PEOPLE, ANIMALS AND NATURE: Closing the Distance

Richard Huber, *Treasury of Fantastic and Mythological Creatures*. New York: Dover, 1981

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There are various ways that people distance themselves from both others' suffering and from animals whom they exploit or have others exploit for them. One way of distancing is by *compartmentalizing*. An example is the scientist who experiments on dogs in the laboratory during the day, and then comes home and enjoys the company of a dog as a companion and playmate. Another example is the veterinarian who saves the lives of sick and injured animals, and then enjoys a weekend's deer or duck hunting.

Compartmentalizing is often combined with *rationalizing*. Rationalization is another way of establishing emotional distance, and of justifying one's actions. The scientist, for example, will

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rationalize that the suffering of animals in the laboratory is justifiable because it benefits humanity. Such purported benefit gives an altruistic (albeit anthropocentric) credibility to the scientist. An altruistic justification of cruelty toward animals has become a culturally accepted norm. And so we find the veterinarian-hunter, like the trapper, rationalizing on the grounds of altruism that it is for the animals' own good to kill them in order to regulate their numbers and by so doing help control disease, starvation in winter, etc. Many farmers likewise use altruism to rationalize often inhumane, intensive livestock and poultry husbandry practices: they are feeding a hungry world and providing the consumer with the cheapest food that modern animal production technology can produce. Less inhumane alternatives are immediately dismissed as too costly.

In addition to the processes of compartmentalizing and rationalizing, there is a third way in which we distance ourselves from animals and others' suffering. This is by *objectifying*. The animal that is vivisected, shot, trapped or slaughtered is often treated as an object, as a "thing," devoid of feeling and intrinsic interests and value (as an end in itself). As poet Marilyn Le Seur has said, "We can only destroy that which we objectify." Such objectification, like compartmentalizing and rationalizing, is a mechanism of self-defense against guilt and the burden of and responsibility for another's suffering and existence. It leads ultimately to denial and a severance of empathy or fellow-feeling, which is the connecting bridge for compassionate concern and action. One of the symptoms of this emotionally and perceptually disconnected state is what psychologist Donald Barnes calls "ethical blindness." A common example is of the woman who wears furs and loves

animals. While she might be excused by some because she is ignorant, it would be wrong and uncompassionate to judge her as being a cruel person. It is likewise wrong and counter-productive to regard all vivisectioners, trappers, hunters, factory farmers and others who exploit animals as being cruel and unfeeling people. It is their avoidance of feeling, their distancing and ethical blindness, that need to be addressed, and it is especially the lack of feeling or empathy that should be of concern to all humanitarians.

The suffering of animals and their cruel exploitation will continue until people begin to suffer themselves for the animals. The final barrier to this is fear: people are afraid to

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empathize fully with the world's suffering and they do not want that burden in their lives. And there are other obstacles. One is the presumption that those who condone or who are indifferent to what today amounts to a holocaust of the animal kingdom are incapable of feeling. They don't want to feel. Another is that when one does begin to experience the world's pain, one feels impotent, helpless, hopeless and even alienated from others who seem blind or indifferent to it. But this is their way of coping. One great spiritual teacher, named Gautama Buddha, advised that the

end of all suffering is in suffering itself and that compassion toward all creatures is the only true religion. In Judaism the statement, "He who kills an ox is like he who kills a person" (*Isaiah* 66:3), speaks to this same issue of identification with animals.

From a Christian perspective, the way of compassion is implicit in the injunction that one must first become like a child again before one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. In one of his poems, Walt Whitman tells of a child who went into the world and everything that he beheld, he became. It is through such complete empathetic identification with animals and nature that the observer and the observed become one.

John Baker, Bishop of Salisbury, believes, "the most important duty of all Christians in the cause of animal welfare is to cultivate this capacity to see: to see things with the heart of God, and so to suffer with other creatures." "To suffer with" is the essence of compassion, and it is a cultivated capacity of perception through feeling or empathy for other sentient beings.

As John Bryant observed in his book *Fettered Kingdoms*, "There is no peace on earth for the truly compassionate, for it is the compassionate who suffer the burden of the world's pain."

However, this capacity cannot be limited simply to other sentient beings, human and non-human, but must be cultivated to embrace the whole of Earthly creation. Father Thomas Berry contends, "If Christians did take their own revelation seriously they would long ago have perceived in the degradation of the earth a new phase in the Christ Passion. For if in Christ all things hold together in their full grandeur then the disintegration of the earth as the most glorious manifestation of the Christ reality would

be seen as a shocking experience to every Christian. We might then expect Christians to see that their ecological concerns are integral with their Christ concerns."

In Zen philosophy this non-dualistic perception is recognized as self-realization. There is no distancing between self and other. Such a state of mind, as esoteric as it may sound, is an integral quality of humane and compassionate relationships between people, animals and all of nature's creation.

For those humanists, atheists, agnostics and others who do not adhere to any particular religious tradition, it must still be self-evident that the more we distance ourselves emotionally from animals and from others' suffering, the less human we become. As rationalism supplants compassion and our anthropocentrism increases our distance from the non-human Creation, we are losing our sense of humanity. This loss of humanity has become a major threat to the survival of the human species as a *humane* being. And it has likewise become a threat to the integrity and future of Earth's creation.

There are those who have put their faith in science and technology and in human will and ingenuity to solve these problems. Some of them also believe that it is part of the normal evolutionary process — if not divinely ordained — for *Homo sapiens* to exploit all of life and to turn the natural world or biosphere into a humanized and industrialized "technosphere." They have distanced themselves so completely from animals and the rest of creation that they represent the germinal core of a new race of humanoid that I have termed *Homo technos*: technocratic man. But as Fr. Thomas Berry has advised, if the human species is to avert this cultural mutation for the good of humanity and of the natural world, we must become instead "biocratic" —

intimately involved both emotionally and intellectually (as well as spiritually) in the Earth's creative processes of which, as *Homo sapiens*, we are still an integral and interdependent part. There can be no distance, and indeed ecologically (and spiritually) there is none: we are all part of the One Life and of the Earth community and to think and act otherwise will ensure our own nemesis. But as we come to empathize with the world's suffering — to have what I call pan-empathy — and begin to heal this sick and dying planet and ourselves in the process, humanity will indeed evolve: *Homo sapiens* becoming *Homo pansapiens* through compassion and reverence for all of Creation. However, I do not wish to end with such simplistic optimism, even though I still have faith in the inherent goodness of the human heart — when it can be reached, that is. I reiterate that the greatest threat we face today, archetypically embodied

in the concept of *Homo technos*, technocratic man, is the loss of heart, of fellow-feeling and respect for all sentient beings, and with this, the inability to love and unwillingness to suffer the world's pain.

To feel at one with Nature, the Body of Christ, and to experience the world's pain, is to receive the stigmata of the Earth crucified. To be at one with the Earth, through the beauty and mystery of Nature's creation, and through love for every creature and created thing, is to know the divine Self or One Life. This realization of the Christ, Buddha-nature or Universal Self for the theist, atheist and agnostic alike, is the source of hope and inspiration for our redemption and for the healing and resurrection of the Earth.

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