



FINDING HIS RELIGION

VV talks to activist and author Mark Hawthorne about veganism, rabbits and his very first book, *Striking at the Roots*, and how it evolved. Interview: SB

US activist and writer Mark Hawthorne has a book out, *Striking at the Roots: A Practical Guide to Animal Activism*, and VV wants to know more. When I call Mark at his home north of San Francisco I tell him I don't have any prepared questions and that we're simply going to have a nice chat. "Like we're just having a cup of tea," he says. (He must sense I've got a fresh cup in front of me.)

It must be exciting to have his first book out, I begin. "Oh yeah, it's very exciting," he says. "At first I wasn't excited. I'd worked very hard on it and I had this fear that nobody was going to buy it. Not only are people buying it, but more people are buying it than I ever expected. So there are more people than I realised who are interested in being active for animals."

That's so heartening. What gave him the idea to write it? Was it just that there was nothing else like it out there and he wanted to fill the gap? "Exactly. There was nothing else that I could find. When I got involved in activism — and it's only been about five years — there was no resource in one spot. You could write to PETA or read about the wonderful work of Patty Mark or you could turn to a number of resources on the internet, but as far as finding one source that you could easily carry with you, read at night or something, there wasn't anything out there. I thought maybe I could talk to the people I admire about activism and get their point of view."

And you've ended up talking to practically everyone in the animal rights movement, I say. "I certainly tried. And I talked to more people than the ones who ended up in the book." It's great to see all those names that we're familiar with rounded up together at last. "Well, the publisher told me the book would be distributed in North America, Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and to be sure that I made it interesting for those people."

Well, that's what you've done. "Yeah, and it was easy. Especially Australia and New Zealand, I mean, there's so much going on in those countries. And thank god for someone like Patty Mark, who is a hero to me. She's doing such amazing work. So, yes, it was very easy to get input from other countries."

The book is dedicated to "a certain cow in India, who showed me a kinder way of living". What's the story behind that? "Well, I spent three months in India in 1992. I was still a meat-eater then and I was living with a Buddhist family in Ladakh in the Himalayas. They had a large garden and 99 per cent of what I ate came out of that garden. So I was a de facto vegan. I felt fantastic, even living at 12,000 feet. I had incredible energy and I just felt amazing."

"One day a cow came into the garden and was eating the plants. I stood there and looked in her eyes and she looked into mine. I had never been that close to a cow before. I'd never really

considered that this being had every right to live — as much right as any human being. She was so sentient. I could see her intelligence and her desire to live. I know that your readers would understand that, but a lot of people might not. At that point I thought, 'I can't eat beef any more.'

"I started with cows and it was really, for me, a mystical moment. When I got back to the States I gave up other meat, and then finally went vegan."

And what about this special bond he's got with rabbits? Mark laughs. "Well, yeah, I live with five rabbits. First, I got involved with two organisations. I went out to visit Animal Place here in California and I learned about intensive confinement for chickens and about the dairy industry. I went vegan that day. Shortly after that I was reading about Rabbit Rescue and that rabbits are the third most popular companion animal, and that there was a real need for people to foster rabbits.

"Humans started domesticating rabbits mainly for food. I think it started in France, and to keep a rabbit outside in a hutch was no big deal because you were going to eat that rabbit. At some point we realised that rabbits make great companions: they have amazing personalities, they're very intelligent, they use a litter box, they know their names, they love to play and they form very deep bonds with their human guardians. The more I learned about rabbits the more I was fascinated by them. Plus, they're vegan. What a combination. My rabbits eat better than I do.

"Anyway, I contacted this group called Save-A-Bunny and said I was happy to foster a rabbit. Very few men are involved in fostering rabbits, and that's kind of true of veganism and animal rights activism as a whole; it's mostly women. Fostering is where you bring this rabbit into your home and you take care of the rabbit and when somebody wants to adopt him you give him up. [laughter] Well, that didn't work." No, I wouldn't have thought so.

"For some people it does." Not for you, though. "No. And now I have five. They're all neutered and they're wonderful creatures. I so admire them. All the rabbits I have in my house are special-needs rabbits. They've all been abused or have special medical needs. Yet they're so happy and they have such great friendships."

I tell him that my partner and I went vegan because of a big lop-eared house rabbit we adopted in London. So I'm extra sympathetic to the rabbit cause, even if they do like to chew through electrical cords. "Yes, they just can't help themselves," he chuckles.

I tell Mark that when one of his stories appeared in *VV* a couple of years ago, along with a picture of him hugging a bunny, we had a few female readers asking where they could get a man like him. That makes him smile. "I know it's difficult. With Rabbit Rescue the ratio is something like seven women to one man." But that's good for you, I laugh. "Oh, yeah. It's *fine* for me."

He considers. "I don't know what it is about rabbits — I think men are a little intimidated by them. There's a certain nurturing quality that's needed. I must be a bit more in touch with my feminine side."

Read the rest of this interview in the June-August issue of *Vegan Voice*, out in the last week of May and available in selected outlets and by subscription. <http://veganic.net/>