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## Interview with Melanie Joy

By OUR HEN HOUSE

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

ALESSANDRA: Continuing our full range, the world of Our Hen House TV, we'll hear from three-time podcast veteran Melanie Joy, author of the must-read book, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*, which highlights the bizarre inconsistencies that most of us hold when it comes to animals. Melanie is also the founder and president of the Carnism Action Awareness Network, a charitable organization dedicated to raising awareness of and transforming carnism, the invisible belief system that conditions people to eat certain animals. You can find Melanie's work at [carnism.org](#).

JASMIN: Really a great guest here with us. Welcome to Our Hen House, Dr. Joy.

MELANIE: Oh, thank you so much. Call me Melanie, please. It's just such a pleasure to be here with you two.

JASMIN: It's such an honor to have you. We have long been a fan of you and your work and of course of this book, which I was just mentioning is a little worn because we have read this a few times: *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*, which in and of itself is very thought provoking.

MARIANN: It's such an important question. And one of the things that you bring up in the video and in the title of your book is this whole idea of the way thinking about eating dogs or specifically golden retrievers just kind of brings people up short. Can you explain?

MELANIE: Mm-hm. Well, this is something that evolved from my own personal experience, which is what was the catalyst for my work in the first place, because like so many people I grew up with a dog and I also grew up eating animals, and for the first half of my life I didn't make the connection between the meat on my plate and the living being it once was. If somebody had served me a dog, that connection would have been immediate for me. And so when I stopped eating animals and I had this paradigm shift, when I looked at meat for example I saw a dead body. I didn't see food anymore, the same way that other people might see a dog if they were served a dog. I became very curious as to how I had gone through so much of my life just not making that connection. And so this is a powerful example for people because we haven't learned as a culture to desensitize ourselves toward dogs as we have been taught to desensitize ourselves to farmed animals.

MARIANN: I think it's so interesting that you say it that way because I think when most people think, of course there are cultures in which people eat dogs. And people tend to think of, "Well in this culture we learn not to eat dogs," but it's not really true. In this culture, we learn that we're allowed to eat other animals. It's the other way around, and I think that's so much of what you do. You turn things around, Melanie. And particularly, I know that the word "carnism" has really entered the lexicon of people who are thinking about animals. Can you explain what you mean by that word, which really is your way of expressing this whole concept?

MELANIE: Well, carnism is the invisible belief system that conditions us to eat certain animals. So it's essentially the opposite of veganism. We don't see carnism the way that we see veganism or vegetarianism because carnism is a dominant belief system or ideology, and so it's entrenched. It's woven through the very fabric of society, and it also becomes internalized there for shaping the very way we think and feel about eating animals, or more accurately the way we don't think and feel about eating animals. And so you're right, even though in some places of the world people do eat dogs, all meat-eating cultures tend to teach people to desensitize themselves to select species that that culture has deemed to be edible. All the other species, we seem to naturally find disgusting and often offensive to consume. So we really learn how not to feel disgusted and empathic toward other animals, the ones that we've been taught to classify as edible.

JASMIN: Do you think that the rise of veganism in the mainstream is making it so that people have to kind of not be so defensive about the idea of who they're consuming?

MELANIE: Yeah, well, I think absolutely most people feel defensive, if they do indeed feel defensive about the idea of eating animals, because most people really care about animals. And they care about justice and certainly don't want animals to suffer and yet they nevertheless eat animals. And so there's this real what psychologists call cognitive moral dissonance. It's an internal moral conflict that most people feel. And what carnism does is it socializes us to just block that discomfort out. So, but consciousness is changing, absolutely.

MARIANN: What are some of the psychological defenses that people employ to -- because you're exactly right. What we're always saying is that everybody agrees with us. Like, maybe a few psychopaths don't, but almost everybody loves animals and would never want to see them really harmed or wouldn't want to see them suffer and yet people participate in this. So what you've done so brilliantly is show that people use these psychological defenses to not know what they know. How does that work?

MELANIE: Well, first I want to say I don't know that most people actually do love animals, but they certainly don't want animals to suffer. Some people, and people who are vegans, will say, "I don't really feel any love for animals," any more than, as Peter Singer pointed out, people who were against the abolition of slavery felt a natural love for Africans. But we do feel a strong desire not to participate in an injustice. And eating animals, killing somebody unnecessarily, is an injustice and most people do have a caring for animals certainly. And so because of that, carnism to maintain itself needs to use a set of social and psychological defense mechanisms so that humane people and rational people can participate in inhumane, irrational practices without really realizing what they're doing.

And so you asked about these defenses. An example is justification. I describe this mythology surrounding eating animals that we've essentially been indoctrinated with. And this mythology is kind of, all of these myths fall under what I refer to as the Three Ns of Justification: eating animals is normal, natural, and necessary. And of course these same arguments have been used to justify violent practices from slavery to heterosexual supremacy. So that would be one example of a carnistic defense. Carnism also teaches us to think of farmed animals not as individuals, right? So we don't think of pigs, for instance, as having their own unique personality or their own unique character. We simply see them as abstractions. A pig is a pig and all pigs are the same. And it makes it easier to consume their bodies when we're not making that connection with them.

JASMIN: So what do you think is the magic bullet that's going to kind of pierce through this denial that we have, that this is not an individual?

MELANIE: Well, the good news is that this denial that we have, it's taught, it's socialized. And most -- I've been speaking about this issue for a long time now, and I very rarely encounter a person who doesn't really want to do right by the animals and themselves, because carnism really requires us to act against our own interests, to act against our own values, and to contribute to the suffering of our bodies, of our hearts and minds, and obviously of billions of other animals and the environment. So the good news is that as Gandhi said, in the end the truth always wins, and most people really do care about the truth and really want to lead more authentic and freely chosen lives. And it's simply a matter of being able to have this conversation in a way that increases the chances that the message is going to be heard, that bypasses those carnistic defenses that are automatically internalized by us when we're born into the system.

JASMIN: Well, you did talk a moment ago about social justice, and I love this way of looking at it, that it's not necessarily a personal choice, it's more of a social justice issue.

MARIANN: Oh, people always want to present it as a personal choice. "Well, I have no objection to you being vegan. You should have no objection to my eating meat." But it's far more than a personal choice because there's a third party.

JASMIN: Absolutely.

MELANIE: It is, and one way we can think about this is it's often framed as personal choice because if people -- well let me back up. Until we step outside of the system that's carnism we will view eating animals as just a matter of personal ethics and we won't recognize that it's the inevitable end result of this deeply entrenched oppressive -ism. Without awareness there's no free choice, and when people are not aware of carnism they're looking at the world through the lens of carnism. So it's impossible to really make your choices freely because you've been so conditioned to think and feel a certain way. And of course our choices are impacting others. It's almost like assuming that owning slaves had nothing to do with racism, that it was just a matter of personal ethics.

JASMIN: Yeah, well you have toured around the world giving these talks and you get huge audiences. And I guess I'm wondering, who's coming to these talks? What is it that is drawing people to want to explore this question? Why do we love dogs and eat pigs and wear cows? What is it that makes people want to start thinking about it? Because they are thinking about it more than they used to.

MELANIE: Absolutely. They are thinking about it more than they used to, and people have this -- the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton described people having a knowing without knowing, when the populace is aware of an unpleasant truth on one level but on another level they just don't connect the dots. And so the title of my book speaks to that knowing without knowing. There's something inside of people that says, "Wow, really, I never thought about that question before" and people can relate to it. And people are ready, many people are ready to have this conversation and so for me it's very heartening and inspiring to see such a positive response and to see the world really starting to wake up.

MARIANN: Sometimes I bring up that dog question and I think it's, bringing up the dog issue is a great way -- I guess it just brings people up short, it makes them see things differently. But sometimes I bring it up to my kids, and there will always be some students who agree that it's not right we should have this attitude toward cows and this attitude towards dogs, but in kind of a cultural acceptance point of view. They come to the conclusion that we really should be eating dogs too.

JASMIN: That's where they come out of it, wow!

MARIANN: Well, law students, you know? So, but does that happen to you and do you find that people come up with new ways to resist knowing what it is that the dog story will tell them?

MELANIE: I think there is some logic to that response.

JASMIN: Yeah, of course there is!

MELANIE: But at the same time it's like saying, "We want to stop exploiting children in this country. Well why stop exploiting children in this country? Why don't we just exploit children all over the world?"

MARIANN: Yeah, then it'll really be fair!

MELANIE: But this is just an example of how carnism distorts our perception so much that it just warps our logic so that illogical answers really do seem logical on the surface. And people do sometimes have that response, and it's because as long as you're looking at the world through the lens of carnism you're not making that connection where you're actually perceiving the behavior of eating somebody, when it's unnecessary to do so in particular, as being an act of exploitation. Once people recognize that, then of course the choice is to end exploitation, not to expand, enhance the exploitation. And the reality is that in meat eating cultures around the world, the type of species consumed changes from culture to culture. But members of all cultures tend to have the same type of relationship to meat eating. It's just the content that changes.

JASMIN: That's so interesting. I think that's so funny that your students came at it from that perspective too. I've done that with brown rice and white rice. I always thought it was so much healthier to eat brown rice, and then Dr. Fuhrman, who's this doctor whose work we read a lot, he was once like, "It's kind of like eating white rice," and I was like, "Well, let's eat white rice then!" rather than saying I should just not eat either of them.

MELANIE: That's actually a good example.

JASMIN: That's funny, yeah. And now, I jotted this down 'cause it stuck with me. You say in your book, "If we no longer feel entitled to kill and consume animals, our identity as human beings comes into questions." What do you mean by this? It's so interesting to think of it like that.

MARIANN: Yeah, it runs deep.

MELANIE: Well, carnism, I always say asking people to stop eating animals is not simply asking for a change in behavior, it's asking for a shift in consciousness. It's asking us to really envision our place in the world and to recognize ourselves as animals too, and that we are strands in the web of life rather than standing atop the so-called hierarchical ladder of life. There's an interesting book called *Meat: A Natural Symbol*, and in the book the author talks about how eating animals, it reinforces the sense of human supremacy, it reinforces the sense of power over others. We have the power to create you, to kill you, and to consume you. And it's deeply symbolic in many, many ways. So when we stop eating animals we're making a choice to change what we're doing but we're also shifting our consciousness in terms of how we perceive ourselves and what we're entitled to or not.

MARIANN: We're always trying to think of ways, as are you, as is everyone who does this, ways of letting people see, helping people to see what it is that we see. And one of the ways that we do that is to show footage of what's happening to animals. And we've talked about it before on the show. We struggle with how much we can show before people just turn the channel. Oh, well, that's me. That's my 1950s version of turning the channel off.

JASMIN: And then they get in a car and they roll down their window, 'cause this is how you roll down a window in a car, right?

MARIANN: But what is the role -- I mean, what's happening to animals is so bad that showing people that I think can sometimes reinforce their denial, 'cause it's that cognitive dissonance you were talking about, 'cause there's such a strong incentive to not want to know that.

JASMIN: "I don't want to see it, I don't want to know."

MARIANN: How do you feel about showing people what's really happening to animals?

MELANIE: Well, the good news is that people's response to witnessing animal suffering is a reflection of our hardwired empathy for other beings.

MARIANN: Absolutely, I totally agree.

MELANIE: It's a demonstration of what we've been talking about here today. People really care. The way that we approach the issue is very important. It's showing somebody trauma, and it can be traumatizing for somebody to witness that and yet it can be very empowering and it needs to be done in a way that people feel safe. It's really important for example to get somebody's consent rather than just kind of the shock value of, "hey, look at this!" because people will feel assaulted if they're not emotionally prepared for it, if they haven't agreed. And to allow them to feel some sense of agency and -- even if you're doing it on TV. When I'm giving a talk it could be hundreds of people in the audience. I give people permission: "You can close your eyes, plug your ears and you won't be judged. At the same time I really encourage you to watch this." And I've chosen -- the way you choose material

is important too, to try to choose material that raises awareness but that isn't going to be overly traumatizing, so to keep it shorter.

JASMIN: We try and offset it also with showing positive footage. So if we're showing gestation crate footage we'll also show some frolicking pigs at Farm Sanctuary or another farm animal sanctuary.

MARIANN: I think it alleviates some of the anxiety that it brings up. And to keep it short, it really overwhelms.

MELANIE: Yeah, it doesn't take a lot.

MARIANN: If we want people to see it you can just show it to them.

JASMIN: Exactly.

MELANIE: And prepare them, let them know this is what's coming, and this is why and this is how you can benefit from seeing this and so people have some sense of personal power.

JASMIN: Can you tell us about your organization? Because I know you're doing such great work with it.

MELANIE: Thank you. Carnism Action Awareness Network or CAAN is my organization and our mission is to raise awareness of and transform carnism. And so it's a relatively new organization, it's about two years old. It merged with my book, and we're doing some exciting things. I'm living in Germany at the moment and we're launching a national carnism awareness German campaign that is reaching out across Germany and Austria right now, in collaboration with Germany's leading vegan organizations. So that's very exciting and CAAN USA is a part of this and we're also doing a lot of outreach speaking here. I'll be speaking in India, Brazil, Mexico, Sweden, Italy, just a bunch of places this year to really continue to bring the message out there.

MARIANN: That's so exciting.

JASMIN: That is amazing.

MELANIE: Yeah, it's really been very inspiring to see the positive response around the world because it really is testament to what we've been talking about, that people are ready to change and want to change.

JASMIN: Well, I don't think it's a coincidence that Germany has become so vegan-friendly. Melanie, you're doing amazing work there. I know there's a lot of other organizations too who are on the ground that are really bringing awareness to animal issues.

MELANIE: Thanks. Well, it's really, I've only been there for three months. There are great organizations there. My partner is a CEO of one of the leading vegan organizations in Europe, Vegetarierbund Deutschland, doing great work, and the German public is incredibly receptive to this. And it's just very exciting to start internationalizing this issue 'cause the more we can raise awareness in Germany and in the United States and bring groups together and expand this conversation, the more power we have as individuals and as a movement.

MARIANN: And I truly think it's an international issue and there are people all over the world who care about this issue. That's great to hear.

MELANIE: It's an international problem. It's a global problem and it needs a global solution. And so we're really starting to be able to do that now.

MARIANN: That's great.

JASMIN: And what about the task forces, the CAAN task forces?

MELANIE: Our task forces are groups of professionals who are coming together with our support to raise awareness of and challenge carnism in the professions because carnism is an institutionalized system. And so therefore we need to really try to work on transforming the system from the inside out through institutions, and the way to do that is through professionals. So anybody who's interested can come to [carnism.org](http://carnism.org) and get more information.

JASMIN: Well, that's so amazing.

MARIANN: Yeah. I think you're really, really moving the ball forward. And the more people who know, the more open I think other people are to knowing. And so the information you're bringing to people I think is, it has the power to be exponential in its growth.

JASMIN: Absolutely. We can't thank you enough for all that you're doing to change the world for animals.