

00:04

In the summer of 2014, I found myself sitting across from a man who, by every definition, was my enemy. His name was Craig Watts, and he's a chicken factory farmer. My career is devoted to protecting farmed animals and ending factory farming. And up until this point in my life, I had spent every waking moment standing up against everything this man stood for, and now, I was in his living room.

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The day I met Craig Watts he had been raising chickens for 22 years for a company called Perdue, the fourth largest chicken company in the entire country. And as a young man, he had yearned for this way to stay on the land in one of the poorest counties in the state. So when the chicken industry came to town, he thought, "This is a dream come true." He took a quarter of a million dollar loan out, and he built these chicken houses. Perdue would give him a flock, he'd raise them, and each flock he'd get paid, and then he'd pay off in small increments that loan, like a mortgage. But pretty soon, the chickens got sick.

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It's a factory farm, after all, there are 25,000 chickens that are stuffed wall-to-wall, living on their own feces, breathing ammonia-laden air. And when chickens get sick, some of them die. And you don't get paid for dead chickens, and Craig started to struggle to pay off his loan, he realized he made a mistake, but he was all but an indentured servant at this stage. When I met him, he was at a breaking point. The payments seemed never-ending. As did the death, despair and illness of his chickens.

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Now, if we humans tried to think of some super unjust, unfair, filthy and cruel food system, we could not have thought of anything worse than factory farming. Eighty billion farmed animals around the world annually are raised and slaughtered. They're stuffed in cages and warehouses never to see the light of day. And that's not just a problem for those farmed animals. Animal agriculture, it accounts for more greenhouse gas emissions than all of the planes, trains and automobiles put together. And one third of our arable land is used to grow feed to feed factory-farmed animals, rather than ourselves. And all that land is sprayed with immeasurable chemicals. And ecologically important habitats, like the Amazon, are cut down and are burnt, all so we can feed and house farmed animals.

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By the time my three kids grow up, there's very unlikely to be polar bears, Sumatran elephants, orangutans. In my lifetime, the number of birds, amphibians, reptiles and mammals has halved. And the main culprit is our global appetite for meat, dairy and eggs. And for me, up until this point, the villain was Craig Watts.

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And as I sat there in his living room, my fear and my anger turned into something else. Shame. My whole life I had spent blaming him, hating him, I even wished him ill. I had never once thought about his struggle, his choices. Could he be a potential ally? I never had thought he feels as trapped as the chickens.

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So we had been sitting there for hours and the midday turned into afternoon, turned into dusk, turned into darkness, and he suddenly said, "OK, are you ready to see the chickens?" So under the cover of darkness, we walked towards one of these long, gray houses. And he swung open the door and we stepped inside, and we were hit with this overpowering smell and every muscle in my body tensed up and I coughed and my eyes teared. I was too overwhelmed by my own physical discomfort, I didn't even look around at first, but when I did, what I saw brought me to tears. Tens of thousands of newly hatched chicks in this darkened warehouse with nowhere to go and nothing to do.

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Over the next few months, I returned many times, with filmmaker Raegan Hodge, to record, to understand, to build trust with Craig. And I walked his houses with him as he picked up dead and dying birds, birds with messed-up legs and trouble breathing and difficulty walking. And all of this we caught on film. And then we decided to do something I don't think either he or I ever expected to do when we first met. We decided to release that footage. And that was really risky for both of us. It was risky for him because he could lose his income, his home, his land, his neighbors hating him. And I could risk getting my organization sued, or being the reason that he would lose everything, but we had to do it anyway.

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"The New York Times" broke the story and within 24 hours, a million people had seen our video. It went viral by every definition, and suddenly we had this global platform for talking

about factory farming. And working with Craig got me thinking. What other unlikely allies are out there? What other progress, what other lessons can I learn if I cross those enemy lines?

06:20

The first lesson I learned is that we have to become comfortable with being uncomfortable. Only talking to people who agree with us, it's not going to get us to the solution. We have to be willing to enter other people's space. Because quite often, the enemy has the power to change the problem that we're trying to solve. In my case, I'm not in charge of a single chicken. The farmer is and so are the meat companies. So I need to enter their space if I want to solve the problem.

06:54

And a couple of years after working with Craig, I did something again I never expected to do. I sat down with an even bigger so-called enemy: Jim Perdue himself. The man I had made the villain of my viral video. And again, through difficult conversations and being uncomfortable, Perdue came out with the first animal care policy of any poultry company. In it, they agreed to do some of the things we had criticized them for not doing in the viral video, like put windows into houses. And pay for them. And that was a really important lesson for me.

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The second lesson is that when we sit down to negotiate with the enemy, we need to remember, there's a human being in front of us that very likely has more in common with us than we care to admit.

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And I learned this firsthand when I was invited to visit at a major poultry company's headquarters. And it was the first time that my organization had been invited, and any organization had been invited, to visit with them. And as we walked through the corridor, there were literally people who were peeking out from the cubicles to get a quick look at what does an animal rights activist look like, and we walked -- I look like this, so I don't know what they were expecting.

08:22

(Laughter)

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But as we walked into the boardroom, there was an executive who was in charge, sitting there. And his arms were crossed and he did not want me to be there. And I flipped open my laptop, and my background photo came up, and it was a picture of my three kids. My daughter clearly looks different than my sons. And when he saw that photo he uncrossed his arms and he tilted his head and he leaned forward and he said, "Are those your kids?" And I said, "Yeah. I just got back from adopting my daughter -- " And I babbled on way too much for a professional meeting. And he stopped me and he said, "I have two adopted kids." And for the next 20 minutes, we just talked about that. We talked about adoption and being a parent and in those moments, we forgot who we were supposed to be at that table. And the walls came down, and a bridge was built and we crossed this divide. And more progress was made with that company because of that human connection that we made.

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My last lesson for you is that when we sit down with the so-called enemy, we need to look for the win-win. Instead of going in with farmers like Craig Watts and thinking, "I need to put them out of farming," I started to think how can I help them be different kinds of farmers, like, growing hemp or mushrooms. And a farmer I later worked with did exactly that. He did do the exposé with me and filmed, and we went with "The New York Times" again, but he went beyond that. He quit chicken factory farming, and it turns out that those big, long, gray warehouses are the perfect environment for growing something else.

10:18

(Laughter)

10:22

(Applause)

10:26

That's hemp, people, that's hemp.

10:29

(Laughter)

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Here is an environmentally friendly way to stay on the land, to pay the bills, that a vegan animal rights activist and a chicken farmer can get behind.

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(Laughter)

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And instead of thinking, how can I get these big meat companies out of business, I started thinking, how can I help them evolve into a different kind of business. One where the protein doesn't come from slaughtered animals, but rather, plants. And believe it or not, these big companies are starting to move their ships in that direction. Cargill and Tyson and Perdue are adding plant-based proteins into their supply chain. And Perdue himself said that, "Our company is a premium protein company, and nothing about that says that it has to come from animals." And in my own home town of Atlanta, KFC did a one-day trial with Beyond Meat, for plant-based chicken nuggets. And it was insane, there were lines wrapped around the corner, there was traffic stopped in all directions, you would think they were giving out free Beyoncé tickets. People are ready for this shift.

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We need to build a big tent that everyone can get under. From the chicken factory farmer, to the mega meat company, to the animal rights activist. And these lessons, they can apply to many causes, whether it be with a problem with an ex, a neighbor or an in-law. Or with some of the biggest problems of exploitation and oppression, like factory farming, or misogyny or racism or climate change. The world's smallest and biggest problems, they won't be solved by beating down our enemies but by finding these win-win pathways together. It does require us to let go of that idea of us versus them and realize there's only one us, all of us, against an unjust system. And it is difficult, and messy, and uncomfortable. But it is critical. And maybe the only way to build that compassionate food system that we all, from the chicken to the chicken farmer to the mega meat company, to all of us, deserve.

13:17

Thank you.

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(Applause)