



Derek Goodwin

Not Following the Herd

Author and sanctuary founder fights for farm animals

Many animal rights organizations lobby and campaign on behalf of animals who live and die in factory farms. Farm Sanctuary does more – it's a home for those who are rescued.

Gene Baur is the founder and president of Farm Sanctuary. His new book, *Farm Sanctuary:*

***Changing Hearts and Minds About Animals and Food*, describes the two refuges he now runs in New York and California, how the organization grew out of other social causes he'd been involved in, some of the amazing rescues and transformations of the animals, and how we can all bring an end to the terrible cruelties of factory farms.**

Best Friends: *People often think that the animal rights world is closely allied with liberal politics, and you began as a poster person for that stereotype, working with Ralph Nader, living out of a Volkswagen bus, traveling with the Grateful Dead, and being involved in all manner of left-wing causes.*

Gene Baur: The irony is that I grew up in a very conservative Catholic family. I went to Catholic school and then to a Jesuit high school. And some of the basic values of “Do unto others,” the Golden Rule, and “Thou shalt not kill” all stuck deep inside of me. But I didn’t feel that some of those institutions were really doing what their stated purpose should be.

In our neighborhood, there were refugees from the wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Crime was rampant. I’d grown up with the conservative viewpoint that people should take personal responsibility. But I also understood the difficulty these refugees had, being uprooted from their countries and trying to make the best of it in L.A. And I started moving into progressive causes.

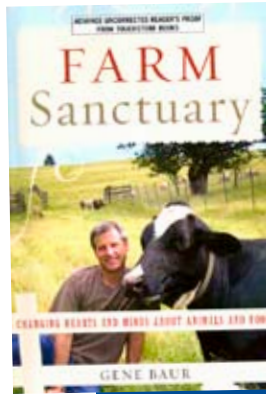
My undergraduate degree is in sociology, and the more I learned about the conditions that bring about certain behaviors, the more I started leaning toward the left. I came to see that living responsibly means living on the planet in a way that is not wrecking it. But some business interests that speak about personal responsibility don’t act accordingly. They exploit resources and profit from them without respecting the land or the animals or other people.

B.F.: *In your book, you compare the situation of animals today to institutions like slavery 150 years ago.*

G.B.: Humans are capable of great kindness, but we’re also capable of great callousness and cruelty. And when we’re engaged in cruel acts, we tend to rationalize and justify them. The choices we make about what we eat and how we live have consequences.

Small cruelties add up and become big cruelties. Crowding animals into smaller and smaller spaces and in larger and larger numbers, and having to cut off parts of their bodies, and then giving them drugs just to keep them alive and hormones to make them grow faster, these things are extensions of the same attitude of disrespect to one another.

In the cases of slavery and animal agriculture, money and profits are at stake. So there is a tendency to rationalize it and



“As part of our campaign against crated veal, or ‘milk-fed veal,’ as it’s also known, we have argued that all calves should be given space to exercise, have the ability to interact with other calves and engage in natural behaviors, and be fed a nutritious diet that supports their physical development. These public education efforts have had an impact. Increasingly, veal from crated, anemic calves is moving off the plates of caring consumers throughout the United States. Since the launch of the no-veal campaign, veal consumption per person in the United States has dropped from an average of 1.6 pounds a year in 1986 to about half a pound today, a decline of over two-thirds.

“We have also reached out to restaurant chefs and managers to make them aware of the cruelty involved in producing veal and urge them to stop selling it. More than four hundred restaurants in twenty-eight states and Washington, D.C., have signed our No Veal Pledge, agreeing not to serve veal from calves raised in crates and fed an anemia-causing diet. Many have dropped veal from their menus entirely.”

– From *Farm Sanctuary*

justify it. A lot of the arguments that are used to justify our use of animals – like the religious ones that they were put here for our benefit – are the exact same arguments that were used to justify slavery.

B.F.: *There are lots of organizations in the animal rights movement that are advocating for farm animals. But you’re one of the very few who actually look after animals.*

G.B.: I love to be on the farm and see the animals enjoy life. Sanctuaries like Best Friends and Farm Sanctuary are transformative places for the animals and also for the people who come and visit. Animals who come in frightened and scared and hurt are looked after, and they start regaining their health and their ability to trust people and to enjoy life. So it’s transformative to watch that.

And having animals here keeps us centered and grounded in what is important about this work, which is respecting others and treating them with compassion and understanding.

And, you know, the animals are healers. Just as we take animals out of abusive situations and help to heal them, they help to heal us, too. Sometimes when you’re doing legislative work, it’s tough going when you’re only able to make very small improvements in how animals are treated. But when you take living animals out of a trash can when they are near death, or off of a dead pile [at a factory farm] and you bring them here and you watch them start waking up and then start standing and walking and eventually running and playing, there is something very profound and empowering about that.

B.F.: *Tell us about some of the animals.*

G.B.: Opie was a calf who was down at a stockyard – unable to get up. He was dying of hypothermia, and the stockyard worker was going to bury him later that day. I was able to convince him to give me the calf. I went to the local veterinarian, who was a dairy industry veterinarian. He was pretty hostile and told me I was wasting my time and that it made no economic sense. But I finally convinced him [to treat the calf], and Opie started perking up within about 24 hours.

Taking care of Opie showed me how social these animals are. They have more than just their biological needs. They need to have friendships with other animals of their species. So when I took Opie out to the barn and he saw the other cows, that really did good for his spirits and really helped his recovery. He’d been left for dead. But he’s still here with us. He weighs over 2,000 pounds. He enjoys his days on the farm with his friends.

B.F.: *What kind of social system do cows have?*

G.B.: They’re very herd-oriented. If one is taken away, the others will moo because they miss their companion. They generally stay together and they watch out for each other. They have leaders who determine when they are going into the barn or when they are going out.

And that’s why it was so important when Opie was young for him to go out into the barn with the other cows and to know that he was with his people and they were welcoming him there.

The other thing is that he was a calf. Calves learn behaviors from their parents or from other members of the community. On modern farms, that doesn't happen. They grow up in such strange and artificial environments. We have a cow, Phoebe, who we believe had a number of calves taken away from her. That would have been a traumatic experience, but as soon as she came here she started mothering other animals when they came in. And there is a story in the book about how she bonded with David the sheep. At a factory farm, they are not allowed to express themselves at all.

B.F.: *People get upset in this country when they hear about dogs in other countries being killed for food. But we don't seem to be bothered about what happens to other animals at home.*

G.B.: It really speaks to the prejudices we have and the arbitrary distinctions we've set up. People have gotten to know dogs and cats. But if they got to know cows and pigs and chickens and other farm animals, I think they would be just as upset about the way they're treated and then slaughtered. All these animals deserve to be treated with compassion and respect. Cats, dogs, cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys: They all want to live.

And there's no reason to kill them. We can live and be healthy without eating

animals. Killing is not necessary. It's just something we've developed a habit of doing and we try to rationalize it in different ways, like by saying that these particular animals are here for this particular purpose. You hear that kind of thing a lot from people who say that God gave them to us to use as we want.

But, as I said, we can live and be healthy without killing and eating other animals. Here at Farm Sanctuary, we'd like people to think about that.

B.F.: *A lot of people decide to give up beef and they think they're doing something better because they're eating chicken and fish instead, and more dairy foods as well.*

G.B.: And that means more animals actually being killed than ever before. Since people have shifted away from eating cows to eating more chickens, we're now up to around 10 billion animals a year being killed. When Farm Sanctuary started in 1986, the number was around six billion. And a big part of that shift is based on the wrong belief that chicken is healthier than beef.

B.F.: *And with the terrible conditions they're kept in and all the antibiotics being pumped into them ...*

G.B.: Absolutely. The idea that eating chicken is healthy has created this growth in the slaughter of chickens, but it's a myth. Of course, the very idea that we have to eat animals is also a myth.

B.F.: *You also have turkeys at Farm Sanctuary. And we have wild turkeys around the sanctuary here at Best Friends. But it's frightening to see the difference between wild turkeys and those helpless creatures who come from factory farms.*

G.B.: They've been genetically bred to grow fast and large, so their hearts and lungs have a hard time supporting their massive bodies, and so do their legs. At Farm Sanctuary, we keep them on a high-fiber diet so they don't put on too much weight. And we encourage them to exercise.

It's interesting that this is the same sort of advice that's given to people – to eat better and to exercise. There's a parallel there, isn't there? We've bred these animals to be so big that they have these health problems, and now we're experiencing these same problems related to obesity ourselves.

B.F.: *We are what we eat.*

G.B.: Totally. What we eat literally becomes incorporated into our bodies. It also affects our minds. I think one of the reasons we have so many psychological problems today is because of the way we eat. And the chemicals [in our food] can be measured but there are other things that maybe we can't measure that also have an effect.

B.F.: *In your book, you pride yourself on being a pretty good cook. What are some of your favorite foods?*

G.B.: Well one of the things I usually make is scrambled tofu. But I've never written down any recipes.

B.F.: *Any particular recommendations for people who are thinking of changing to a vegan lifestyle?*

G.B.: It's not as hard



Photo: Derek Goodwin

as most people assume. There are lots of products now available in stores to replace meat, that can be used as direct replacements for meat products: veggie burgers, veggie hotdogs, veggie meatballs.

I also encourage people to be creative, to get to know different kinds of vegetables and beans and pick up a vegetarian cookbook and put some time into it, if they have the time. But if they don't, it's easy just to substitute some meatless meats for the meat products they've been eating or they can just leave them off. You can have a great spaghetti dish without the meatballs and you can also add more veggies to it. You can add more broccoli, for example, and that would be healthier. And there's a lot you can do with beans. You can take, for example, vegetarian baked beans and you can get veggie hotdogs and cook them on the stove and you've got the old beans and franks, except it's all vegetarian.

B.F.: *You've always been involved in legislation, too. What are some of the things on your agenda?*

G.B.: We're involved with an initiative

in California right now to ban veal crates and gestation crates and battery cages. We're in the Supreme Court in New Jersey challenging some standards for the so-called humane raising of farm animals. And we hope to be able to open up some other sanctuaries near big cities like New York.

B.F.: *Most people don't know that farm animals are also the greatest source of greenhouse gas emissions on the planet.*

G.B.: Yes. The livestock industry produces more greenhouse gases than the transportation industry. And it's also one of the top contributors to other problems like land degradation, water degradation and pollution, and loss of biodiversity.

All of these things have been linked to the agribusiness industry. There's a United Nations report called *Livestock's Long Shadow* that came out in 2006 that highlights all of the various problems associated with animal agriculture.

B.F.: *How do you see things developing for farm animals over the next, say, 10 years?*

G.B.: Well, on the one hand, we're seeing factory farming spreading into developing countries. On the other hand, we also have small farms starting to crop up. Organic production is on the increase as people recognize that animals are being mistreated on factory farms.

So it goes back to those conservative values I grew up with – about people taking personal responsibility and recognizing the consequences of their food choices. I think most people agree that killing is a violent act, that factory farming is a destructive force, and that eating animals has all these harmful consequences and we're all suffering because of it.

I do believe more and more people will become aware and then make the choices that make sense for themselves and everybody else.

Most people don't like to be cruel and mean. Most people want to be decent. So that gives me hope. 🐾

Farm Sanctuary: Changing Hearts and Minds About Animals and Food, by Gene Baur, is published by Touchstone and is available at bookstores and online retailers.

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