



Entrepreneurship and Ethical Considerations in Animal Welfare and Meat Production with Dan Honig

Abigail Anderson:

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the voices and bioethics Podcast. I'm Abigail Anderson, your host for today's episode. And I'm very excited to share that our guest today is Dan Honig, founder of Happy Valley meat company. Just to get started, would you mind taking a moment to introduce yourself and just share a little bit of your background?

Dan Honig:

Sure. Absolutely. Thanks so much for having me here today. So my name is Dan Honig. I grew up in New Jersey and had no idea where food came from at all. And so it's kind of amazing that I ended up in the food world having you know, other than eating things and thinking they were tasty, not really having an experience with food. And the way that happened was I studied philosophy and the environment at NYU. While doing that, I took a course on animals, ethics, and the environment with my professor who then became a mentor and friend, Chris Schlottmann, and in this course, it totally opened my eyes to all the decisions that happen to actually get food to the table. One of my favorite things to talk about with any of our customers or anyone who are teachers like asking how long it takes to raise beef. And most people don't realize that it's, you know, a three year decision that a lot of farmers have to make. And there's three years of work that go into making beef. And as a 20 year old, who had no idea, I was just like, oh, my gosh, this whole system, all the choices we're making just every time we eat, and that really inspired me to focus on food and food systems. And, and that led me to earn my master's in bioethics at NYU, as well, because I really liked this sort of combination of, you know, it's the ethics of a system. You know, it's so complicated with the health choices we're making, the environmental choices we're making, and then just purely treating other living

creatures well, and it was clear to me that the American meat system wasn't. So it really inspired me to want to learn more.

Abigail Anderson:

I really appreciate that you have a very cool story and a very cool background. And I'm very excited to have you here today. And I'm looking forward to hearing your unique insights and experiences. I actually personally learned about your story and Happy Valley Meat Company, when I myself was applying to programs to get a degree in bioethics, which has also landed me in New York City. Could you just elaborate a little bit on what inspired you to use your degree in bioethics to found Happy Valley Meat Company?

Dan Honig:

Yeah, so one of the great things about the program was it sort of forced us to get hands on practical application. So they made us get internships. And my internship was actually I had, let's say, awoken to the idea of, you know, the matrix mentality, but I sort of was made all of a sudden aware of, there's so many decisions that go into what we eat. So I took an internship at a pork purveyor, and I was not eating meat at the time, I was a pretty strict vegetarian until not that long ago, I eat meat now, but only if I know where it comes from. And because of, you know, this philosophy background I came in, was sitting in this job interview, and like, oh, shoot, I realized that might be weird that I don't eat meat, and I'm applying to learn more with your company. And they're like, Oh, that's cool. You know, the idea is, we want to change the meat system as well. And so through this internship, I got to go and visit farms and slaughterhouses. And it was sort of an academic exploration of like, you know, practically what is going on in the real world that I was just spent the last couple years reading about, and I got to visit farms and slaughterhouses and really came away with this conclusion, yes, the current meat system is hurting the farmers hurting the farm animals, and it's not very great for just the planet. But it doesn't have to be that way. There's lots of people who are really passionate, and who can treat the animals with respect, and therefore create a system in which we can eat animals, you know, have animal agriculture and still support, you know, in an ethical way. And so that's where that's where my philosophical studies really were on, like, how does that system act ethically?

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, no, that's really interesting to hear. And what was that experience, if you want to elaborate a little bit more on it, like having that internship and going to see these farms and slaughterhouses? Like coming from no background in it, and then seeing those things? You know, my personal experience? I was raised around a lot of that, but what was it like, you know, not having seen that before, and then just getting right into it?

Dan Honig:

Yeah, I mean, I'm still learning right? I still, I still don't have all, you know, to feel the right

language. I feel like there's a brilliant David Foster Wallace essay, where he talks about how we all speak different languages, and a lot of life is just learning how to translate between each other and all the different nothing's really incorrect. And we all speak our own specific dialect and I just didn't have any of those words, but I was really eager to learn and people in general really, I feel like like teaching and I remember for the first time going to a slaughterhouse I was in charge of turkeys I had to like we were doing Thanksgiving turkeys and we had thousands of turkeys I still dream in pallet positions of kind of where all you don't want to ever ruin somebody's holiday. And I remember walking onto the kill floor where they were processing pigs and really like if I'm going to be in this like, I need to be able to be able to explain the entire scenario I need to. And there were definitely butterflies in my stomach to which like, we walked back on the kill floor and they had taken a break. So then I was really disappointed. But then I came back and got to experience not that it's enjoyable, but to see that it's done with respect, really, from never ever considering that to seeing that for the first time and seeing the folks care with respect and talking to them. And seeing this like thing that's hidden from a grocery store was really eye opening, and it created a hunger and made us just learn more. And that's a lot of what my job has been is I see myself being in this translator role of coming from somewhere where I didn't have that base language, listening to what everyone's saying, and trying to figure out how do we communicate? So from chefs, to school purchasers to processors, to everybody who's trying to be in the system, and everyone's speaking different languages. That's really where I see myself trying to stand up and, and help us conversation.

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, no, it's really interesting hearing how all of your experiences kind of came together and led you to founding a company like Happy Valley Meat Company, which is no small feat. So what was your experience like in the early days of Happy Valley Meat Company, when you were trying to find and connect with farms that would maybe be interested in providing meat as well as convincing chefs and retailers to serve meat from Happy Valley?

Dan Honig:

Yes, I ran a butcher shop on the Lower East Side, before I started Happy Valley, I worked for a company called Heritage Foods, which was that company that I got an internship with, and I ended up staying out for I think, about three years. And what heritage do with pigs which are much smaller than beef animals was they took the best parts of the conventional system, which is that everybody wants to support small farms. But then there's a really efficient system that developed around getting cuts of meat to people who just want to use a single cut of meat. But a farmer wants to sell that whole animal. And so if you ask them to sell everything through pieces and cuts, then they have a new job, which is not just to grow and raise animals, but then to manage inventory and manage customers and the pigs are smaller. So inherited did was they took just the cuts, they would buy all the animals from the farms, and they would send you know a case of let's say, pork loins to a customer, and the pork ones would have the story, it would know where it came from, but you would buy it the same as you would buy in a regular conventional system. And so this way, you don't have to buy a whole animal and change

everything about your restaurant. And I thought that was amazing. I thought that was like we can't ask everybody to change everything about what they're doing all at once, even though big changes do need to happen in order to have a sustainable food system. So I had the hubris to think that that could easily be done with beef too. But for reference, pigs weigh about 200 pounds beef weighing about 800 pounds, but you know, once they're processed, so it's a lot more and be at a lot more cuts. And it's a deeply competitive industry, where four companies control 85% Of all the beef supply 95% Of all the processing capacity. And so there wasn't really a lot of folks doing that, you know, take the story and put it on to something more efficient, there was more like selling whole animals. And so the early days was like, Oh, we could do this, it's easier and quickly became like, we have a lot of inventory we need to deal with and kind of different visions of I started with some partners, and we actually had different visions of what we wanted. Particularly around, a lot of businesses are built to exit, right. So a lot of businesses are built to sell and the product of the business isn't the meat. But it's the business itself. And that's never what I wanted for Happy Valley, I wanted Happy Valley to create a scalable system for regional agricultural meat system, and I wanted it to last I didn't want to sell and get out. Like, that wasn't the point. It wasn't to extract profits from a community it was to build value into a community. And that's where that's, you know, so there was a lot of like partnership breakups and sort of dealing with that. And you know, driven is this whole idea like of what I studied in in college, which was we need a system that treats the people and animals that feed us respectfully and fairly and that was sort of that that gold standard driving momentum for for Happy Valley. Yeah, I have definitely many stories of starting a business like if there's me No, maybe if there's something more specific about starting you might be interested in.

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, I mean, I just myself, I would love to start a company I have no idea what that would be, which is why your story is really interesting to me. But to go from just like an idea like something you had an internship and a degree that inspired you to creating a business that like you said, isn't just modeled for you to like sell it one day like you wanted to create a business that you really care about and something that really last is really quite unique and I think it's really special. So if you have any advice for our listeners, or even for me just on how you know we people with the same kind of idea and values as you can create businesses like that and compete against these larger ones, but still kind of maintain what you like started out believing in.

Dan Honig:

Yeah, I mean, the answer to almost every question will be good communication and good people. And we didn't take any investment. So right when you take investment, it's sort of like the gasoline on the fire. And if you take out an investor, you have to give that money back at some point, you know, it's just like, that'll always have to be paid back. That's really tough. I feel like in startup culture, the idea of like, raise big rounds of money, grow your business really quickly. But you guys kind of ask yourself, why are you taking money? And is it just, you know, if

you're just trying to exit like, that's something to be clear. And so you know, starting out a business, I'd say the hardest work that you'll have to do at some point in your business, is to create that vision in a way that's really easily communicable, and then getting people on board with that, right. And so if we had started with partners were like, hey, like, I don't ever want to build Happy Valley to sell, I want Happy Valley to like, I want to die and Happy Valley still exists providing value for the farmers, you know, in the northeast, we probably wouldn't have worked together because the you know, their values would have been different, like, oh, we want to make money. And that's like the point of a business. And so that really hard work of understanding what you want and what you need, and what that vision is, and then getting folks, and you'll have more folks that aren't interested than are interested. And that's good, right? Like, you don't want to have an infinite choice of all the people on the planet to work with, you want to have just the people on the planet, even if you do take money from investors, making sure that they understand like the same timeframes that you're working on. And that's really hard. And we still are like developing our kind of communication skills. But that's what I would say is make sure you're working with the right people and you are on the same page and you're aligned with what you're trying to do. Otherwise, you're just gonna have to untangle it down the road.

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, that's really amazing to hear. And very good advice for all of our listeners, and even for myself that are maybe will one day be in the position to start our own company like that, with what you've shared. So far, like you've talked about so many factors that have gone into starting this company that really like make it special have made it special from the beginning, and will continue to do so, so far down the line. And one of these factors that truly makes Happy Valley Meat Company so special and important is that you pay so much attention to providing this ethically raised meat that comes from family farms. And so why do you feel like it's so important, maybe from a bioethical perspective, to focus on providing ethically raised meat as opposed to relying on factory farming?

Dan Honig

I think it's a really complicated system. And the more like, it seems really, like simple and maybe dichotomous but then the more you get into it, the more you realize, like how many variants there are between like different ways that people are farming and different lands? Well, we worked with that to develop our welfare guidelines. And you know, what she said was just because of animals in a barn doesn't mean that it had a bad life, it means it might be harder, but there's like people who can have animals that have more limited outdoor access, but those animals can still have that. But they have to put a lot more care into making sure those animals live good lives. And so it's the same as we don't say, all cats that are indoor cats have a bad life. And all cats that are outdoor cats have a good life. It's just like a lot of decisions. And a lot of like, she built a very like outcomes focused like what do you look for to define what a good life is. But you know why it's so important to know where your meat comes from is because these are systems like that can ruin the planet and like have been their systems that can take

multigenerational land away from folks who have been farming on it, and are just trying to keep the land for their future generations, I think in the statistics, and like, I guess like in the last 40 years, we've lost a million farming jobs, like a million farmers have decided not to farm anymore. So what we're getting is, you know, a more and more concentrated field of work where land, you know, they always say they're not making any more of it, like, you know, it's like this this like medium in which like families can pass wealth from one family to another. And as it keeps getting sopped up by larger and larger, you know, farming corporations, where does that leave the people who are ones on those land who had that land as a source of wealth just for the fact that we're also eating animals like this maybe a little bit more kind of complicated because some some religious views believe animals were put here for for us and that we don't owe them anything. But you know, outside of just talking philosophically, it just feels like we owe them a good life. Like we're their shepherds. And so far as we're gonna force their existence, it just feels wrong to torture. And so like on that front, there's also people care, like, you know, unequivocally when you poll folks, they really care where their food comes from. The biggest challenge is the infrastructure that exists like our system is built to feed both meat and food in general is built to try to make cheap food and in large scale, but it's not built necessarily to support the local ecosystems. And so there's so much good that happens from supporting your local farms from like keeping those tax dollars in your community to you know, fund schools and build roads, to keeping you know, like the clarity and like being able to ask those questions of how is this food made? So whatever dietary choices you have, you know, we all value different things. But if you can't ask somebody to those questions, you can't really get the answers. And so that's like one of the major boons of a local food system is being able to get questions that matter to you answered, which is a lot more difficult when you just go to a grocery store, and you have three inches to read whatever three inches of label they decided to put on, because then they're trying to just market to you and tell you what they think, you know, find most important. Yeah, and so so that's, again, like Happy Valley exists in this like middle ground, which is how do we build that local mid size infrastructure where we can take advantage of these larger efficiencies, but still tell the story of where it comes from. And that's missing, that's just like, you know, people want it, but there's not an infrastructure in order to deliver it to them. And so that, you know, that's really one of the big problems that we're facing. One of the really interesting things about a local food system is during the pandemic, when there were grocery stores that were empty. Time and time again, local food systems were more resilient people were turning to their smaller grocery stores turning towards our local farms, because we were more nimble, and we were able to get product. And that's a massive strength of being able to support local this, hopefully, we won't have anything like a pandemic again. But the strength of that local community, being able to feed itself is massive.

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, you just made a ton of great points. But one thing you talked about is, you know, people want to, they want to know where their food comes from, but when you just go to the grocery store, you don't necessarily have the opportunity to ask these questions. And there's kind of a maybe a responsibility on some of these local food systems that can be involved in like sharing where their products come from, like telling the stories that you're talking about. And you

know, I myself, I grew up on a family farm, we raised pigs. And so I have a little bit of experience, like seeing the farm to table process and understanding where you know, ethically raised meat from a small family farm, like how it gets to where it does, and how this whole process goes. But this is not something that the majority of the population has. So what are some steps that you think that even people like you and me can take to get the word out and inform the general public about the importance of, you know, treating animals that are raised for meat in an ethical manner?

Dan Honig:

Yeah, I think you can only force so much information. But I think making it easily accessible. We do a lot of farm tours. And so like, we'll bring folks to farms, I think that kind of the growth of farmers markets is really important. There is a level of engagement, right? Like getting folks to ask questions, and teaching them what questions to ask because I was thinking about this the other day, I was at a, like a producer dinner one time and telling folks where it was at a restaurant and telling folks where the food came from. And somebody had asked me a question about ethical slaughter, that Temple Grandin has done a huge amount of work. And then also benefits that animals that are killed well, are more, you know, efficient monetarily, an animal that had a bad death is going to be worth less. And so like combined that with like Dr. Grandin's like skill set, like everyone was really receptive to that that's actually a part of the industry that's quite strong, at least for beef cattle. There's other kind of questions about other other means of slaughter. But the interesting thing that I was thinking about that today was just clearly trying to engage, right? Like she was really interested. And she asked a question, and it seemed like maybe just like, didn't really know exactly where to ask. And so like, there was a little bit of trouble on me making sure I got her the answer that she you know, she was asking, like, what is their life like, and like helping kind of get at the heart of what she was really trying to understand, which was like, How can I feel good about this, like, you know, helped me like, what's the difference between this world, the other world, and I think that for myself, like, sometimes I feel nervous to ask questions, because I don't even know what to ask. I know, it's something that I might be interested in. But I don't have the language or the tools. And so I think it's on folks who do understand to help meet more than halfway and give those sort of grasping points, folks to ask more questions and get curious. I mean, it feels funny to like, be curious, but not be able to know how the language to ask a question.

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, no, I think that's a really great point to make. And, you know, this is a problem. I feel like, you know, we all experience in some facet of our life like you, you're curious about something, but you don't know exactly how to talk about it, or who to ask about it, or what to ask. And so I really appreciate you pointing out that maybe it's somewhat on the industry to go more than halfway and just help people understand these things a little bit as at least as much as we can. And then you've touched on this a little bit. But maybe if we could expand a little bit more Happy Valley Meat Company, you have a welfare promise. And so your farms and slaughter facilities are required to follow your own animal welfare standards that were created based on

the five freedoms. So could you just share with our listeners what the Five Freedoms are and why they're crucial part of your welfare guidelines?

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, for sure. So the Five Freedoms I think were kind of formally developed in the 60s in England, but they are the freedom from hunger and thirst, the freedom from discomfort, the freedom from illness, the freedom to express natural tendencies, and then the freedom from fear and distress. And so I think like freedom from hunger and thirst seems really obvious and clear, like animals should be able to eat food and not be starving. And discomfort as well, like, you know, to hold an animal in a cage where it can't move is like very clearly causing a difficult life for that animal. Like freedom to express natural tendencies. That's one that's kind of interesting, because it means different things for different animals. For instance, beef really don't like being alone, there are herd animals. And so if you were to take one bovine, or one, you know, beef animal by itself, that'd be really stressful for that animal, because it's just not made to be by itself. And you see them behave differently. Like you see animals sort of start exhibiting stress signs. So anyway, so those are the Five Freedoms, they're important, because they give us that framework by which we can start to measure and look for are like, it's really easy to be like, are they being fed? We look for outcome. So like, we look for, like, what can we look at? And what can we measure to define a good life? And it's hard? Like, if I were to ask you, are you having a good life? Like probably depend changed, depending on the day that I asked you that question. And so it's, you know, it's a, it's trying to ratchet down a definition that we can agree upon, so that we can build standards. And so we've partnered a lot with the ASPCA, which is the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. And they have an amazing program that's called shop with your heart. And what they realized was, we work a lot on companion animals, but the American farm animals deserve our attention as well. And so they're actually great at lobbying Congress to put some of these animal welfare standards into the farm bill and like into like our policies to protect animals. And so I'd recommend anybody who's interested in this animal welfare to look at the ASPCA shop with your heart program. And they also utilize these Five Freedoms in their program to help find this common ground of when we say this animal deserves to have a good life. This is how we communicate. And this is sort of these are again, going back to that good communication. These are the standards that we all agree on. I think it was commissioned by a scientific I believe the exact founding of it was in the 60s, there was like a similar to like Upton Sinclair, that there was a in the jungle, there was a report about the conditions for animals in the British farming system, which led to a scientific inquiry and development of these Five Freedoms. And they're pretty well respected and held amongst all animal welfare advocates at this point.

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, no, that's really interesting to hear, you know, on top of animal welfare, there are other factors that kind of affect the ethics of sourcing meat, like sustainable farming, environmental protection, and even just transparency about the farming methods. And all these things can improve not just the lives of the animals, but the lives of people and improve the environment

as well. So could you expand on why ethically raised means more than just the humane treatment of animals?

Dan Honig:

Yeah, absolutely. So ethically raised means more than just the humane treatment of animals, but also can include the, like you said, the environment. And for us, I think our biggest strength is the economic impact for small farms. You know, as we're seeing more and more of this consolidation, that farmland is the wealth of our agricultural communities. And as that gets softened up by bigger and bigger operations, it's a displacement. It's a reallocating of wealth from smaller families, to larger corporations. And, you know, there's lots of folks that can argue about that. But for me, like, you know, part of my ethical framework is trying to reverse that tide, or at least trying to stem that flood of coagulation, if you will, of assets and capital away from more people, until less people that I think the most complicated way of speaking about ethical meat is the land component. There's a lot of science that, you know, is being debated, like most folks agree that beef can be really rough on the environment. But then there's a couple of ways of farming that can help sequester carbon. And so there's these really fierce debates going on right now as to what types of farming help with climate change that help preserve land. And so you're seeing a resurgence in this term regenerative is the you know, it used to be organic, and the organic sort of greenwashing, I would say, is one of the biggest problems of our industry because these words are so fuzzy and you only have so many terms of what you can use to describe food that if you can create a like grass fed, for instance, right? So grass fed can mean animals out on pasture their whole lives, eating like a balanced, you know, pastures that are balanced for the nutrition or it can mean they're fed pellets and a feedlot that are just purely grass, or it means that can be fed hay like it can mean so many different things. But the greenwashing of grass fed has made that label be nothing other than animal ate grass, but that's not what the value is value doesn't I care that animals eat grass? The value is so much more complicated, like I want the animals to go into a system that improves the land that can sequester carbon that has a high animal welfare that support small family farms. And so regenerative is the latest label that is coming out and it's really adding on to the animal welfare component and the clean eating component into. How do we protect our land and it'll give you a little bit guidance of farming practices, like maintaining cover crops so that your land isn't always barren so that you're not having soil runoff and you're able to, you know, sequester carbon, you do that by having organic matter that like root material that gets absorbed into the ground and left in the ground. So yeah, it's like some of these terms help you identify the farming practices being used. But it's an immensely complicated. It's like, the type of you know, I'm quoting now, Eric, whatever regenerative practices that would apply in, let's say, the Pacific Northwest, don't necessarily apply in the Northeast, or the Southeast. And so we can't expect everyone to become experts, like, you know, everything. And that's definitely one of the difficulties of kind of our position in the system.

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, no, that was really interesting to hear. And I appreciate you sharing all of that. We have

just a couple of minutes last. So could you just briefly expand on how Happy Valley Meat Company has a positive impact on the economy and betters the lives of the farmers that it works with?

Dan Honig:

Yeah, so there's a economist who built a tool with some USDA funding that goes to explain creates like a multiplier, right. And so it's, it's like every dollar spent to the community, some, like the dollar does more than just one dollars worth of work, the multiplier for our company was 1.95, which means for every dollar that was spent with us, it basically creates another 95 cents worth of economic impact. And that's through the farmers that we work with will buy their seed from another local person, that another local person will buy their tractor from their local tractor dealer, and they all pay taxes in that community. They're all, you know, part of that community. And so more of that money stays there than if you were to work at a conventional system, I think the number is closer to like 1.45, as money starts being extracted, and it gets extracted just from like, not that it disappears, but it just leaves the system and goes to outside investors. And one of the biggest things that we provide for our farms on top of the communities having that income, but it's the stable income that we provide the fact that we go directly to our farms, and we say, this year, we think, you know, we'll need this amount of product. And this is the price we're paying. And that's not really a thing that happens in agriculture. This is something that was like wild to me was, again, we were talking, you know, beef animals are like two years old, but then you have breeding decisions and all of that, can you imagine doing something for like three years, and not knowing how much you're gonna get paid at the end of it? It's insane. It's kind of like a crazy thing about farming is that farmers just kind of for the most part work and don't know what they're gonna get at the end of the day. And they have to be really savvy, like I didn't know how complicated economically, you know how sophisticated farming actually was as a job. So being able to provide, you know, the stability is definitely the biggest boon that we bring to our farmers so that they can support their communities.

Abigail Anderson:

Yeah, well, I really appreciate you sharing that. We can end it on that note, and I'm so glad that you were able to take the time to be here today and have this discussion. Once again. I'm Abigail Anderson, and this has been the Voices in Bioethics podcast with our guest Dan Honig, founder of Happy Valley Meat Company.

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