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The Power of One: How the Individual Activist Can Make a Difference

Henry Spira

Today's animal rights organizations are numerous and powerful. More than ever before, they are well-financed, politically connected, with their own legal, advertising, and public relations departments. Enormous direct mail, campaigns are routine.

One may ask what role, if any, remains for the committed individual, who has no apparatus or financial backing. It may be encouraging to remember that it was an individual's initiative, Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation*, that 22 years ago launched the modern animal rights movement.

Few of us can write a book with global influence, but with knowledge, imagination, and commitment, many individuals can make a difference. Not every activist's initiative needs to make the evening news. Rather, it is the accumulation of smaller actions by individuals that has made animal rights the mainstream concept it is today.

Some activists are truly ingenious. In 1982, Sergeant Sherry Schlueter of the Broward County (Florida) Sheriff's Department founded the first law enforcement unit specializing in animal cruelty investigation. She has spoken on animal abuse investigation and prosecution to both law enforcement and civilian investigators around the U.S., clarifying the intricacies of protecting victims who are considered property, but are living beings. Her latest presentation was to the Los Angeles Police Department. Her initiatives have received local and national publicity, including appearances on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and in *People* magazine. She has succeeded in combining her police career with being an activist, a singer, and an athlete.

Holly Jensen also combines her career and her concerns. She is a critical care nurse and instructor in a community hospital, teaching groups of 30 to 60 doctors and nurses. She emphasizes disease prevention, and provides data that clearly demonstrates the connection between lifestyle choices and good health. Jensen uses the data generated by Dr. Dean Ornish, who combines vegetarian diet and exercise in his well-documented program to reverse the course of heart disease. Passing this information to people who can make a difference, Jensen helps improve human health while reducing animal suffering.

Likewise working within the system, professor of philosophy, physiology, and biophysics Bernard Rollin joined the Colorado State University faculty in 1977. In the heart of cattle country, Rollin sensitizes veterinary and agriculture students to the ethical issues in our relations with other animals.

Andrew Rowan founded the Tufts University Center for Animals and Public Policy, where he meticulously searches scientific literature to produce persuasive position papers, crucial in the campaigns to end use of the Draize and LD-50 animal tests and influential in many other aspects of reducing animal suffering. Rowan brings scientific credibility to the animal protection community, and has changed the prevailing attitude within the scientific community from "if an alternative can be developed" to "when we develop an alternative."

Temple Grandin, an agricultural consultant, designs and implements animal handling systems that take into account the behavioral and physical needs of farm animals. She, like other effective individuals, is totally down-to-earth, practical, and street-smart. Instead of telling the industry what to do, she shows executives and plant managers how.

Becky Sandstedt, an airport cocktail waitress in St. Paul, Minnesota, achieved a breakthrough of a different sort. She had heard about "downers," pigs and cattle either too sick, weak, or injured to stand up on their own, and decided to check out local stockyards. With a video camera, Sandstedt documents the suffering and abuse over many months. "When they wrap a chain around a limb and drag an animal off," she reported, "you can hear the bones cracking and the cows mooing, and their eyes just bulge out with fear and pain." Her expose was featured on prime-time television. This brought the horror of downers to national attention, and very possibly closer to a solution.

More recently, English activists David Morris and Helen Steel, almost penniless, with little more than audacity, persistence, and a fax machine, have managed to shake the \$30 billion McDonald's fast food operation to the core. In 1990 they distributed leaflets challenging every facet of McDonald's business, alleging that McDonald's contributes to animal cruelty, public health problems, and environmental destruction. When McDonald's retaliated with a libel suit, the activists used the trial as a stage to expose McDonald's before the world. The still running "McLibel" case is now the longest civil suit in English history. Said the Canadian quarterly *Adbusters*, "They show by example that average people can throw a spanner in the works without specialized knowledge or training--just an alternative viewpoint and resolve."

No action is too small. In the fall of 1995, we received a scrap of paper in the mail, unsigned, without a return address: a photocopy of an invitation which had been sent to a few wealthy individuals, asking them to spend a day in the country shooting captive-reared birds as the birds were allowed to escape for the first time from their cages. The shoot was to raise funds for a highly respected charity which saves children from blindness.

We called and wrote the chief executive of this organization and pointed out the irony of executing animals to prevent children from suffering. Within 24 hours, we also prepared a series of ad concepts which we intended to develop and run as full pages in *The New York Times* if the shoot went forward. When the chief executive expressed sympathy with our concerns but also some ambiguity as to how his board might react, we faxed him the ad concepts for use as leverage. From start to finish, the matter was resolved within 72 hours, with the cancellation of the bird shoot and the organization's pledge never to hold another.

The hero or heroine of this story is the unknown individual who decided to anonymously intervene. It took nothing more than a copy machine, an envelope, a stamp, and some determination. Similar actions have shut down unsafe power plants and ejected crooks from political office.

Target

What, specifically, can or should individual activists be doing today? The quickest way to take a bite out of farm animal misery is to cut out or cut down your use of the products of animal agriculture. That's a powerful message for the moguls of misery in the meat-industrial complex.

Always, stay as informed as possible and spread the word. We live in a society where information is widely accessible to those who are willing to do a little digging. The informed activist will inevitably find that the pursuit of animal rights offers more challenges today than ever before--that more animals suffer today through human action than at any previous time in history. While laboratory use has been reduced by an

estimated 50% since the 1960s, the number of farm animals slaughtered has increased fourfold, from two billion animals a year then to more than eight billion now. Yet farm animals are largely ignored. Only about 5% of animal protection movement resources are dedicated to addressing this 95% of the problem.

Activists who want to make a difference must expand the movement's focus from the 5% to the 95% of animal suffering. Join major animal protection organizations and then lobby at meetings, conferences, and rallies toward getting them to dedicate greater resources toward liberating farm animals. It is indefensible to spend 95% of the money donated to help animals on 5% of the animals who need help. We need to stop congratulating ourselves on saving the occasional celebrity animal while losing ground with the billions of farm animals. It would be a major breakthrough if activists could create the critical mass necessary to convince the major national organizations to make farm animals their priority.

Multipliers

Activists can raise public interest in farm animals by writing letters to the editors of local and national newspapers. Newspapers offer access to tens of thousands and even millions of readers for the price of a postage stamp. Just clearly and concisely address an item which recently appeared in the publication you write to, or is otherwise in the news. Write as if you're talking to someone whose interest you want to hold. Occasionally a published letter can touch a nerve, sparking dialog that continues for days, weeks, sometimes even months.

Seize opportunities to promote the nonviolent diet. Any restaurant becomes a place of political action when you ask the owner to add vegetarian *entrees* to the menu. The same applies to your local supermarket, your child's school, or your company cafeteria. You can likewise request vegetarian alternatives at all public and private functions that you attend or are involved in, from PTA meetings to political fundraisers and social events.

One vegetarian activist can make meatless meals available to many others with just one effective message. Eddy Bikales described his "vegetarian multiplier effect" in the magazine *Satya*. He wrote a polite letter to the food-service manager of his company's cafeteria, suggesting meatless *entree* ideas. He followed up within a week with a telephone call, and was actually thanked for offering the suggestion. Within another week the menu changed. A similar letter to the Sheraton management decrying the lack of vegetarian options during a major business conference promoted further change. The arrival of meatless options empowers every customer who follows, saving many animals.

There are also less direct ways to promote the nonviolent lifestyle. Susan Kalev, a committed vegetarian, recently approached the management of the Barnes & Noble bookstore chain, pointing out the large number of vegetarian cookbooks they sell, and persuaded them to sponsor a series of lectures by authors of vegetarian cookbooks. This was a valuable contribution to a growing trend.

Factory farming has implications beyond animal cruelty, involving environmental damage, hunger, and public health issues. Animal protection activists might link up with colleagues active in these other fields, to work together, or just to draw their attention to the overlapping concerns. Some environmentalists, in particular, need to be reminded that the greater ecological problem is not the burger wrapping but the burger itself.

This is already happening within the New York City Sierra Club, thanks to Sandy Reed, who in 1991 started an animal protection committee to oppose canned hunting and horse carriages. Members and longtime animal defender Joan Zacharias have more recently formed a Vegetarian Outings Committee, spotlighting meat-eating as an environmental issue. They are now forging links with Sierra Club chapters

elsewhere, aiming at a national initiative which would promote vegetarianism within the Sierra Club as a whole.

Once an activist sets priorities, the key to success may be more a matter of imagination and perseverance than of money or apparatus. Some well-funded organizations never accomplish anything that makes a difference. By contrast, resourceful individuals make a significant difference--and you can be among them.

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