

❄ The Radical Imperative: Interview with Lee Hall ❄

Lee Hall became vegan in 1983 (the a-ha! moment is described quite beautifully at www.veganmeans.com/vegan_who/Aha_Moment.htm), and then went on to develop a passion for animal advocacy that would eventually lead to law school and the hope that legal changes could alter society's treacherous status quo.

In 2002, when Lee was co-teaching an animal-law course, living in a small flat a few miles to the south of New York City and taking in street cats, there wasn't much time to read the captions on the calendar hanging on the fridge. But doing so led to a pivotal moment. It was a *Friends of Animals* calendar; the photo of the month showed zebras, living free. The caption described how we humans have domesticated and interbred equine animals to get them to work for us but noted that zebras have long defied domestication. That resistance, the caption explained, is part of *Friends of Animals'* mission as well.

Lee joined *Friends of Animals* as the group's full-time legal officer that year, and since then has written a number of controversial works. However, all follow a consistent projection: the future of humanity freed from the might-makes-right policies that have defined much of human history.

Lee (whose work with *Friends of Animals* is pointedly and thoroughly vegan) has a new book out titled *On Their Own Terms: Bringing Animal-Rights Philosophy Down to Earth* - see the [Amazon USA](http://Amazon.com) website for many positive reviews. It argues for a vegan humanity in which animals are not eaten or domesticated by humans, but instead roam free and respected, and it states: "Animal rights isn't going to be about increments, except in the sense of inspiring people in the direction of veganism. Animal rights is going to be a whole paradigm shift."



What prompted you to propose a new philosophy about how we should treat animals?

I started writing *On Their Own Terms* after noting that most available writings were focused on husbandry standards for agribusiness. Yes, there were also the more serious animal-rights books, and they influenced my thinking. Yet even self-identified abolitionists were, to some extent, focusing on changes in the conditions at chicken businesses, supporting the use of pharmaceutical birth control on free-living animals, and so forth.

The way to address the circumstances of animals on farms is simple: *Don't consume them*. That decided, we can do the vital work of defending animals living on nature's terms. Free-roaming / swimming / flying animals are living *now* as though the rights principle were accepted by human culture. Why, then, would the disappearance of these animals' spaces and communities be ignored by animal advocates? And why would animal advocates help push them aside by recommending pharmaceutical control?

I made a commitment to revive the vegan message and make it central in a book about animal rights. Vegan living is an exciting proposal. The book proposes the rationale and a DIY manual to seize the day.

Why do you consider environmentalism crucial to animal rights?

What we call the environment is the animals' home. Animals need their space, their nutrients, their water. There can be no genuine animal rights without these basics.

How do you promote a social movement towards greater respect for animals in which they are not simply ours to do what we like with? Surely this would need a radical change in our attitudes and the structure of

human societies?

Yes, and that is what the vegan movement has been saying since 1944: we call for the first civilisation that merits that term. The society that consumes animals is still the standard, and many do not like to be reminded that there is another way to live.

But we've now reached the social and ecological crises that the early vegans foresaw. We can – we must – leave animal exploitation behind us. The tipping point could come quite soon, so I see my role as putting as much information out to people as I can, as you and I are doing through this conversation.

Our words matter. Rather than asking a restaurant to bring in vegan options (do we really think ethics and sustainability are optional?) we can start talking about *vegan offerings*.

Would this new movement towards a holistic human consciousness create differentials between wild and domestic animals?

Yes. Purpose-bred animals should receive care as long as they are here; but it would be curtain time for breeders. Neuter cats and dogs. No more breeding. No more bringing cows on to farms.

Everyone is shouting "Rescue, rescue!" - and we do. It rightly makes us feel good when we can offer another being a lifetime of safety and comfort. But let's also work to persuade our towns not to license breeders. All this rescuing becomes cyclical - and it too takes habitat away on a finite planet.

As for free-living animals, they have an interest in living full lives, procreating and raising their young. Birth control should be a respected, accessible and desirable thing for *Homo sapiens*. There are seven billion of us. The earth has never seen such a thing!

Must we do away with the 'welfare' of animals to let them live their lives 'on their own terms'?

No, welfare is a good thing. It means well-being. Living on their terms, rather than for human purposes, is the ultimate in well-being for other animals.

Isn't it likely there will be confusion about what is meant by *animal rights*? This term means different things to different people.

I'd define *animal rights* as a social and legal movement to cultivate and sustain human respect for the dignity of non-human animals. A fair working definition?

You say that not all campaigns are effective in furthering this goal. What type of campaigns are you thinking of? And what do you think about the use of graphic videos and photos in campaigning?

Many charities work to make human supremacy humane. Their staffers and supporters say modifications in industry are important because "you have to be realistic" and "everyone isn't going to go vegan." Is the negativity self-fulfilling? Our thoughts, and the words we select to express them, have consequences.

A campaign is effective when it inspires a personal change and a social commitment. Graphic videos and photos can depress and disempower. We see some outrage directed at rogue workers who flout established handling practices. Does the graphic picture explain to the audience that careful use of animals would still be offensive?

And do slaughterers change because they see violence? If scenes of blood and distress just by themselves led to changing people, abattoir workers would be a nation of vegetarians.

Granted, people can be deeply moved and changed by a glimpse behind the doors and walls. What I'm concerned about here is the tendency to push the shock effect so that it becomes a method, and perhaps another form of animal use.

Keep in mind too that the industries that use animals have found advantages in the effects of activists' images of maltreatment. If they advertise so-called humane eggs or dairy or flesh products, they benefit from the contrast of their grazing animals against the shocking videos.

Do we offer an understanding that those grazing animals on the local farm are in a dreadful situation with no escape? In *On Their Own Terms* I recount a memory told to me by singer and songwriter Sharleen Leahey, who visited a farm, and understood why our diet should not take advantage of animals caught in the dairy industry: "I got to hang out with some boy calves who were sucking my fingers because they missed their mothers. They were being sold off to some bleak fate. I can't get those calves out of my mind. Their softness and their innocence. It haunts me." The authentic voice of a sensitive person who has experienced a changed world view is the most powerful form of communication the vegan movement has ever had.

Changing the subject, slightly: What about pictures of other beings' freedom and power? In our interventions to stop carriage driving, we find most people have never even contemplated horses independent of us. How can we enable people to imagine other animals not as eternal victims to be rescued from danger by our heroic selves, but with their dignity respected? Vegan living – conscientious objection to deliberate exploitation of aware beings – spares animals from domination. Portray it as refreshing, life-affirming, and no one will avert their eyes upon opening your brochure. Vegan restaurants will gladly stock it, as it won't put patrons off their

meals. And people will give copies to children and people they meet in the course of their daily errands.

You mention that vegan cookbooks are "a real part of politics, a real contributor to animal rights theory" - can you say a little about that?

Helping people grow and prepare food is empowering individuals and communities. It's the best politics in action. That's why we support vegan caterers, publish recipes and cookbooks, get these cookbooks into our local libraries and bookshops, and bring vegan caterers to schools and public events. I'd recommend putting recipes into vegan starter guides too – good recipes. People remember an attractive and delicious spread, and want it again.

And, by using a vegan cookbook, a person can learn about animal rights. *Dining With Friends*, the cookbook I co-authored, has some introductory animal-rights information in the introduction and in the glossary of ingredients and terms.

It's great to have books, classes, discussion groups, blogs, magazines and videos about animal rights, but consider the positive power of a chef, a cookbook, a vegan restaurant, or a garden. These offer the social or physical environment in which people can consider a new perspective with a straightforward, dynamic, creative and tangible kind of empathy. Vegan education at its best describes the oppression, but does not leave a vacuum. It guides people to an attractive and fair way of life.

At the end of your book you've created a workshop for readers to find their own animal-rights theory. How important do you see this, and are you promoting this idea independently from the book?

Very important. For people who commit to animal rights, goal-setting - envisioning the world we work to see - is vital. We don't achieve what we don't conceive.

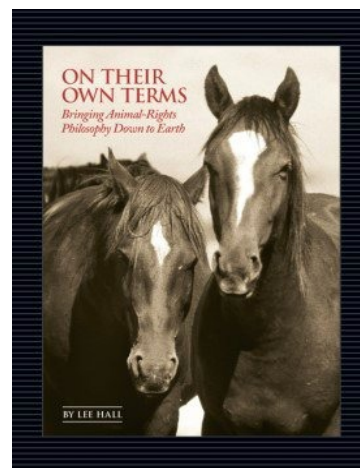
Imagine the earth's wildlands recovering. Air and water, clean and clear. No bird cages, spurs, guns; nor bait, nor tackle... Imagine a culture and a landscape where animal-rights principles are valued. Imagine growing up with parents who wouldn't think to encourage an interest in racing horses or chasing foxes.

Imagine: Circus performers are human artists, all. Advocates in Britain have imagined that culture and it is coming. MPs are currently agreeing to stop the use of tigers and other undomesticated animals. So we imagine a culture transformed, and then map our route so we can set off and move in the right direction.

Some people have told me they are putting the workshop to personal use, and that's exciting for me to hear. It could be used as a community-based workshop too; I'm about to leave for the North American Vegetarian Society's annual, all-vegan Summerfest and I'll try it out and let you know how it goes.

What do you mean by 'personhood' and how far does this extend into the animal realm?

Personhood is the respect we afford to another being



experiencing life. The point isn't to make other animals adjuncts to human culture, but rather to have a society that cultivates respect for animals on their terms.

How far would it go? Well, early vegan Donald Watson tilled the garden with a fork instead of a spade to avoid harming earthworms. This would take us to a slower way of life, but would it not be a life and an emotional capacity greatly enriched?

What aspects did your earlier book (*Capers in the Churchyard: Animal Rights Advocacy in the Age of Terror*) cover?

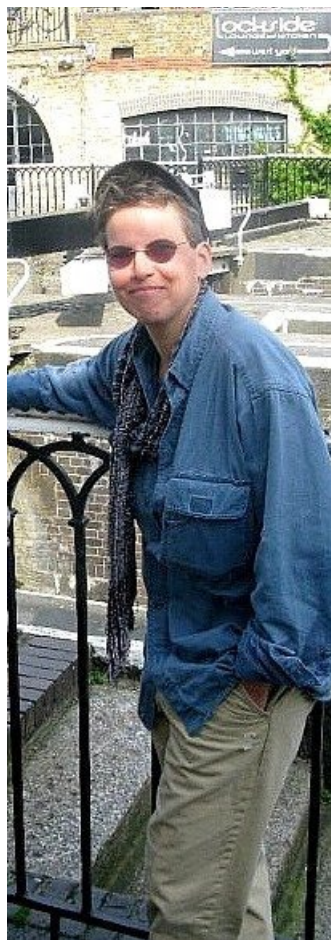
The purpose of the book was to make the case that veganism itself is direct action. And also to note that some activism turns out to replicate macho control patterns we'd be better off without. But let this not be misunderstood as advertising passivity. Agitation – out on the streets and in the courts – is also immensely important. I would rule out systematic intimidation as a method, yet push back against animal circuses, hunting, races, bullfights and rodeos, etc, by engaging potential ticket-buyers and working to inspire transformation.

Corporate animal users and the anti-greens have, in the past 15 years, essentially turned the tables on progressive activists. By 1997 Ron Arnold had published the hideously titled book *Ecoterror: The Violent Agenda to Save Nature*, through Free Enterprise Press. Today, the word ecoterror is used by lawmakers, newspapers and ordinary people. The anti-greens adopted a habit of insisting that animal advocates and environmentalists are haters, potentially even homicidal. They will look for any justification to prove their point and press for clampdowns on activists; and it is my opinion that we should, to the extent we can, prevent them from having those excuses.

It is the sign of health and respect amongst contributors to a movement that we're willing and able to communicate openly about whether some methods are better than others for advancing our movement. As activists we do have some level of responsibility for each other, and we become the walking, talking illustrations of the culture we want.

Finally, does your writing and legal work extend to areas outside animal rights?

Yes: refugee rights, and the connection of feminism and animal rights. I previously worked in migration and refugee law. I still do. Refugees have a problem being taken seriously as persons. Non-human beings live as refugees in our midst even though they move with grace and ease in the environment, and if anyone is alienated from our genuine sense of living in according with Earth's seasons and climates, well...■



This is one of several Vegan Views interviews over the period 2011-2013. The others are freely available on the home page of the Vegan Views website www.veganviews.org.uk (mostly in pdf form).

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