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John Robbins: Life on the Frontlines of the Food Revolution

Author **John Robbins** talks about the science of soy, meat production, our "disease care system," and how MLK Jr. influenced his work.

NO HAPPY
COWS

Dispatches from the Frontlines
of the Food Revolution

Americans take the old adage "you are what you eat" very seriously. Food today has become a kind of identity politics -- avowed meat eaters, die-hard vegans, diligent locavores, junk food enthusiasts. That's why **John Robbins'** new book ***No Happy Cows: Dispatches from the Frontlines of the Food Revolution***, is a refreshing read. A veteran writer, Robbins is also author of the acclaimed 1987 book, ***Diet for a New America***, among numerous other works. His food writing draws the intersections of animal rights, health and the environment. But just as important, Robbins' work seeks the converging paths of many different kinds of people.

No Happy Cows is a collection of writings, some of which were drawn from popular blogs on the Huffington Post, which take on hot-button issues like the condition of animals in factory farms (so horrifying you know you don't want to read about it anymore, but you still should), the health impacts of soy (wonder food or health menace?), food safety, grass-fed meat,

hormones in your milk, child labor in the chocolate business (and the health benefits of chocolate), fair-trade coffee, predatory advertising, and more.

Although a proponent of eating a plant-based (vegan) diet, Robbins is decidedly not preachy. That's not to malign all vegans as evangelizers, but sometimes when you care deeply about something (not just what you eat), it's easy to lose sight of the bigger picture. As Robbins told me, "the more passionate you are about something, the more you need to remember to be respectful to people who have different beliefs or different lifestyles."

In fact the book opens with an incredibly moving chapter in which Robbins encounters a hostile pig farmer. Both Robbins and the farmer make snap judgments about each other, but by the end of their meeting both men are irrevocably changed when they are able to finally see past their own biases and look deeply at their lives. "To me, this is grace -- to have the veils lifted from our eyes so that we can recognize and serve the 9powers, or for ecstatic journeys to mystical planes, but to me, this is the true magic of human life."

AlterNet recently caught up with Robbins by phone and talked to him about our relationship with animals, with each other and with our food, and about his decision to choose a different path other than the one destined for an heir to the Baskin Robbins ice cream empire.

Tara Lohan: You write pretty early in the book that you were being groomed to take over the family business, Baskin Robbins. When did you first have an inkling that your path would be much different than that?

John Robbins: My dad and my uncle were the cofounders and the co-owners of the company, and I'm an only son -- I have sisters, but no brother and my father groomed me to succeed him. All of his expectations were on me. I went some steps down that path but at a certain point I felt pulled in a very different direction. So I walked away from the company and I also chose not to be financially connected to it in any way. I told him I didn't want a trust fund, I didn't want to depend on his achievements for my

life, I wanted to live by different values. And over the years that followed I wrote the book *Diet for a New America* which is highly critical of modern meat production, modern dairy production. I don't believe I could have appraised the modern dairy industry and modern meat production as objectively as I did if I had remained tethered financially in any way to it.

TL: Was there a particular experience in your relationship with animals that led you to your decision?

JR: There were several. I've always loved animals and felt connected to them. It alienates our hearts from ourselves in a profound way when we treat animals cruelly. You do as much for the child as you do for the caterpillar when you teach a child not to step on a caterpillar. We have developed a system of livestock production, of agribusiness that treats these animals with a degree of contempt that is, to me, completely inconsistent with our compassion as people.

As well, the ice cream business is selling a product that isn't good for people's health. My uncle, Bert Baskin, my dad's brother-in-law and partner, died of a heart attack at the age of 54. He was a very big man who ate a lot of ice cream. When it happened, I asked my father did he think there was a connection between the amount of ice cream my uncle would eat and his fatal heart attack, and my dad said, "No, his ticker just got tired and stopped working." And I realized, my father could not even consider the possibility there might be a connection -- by that time he had manufactured and sold more ice cream than anyone who had ever lived on the planet and he didn't want to think he was harming anybody.

But I felt that I had to consider that question and I didn't want to make a living selling a product that might be undermining anybody's wellbeing. I began to think of the ice cream business as something like the tobacco business -- the more you consumed of the product that was sold, the more likely you were to have serious health impacts. Ice cream isn't going to kill anyone, but the more you eat, the more likely you are to have a heart attack like the one that killed my uncle. Ben Cohen, the cofounder and for

many years co-owner of Ben and Jerry's -- lovely man, peace activist, very progressive guy, beautiful human being -- but he was a big guy who ate a lot of ice cream, and he had a quintuple bypass in his late 40s.

So I'm not pointing the finger at Baskin Robbins per se, but people think of ice cream as a happy food and it certainly provides momentary pleasure, but I didn't want to sell it and I didn't want to derive my livelihood from an industry where the more it sold, the more people hurt.

TL: You've written quite a lot, as have others, about CAFOs (concentrated animal feeding operations). At this point do you think most people actually do understand where their meat is coming from?

JR: Well, they didn't used to. I think through my work and many others' work there has been tremendous awareness about the cruelty that's involved in factory farms, but the industry is fighting back. This is one of the reasons that I wrote No Happy Cows. There are two forces I see today in our society that are on a collision course. On the one hand, there is an ever-growing number of people who want their food to be healthy for their bodies, who want it to be produced in a sustainable way, who want it to be produced in a way that isn't decimating the biosphere, that isn't harming farmworkers, that isn't polluting the air and the water -- they want it to be friendly to the Earth and to people. These people are eating organically, they want GMOs to be labeled, they want to have less processed foods in their diets, they are reading books about how to be healthy -- there is an increasing number of people who make that connection.

But on the other hand, we have Monsanto, we have McDonald's, we have Coca-Cola and Pepsico, we have these very large entities -- Cargill and all of agribusiness -- who want to produce food as cheaply as possible because that is where their profit lies and they have a very different set of incentives. They control food policy, they control the farm bill, they control every recent administration's agricultural policies. They have enormous clout through the advertising dollars they spend on the public mind, on the lobbying dollars they spend on public policy, and these two forces are really

at war with each other. I wrote No Happy Cows both to report on that war and also to take a side in that war. I am a journalist, I am also an activist, an advocate, I am very clearly wanting us to create a food system that isn't owned by Monsanto, that is based on a relationship to the Earth that is harmonious and sustainable and that produces food that supports people's well-being rather than compromising it.

TL: So considering the enormous impact that these corporations have over our legislators, over the Department of Agriculture, what are the most important things for us to be doing?

JR: There are many things. No Happy Cows and all my work has sought to help people know what they can do. Right now there will be a ballot measure in California in November that I'm very actively involved in, and it would mandate the labeling of GMOs in the state. We have seen in Connecticut and Vermont in recent months, legislation almost pass that would do that in those states. In both cases Monsanto threatened to sue the state if that legalization was enacted and in both cases the states backed down at the last minute, not wanting to take on Monsanto, not wanting to burden their taxpayers with the cost of that. If a private company can intimidate a state that badly, it is a statement on how far we've come from anything like a democratic process here.

California is big enough that perhaps it won't fold. We know that Monsanto and their allies in the biotech industry are going to be spending at least \$100 million to try and defeat the measure. We know that they are going to tell the public that if it passes it will raise the price of food, it will make the hungry starve and cause all sorts of problems -- it's all BS and it's all PR. Labeling is not going to do that. All it is going to do is give people information about which foods do in fact contain genetically modified ingredients.

To get involved in that campaign, I think is a tipping point. There are others. People can pull their dollars out of industrial agriculture, shop at farmer's markets, join a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) if that's available,

shop at local health food stores, eat as much organic as you can, eat lower on the food chain, derive as many nutrients as possible from plants, eat a plant-strong diet, don't eat processed foods (those are the ones that have the high profit margins for these processed food companies), do what you can to keep your kids free from the barrage of junk food advertising.

Junk food and fast food companies spend over \$100 billion a year on ads targeting children. And the foods that they are promoting are always unhealthy -- it's incredibly consistent. They market the least healthy foods to the most vulnerable and impressionable among us -- our kids. And I think we should ban it, I think it should be illegal, but short of that we need to do everything we can as parents to keep our kids safe from that kind of predation, that kind of exploitation, is crucial.

TL: I thought your chapter on soy was very interesting. This can be a pretty confusing topic because there is a great deal of research on whether or not soy is healthy and some of it seems conflicting. Do you think that people are becoming unnecessarily scared of eating soy?

JR: Many people are, yes, I've seen that and then on the other hand there are people who've been excessively enthusiastic about it thinking soy was the answer to everything and the more you ate the better. We've had two developments in the soy world in recent decades that are a major concern. One of them is that now, almost the entire soybean crop in the United States that isn't organic is GMO with RoundupReady soy from Monsanto. The other is that food manufacturers have developed soy-isolated products that are far removed from the whole soy food and as such have some dubious nutritional realities. Both of those things are question marks about soy, although if you eat organic soy and you eat whole soy products those are problems you are managing to avoid personally, but they are still of course problems for society.

I think there is a balance here; whole soy and organic for most people eating the American diet can be a very healthful alternative to the factory farmed meat products. We shouldn't throw the baby out with the bathwater

and there have been a lot of people who have. There are some people who have developed soy allergies in recent years and there are a lot of people showing up with food allergies today ... and we see the graphs, it correlated directly to the widespread use of GMO foods in our food chain.

We know from animal studies that animals that eat [genetically engineered] Bt corn develop all kinds of intestinal problems at very high rates, predictably and consistently. We know that cows and sheep that graze on Bt corn and Bt cotton fields after the harvest often die. There are many, many indications that genetically engineered foods aren't nearly as safe as the industry wants us to believe and as the government has allowed them to act as though they were that safe. The Obama administration as well as the former administration has basically just given them a green light without any testing requirements.

TL: I think you likened the proliferation of soy in all our food as a mass experiment.

JR: Right, but when animals are used in research, be it guinea pigs or rats or mice or whatever, presumably researchers are watching over and conducting the test and examining the results and trying to learn something of value from that. They may be cruel, they may be morally objectionable, but one at least assumes there is an effort behind it to learn something. But in the larger experiment of GMO foods there is no one watching over it, there is no one calculating what is going on.

For example, if a mother feeds her baby Gerber baby food and it is made with cornstarch and the cornstarch is GMO and the child has an allergic reaction, the mother has no way of knowing that the cornstarch in the product is GMO, nor does her pediatrician. So the child is sick and they do the best they can, but there is no way to trace it and no way to track it and there is no place to report it to the CDC or some other entity watching over to see what's happening to the guinea pigs: us.

I actually think one of the reasons that Monsanto and the others are fighting labeling so much is not just that they have a declining market share, it is also that if there was labeling there would be traceability. There are liability issues here that could be enormously economically significant to these companies and they don't want to get near that. By not having labeling they are buffered from any liability.

TL: You have a pretty incredible story in your book about a woman who's able to make dramatic changes in her health, with diabetes and with her weight, after switching to a plant-based diet. And what's more shocking is that her doctors aren't surprised but never offered it to her as a possibility.

JR: Who are these people? They may think that a healthy diet is too hard, but let the patient decide. We talk about having a healthcare system but we don't, we have a disease care system. Our medical doctors are training in a certain schooling that teaches them how to diagnose disease and treat it with drugs primarily and sometimes with surgery. They know very little about nutrition, they know very little about preventing disease, they know very little about creating health.

The average MD in four years of medical school gets 2.5 hours of coursework in nutrition ... and they are overworked and they are working in a terribly inhumane system and everyone is stressed beyond almost human endurance. And so what is happening is MDs today have higher rates of obesity than the norm; they die sooner, they have more heart disease, more cancer than the norm -- more drug addiction than the norm. These are not people who embody health principles. They haven't learned that and there is nothing about their occupation or environment that makes them experts in positive health principles and the value of nutrition and the value of exercise and yet we go to them expecting them to have that expertise.

TL: It seems that Big Business, whether it is food companies or pharma are driving our healthcare decisions.

JR: Oh god, to an extent that the public can't even imagine. The extent to which protocol, standards of care are derived from drug company propaganda -- it is one of the scandals of our time.

TL: In terms of grassfed meat, you mention it being a good alternative, but to a really horrible system, can you talk a little about how grassfed meat can be a threat to public lands? I don't think that gets discussed much.

JR: The Bureau of Land Management has been leasing public lands to the cattle industry for a long time for a pittance -- almost giving that use away. And the cattle take a toll on these public lands, sometimes a devastating toll, yet the industry has had such a foothold in policy that has enabled them to lease these lands for nothing -- generally 1 percent or less than what it would cost if they were leasing private land. We have animal control where the government will pay to kill wolves and other kinds of wildlife that bother the cows or compete with them -- this is a cost to our environment, a cost to our wildlife that most people don't even know about. It's one of the things I think we need to stop if we're going to try and get an accurate accounting of the costs of meat we produce.

I do think that pasture-fed beef is a better alternative to feedlot beef for many reasons but there is one way it is worse -- and it's an important way. One of the reasons that feedlot agriculture was developed -- you confine it and feed it corn and soy, antibiotics and other growth promotants -- and it gains weight pretty fast. Out on the pasture the weight gain is slower, so it takes longer to bring the animal to market weight. So grassfed meat takes longer to produce and the animal, during the course of its life eats more food -- not soy or corn, but grass -- and it produces more methane. As a result the grassfed beef animal is responsible for more methane production than a feedlot beef animal per pound of meat. And methane is a very serious greenhouse gas and everything we can do to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas is, I think, compulsory today.

If we're going to create a sustainable way of life -- a thriving, just and sustainable food system -- we are going to have to eat less meat and less dairy products. We are going to have to go back to traditional cultural cuisines in which food from animals played a small part. We've developed the idea that meat and dairy are the rewards of affluence and we have propagated those beliefs to the rest of the world. There are more Baskin Robbins in Tokyo now than there are in Los Angeles and KFC makes more money in China than it does in the United States. We are destroying entire cultures' traditional cuisines and their relationship to the environment and their food.

We're spreading this like a religion -- it's like the Great American Steak religion -- but it's chicken and dairy, too -- around the world. It's not sustainable and it's producing an egregious concentration of greenhouse gases. It's polluting the air and the water everywhere. It's monopolizing food resources that could be used to feed people directly and I would say it is contributing to increasing hunger in the world. We need to reverse these directions. I think the stakes are dire.

TL: One of the things I really loved about your book was getting people to think not just about their relationships to animals, but their relationships to each other and not judging each other about the decisions they make, but really listening to each other and not being closed off by your own beliefs.

JR: That's very important to me. I've been in this business, if you will, for a long time, I've seen too much of what I call "moral vegetarians" and self righteousness. Dr. King -- I worked with him and marched with him in the '60s, he was a mentor to me -- and one of the things I heard him say is "you have no moral authority with anyone who can feel your underlying contempt." And there has been a great deal of that in the health food world and the vegetarian world and in all progressive causes, which are dear to my heart, but at the same time ... the more passionate you are about something, the more you need to remember to be respectful to people who have different beliefs or different lifestyles.

Why don't we create public policy for people to make it easier for them and less expensive for them to make the healthier choice? Right now it's the other way around -- the cheapest calories in every supermarket are the least healthy and that is the result of public policies.

I don't think people always grasp the significance of their food choices. We know one bite tastes better than another, we know the short-term economics of the different choices. Less conspicuous are the longer-term health implications and even less apparent are the environmental realities and social justice realities and global realities. It happens that the food choices that are often healthiest for us are the ones that are the most benign to the environment. I think as citizens of this planet we need to understand the environmental implications of our choices and make those steps that are consistent with our desire to see a better world, a healthier world, and a world that works for as many people as possible.

Tara Lohan is a senior editor at AlterNet and editor of the new book [Water Matters: Why We Need to Act Now to Save Our Most Critical Resource](#). You can follow her on Twitter @TaraLohan.