

Invasion of the Movement Snatchers: A Social Justice Cause Falls Prey to the Doctrine of “Necessary Evil”

By James LaVeck

You never know when a PR agency is being effective; you'll just find your views slowly shifting.—PR Executive

Few of us realize that some U.S. industries pay hundreds of millions of dollars to public relations firms charged with the removal of any and all obstacles to their acquisition of profit. High on the list of those obstacles are grassroots social justice movements.

In a 2002 article on their Center for Media and Democracy website, authors and social activists John Stauber and Sheldon Rampton described the activities of MBD, one such PR firm involved in the dismantlement of citizen movements concerned about problems ranging from acid rain, dioxin, biotechnology and toxic wastes, to apartheid, nuclear energy, endangered species and oil spills.

“Their favorite method,” wrote Stauber and Rampton, “is a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy heavily dependent on co-optation: First identify the ‘radicals’ who are unwilling to compromise and who are demanding fundamental changes to redress the problem at hand. Then, identify the ‘realists’—typically, organizations with significant budgets and staffs working in the same relative area of public concern as the radicals. Then, approach these realists, often through a friendly third party, start a dialogue and eventually cut a deal, a ‘win-win’ solution that marginalizes and excludes the radicals and their demands.

“Next, go with the realists to the ‘idealists’ who have learned about the problem through the work of the radicals. Convince the idealists that a ‘win-win’ solution endorsed by the realists is best for the

community as a whole. Once this has been accomplished, the ‘radicals’ can be shut out as extremists, the PR fix is in, and the deal can be touted in the media to make the corporation and its ‘moderate’ nonprofit partners look heroic for solving the problem. Result: *industry may have to make some small or temporary concessions, but the fundamental concerns raised by the ‘radicals’ are swept aside.*” [Emphasis added.]

What does this troubling scenario have to do with animal advocates and our movement to end the exploitation of sentient beings? Well, it turns out the first time Stauber and Rampton wrote about MBD, it was in reference to a presentation given by Ronald Duchin—the “D” in MBD—to none other than the Cattleman’s Association (see page 66 of *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*). The year was 1991, and Duchin, a graduate of the Army War College and former special assistant to the Secretary of Defense, was outlining the most effective strategy for “dealing with” the meat industry’s biggest irritant: *us*.

Duchin recommended the following three-step plan:

- 1) Isolate the radicals
- 2) “Cultivate” the idealists and “educate” them into becoming “realists”
- 3) Co-opt the opportunists into agreeing with industry.

Duchin acknowledged in his speech that idealists were hard to work with, and that because of their inherent altruism and the fact that they gain nothing personally from holding their views, the public tends to believe in them. He then offered the cattlemen a clever strategy. He said that if idealists can somehow be convinced that

their opposition to a product or an industry inadvertently caused harm to someone, they could not live with the contradiction and would be forced to change their views, to adopt a more “realistic” position.

Duchin next told the cattlemen about how to work with movement “opportunists,” people he described as engaging in activism for “visibility, power, followers, and perhaps, employment... The key to dealing with opportunists is to provide them with at least the perception of a partial victory.”

The widespread adoption of “cage-free” eggs? A few seats at the table with the group developing standards for producing “Animal Compassionate” lamb? Uncrated “pink” veal? Today, these and similar developments are being widely characterized as victories by organizations with reputations for staunchly opposing animal exploitation.

The Bill of Human Kindness

It’s not pleasant to think about the possibility that our movement could be in the process of being co-opted and neutralized according to a blueprint laid out 15 years ago by a meat industry consulting firm. But for the animal exploiting industries, there are billions of dollars at stake, and it stands to reason that they are going to commit serious resources to the protection of their interests, and they are going to play to win. Consider how the relentless pressure to bring stock performance ever higher, quarter after quarter, can drive corporate executives into a hypercompetitive frenzy. As a result, one regularly reads of industrial espionage, media smear campaigns, attempts to corrupt political leaders, accounting scandals and brutal takeover battles. Is there any reason to believe that people caught up in such a system might be any less ruthless when dealing with a citizens’ movement that seeks to put them out of business?

Stauber and Rampton, after years of investigating the activities of the PR industry, point out the tendency of activists to deny the possibility that we could be duped, “activists like to believe that we are too committed to our causes, too worldly and aware to be sweet-talked into unwitting submission by sitting down and partnering with the enemy.” But according



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When we switch from asking people to eliminate or reduce their consumption of animal products, to publicly endorsing “humane” animal products, are we not, in effect, calling off our own boycott? Think about it. “A boycott, once terminated, is not easily turned back on.”

Devlin, at Woodstock Farm Animal Sanctuary. Photo by Wiebke Wiechell, courtesy of www.flickr.com/photos/inkedyogachick

to PR industry guru Denise Deegan, notes Stauber, “industry continues to regard this sort of ‘dialogue’ as its most effective method for managing activists.”

Stauber and Rampton’s work is hardly based on armchair theorizing. Rather, it is derived from exhaustive study of the history of real-life grassroots movements that, like the animal movement, have attempted to confront industry abuse. They studied, for example, how the MBD PR firm grew out of a successful campaign to neutralize a massive boycott of the Nestlé corporation. In the late 70s, Nestlé was attempting to persuade millions of third world women to use synthetic infant formula instead of breast-feeding their babies. “In activist lore,” note Stauber and Rampton, “this boycott is touted as a major victory, but in the corporate world it is understood that industry really won the day by pulling the rug out from the campaign. By making selective concessions to the activists, Nestlé succeeded in negotiating an end to the boycott. Later, activists were dismayed to discover that its infant formula marketing practices

are continuing with only token changes. Third world children continue to die, but today their plight receives little attention, and activists have found that a boycott, once terminated, is not easily turned back on.”

Translate this to the animal movement, and the call for a boycott is, very simply, vegan advocacy. When we switch from asking people to eliminate or reduce their consumption of animal products, to publicly endorsing “humane” animal products, are we not, in effect, calling off our own boycott? Think about it. “A boycott, once terminated, is not easily turned back on.”

Playing to Win-Win

So this is serious. Let’s go through it again and reflect upon how recent developments in the animal movement might map onto the PR industry playbook as summarized by Stauber and Rampton.

First identify the ‘radicals’ who are unwilling to compromise and who are demanding fundamental changes to redress the problem at hand.

Hypothetically, that could be anyone who believes animals have rights, that exploiting them is wrong, and that the solution is encouraging people to boycott all animal products, with a long-term goal of abolishing the property status of animals. We’re not talking about radical tactics, but radical ideas. We’re talking about community educators, amateur investigators, protesters, attorneys, bloggers, artists, nurses, animal rescuers, merchants, writers, leafleteers, clergyfolk, dieticians, former farmers, humane educators, college students, sanctuary workers, yoga instructors, teenagers, musicians, doctors, and all kinds of everyday activists who practice veganism as an expression of Gandhian nonviolence, as a refusal to cooperate in any way with those profiting from the oppression of others.

Then, identify the ‘realists’—typically, organizations with significant budgets and staffs working in the same relative area of public concern as the radicals.

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large multi-million dollar animal protection organizations with significant farmed animal campaigns.

Then, approach these realists, often through a friendly third party, start a dialogue, and eventually cut a deal, a 'win-win' solution that marginalizes and excludes the radicals and their demands.

Hypothetically, this could be an offer made by someone like John Mackey, CEO of Whole Foods, one of the nation's leading retailers of both meat and organic produce, to partner with animal advocates and meat industry "visionaries" to develop new standards for the "humane" exploitation of animals. However, in order to participate, the "realists" must de facto contradict their own position

that sentient nonhuman animals should not be used for human purposes, for to negotiate the details of their exploitation with those who will do the killing and make the profits dramatically undermines the integrity of this fundamental principle.

Now, through the combined efforts of industry and the participating animal organizations, the "reasonable" person's response to being made aware of the plight of farmed animals becomes *not* veganism, *not* reduction of meat, dairy and egg consumption, but rather, the purchase of "humane" animal products.

Simultaneously, the focus of public dialogue irrevocably shifts from the questionable morality of using and killing animals, to an elaborate, endless wrangle over

how the deed will be done—conditions, treatment, standards and regulation.

In this new framework, public calls by animal advocates for the boycott of all animal products, for nonparticipation in exploitation, have no place. Such talk is now an embarrassment for the participating animal groups, and a joke for the meat industry people. Such talk is now relegated to the realm of "radicalism."

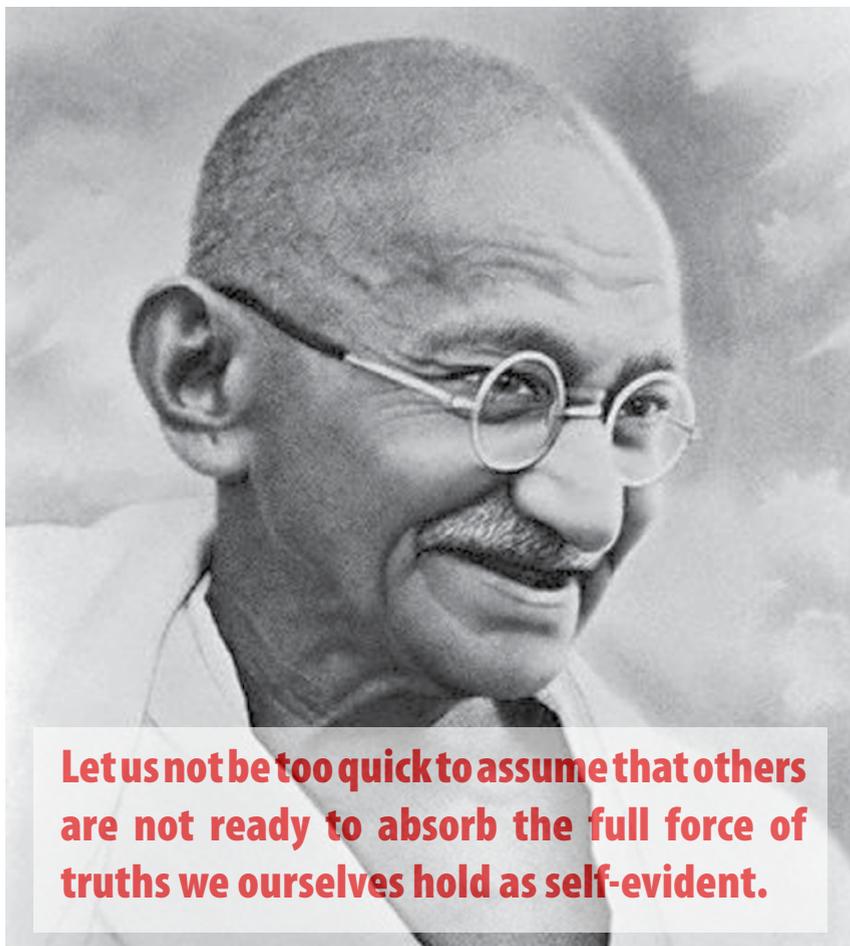
Next, go with the realists to the 'idealists' who have learned about the problem through the work of the radicals. Convince the idealists that a 'win-win' solution endorsed by the realists is best for the community as a whole.

Hypothetically, these could be the small, idealistic organizations that are convinced to join the larger organizations in endorsing the "'humane' standards mini-revolution." Together, they persuade frontline educators and citizen activists that solely advocating for veganism is no longer the right approach. Activists must now simultaneously support "humane" meat and "cage-free" eggs as a purported transitional step for people who won't give up consuming animal products today. To do otherwise, it is argued, is tantamount to abandoning billions of animals now trapped in the existing meat industry system.

Confronted with this seeming "contradiction," large numbers of movement idealists shift their views and begin adopting a more "realistic" position, a textbook application of Duchin's turn-idealists-into-realists formula. This new "realism" includes public advocacy of non-vegan behavior—consumption of "humane" animal products—alongside public advocacy of vegan behavior—boycotting of all animal products. Eerily, these newly transformed idealists even begin to refer to themselves as "realists," and to those who hold on to their own former values for non-participation as "purists" and "absolutists," sometimes even "selfish" or "self-righteous" in their "moral rigidity."

Meat-ing People Where They Are

It is striking, and deeply troubling, how this new way of thinking of ourselves and our advocacy conform so perfectly to Mr. Duchin's roadmap for our future, and how it so precisely echoes the "dilemma" of



Let us not be too quick to assume that others are not ready to absorb the full force of truths we ourselves hold as self-evident.

Mahatma Gandhi. Image: © Bettmann/CORBIS

Whole Foods' John Mackey, who talks of how he would lose his position as CEO, the very basis of his ability to make a difference, were he to impose his personal values and deny his customers the opportunity to purchase a wide variety of animal products. Therefore, given his concern for animals, Mackey is morally obligated to do what he needs to do in order to maintain his position at the top, and to use the power he has to create a new line of "animal compassionate" meat products, while working with participating animal groups to convince the public to buy them—thus, in Mackey's own words, "pioneering an entirely new way for people to relate to farm animals, with the animals' welfare becoming the most important goal."

Likewise, some leaders of participating animal groups might reason that, were they to "impose" veganism and the abolition of animal exploitation on the public by refusing to offer them an approved "humane" animal product alternative, they too would lose the money and members that they believe are the basis of their ability to make a difference. Rather, in order to have clout and credibility with the widest range of funders, legislators, journalists and other "mainstream" people, they need to "meet people where they are," and offer "options." They seem to believe that they are, in fact, morally obligated to work with industry to develop and market "humane" animal products that they claim will help the public and the meat industry transition away from the most egregious forms of animal torture.

In order to see where this new "meet-people-where-they-are" approach is leading our movement, we need go no further than the latest labeling scheme, this one launched in Australia by an international animal organization. It is called "Humane Choice," and the press release enthusiastically declares that the new label "will guarantee the consumer that the animal has been treated with respect and care, from birth through to death... The Humane Choice label will denote the animal has had the best life and death offered to any farm animal... They basically live their lives as they would have done on Old MacDonald's farm..."

Humane Choice? Old MacDonald's farm? See how the roles are reversing? Animal advocacy is no longer about

ethics and social justice—it is now about *consumer choice*. The selling of meat is no longer about commodification, exploitation and profits—it is now about *animal welfare*. Veganism is no longer a moral imperative—it is now a charmingly eccentric *lifestyle choice*.

Bringing us to Stauber and Rampton's finale: *Once this has been accomplished, the 'radicals' can be shut out as extremists, the PR fix is in, and the deal can be touted in the media to make the corporation and its 'moderate' nonprofit partners look heroic for solving the problem. Result: industry may have to make some small or temporary concessions, but the fundamental concerns raised by the 'radicals' are swept aside.*

The Animal Welfare Industrial Complex

Whether our movement came to its present state in whole or in part through PR industry machinations, or if it is simply self-destructing of its own accord, we should be shocked and deeply concerned that the structure of today's animal movement so closely resembles the vision of moral compromise, division and debilitation put forth by a meat industry PR consultant so many years ago. However it was accomplished, it is undeniable that the firewall of linguistic precision, critical thought and philosophical integrity needed to protect our movement from such degradation has been all but torn down.

It's troubling to think about how things could have gone this far so fast, but it stands to reason that Mr. Duchin and his ilk haven't been twiddling their thumbs for the past 15 years. As animal organizations and the meat industry co-mingle their affairs in an increasingly bewildering tangle, their language, values, interests and goals are becoming indistinguishable, creating a kind of "animal welfare industrial complex" in which the "players"—dominant figures of the industry and the corporate animal movement—will regularly meet in private to negotiate the price of public concern for animal suffering.

To the industry will go animal organization endorsements of an ever more bizarre array of "humane" products and "compassionate" practices. To the animal groups will

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go a pocketful of “partial victories” as well as a few gratuities like conference sponsorships and high profile publicity opportunities. By making the process so orderly and rational, by whittling it down to a few key players with an unspoken understanding of the arrangement, all parties involved will receive a regular supply of what they need to keep growing at a rapid clip. More money. More customers/members. More political connections. More ability to dictate the terms of public discourse.

The workings of this hypothetical animal welfare industrial complex fit comfortably into the Orwellian culture of our post-9/11 society, where civil rights and the rule of law are being systematically undermined in the name of protecting our “freedom.” Central to it all is our acceptance of the doctrine of “necessary evil,” which leads us to go against our core values and rationalize our complicity in acts of violence and injustice committed against others—acts that are often described as “sad” and “regrettable,” but, let’s be realistic, unavoidable and absolutely necessary if we are to accomplish our righteous mission. Under the doctrine of necessary evil, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with indefinitely incarcerating thousands of people suspected, but not charged, tried or convicted of any crime, in a worldwide network of secret prisons, and even torturing them—as long as all of it is done for noble reasons, and according to the proper “standards.”

Consider the parallelism of these two passages, the first from the *New York Times*, and the second from the website of a new animal industry marketing campaign in England:

Although the C.I.A. has faced criticism over the use of harsh techniques, one senior intelligence official said detainees had not been mistreated. They were given dental and vision care as well as the Koran, prayer rugs and clocks to schedule prayers, the official said. They were also given reading material, DVD’s and access to exercise equipment.

This is not veal from dimly lit crowded pens. These animals enjoy a very full life, with plenty of space and light, inside suitable buildings over winter and outside at pasture for the rest of the year; a varied diet; and the care of a foster cow when available.

Yes, poor orphaned calves destined for the butcher’s knife are now going to be lovingly nurtured by a “foster mom” before their lives are prematurely snuffed out. And lest anyone feel bad about the brevity of the baby cows’ existence, the industry helpfully points out that “with a life span of six months, they live twice as long as even the slowest growing chicken; they have the same life span as a good organic pig, and longer than many organic lambs.”

So those who consume the flesh of these coddled calves are actually humanitarians solving an “animal welfare problem.” By eating the unwanted male offspring of dairy cows, we will spare these unlucky newborns from the morally repugnant alternative, a shorter and more brutal life in a crate. One cannot help but recall the quote attributed to an army lieutenant during the Vietnam War who declared, “We had to destroy the village, in order to save it.”

According to a newspaper report, nine days after the launch of this “Good Veal” campaign, veal sales at one English supermarket chain rose 45 percent. Notably, the campaign’s website features the endorsement and logo of a large, well-respected European animal advocacy organization whose name begins with the word “compassion.”

Hence, a decades-long boycott is all but neutralized. Think of how many people worked, and for how long, to educate the public about why the eating of veal should be taboo. Just how much specially labeled “Good Veal” does one have to eat before the distinction dissolves, and it simply becomes good to eat veal?

Once again, our movement’s fundamental concerns...artfully swept aside.

The Art of Relentless Compassion

In this new era, to be a vegan advocate, to successfully encourage others to boycott participation in the exploitation of animals, one must do so much more than expose people to the injustice of animal exploitation, help them overcome the force of their own personal habits, resist family and societal pressure, and see through the outrageous deceptions of the meat industry. Now, one must also debunk the patent fallacy of “humane” happy meat products enthusiastically endorsed, promoted and in some cases even developed by a number of organizations that are, essentially, the public face of animal advocacy.

If abolition of exploitation is our ultimate goal, as is so often claimed, and if veganism is the single most powerful personal expression of opposition to animal exploitation, why on earth would any animal organization participate in making the job of vegan activists and educators so much harder?

Already, sanctuary workers, educators and frontline vegan activists are reporting that members of the public, when confronted with the reality of farmed animal exploitation, increasingly indicate that they will express their concern for farmed animals, not by boycotting or reducing their consumption of animal products, but by purchasing animal products marketed as “humane.” Whole Foods, not surprisingly, is often mentioned by name.

“Humane” animal products appear to be a nearly perfect antidote to the inner conflict brought about by awareness of one’s own complicity in the exploitation of animals. But sadly, by trading a sacred truth for a clever lie, “humane” labels make a mockery of an authentic moment of conscience.

If we step outside the mindset of the animal welfare industrial complex, and choose instead to model our approach on successful social justice movements of the past, it becomes clear that our job is to relentlessly investigate and expose the industry’s exploitation; to rescue animals and offer sanctuary; to educate the public about who animals are and why it is wrong to use and kill them; and to create and promote ideas, products, social values, commercial practices, traditions, artworks,

language, philosophy, and laws that are wholly nonviolent, that do not in any way participate in or reinforce the legitimacy of the exploitation of any being.

Such a time-tested way of working for peaceful change is both practical and powerful, and well suits the dignity of the cause we serve. It speaks to the best in human nature, and produces ever-growing waves of change. Each person who joins in signals a reprieve for a large number of animals, adds to the common pool of creativity and wisdom, and becomes another caretaker of a vision uncontaminated by pessimism or self-interest. This naturally grows our movement without diluting the strength or clarity of our message, and wins the respect of those vast numbers of people who are willing to listen and learn from us, but are not yet ready to join our cause. To them—the people working through doubt or lifestyle transition—we respectfully offer opportunities to learn more while experiencing the joy of our nonviolent culture, as well as constant encouragement to reduce their consumption of the products of suffering. Over time, by transforming more and more individual lives, we can, and will, transform an entire society.

Walking this path, we can be confident that each step we take, large or small, is a step in the right direction, a step toward liberating countless beings from a life of exploitation and suffering. And rest assured, under the mounting pressure of public outrage at the cruelty and injustices our work relentlessly exposes, the meat industry will have no choice but to respond by “improving” their practices. If history is any guide, in many cases their claims of making things better for the animals will belittle more than self-serving fabrications. But sometimes the changes they make will actually decrease the suffering animals endure before slaughter, and of course, we can all agree that’s a good thing.

But we don’t need to be a part of dreaming up the details of the industry’s new and improved systems of exploitation, and we certainly don’t need to put our good names and our movement’s credibility behind the questionable products that result. Let the industry pay people like self-described animal advocate and slaughterhouse designer Temple Grandin

to do that. And let such professional apologists “take the credit” for creating more efficient and more profitable methods of “killing with kindness.”

Let us not forget, there is a reason why human rights groups do not develop or endorse “humane” methods of torturing and executing political prisoners, and why children’s rights advocates do not collaborate with the international pornography industry to develop standards and special labeling for films that make “compassionate” use of runaway teens. To do such things is to introduce moral ambiguity into situations where the boundaries between right and wrong must never be allowed to blur. To be the agent of such blurring is to become complicit oneself in the violence and abuse.

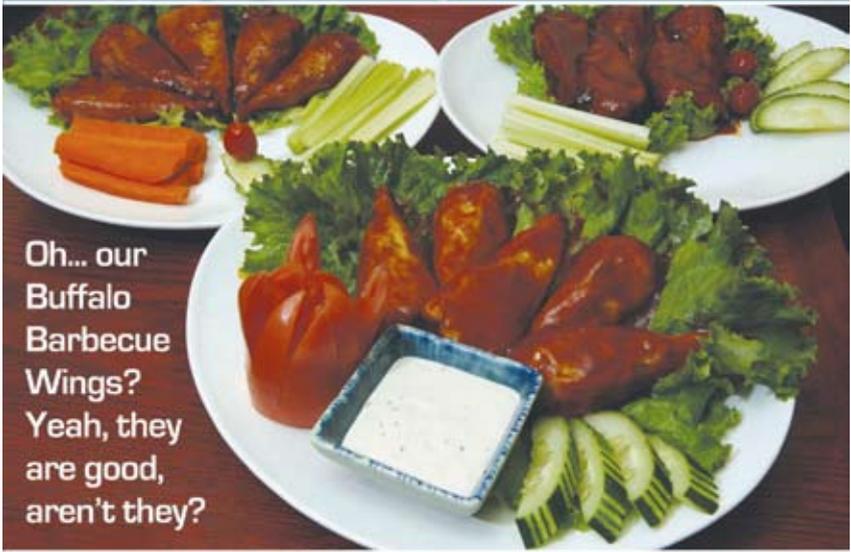
Let us be clear. When we endorse the consumption of any kind of animal product, we’re not only encouraging an act we ourselves know to be immoral—not only blurring the line between right and wrong—we’re also willfully ignoring animal agriculture’s massive contribution to global warming, world hunger, chronic disease, worker abuse, desertification

and third world poverty. Let us not be too quick to assume that others are not ready to absorb the full force of truths we ourselves hold as self-evident. The world has seen quite enough cynicism by now, and is ready for something new. Let us freely share with everyone the best truth we have, and let us do so with the courage, altruism and integrity of the unapologetic idealists who have come before us—those whose historic words and deeds have redefined the limits of human potential. ■

A principle is a principle, and in no case can it be watered down because of our incapacity to live it in practice. We have to strive to achieve it, and the striving should be conscious, deliberate and hard.—Gandhi

*James LaVeck is cofounder of the nonprofit arts and educational organization Tribe of Heart and producer of award-winning documentaries **The Witness** and **Peaceable Kingdom**. A substantial revision of **Peaceable Kingdom**, which will include an examination of the ethics of “humane” meat, is currently in post-production. To learn more, visit www.tribeofheart.org.*

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