



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 643, Interview with Mama Valderrama

Mariann Sullivan: Welcome to Our Hen House, Mamta.

Mamta Valderrama: Thank you, Mariann, it's a pleasure to be here.

Mariann: It is really a pleasure to have you because you are following an interesting career path. Let's just start off by telling people briefly about your current job. What is it that you do for Mercy For Animals?

Mamta: Sure, I'm called the Global Senior Vice President of Operations. So my job is to support a lot of the behind the scenes type of work. It's the finance team, logistics, the tech team, and, most recently added, I get to support our research and impact teams as well.

Mariann: We're going to go into some depth on all of the reasons that you care about animals so I'm not really asking that at the moment, but I'm just really interested in why you decided to transition from a successful career, I think you were in healthcare, to working in animal rights. I think that is something that so many people dream of doing and you managed to pull it off. What incentivized you to make this leap?

Mamta: This was a job that fit my passion and my interests. I had been in the workforce for 20 some years, was really passionate about health care and continue to be so.

When I first started my career in health care, I joined from the standpoint of wanting to help the uninsured and under-insured Americans maybe get better access to care and did a lot of great work in that space. But as I moved further and further into my career, just really felt like I wanted to do something that was more mission aligned with how I lived my day to day and where my thoughts were on a daily basis. And that was really in the value of ahimsa, or non-violence.

So, at a particularly frustrating point in my corporate career, I came home and looked up vegan jobs on Google.

Mariann: I'm sure lot of people listening can identify with that.

Mamta: Yeah. And then I saw this job posted, I really thought it was a long shot and it was very serendipitous that it all worked out.

Mariann: Yeah, I'm not sure of exactly the timing, but it seemed to have been sort of simultaneous with the pandemic. Is that part of what was going on for you?

Mamta: A little bit. My frustration with health care didn't have as much to do with the pandemic. More, the caution of being out in doctor's offices and clinics during the peak of COVID was very anxiety ridden. I have a young daughter at home; I live very close to my senior citizen mom. So there was a lot of anxiety associated with my day-to-day job and my function.

So I was certainly looking for something that would maybe pull me out of those situations and scenarios because of the pandemic. But the timing just happened to be also when I was no longer feeling a calling in healthcare as well.

Mariann: As you mentioned, animal rights was not a new concept for you. And this is what we really want to talk about, well we want to talk about a lot of things, but I really want to talk about growing up in the Jain religion. And I would love to explore how that has shaped your worldview. Tell us a little bit about where you grew up and about your childhood and then we can get into Jainism in more depth.

Mamta: Sure. I'm the daughter of immigrants from India. I am one of three siblings; I have an identical twin sister and an older brother. My sister and I were born in Memphis, Tennessee. My parents immigrated from India to Florida. They were Gators, they studied in Florida. They moved to Chicago where they had my brother and then my dad was one of the first early employees of Federal Express, which is based in Memphis, Tennessee. Which is how my family ended up in the Deep South in the seventies. It was maybe my fourth or fifth year that my dad was recruited by a competitor to FedEx that was based in Newport Beach, California. So my first memories are of growing up in Southern California and Los Angeles. And that's where I consider myself to be from. But throughout this whole childhood and into my adulthood, Jainism was very strong in my values, my beliefs, my upbringing. I think that was partly my parents really clinging to their culture and their past. Moving to the United

States, trying to fit in, but trying to hold on to every last thread of everything that they knew as well.

Mariann: Yeah, Of course, that is the immigrant challenge, isn't it? For those who aren't familiar at all, I think probably most listeners have heard of Jainism, but probably don't know a lot about it. Can you just give us the basics? Just tell us what it is.

Mamta: Yeah, absolutely. Jainism is probably like the fifth largest religion in India. It's definitely considered a religion although if you really get into the learnings and teachings, it's more of a philosophy or a way of life, kind of a way of being. The main tenant in our religion is nonviolence to all beings and the word for that is ahimsa. And that's a word I think a lot of your listeners are probably familiar with.

Practicing Jains are vegetarian by culture and by religion. There's a growing body of Jains that are moving towards veganism as well. Some people consider it to be a very strict religion. From a food standpoint, in addition to being vegetarian, the very strict adherent Jains don't eat root vegetables. When you pull out the root vegetable, you not only are killing the microorganisms that are associated with this kind of violent act of pulling a root out of the ground, but you're also killing the plant as well. Like a potato root could no longer flourish additional fruit after you've pulled it out of the ground, where if you pick an apple from a tree, the tree can continue to bear fruit. So, that's kind of the general philosophy around ahimsa. It's very rooted in food, but it extends much further than that. Jains refrain from leather, well, all of the things that you'll hear vegans also refrain from. And more and more Jains are also moving away from dairy, too.

Mariann: Yeah, I really want to get into the dairy issue. That's really interesting. And I also find so interesting the root vegetable thing. I think many people have seen images of Jains, talking about it being very strict. Strict is a word that everybody likes to apply to people who try to be kind. Very strict. Strict vegans and strict Jains. But I have seen pictures of sweeping bugs out of the way and I just totally understand! Like once you understand how it happens, because once you really try to be non-violent in a world that it's very hard to be non-violent, it can lead you down some very difficult paths. And it sounds like for many Jains, and perhaps you included, I don't want to make assumptions, certain lines have been drawn. You said with the root vegetables, it seems like some people adhere to that and some people say, "all right, we're drawing the line in a different place". Am I right?

Mamta: That's absolutely correct, it's a balance, it's a dance. I think practicing Jains have to draw a line for what feels right for them. Some people can adhere to all of these rules that exist under Jainism. Some others decide to accommodate other things, but I want to go back to something that you said that's a really good point about using this word "strict". And even I'm in the habit of labeling Jains and myself as "strict". I think it's really important to move away from that and maybe think about it as "disciplined". Strict sometimes has a negative connotation to it and I think disciplined can go the opposite direction or it's just more factual, in terms of the connotation that it brings.

Mariann: I think even disciplined sounds a little harsh to tell you the truth. I kind of like careful.

Mamta: Huh, that's interesting, careful...

Mariann: Well, that just popped into my head. So maybe it doesn't work. I don't know, but definitely not strict. It's just a bad word.

Mamta: It is a bad word. And I thank you for pointing that out.

Mariann: I think it was when you said it, you kind of brought attention to it as well. There are a few other concepts within Jainism in addition to ahimsa which are somewhat familiar to us. I guess through Hinduism, there are similar words used and similar concepts sometimes, though it's certainly not the same religion. But another is karma. Can you just talk a little bit about the role of karma in Jain belief?

Mamta: Yeah, absolutely. So Jains believe in reincarnation and the path to reincarnation is through accumulation of karma. And so every act, every thought, every word, every deed, accumulates karma in the individual. Some people think of it as like negative karma and positive karma. It's less of a scoreboard and more just that certain acts accumulate certain amounts of karma. And the goal in Jainism is to escape the cycle of births and deaths by continuing to accumulate good karmas and eventually escaping the circular pathway of reincarnation into what's called Nirvana or Moksha. Attaining Nirvana or Moksha means you've escaped the path, you're a fully enlightened person. And in Jainism, we bow to 24 people who attained Moksha or Nirvana at some point in their history. These are people that lived thousands and thousands of years ago. And those are the people that Jains bow to as the examples for us to live by. Another interesting point that you may or may not know, Mariann, is that it's really technically an atheistic religion, in some ways. We don't believe in

mortals and immortals. We believe in these 24 beings that we bow to as examples, but that we all have the potential to obtain that level of existence as well.

Mariann: Oh, that's so interesting. I wish we could talk for hours about Jainism. We can't, but I always find religions really interesting. It reminds me a little of like...so you always have to be careful talking about religion because you never know what will be a bad thing to say. But, I grew up Catholic and that reminds me of...I mean, obviously it's a very deistic religion. It also has this concept of Saints and it sounds a little bit similar to that. Saints are people who lived, but who have reached this special status. And it sounds like, listening to it for a few minutes, it sounds like Hinduism, but not like Hinduism. So really a fascinating topic. But what we're here to really talk about is, who has a soul within Jainism and then we'll get into what is the effect of that belief on eating?

Mamta: In Jainism, we believe that all living beings have souls, and that's the reason that we abstain from violence towards them. So, at the biggest level, that means being vegetarian. At a more micro level, like to your point that Jain monastics sweep their path in front of them as they're walking to avoid stepping on any creatures that might come under their feet.

It's the reason that Jain monastics also do not wear shoes when they're walking. Outside, inside, on any type of terrain, because they're more likely to kill the microorganisms or these small insects and bugs that come under their feet if they're wearing shoes. Jains also, when we pray, we wear almost like a COVID mask, but it's called a muhpatti or a mask. And that is to avoid the hot breath from disseminating and killing more of the bacteria that are in the air. So there's all these sorts of things that Jains do to prevent our own individual violence towards the world or impact and footprint on other living beings. And that is, again, in the effort of limiting the negative karmas that we're accumulating in the hope of also then minimizing the harm that we expose others to as well.

Mariann: How does it really play out, when it comes to food?

Mamta: So with food, it really is centralized. And this is what, as a child, young Jains, myself included, are taught. You're vegetarian and the reason for that is because of the harm that you're causing to animals. So we know all the different reasons that people choose not to eat meat or not to eat animals. For Jains, the main teaching is to not commit violence to another living being. It's wrong to do that and so that's how we refrain from eating meat. Jainism is an ancient philosophy and way of life and at the time that it was written there was no such thing as factory farms so cheese and dairy were considered acceptable. The animals from which they sourced those products, sourced the milk, were

treated more humanely than animals that are in factory farms today. And so this continues to be a little bit of a growing point for practicing Jains. There's a movement of people that believe in being vegan amongst the Jain community. There's others that are more reluctant or still learning that path. And so that's something that I continue to be involved in and learn and grow from. But, being in the work that I am, fully aware of factory farms and the impact of those and the sourcing of dairy and cheese from factory farmed animals. Myself, and the people that I'm sending ripples forth within my own community are moving towards veganism.

Mariann: Yeah, that was definitely something I had planned to ask you. Is there hostility? It's hard to imagine people following this religion being hostile, but I guess humans are humans, even if they're Jain. Is there hostility around this issue? Or is it just really treated as a difference of opinion? Is it a difficult process?

Mamta: One of the beautiful things about Jainism, one of the other tenants in addition to ahimsa is called Anekāntavāda. That's another Sanskrit word, and that translates to multiplicity of viewpoints. So the objective there is to be open to and accepting of lots of different opinions and ways of being. So there's a saying in Jainism that translates to "live and let live". And, in a more colloquial way, you might say, "you do you, I do me". And within the discussion about dairy versus non-dairy and cheese versus non-cheese in Jainism there's definitely a continuing conversation and I think it continues to evolve and I'm so grateful that Jains are open to having that conversation. There's certainly tension. You know, we're human and so, there's certainly been tense conversations around this, that strict Jains that really adhere to the ancient doctrines point to the fact that those 24 beings consumed milk and they even advocated for. While others say, "the way that the industry has evolved, we just no longer can justify having these products in our homes". So I think this will continue to be an evolving discussion amongst the Jain community.

Mariann: Yeah, it certainly sounds like it. What about the new vegan meats? How do you feel about them? How do Jains in general feel about mimicking animal products?

Mamta: Yeah, this is a really good topic for Jains, Mariann. Growing up in a vegetarian household, I've been vegetarian....and, by the way, if it's of interest to you, I grew up eating meat. I ate meat until I was four or five years old. And that was my parents who made that decision so that my siblings and I would fit in. So again, we were in the Deep South in the late seventies and my older brother was already being bullied for lots of different reasons. And so my

parents thought that this might be an easier way for us to fit in or one less thing that would help us to not stick out in a crowd.

My sister and I, when we traveled to India for the first time, we were five years old, and I remember when we were landing in New Delhi, my mom turned to us and said, "don't tell anybody in India that you meat". So we quickly realized it's like a source of shame. This is something that's wrong and bad.

We were in India, that trip was about a month. I don't have a memory of this, but my mom tells my sister and I that coming back and every day after that, we just wouldn't touch it. And that was the end of it. We couldn't look at it, we didn't want to touch it, we were very sensitive to it. And we just said, "no, this is not for us". And I don't still think I had the awareness of why. I just think I associated it with shame or like my family would shun me or not be proud of me if they knew that I ate meat.

Mariann: Maybe we should just send to every kid in the world to visit the Jain community in India for a couple of weeks...

Mamta: I think about this too. I think I'm one of two or three practicing Jains at MFA. And I do think that there were some learnings there. Just like sometimes those of us in the AR movement think about other really successful movements, like the fight against tobacco a few decades ago, and like learning from that and how can we take that and emulate some of those ways in our movement towards animal protection and animal freedom. I wonder if there are learnings too, around some of these ancient cultures that grew up with this philosophy. I don't know what those are yet, but I certainly think there's something there.

Mariann: Oh, I totally agree with you. And I think that we will find that there are more of them than we realized. That this is an issue people have struggled with for as long as they've been people. But, getting back to the question...

Mamta: You asked about the mock meats and I'm sorry, I went on and on.

Mariann: That's ok, it was all good.

Mamta: My long-winded answer was that because I didn't grow up eating meat. I'm one of the people that's not looking to replace it. So the mock meats, I think are a wonderful thing for animal protection and for the world of veganism and for the people that are looking to make a change and a transition. They do creep me out a little bit. I've been in situations where maybe that was the only option at a restaurant so I ordered it. But when it was in front of me, I just felt very

insecure, or uncertain, if this was the real thing or not. And just couldn't partake. Which is a real nod to the people making these products. Yeah, so, they're doing great, but, they're just not for me.

Mariann: Yeah, I can totally understand that. I think for a lot of people, even who did grow up eating meat, not for everyone, but they can kind of be a transitional food. They're a way to transition away from meat and then sort of develop your taste for vegetables and other foods. So I can totally understand that.

Now you mentioned that your parents, which is just sort of a really sad story that they felt that just to help you fit in, you should be eating meat. And I can totally understand why that's the case and it can generally be pretty tough to fit in as a child of immigrants. And you also had this added feature of a religion that nobody had ever heard of and that you were vegetarian. So once you stopped eating meat after this trip to India, did you get a lot of pushback as a child? And, I'm kind of curious, were you Jains on your own or were you a part of a community?

Mamta: So, yes, part of a community, but not until later in my childhood. So my first years of life, we were just Jain, my family, and not part of a Jain community in Memphis or in Southern California. That came a couple of years later. And, yes, I have very vivid memories of being discriminated against or bullied or mocked, both by kids and adults for being specifically vegetarian, not Jain, but for being vegetarian. I do associate that diet choice with, of course, my culture, but I do associate it a lot with...there's a lot of topics, as you know, around racism in the vegan movement, but it's bigger than that for me, it's just racism and bias towards being culturally vegetarian as well.

Mariann: Oh, that's really interesting. I know you have a daughter. Do you find that things are different for her than they were for you?

Mamta: Very much so. And in such a wonderful way. She is very confident in her vegetarianism. She doesn't question it. She sees her friends around her eating meat, and she has a very strong adverse reaction to that. In some cases she'll come home and she'll say, "mommy, I really liked this girl at school, but she's a meat eater." In her mind, she's six, and that's an insult.

Mariann: It is in my mind too.

Mamta: Or something that she's like worried about for her friend. Kind of like, she feels this responsibility to show her the way. And I'm so grateful for the

diversity in thought in public spaces now that didn't exist when I was in school. Schools are much more sensitive to all of the different dietary needs and preferences of families, allergies as well. The different sources of protein. That's, of course, like an ongoing battle for those of us, we all know and can relate to that. But schools, I think in particular, are becoming more sensitive and open to that.

And even when we go out, I think we can all relate to the experience that more and more restaurants at least have one vegetarian option that can be veganized or a full vegan option as well. Which, I'm really grateful to see that kind of progress. I wish that more of that existed when I was coming through it, but I also am feeling very proud of being part of making those changes happen and being one of the early people in this space.

Mariann: No, I agree. And I totally agree that it's so exciting to see it happen. It does occasionally occur to me that things are SO much better for vegans. They're not that much better for animals, if at all. But, one probably has to come before the other.

Speaking of your daughter, in addition to your religious background, obviously another driving force in your life is feminism. Why do you feel it's so particularly important for the animal protection movement to focus on women? Both as in hiring women and targeting women with their advocacy.

Mamta: So, one thing that I love about the work that I do specifically at Mercy for Animals is that we are so sensitive to and inclusive of using language like "people who identify as female" and coming from a very inclusive standpoint. We are very committed in the movement to a diverse workforce and diverse teams. That's women and any other kind of demographic that's been marginalized in the past.

I think feminism and a message towards the female audience is especially important because, for better or worse. And maybe you will get some pushback in this, and I'm very open to that feedback. But I think women are still driving a lot of the food choices and food decisions for families. And that's not true in every case, of course, there's going to be exceptions to that. And that might be shifting, but historically that's been the case. And I recently did look into this and I think that still continues to be the general trend. And so I think that there's a lot of value in messaging that is inclusive to all of our potential audience, but in particular towards the female voice. And I see that both in how we recruit in the animal rights movement, and also the messages that we're putting forth in trying to convey the work that we do in animal protection as well.

Mariann: I certainly think it's true, whether it should be true or not is a totally other question, but I certainly think it's true that women are probably making most food choices for families. And also, I just think it's true that in spite of the many wonderful men within the movement, it has always been a predominantly female movement. So I totally agree with you.

Another factor, and this has to do a lot with leadership, I think. You mentioned in a recent interview, the data show that women are more likely to not speak up in meetings, are more likely to apologize while articulating a point and are more willing to be interrupted. I know that these things are true and I believe that they are, well not true of everybody obviously, but I believe that they are, in many ways, cultural. Like, it's not just that women don't want to speak up it's that the culture makes it harder for them to do that. So what can an organization do to make sure that women are in that atmosphere that encourages them not to take a back seat as perhaps they've been brought up to do.

Mamta: So the first thing is, I'm going to borrow a lesson that I learned from a comedian that I follow Lilly Singh. She recently did a wonderful Ted talk called *A Seat at the Table*. And, creating a seat at the table is a first step towards elevating women in leadership roles. What enhances that is creating a table that isn't wobbly or chairs that aren't wobbly, which was the main point in this Ted talk and I really encourage everyone to go check it out if you're interested. It was just at the end of March that it came out. Women have been taught, like my generation, to just be grateful for having the opportunity to be on a leadership team or to have a seat at the table. I'm not talking specifically at MFA, but some of my previous jobs, just to be grateful to even have a seat. But then once you're in the seat being expected to quiet your voice or “fit in”. And that kind of defeats the purpose. The next step now is, okay, women are getting more seats at the table, but how are you making sure that we're elevating their voices?

One thing that I'm really particularly grateful for and really appreciative of at MFA, that I've observed, is some of the male coworkers and activists, I have noticed them hang back in meetings. That they won't be the first to jump in when we're having a discussion, they'll create space. So bringing awareness and having individualistic awareness, I think is wonderful and pointing it out as a recommendation if we're feeling that there's a lack of that I think is also...It really speaks to the culture of an organization that's open to having that kind of conversation and I see that as something of real value I've benefited from. And I particularly feel this acutely because you add the layer of being part of the global majority as well. Coming from a patriarchal culture, I was very much taught to be soft, to quiet myself, hang back. And all of those things are, by the way, completely against my nature. So that has been a continuous struggle for me in my professional life, for sure.

Mariann: Yeah, and even if they aren't against your nature, which, I'm sure for some people they are, and for some people they aren't, which is completely fine. Like when you're an activist, if you are a retiring person, you kind of have to overcome that. When your organization isn't helping you overcome it, that makes it even harder. I know MFA is one of the leaders in the movement for opening its doors to members of the global majority. Was that an important feature for you?

Mamta: Yeah, that was definitely important feature that they were looking for all different types of voices and that continues to be the case. And I mentioned this a little while ago. I really value that about my current workplace that I did not have as much of in any of my previous work environments. And so again, when I was mid-career making this shift, in addition to looking for an organization that aligned with my values, it was really important to me to find a cultural fit as well. Another really appealing factor of MFA specifically was that it's led by a female. Our president, Leah Garcés is somebody I really respect and value her leadership. This is my first time working for a women led organization and it does make a tremendous difference. And I see a lot of power in that.

Mariann: So you left a really successful career to do this work. And of course, the animal protection movement really needs to draw from people who not only have the passion, but have the skillset. And in addition to pursuing diversity, how can the animal protection movement attract more people who do have that education and experience to add value to the movement? What do you think that people are looking for that would allow them to make that jump?

Mamta: I think it's important to just acknowledge, too, that I was in a place financially and with my family where I could make this change. Because in the for-profit sector, on average, the salaries are 20 to 30% higher, maybe more. And so I think that's an important point because that's privilege. That's not something that maybe everyone has the opportunity to do. Just wanted to put that caveat out there.

But I do think that people are, in general, looking for workplaces that are more aligned with their values. And I'm seeing that more and more with the generations behind me, the gen Xers, the gen Zers. People in my generation and my parents' generation, a lot of times view jobs as a job. It's a place to go to, to do the stuff to earn money, to be able to have the lifestyle that you want.

Whereas I think more and more people now in a really wonderful way are demanding that, they're spending the majority of their time at work, and they're doing something that they really care about or passionate for. And so I think the

more that we can appeal to people's value systems and beliefs, get people aligned with our value systems and beliefs early on, which is a lot of the work that we're doing at MFA and in the AR movement as a whole. I think that'll continue to perpetuate this pool of talent.

Mariann: Yeah, no, I think those are really important points. And the more I think about it, the more I realize how important it is. And even for young people starting out, it's important to try not to get yourself in that position where you can't...which is not possible for many, many people, but where you can't make a move to take a lower salary if, at some point in your career, you decide "I want to do something better than this with my life". I really hope that's the direction in which, not only the animal rights movement, that the world is moving because it would be good for improving the world and just good for people's mental health.

And I'm so excited that you had an opportunity to do it. Thank you so much for sharing all of this with us. Especially, well, it was all really interesting, but the stuff about Jainism is just mind blowing. So, thank you for sharing that with us. Do you think...all right, I have one more question.

Do you think there's a place within Jainism for people who aren't Indian for people who are not culturally from...you know, as Buddhism has grown in the West, or do you think Jain is a specific cultural phenomenon that really doesn't have a place for newcomers?

Mamta: No. I absolutely think that Jainism is an accessible philosophy and way of life for people of all backgrounds and age and demographics. And we welcome that. It is a predominantly Indian religion, meaning Jainism and Buddhism started roughly about the same time in India. Buddhism, interestingly, spread throughout mostly Asia and now lots of parts of the world. And isn't really practiced as much in India. It's still there, but in a much smaller footprint. Whereas Jainism ended up being really contained within India. And the expansion of it has been because of Jain families immigrating to other countries, but it hasn't really grown to include people...like people outside of the Indian culture have not really adopted Jainism or that come from Jain families. But I absolutely think there's a place for that. I also think that because it is a way of life, more than a religion, there are lots of people who are probably practicing Jainism right now without a lot of awareness of that. Especially people in our movement, in their philosophy and way of life. So definitely. And there are Jain centers, we call them Jain centers, Jain temples in almost every major US city and, of course, we have an online footprint too. But if that's of interest to anyone, I personally invite anyone to reach out to me to learn more.

This is not a cult. It is really a decentralized religion and way of life that I think a lot of your listeners could probably really relate to.

Mariann: Oh, that's fascinating. I hope some people look into it and thank you for sharing all of this with us Mamta and for joining us today on Our Hen House.

Mamta: Thank you for having me.