Between the Species

EMPATHY TOWARD ANIMALS AND OTHER SENTIENT BEINGS- A VERY PERSONAL ACCOUNT

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Once upon a time when I was around eight years old, at the stroke of midnight, I donned a mysterious outfit. The costume was constructed similar to the one that Batman always wore, except for a few details. The mask was white instead of black, but the eyes were slit just as in Batman's. The black

**AUTO-
BIOGRAPHY**

Jim Harter, Animals: 7419
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cape hung rather nicely, and upon it two letters were clearly visible: "A P," which stood for "Animal Pals," a group I hoped to have in operation to protect animals in similar ways to Batman's protecting people. This was a hot summer night in 1938 when I was quietly springing into action in the darkness of the porch off my bedroom to become a fearless fighter for justice for those who could not speak or act for their own protection. But let me continue this story later.

An important question, the answer to which could be crucial for saving humans from continuing to destroy each other, is, "How does one become imbued with the attitude of caring about beings other than oneself?" Being able to answer clearest and most accurately for myself, let me tell you about some of the dynamics involved in my sensitivity toward suffering. My first memory of an animal sharing feelings with me was when I must have been between four and five. I fell off my tricycle and was crying until suddenly a German Shepherd dog was licking my face and hurting knees and picking me up by the shirt collar to help me to my feet, then leading me back to my house. At about this same age, I remember cuddling with a pet Fox Terrier, Tiny, in her basket, and I remember feeling a gorilla's sadness as he sat alone in a barren cage with only a tire supplied with which he could relate--except our eyes did meet, and I think he may have seen concern in mine as I saw despair in his. A couple of years later, when the circus came to town, I recall being eye to eye (although on the other side of a rope) with a chained baby elephant. As our eyes met, I felt a certain union/understanding when across the rope came his trunk, which he gently put around my shoulder. I was ready to bring him home with me when an adult whisked me away. There were pleasant dreams of my rearing this baby into a full-sized adult and riding proudly around the neighborhood on his back, both of us feeling very satisfied with life.

A clear recollection coming from somewhere between three and five years old is of being horrified at the dining room table, hearing my grandfather respond to my question, "Where does this meat come from?" "Cows," he answered matter-of-factly. But when I asked how the cows made the meat and learned that the cow was murdered and that we were eating dead bodies, I felt so strongly that it was outrageous, no one could coax me

to eat meat for over six months, I've been told.

A couple of years later, after catching my first fish, the sense of accomplishment and excitement suddenly turned to concern and sadness when my mother commented about its gasping and writhing, calling my attention to its plight and its suffering. I let it go and later found myself concerned about Fanny, my gold fish, who seemed to be feeling cramped in her quarters. This moved me to give her exercise and freedom in a nearby drainage ditch. Fanny would have an absolute ball shooting from one end to the other and lived to a ripe old age.

Again, somewhere between five and eight, I think my attitude of empathy jelled, most of all the time I was about to swat a fly. The swatter was poised, ready to strike, when the kitchen echoed with the chef's full, firm voice. Beatrice admonished me, "How would you like it?"

"What do you mean?" I stared incredulously at her big brown eyes and stern but kindly expression.

"Well, that fly has feelings just like you. How would you like to be swatted and killed?"

I certainly wouldn't have, and from then on I couldn't understand how some people pulled the wings off flies. Perhaps they were not aware that a fly could feel. There was a study of one culture where people simply believe that dogs do not have feelings and thus feel free to torment them, to the point where it is considered appropriate to throw stones at any dog one sees just for fun.

After the fly incident, I began noticing horses being beaten--a 1939 World's Fair Exhibit of animals for children, where a mouse was forced to demonstrate "Hickory-Dickory Dock" by continuously running on an electric wheel--I watched that mouse a long time, determining that it could do nothing to stop that wheel or escape it--day-and-night I imagined. That's when I began fantasizing rescuing that mouse as "Animal Pal"--speeding here and there in a high-powered animal-mobile, swooping in with my black cape flying smartly behind, screaming, "How would you like it?" just before rescuing the being in some way.

Another dynamic of my empathy was revealed to me at the age of 23. "You poor thing," said a Freudian-oriented therapist, "the reason you care so much about animals is because you have identified with them. You have suffered so much and felt so helpless yourself that you identified with their suffering." I feel certain that she was right.

More dynamics that were also true in my case are confirmed in the research on altruism in children by Carolyn Zahn-Waxler and Marian Radke-Yarrow, published in "Research Traces Altruism in Toddlers" (American Psychological Association Monitor, Vol. 15, #1) (Jan. 1984)). They found that parental attitudes had an effect in reinforcing such attitudes. (In my case, it was not only my mother's attitude toward the fish and Beatrice with the fly but also my father's ability to warmly relate with dogs and horses.) These researchers also found that children can fixate on another's distress much earlier than most cognitive psychologists previously believed--at around 18 months. They found it often occurs explosively. Along with this, the investigators found that children with one manic-depressive parent tended to fixate on others' distress more often than average (my mother was often depressed, and it was important for me to be aware of her moods).

Ken Shapiro pointed out another dynamic: according to Piaget's child development theo-

ry, we all pass through an "animism phase" but then move on to become "socialized to insensitivity." However, some of us continue in this phase, and others regain their sensitivity to animals' feelings. The nature of this re-sensitizing process is a crucial question for humanity.

Michael W. Fox thinks of empathy as at

least partially inborn. Gestalt psychology confirms this with its belief that we need to complete: if there is suffering, there is a need to resolve it, to end it, to complete the Gestalt.

There were more dynamics involved in my devotion to easing pain. Some of it was simply reinforcement by humane society people, teachers, and peers who appreciated our efforts as teen-agers--to be called to address the American Humane Association convention at the age of 17 on how to run a junior humane society--and it was rewarding to hear the applause in a school assembly after a speech against hunting--and to have one student say he threw away his gun after my appeal, and felt good about it.

To end my treatment of altruism, I want to share with you the one thing in life about which I have become more and more convinced: there are 37 reasons for anything--that is, there are lots of dynamics always at work causing an event, kind of personality, attitude, belief (three to six major ones and probably another thirty or so in most cases).

Now back to my story. There I was donning my costume, on the first mission to rid the world of evil and pain for animals. Now I had carefully tip-toed out of the bedroom with only the sounds of deep breathing from my mother who slept in the twin bed beside me. Moments later, in the darkness of the screened porch, I was fully costumed. Now shimmying down the drainpipe to the ground, now sweeping into the night to fulfill the secret mission, I was to save a fellow-being that I had seen tortured relentlessly, that I had heard groaning under stress nearly every day that summer. The knife (similar to the one shown with Daniel Boone in a movie I had seen) was sharpened; now it was cutting the ropes, but they were so thick that only a few strands at a time were cutting. I began to fear it would take too long, sweat pouring, fingers and hands getting sore by the time the second rope was cut. disappearing back into the night, climbing back up the drainpipe, heart beating wildly, silently slipping into bed, happy with a job well done.

The next day the whole neighborhood was in an uproar of disbelief. Every one of my beloved neighbors pondered the mystery. What kind of deranged, terrible, evil, insensitive, child-hating person could it have been

who cut down the neighborhood swing? To this day, no one ever suspected that monster to be sweet, kind, lovable me.

I remember thinking, "Couldn't they hear the agonizing groans of that tree?" (It did groan in a very loud and human-sounding way.) "Couldn't they see the gouging, the gaping wound that the ropes were making on its arms?" (Kilmer's poem depicting tree limbs as arms impressed me.) I now have learned to believe that there is little comparison between the feelings of a mammal and a plant. I occasionally chain saw a live tree, although still with a bit of trepidation. I was just getting used to thinking of trees as nonsentient when someone claimed they had been able to record a plant screaming when it was hurt (with some kind of sensitive electronic instrument) and even in anticipation of the hurt!

But how about fish, reptiles, and insects, do they feel pain as intensely as us mammals? In 1952 I spent weeks at the University of Pennsylvania Veterinary School researching. (Incidentally, I had the same agonizing empathy with other humans as I did with animals. The motivation for the research at this time, age 22, was trying to decide whether to devote my life to preventing human or animal suffering--part of my decision was to be based on whether humans or animals suffer more. I was suspecting that humans might suffer more because their emotions could cause so much more pain along with their rotten thoughts, which I assumed animals rarely or never had.) So, I researched and found little that was conclusive except the clear answers of allegedly the U. of P.'s top veterinary experts on animal pain, who said that (1) warm-blooded creatures and mammals, which includes humans, feel pain the most. Some other wild animals feel pain and stress even more than humans in certain situations, since their senses are more highly developed. For example, a loud sound can be painful to an animal used to picking up minute sounds in the quiet woods. (2) Next come birds, who don't feel pain quite as much. (3) Next come fish and cold-blooded creatures such as reptiles, and (4) finally come insects.

The experts explained that they based this relative ability to feel pain on the size of the cortex compared with the size of other parts of the brain. I believed them

then, but now I realize that it was only their theory. More and more scientific evidence suggests that all vertebrates are likely to feel pain in similar ways and with similar intensities, oftentimes depending more on the individual animal than on the species. It is conceivable that some "cold fish humans" could well feel pain and emotion less than some fish. Incidentally, it has recently been noticed that mechanisms involving pain are more similar and even the physiological responses are more similar than different between fish and humans. However, even the U. of P. experts finally said that no one could possibly know for certain how much pain an animal was feeling without talking with the individual animal.

Upon graduating from college, it became clear to me that since the comparison between animal and human suffering was elusive, I just needed to start somewhere. The opportunities were with humans, so that is how I came to devote myself more to the minimizing of suffering with humans and to work as a social worker, teacher, therapist (where I presently continue as a psychologist in private practice). Nevertheless, I still find that animals are among the last of our "minority groups" because so little effective action is occurring to protect any but humans from massive amounts of suffering such as occur in the laboratory, factory farms, and a hundred other ways that animals are painfully exploited. So I still spend energy on their behalf. Although I tend to put mosquitoes and black flies to quick deaths, I'll still take time to put most other insects that find their way inside back outdoors alive. I continue to attempt being mostly vegetarian.

Yet I am against empathy some of the time. It is just so very troublesome and painful to be oversensitive to the suffering of others. It is just not worth it sometimes. It takes too much out of a person, and sometimes I believe that it takes too much happiness away.

One of my problems is a tendency to identify with the other side. I can see some hunters' side; I can see the meat-eaters' side. Even at age ten, this made for conflicts for me, both intellectually and emotionally. There was a kid in our Animal Pal group who went hunting with his father. I remembered thinking to myself, "It must be such a happy time for them together, probably

the happiest time for his dad and him. Even if I could stop it, I shouldn't; it might spoil so much happiness for them." I still have trouble equating my value of limiting suffering with rare precious time for two individuals that might make for a large part of the little happiness they might find in their lifetime; perhaps they could find nothing else they could so enjoy doing together.

When my son, at around seven, wanted to go fishing, a part of me was crying out in desire to share what I imagined could be such a relaxing time of quiet intimacy together. But I found myself saying/thinking/feeling, "If only the fish didn't feel pain," and telling Arthur that I would first like for he and I to find a way to instantly kill a fish so that it didn't suffer. I purchased a giant magnet with which we fished and had some interesting catches, but far too many beer cans to sustain his interest. When he fished with neighbors that year, a part of me was glad that I was unable to teach him to be as sensitive as I am. Still, I delight in his sensitivity toward and joy in relating with animals warmly and intimately. But I don't want to wish painful empathy on anyone. It's too agonizing.

Recently, when my son became a teenager, continued his interest in fishing, and asked me to go fishing with him, I decided to ask the experts again; this time how to kill a fish most humanely. First was a longtime fisherman who invited me to come with him on his grandson's first fishing. Off the three of us went. The five year-old had a tug on his line, and as he pulled in the fish, seeing its liveness as it was pulled out of the water, he was so excited, exclaiming, "Oh! It's real!" But then he suddenly identified with what both he and I perceived to be its pain. He told Grandpa that he didn't want to hurt it; maybe it wanted to go free. But Grandpa said, "Oh no! Not at all! Fish like to be caught. He's glad you caught him." And that seemed to satisfy this sensitive child, and he could be happy, truly and fully happy with having caught his first fish. What a gift Grandpa created, freeing this child from any guilt, allowing him to fish happily for perhaps the rest of his life.

Another friend gave just as good a gift to his daughter when fishing came up. This

father simply told her that he did not believe in causing fish pain (or any other being). He and his household were also vegetarian. He gave her a strong philosophy (which I admire), and I believe was giving her the gift of clarity and peace of mind--the child can accept or reject such a clear value.

So, guess what? My son just reassured me that you just hit them over the head with a hammer, and another expert tells me you stick your finger(s) down their throat with one hand, holding with thumb below in the other hand and break their back; another uses what he told me is the Indian way, where you thank the fish and apologize before you give a very fast snapping crack just below the eyes on the back of the neck with a narrow club-like stick. Meanwhile, I was told the story of "did you ever catch a screamer?," where one person did not think he could handle a fish that screamed in pain, whereas the other person said, "What's the difference, if they are still feeling it?"

As I sat on the dock, we had already discussed getting hooks out and the sport of fishing with barbless hooks (enabling release more easily as well as making for an additional challenge of skill). There was a long, silver, beautiful trout he wanted to let go; I held it, and I couldn't believe it, it was a screamer! Well, at least it made very audible, plaintiff-sounding mini-yells (I was wishing I had a tape recorder). I know what you're thinking, the groaning tree. But this was different. Each of the three times I pulled the hook around to attempt releasing the barb, that fish yelled. "Listen to that, Art; it's yelling."

"Aw, Dad, it's just trying to get oxygen."

So now I am discovering there are ways to fish with minimizing pain. For example, I find that a soft, wet cloth with which to wrap the fish while taking out the hook before releasing the fish is much less traumatic than using one's hot hands or injuring the fish on a hard surface, and I learned from Michael W. Fox that the cruelest thing is use of a "stringer," where line is run through their gills, and they are dragged through the water behind the boat. There are containers, both mesh and otherwise, that allow water to run through and keep them more

comfortably alive.

Is my philosophy confusing? Is it a clear message to my son? I think it goes like this. I eat commercial fish. They are not caught/killed humanely. If I can quickly kill a fish for eating and catch and release the others as painlessly as possible, then it's all right to fish. Unfortunately, knowing that there is always still some suffering, catching a fish can never be fully joyful. Playing this out philosophically, my basic assumption is that fish feel anxiety and pain. Could I be wrong? I don't think so, this time.

It can be so much healthier to deny, to rationalize, and be unaware of suffering in sentient beings. Ethics can be a real pain. Empathy and ethics court conflicts and confusion. I had finally learned to accept Grandpa's ethic that it is all right to eat meat--the animals don't mind and all--when bam! I read Peter Singer's Animal Liberation and suddenly realized that I was right when I was five years old. Grandpa was wrong! Some of my favorite dishes had meat. Now I could no longer enjoy them. Now menu planning became a new struggle, although I have begun to find experimenting with vegetarian dishes more rewarding.

In 1952, ethics seemed so simple to me. I could not understand how anyone could have a whole conference about it, let alone write long books on the subject. Being ethical simply meant that you caused the least amount of suffering possible and eased the most pain; that would be the most ethical person and way of life. You're good and ethical when you protect, do not hurt another, and ease suffering or comfort. You're bad and unethical when you hurt another, refuse to ease suffering or to comfort, or refuse to protect another. Now, over a half-century old, I am continually amazed at the complexities in ethics.

Ethics is such a personal, oftentimes emotional state of affairs. I remember arguing endlessly with another member of our local humane society board. She believed that the only kind, humane, ethical way to keep a cat was to confine it indoors in order to protect it from disease, cars, other animals, and to keep the cat from harming other animals. She further believed that cats needed to be valued, spayed, and only a few

kittens should ever be born, again those cared for according to the guidelines just stated. To do this all strays were to be captured and euthanized in five days because if after five days the owners had not called, they were irresponsible and did not care enough about their cat. I could not believe that this true cat lover (and she was) was devoted to helping cats through killing them. But she truly believed that a world with just a few cats would make for cats becoming so precious that they would receive exemplary care. One time, while on a mission to capture a group of cats that had become wild, she captured a female who was obviously nursing kittens. Against the pleas of another member who said, "Think of the kittens and how they will suffer starving to death," she decided to take the mother anyway, reasoning that she might not be able ever to capture this cat again, and it would have more kittens. Ten days later the kittens were found in a field, crying constant desperate mews, eyes partially eaten by insects, emaciated, suffering terribly. I euthanized them. Some members felt that an animal should never be euthanized unless there was absolutely no hope of its surviving. How can humanitarians believing in the same basic cause be at such opposite poles? It takes so much wisdom, and empathy (with individual people as well as with animals' needs) to resolve such disagreements.

And then there are the conflicts within ourselves. I find myself making compromises, but there is a philosophy that has finally come together. Most of me now thinks that "Hippocrates was right. The major ingredient in the art of healing is compassion." On the other hand, I can see where some of the attack/confrontive therapies have helped some people. But I believe that strong medicine is not the most helpful as a general rule--Carl Rogers' principles for good counseling make sense. People, children, animals, with very little guidance, usually heal themselves if their helping person simply supplies caring, acceptance, love while focusing on their whole being. Occasionally, I will lead a person into opening his/her psychic wounds and help him/her bring forth tears and feel the pain in order to allow what I believe to be the release of that pain, but mostly I try to use my empathy to help them understand themselves and know that I understand.

Yes, I understand much more now, since

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the time I rescued the tree. I think I'm getting into the third level about which an old Zen saying tells. To a person who has not studied, trees are trees, mountains are mountains, and lakes are lakes. But after a person has studied awhile, trees are no longer trees, mountains no longer mountains, and lakes no longer lakes. And after a person has studied a great deal more and become truly wise, trees are once again trees, mountains mountains, and lakes lakes. I think I'm seeing the trees and the forest now.

A well-published animal researcher once attacked me for daring to talk about "unnecessary pain" in research. He told the group of animal researchers in the room and me that it made no sense to even attempt to ascertain pain for animals. He said, "How could you possibly tell when an animal is in pain? We cannot even tell when a human baby is in

pain." No one in the room but me challenged this statement. I asked whether he was truly unable to tell if his child's cry was that of pain or a cry of positive excitement, such as in play. He never answered. If he truly never learned how to hear the difference between a cry of pain and a positive cry, if he really could not tell when his baby was in pain, this frightens me. I fear that he will teach his students to engage in cold, narrow experiments that attempt to separate and even negate sentience as unreal, even as they act upon the reality of sentience (rather than relating with it). These students would be made blind to the whole being upon which they inflicted an experiment. They would be not only missing much reality but also learning to be so removed, so detached that the being can no longer be seen as a real, live, feeling being; it becomes for them an object quite different from itself.

I find that this kind of callousness from scientists, healing persons, or others spreads easily. Those who separate feelings from their subjects and have learned not to see emotional factors are dangerous to others. The blindness spreads from teacher to their students learning to over-dissect, leading to conclusions that suggest life and beings can be dissected in the community, to narrowly focused conclusions that are read by healing persons, spreading to the doctor-patient relationship where now another human is viewed as the laboratory animal was viewed: the human being is now understood as mainly an object of procedures, seen as pieces, and forgotten is the whole individual. Instead of healing, I believe a damaging process is more likely to occur. Empathy is needed in most cases of even physiological healing.

As Michael W. Fox pointed out to me recently, "Although sympathy can be sentimental and misguided, empathy can be scientifically accurate. Empathy is taking on others' suffering. The accuracy of empathy is improved through objective knowledge." If people realized that everyone they met or heard of were fighting a battle with pain, if we learned truly to empathize, we could not help understanding each other.

On the other hand, detachment toward any

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mal rights groups, the MFA's main talent seemed to lie in using local organizations to increase the income flowing into the central office.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew M. Rowan
Director, Center for Animals
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life in it. "You know I'm going to get you," he said grimly and whacked at her paw as if it were evidence of her trickiness. "I know you know what I'm doing. Why don't you just come out and make things easier for both of us?" he smelled her damp, stiff fur and fetid blood, the foul diseases inside her body. The smells victimized him. They claimed half his brain. They reminded him of everything about himself, of dark holes unknown to sun and air, of slime and the swelling furies of his own body. "I'm going to get you," he said with grim conviction. The overwhelming certainty goaded him even further. His was one of the oldest jobs in the world. Maybe not as old as the age of cave dwellers but soon after, when houses were built above the caves and civilization became a two-story affair or multi-leveled, with living and working quarters above the basements. Excrement slipped loose from her body, as if an organ had disintegrated and turned into sludge. She did not attempt to move away from it. The dissolution of her body was invincible.

Behold, death was good.

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group of sentient beings is the kind of mentality and emotional state that breeds our own destruction to the point of making ground fertile for more knowledge at any price, for more control at any cost, for the needs of "our own kind" being placed far above the needs of others, and even for making ground fertile for the kind of nuclear mistakes that most of us fear.

Opinion

JOHN STOCKWELL

In the last issue I expressed my opinion that there are two visions of the future that are preferable to one in which our relations with the animal world are established through arrangements made possible by biotechnologically assisted animal welfare. The first of these preferable approaches, I said, is derived from James Hillman's work of ensouling the world, while the other is bound up with the bioregional/reinhabitant ethic. Before discussing how the first of these might figure in guiding humanity's relations with other species, it is necessary first to come to some initial terms with Hillman. It is to that project that I will devote my efforts in this issue.

For those readers who may have been following this discussion, I urge that you go back to BTS I/2, "James Hillman on Animals: A Correspondence," because it was from my own need to question Hillman on certain matters that I set those questions for him. For me that correspondence met much of my own need to come to terms with Hillman (although I do not consider that process complete), and so my efforts here will seek only to carry that conversation, albeit now a monologue, somewhat farther in order to prepare the ground for attending in the next issue to a description of several matters: the meaning and practicality of ensouling the world, the benefits to animals of such ensoulment, and the reasons why such ensouling is preferable to a future in which human-animal relationships are established by biotechnologically assisted animal welfare.

For gaining access to Hillman several of his books are essential. Best known are The Myth of Analysis (1972) and Revisioning Psychology (1975). In addition, one should read The Dream and the Underworld (1979), one of his collections of essays (I recommend Loose Ends, 1975), and for a brief formal introduction to archetypal psychology (of which Hillman is known as founder) Archetypal Psychology