle-aged church group, for example. I think that it varies a lot between what audience you’re talking to and in what context you’re speaking. Various activists have found that if they say the word “vegetarian” people have more interest in it. When they see the word “vegan,” they say, “Oh, I could never be vegan” and they shut down on that. If they see a shirt that says “Ask me why I’m vegetarian,” they’re like, “Oh. Well why are you vegetarian?” But again I think this is changing. I was hiking in the Canyon wearing one of my vegan shirts, and this older couple stopped me and said, “Oh, our granddaughter’s vegan. Where can I get her one of those shirts?”

JASMIN: Awesome!

MATT: And I’ve been running with Ellen in our vegan shirts and people will go, “Yay, vegan!” when we go past them. So this is something that wouldn’t have happened five years ago or ten years ago.

JASMIN: Ellen, your daughter, not Ellen DeGeneres.

MATT: Oh yeah, sorry. Ellen is my daughter.

JASMIN: We were like, wow, Matt Ball has connections! He goes running with Ellen DeGeneres.

MATT: Yeah. Sorry. Yeah, Ellen, our daughter, a lifelong vegan. But still, there is in some ways the stereotype of vegans. The book *The Accidental Activist* has stories from other people too. There are eight, ten people who wrote something that I put in the book. And one of them is from Ellen and she tells the story of sitting around with her friends, and her friends think that Ellen, as a vegan kid, can't eat this, can't eat that, can't eat the other thing. And Ellen is like, "No, I can eat something with sugar in it, I can eat something with flour in it." And so they still had this stereotype that vegans are this really, really restrictive diet. So again it depends on the audience, it depends on the context. And I wouldn't say that I have a strong feeling one way or the other or that I have any really great answer to give about using the word "vegan" or not using the word "vegan."

JASMIN: Well, I think that that right there is a great answer.

MARIANN: Yeah, and I think that your point that 20 years ago it had such a different connotation is in some ways an argument for using it at least in the right contexts because that wouldn't have changed if people hadn't used the word. So I agree with you that it's not always easy to know how to use it and it can put some people off, it can bring some people in, but I like it.

JASMIN: You mentioned Ellen, so she's what, 19 now or so?

MATT: Yes. She's in her second year at Pomona College.

JASMIN: Okay, great. And you mentioned she was a lifelong vegan. Now, I just am wondering, she's probably at a point now where she's here to stay, but a lot of kids go through these rebellious phases. God, and I used to like shoplift, I was a bad teenager. And I just would worry if I had a kid that they would one day rebel against me and start to eat animals just to piss me off. Is that something that you worried about, or do you feel like that is a legitimate concern for people who are raising their kids vegan?

MATT: I actually assumed that this was going to happen. I always assumed that kids would rebel just for the sake of rebelling and so I think it's a legitimate concern. But it never happened with our daughter. And a lot of people have vegan kids that we know and we're friends with lots of people who have vegan kids, most of whom, I think just about all of them are younger than Ellen. But most of them have not had problems with their child rebelling. If the child is raised with the age-appropriate understanding of why people are vegan, why they're vegan, I think it's different than being taught something "because I said so." "We're going to church because I said so, we're going to church because we're Catholic," or "we're Jewish" or whatever. I think that a lot of the parents we've talked to, they raised their child to love animals or to know about animals. And most children have a natural inclination to love animals, and so when you tie that to their diet at an early age, I think that has a stronger hold on them than telling them, "You're doing this because I said so." So that might be why most vegan kids we've heard about haven't gone through a rebellious phase.

MARIANN: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense and it's good to hear. I hope that most of those kids rebel by shoplifting like Jasmin did rather than by eating animals.

JASMIN: Shoplifting is bad. Do not shoplift.

MARIANN: So Peter Singer I know has had an enormous influence as we all know on many, many people in this movement. But I think it's possible that he's had even more of an

influence on you than on most. Can you tell us a bit about why his work has impacted you so much?

MATT: Well, remind me to tell you another story about this in a second. But I think as an engineer by nature and by training, I really resonated with the utilitarian philosophy. I don't want to put off your listeners, but I'm not an animal lover per se. I never grew up with a great love for animals, I never wanted to be a veterinarian or I never wanted to run a shelter or anything like this. What resonated for me was the suffering and what we can do about the suffering. So it wasn't like I loved horses so I dedicated my life to horses, or I loved dogs so I dedicated my life to dogs. I dislike suffering and I know that suffering is terrible and that's the bottom line. There's no reason why suffering is bad, it's just that suffering is by definition bad. And so I really resonated with the idea of reducing suffering as opposed to some of the more academic arguments of defining this word this way or trying to oppose something that's somewhat more esoteric or hypothetical or not as concrete as suffering. And exploitation is bad, but exploitation is bad because it causes bad emotion, it causes suffering. And so the bottom line for me was suffering, and when I got to that point, when I understood the utilitarian message, it gave me a clear metric by which to pursue advocacy because we have limited time and limited resources, so that instead of doing whatever I found to be most compelling or I found to be most interesting or I found to be the saddest, I would pursue advocacy such that my choices would lead to the least amount of suffering in the world. And it was Professor Singer's writings that really helped prompt me to come to this conclusion.

He also -- we were talking with various members about the use of the word "vegan," to hawk back to your other question, because we were thinking it might be easier to raise more money without using the word "vegan," because then you could have non-vegans give you money 'cause a lot of non-vegans are uncomfortable with writing a check that says "vegan" right there on the check. And Professor Singer told me there's a real advantage to having a group out there, to having people out there who are sane and thoughtful and non-dogmatic using the word "vegan." So it goes back to what you were saying about, the perception of the word "vegan" has changed because there have been people out there using the word "vegan" in a non-dogmatic way, in a thoughtful way, in a defensible way, and in a psychologically progressive way, presenting it not as dogma but as a way to address suffering. So that was another great insight to me that he provided, so he's had a lot of influence on me in those ways.

MARIANN: Yeah, he makes everything so simple. It's just not rocket science. And actually the fact that it's not -- and I don't think you should apologize to our listeners because not everybody comes at this from this kind of emotional connection with animals. Some people do, some people don't, and we want everybody to understand their obligations toward animals regardless of their particular emotional level. And I actually think, and it strikes us as a hopeful thing, that we're pretty sure that almost everyone does agree with us. No one wants to see animals suffer. I mean, all right, maybe there are a few, but they're kind of psychopaths. I mean, it's a pretty universal sentiment. So I wonder if you agree with that, and I wonder if you could offer your insights as to how, if we live in such a world, we ended up here, and why people don't stop participating when they find out.

MATT: Well, yeah, I'll take the first part first.

MARIANN: I always ask two-part questions. It's a curse.

MATT: That's fine. I think you're absolutely right that most people do agree with us. And even people who kill animals agree with us a lot of the times. I've had this happen over and over and over again. There's -- people who are belligerent towards me when I'm speaking to a group will end up coming around to at least some part of it, you know, veal is cruel, or when I show them how battery hens are treated, they're like, "Wow, that really is cruel." One time I was speaking in rural Pennsylvania, and I could see this guy was very agitated. And when it came time for questions he hopped up and he's a hunter and he was ready to argue with me. And I told him, since my bottom line is suffering, I told him I would much, much rather live my life walking around living free and then be shot than to be crammed into a bathroom with six other people for a few years and being force-fed food and then be slaughtered. And that defused him right there 'cause he agreed that factory farming is bad, so we didn't have to stand there and argue hunting, or we didn't have to stand there and argue animal rights per se, but we could agree that what was going on at factory farms was wrong and should be opposed.

Now for the second part of your question, why don't people change, I have experience with that. When I met my roommate freshman year when I was 18, I went vegetarian for a while and I thought I was starving to death and I went back to eating meat. Except Fred my roommate, all my friends were meat eaters, my family were meat eaters. I planned my whole life to go to good restaurants and travel and have good food and the like. And I think that that's a lot of it. I think a lot of it is social pressure, social norms, social awkwardness of being the vegetarian in the room, the vegan in the room. And it's just, it's very hard for people. It was hard for me, it's very hard for most people to just be the one who stands out. And people who rebel by going vegan to get back at their mother or to try to stand out, when they grow a little older they sometimes go back to eating meat so that they fit in now that they're out in the world and have to get a job and the like. So I think a lot of it is social pressure. We're just, we're social animals and we go by what's the norm around us.

And the way this will change is as there are more vegetarians it will be easier to be vegetarian. But also the programs that people have started, that groups have started, like meatless Mondays, give people an excuse to explore these ideas in a socially acceptable or at least socially well-known forum. And people don't have to say, "Yes, I'm gonna go vegetarian" or "Yes, I'm vegan now." They can start exploring it and see what it's like and have other people around them maybe try it out and the like. And a big portion of what's going on in society now isn't just, everyone's a meat eater and then we're picking people off one at a time to go vegan. It's that this person is vegetarian and they're going vegan, this person is semi-vegetarian, they're going vegetarian. This person is interested in it and they're eating three or four meatless meals a week and they're continuing to evolve.

And as it becomes more widespread it will become less socially awkward. As it becomes more widespread it will be easier to go out to dinner with people and you can have the vegan option at Chipotle or the vegan option at the other restaurant, or you can take people to Veggie Grill if you're lucky enough to live around a Veggie Grill or a Native Foods or another good vegan restaurant. There was a Yelp review of a vegan restaurant that I read, and the person said, "I'm a meat eater through and through, but if Soul Vegetarian was in my neighborhood I would be eating vegan all the time." And it's just that these things are going to expand. William Gibson, the science fiction writer, said, "The future is here. It's just unevenly distributed." And I think that's the truth. I think our vegan future is within view. It's right there in the Yelp review. This guy, he's a meat eater but he loves this vegan food here

and if it was easily available to him he'd eat it all the time. And as that becomes the case, more and more people like him will be eating vegan food all the time. So it's just, it's slow going but we're making progress and we know how the progress is going to continue.

JASMIN: Well, I would love to hear an excerpt from your new book, *The Accidental Activist*.

MATT: Okay, this is a short essay after my wife Anne Green and I watched a movie. It's called "Lincoln and the First Step."

[To read more from *The Accidental Activist*, visit TheAccidentalActivist.net.]

JASMIN: Well, that was really, really beautiful. I love the way you think. And the way you articulate your thoughts I think can be really important for people who are in the process now of honing in on their viewpoints. And even people who already know the way they think, just hearing a different point of view from someone like you who's been involved for so long can be really groundbreaking. And you continue to inspire me. I'm very excited about *The Accidental Activist* and I think that our listeners will get a lot from hearing your wise words. So thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and for joining us today in Our Hen House, Matt, and we hope to stay on top of your future projects and your future plans. And please visit us often, and thanks again for joining us.

MATT: Thanks, Jasmin and Mariann, it was a pleasure.

JASMIN: That was Matt Ball. And you could read his book, *The Accidental Activist*, at lanternbooks.com.