Keeping the Human Spirit Alive

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Approximately two weeks ago, I returned from Moscow, Russia cutting short a trip that was to have taken me and my colleagues to Novosibirsk, Siberia and from there on to the world-renowned Lake Baikal. Our unanticipated early departure was occasioned by the very unstable political situation resulting from President Boris Yeltsin's dissolution of the Russian Parliament. Indeed, just two hours prior to his historic action, we were visiting with a member of that very same Parliament who was then serving as the Head of the Ecology and Resources Committee of the Supreme Soviet. Little did we know at the time how close we came to being long-term residents of the Russian White House.

Russia as we all know is a country in great turmoil. And the basis of that turmoil is both a government and a political system which for the past three quarters of a century has incarcerated the spirit and vitality of the great peoples of that land.

In preparing for this trip, I came across a newspaper article from Europe written by a reporter named Vitalieu. In this article, Mr. Vitalieu seeks to explain why both the people and animals of that country are

victims of the totalitarianism that was the former Soviet Union.

In one incident from the 1980's he reports how some top bureaucrats from the Ukrainian city of Kharov were keen on hunting, but there was no real game in the vicinity, just ducks and hares. So they telephoned the local circus and demanded some tame bears to hunt. The bears were driven into the forest where the valiant hunters were already waiting with their rifles loaded. The poor animals were let out of the cage, but being tame, they didn't try to escape, but just stayed by the circus van as the "hunters" started shooting them on the spot. When all the bears were dead, the drunk and laughing bureaucrats photographed each other with their "trophies" and feasted upon bear livers.

In commenting upon this outrageous event Mr. Vitalieu writes, "There's a considerable devaluation of suffering in our modern world. We are getting used to daily reports from war zones citing the numbers of the killed and the maimed. It's easier this way."

"And so it was also with the cruelest and blood-thirstiest of governments," he continues, "Totalitarianism communism was agony, with the tremors of its agony still being felt. How can we measure the scars it has left on the human soul it had been trying to destroy for all 75 years of its existence?"

Mr. Vitalieu then goes on to describe a film in which Witold Starecki, a Polish film director, tries to provide

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an answer. Titled "Dog Eat Dog," the film, on the surface, deals with the cruel treatment of animals in post-perestroika Russia.

The film was prompted by an article on the thriving business of smuggling turtles from Kagakhstan to Warsaw. Starecki undertook a year-long investigation in Russia, mixing with shadowy animal smugglers, black marketeers and dog catchers.

In the film there are neither voice-overs nor commentaries. "We are left face to face with the ongoing tragedy of the post perestroika Soviet Union," he writes, "where both people and animals are victims. I was struck by the faded, expressionless eyes of the animal traders, eyes where no trace of human feeling could be detected. The eyes of the victims were much warmer and, amazingly, much more human."

"Animals turned human. Humans turned animal...I want to show that all these people are doomed," says Starecki. "I am not trying to force anything on the viewer; I hate messages. I just wanted to say that our awakening from the communist nightmare will begin at the moment when instead of hitting dogs on the heads we shall start stroking them...I am not calling for revenge, but for compassion."

"The conclusion is obvious," writes reporter Vitalieu: "A system incapable of compassion for our 'younger brothers' (that was how the Russian poet Sergei Yesenin called animals) will stop at nothing. It will unhesitatingly send young untrained recruits to die in Afghanistan. It will methodically destroy its best minds. It will easily abandon its children. Ossification of a human soul starts with cruelty to animals, but who knows where it will end or what it can lead to?"

The Humane Society of the United States, through EarthKind and Humane Society International, is seeking to respond to this tragic and desperate hunger for a message of hope and liberation, a message that not only promotes a compassion toward our "younger brothers," but one that invites and encourages a caring concern for humanity as well.

Through our NAHEE materials and a new program soon to be launched by HSI and EarthKind with the assistance of board member Judi Friedman and her husband Lou, we shall actively be promoting a program of humane education in several areas of the former Soviet Union. Small though this effort will be when contrasted with the enormous need, it nonetheless marks the beginning of our response to the desperate call for help articulated by reporters like Vitali Vitalieu and film

makers like Witold Starecki. "Our awakening will begin when instead of hitting dogs on the head, we shall start stroking them."

The title of my address this morning "Keeping the Human Spirit Alive" was inspired by this same article for in it I was helped to see, perhaps more clearly than ever before, how utterly despairing and destitute humanity can become when it loses or abandons a fundamental commitment to the alleviation of suffering, no matter where or how it occurs.

The HSUS has been criticized many times over for directing its activities and resources to issues involving animal suffering when the world is faced with untold human misery, abandonment and suffering on a scale perhaps unparalleled in human history, at least in a numerical sense. "How can it be," I am asked, "that you care more about animals than humans, more about reducing the overpopulation of cats and dogs than reducing the ever-growing population of humans?" The answer, of course, is that these issues are not mutually exclusive, and to focus one's efforts and attention in one area is not to deny the importance of the other. Most of us, I am sure, give generously to organizations and agencies which address human diseases, hunger and suffering. Perhaps some of you also volunteer your time to work for such agencies.

But those who ask such questions, especially when they do so in a judgmental or censoring manner, clearly miss the point. Whether it be the suffering of a starving child or a starving calf, suffering is suffering, and its victim cannot be ignored. Whether it be a man or woman injured by flying mortar shells or an animal butchered for its tusks, or horn, or fur, the pain of suffering is as real for the one as for the other. But it is not finally the victims of suffering that must be confronted and healed, I submit, but rather its perpetrators.

The fundamental essence of animal protection is not finally the preservation of species, or even the relief of suffering. It is, rather, I believe, the preservation and perpetuation of an ethic that refuses to permit man-inflicted suffering to become either operative or normative, whether its victims be animals or humans.

A few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to attend the 100th Anniversary Celebration of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago, Illinois. At this gathering of spiritual leaders from around the world were peoples of virtually every religious tradition imaginable (and a few from traditions and innovations

utterly unimaginable). The central focus of this conference of approximately 6,000 persons was a paper titled *Global 2000 Revisited: What Shall We Do?* In this seminal paper and his very eloquent presentation, Dr. Gerald Barney reminded us that as we approach the millennium which marks our entry into the 21st Century, "we five billion humans must give up old, 20th Century ways of thinking and living; change to a new time and a new purpose; and then start toward the *humane* and sustainable future that we all share." It was most encouraging to hear Dr. Barney call for new ways of thinking and living, and for me it was especially heartening to hear him emphasize the word *humane*, for so often—indeed most often—when anyone talks about a sustainable future, the humane and ethical dimension of that equation is never mentioned. It is always sustainable; rarely *humane* sustainable.

Among the many startling observations emphasized by Dr. Barney was that early in the 21st Century species will be vanishing forever at a rate of hundreds per day. "A species that becomes extinct, that disappears forever," he writes, "can easily be seen as a 'non-problem,' since it just vanishes and disappears. But (in reality) the rapidly increasing loss of species is a very serious problem."

"Species are valuable for many reasons," he writes. First and foremost, the *community* of all life is like a sky full of stars, and it is the whole sky of stars, not human technology, that allows the Earth to continue. We humans have been making our stars shine brighter and brighter, not even noticing that the other lights in the sky are being eclipsed. Each time we crowd out another species, it is an aesthetic and spiritual loss for all of us."

I submit that it is this spiritual loss that is the *cause* as well as the *consequence* of our insistence that everything else in the universe was meant to be overshadowed by our human wants and desires. I submit that it is our insensitivity to the world around us that portends the environmental chaos that daily seems more real than imagined. And I submit that until we are unwilling to take suffering for granted, we shall capture neither the vision nor the will to make right a world we have set on the way to destruction.

There are, however, a few hopeful signs on the horizon. There is, for example, now taking shape a new initiative launched by 30 or more eminent biologists, philosophers, and writers to create what amounts to a citizens charter for chimpanzees. Brainchild of

philosopher and founder of the modern animal liberation movement Peter Singer, this campaign is premised on the awakening that chimpanzees and other great apes are so emotionally and intellectually similar to humans that the moral boundary we draw between them and us is no longer defensible. "Proponents of the project" writes Gail Vines in the *New Scientist Journal* (June 5, 1993) "argue that great apes should be granted the right to life, liberty, and freedom from torture. Their declaration states that it is wrong to 'imprison' great apes without due legal process, kill them, or cause them severe pain."

"Indeed, great apes must be regarded as 'persons' rather than property under law," argues Gary Francione, a leading animal rights lawyer and professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey. "As with young or intellectually retarded humans," he says, "guardians must safeguard the interests and rights of apes and plead their case in courts of law if need be."

It is indeed encouraging that there is beginning to take shape, within a few moral, legal and intellectual centers, the notion that the time has come to remove the moral boundary between humans and *certain* other highly developed species of animals. Certainly the great apes are a logical starting point. But this kind of "more like us" argument for extending to a particular species certain moral considerations both scares me and excites me for reasons I will discuss momentarily. But whatever its long-term ramifications and consequences, we can rest assured that this movement will be opposed vigorously by those who see the continued utilization of these animals for research, entertainment, and "spare parts" as both necessary and appropriate.

"Ronald Nadler of the Yerkes Center has studied great apes both in the wild and in captivity and sees nothing wrong in keeping them in either zoos or research institutes," reports Ms. Vines. "He thinks that Jane Goodall's campaigns to improve conditions of chimpanzees held in laboratories and zoos are pointless. Goodall has, he argues, 'exaggerated the intellectual nature of the animal and also exaggerated the negative aspect of conditions in which we keep them.'"

I am delighted and encouraged to see the emergence of *The Great Ape Project* being advanced by such persons as Peter Singer. For it will take the combined efforts of both animal protectors and persons such as these to make operative the conviction that the currently held distinction between ourselves and our biological cousins, the great apes, is no longer defensible.

The animal protection movement needs, and should welcome with enthusiasm, this kind of initiative. It has, I am convinced, the potential to penetrate a barrier that circumscribes the entirety of the non-human animal kingdom. It is an initiative that, if successful, could then be extended to other species less like ourselves and, perhaps ultimately, deeper and deeper into the hierarchy of animal species as we now view them. It is, however, an initiative that must be regarded as only a beginning; never a conclusion.

There is, of course, great danger in establishing moral rights for those species of animals most like ourselves for by implication it could then be argued that all others are less worthy of a similar consideration. And that conclusion could, I fear, compromise the assertion just made that the essence of animal protection is the establishment of an ethic that refuses to permit man-inflicted suffering toward any creature to become either operative or normative, no matter how great or how small its intellectual or emotional capacity.

I think, for example, of the magnificent sea mammals, who, though not as nearly like us as the great apes, are nonetheless creatures whose capacity for suffering is profound. In this regard, the release this summer of the motion picture film "Free Willy" has served to rekindle the debate over whether or not these highly intelligent social animals should be wrenched from their family pods and held in captivity—sentenced to a quality of life that is greatly diminished from their free living existence in the wild.

I am pleased to announce that in partnership with the Bellerive Foundation whose patrons are Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan and Princess Catherine, the HSUS and HSI have launched a program known as *Into the Blue*, a project to protect whales, dolphins, and the environment.

The ultimate objective of *Into The Blue* is to persuade the human species that it is not right to slaughter, capture, or imprison great creatures such as these and, through the development of a training and release center, hopefully in the Turks and Caicos Islands, to return many of these mammals to their ocean homes.

In 1985, there were thirty different dolphin shows in Britain. Today there are none. The impetus for change in that country has best been described by the actor, Sir Michael Caine, in this way: "...In the public's mind, the overriding image was one of highly intelligent, altruistic animals, being held against their will in squalid, concrete tanks..." And Canadian author, Bruce

Obee, provides us a deeper insight into the growing public concern over the welfare of these magnificent creatures held captive here in North America when he says, while my pragmatic side appreciates the value of captive whales, my emotions tell me it is wrong. These orcas are not fish; they are mammals with families, much like ours. We have the ability to separate them, but do we have the right? It was not until today that I realized that as a Vancouver Islander I have watched this same pod of whales from the shore over the past several years. My own children have seen the offspring of the same wild whales I watched as a youngster. Two families growing up together on the same coast..."

Or consider the majestic elephants of Asia and Africa, the latter faced with the real threat of extinction if the fragile ban on the sale of ivory should soon be lifted. The HSUS and HSI have both visible and factual evidence which would suggest that the current culling programs in several African countries, ostensibly for the purpose of enhancing the biodiversity of the area, are but a prelude to a carefully crafted strategy to reopen the international market to ivory.

Recently David Wills, vice-president for Investigations for The HSUS and HSI returned from a five-week undercover investigation into the current wildlife crisis in Africa. He is absolutely convinced that both elephant and rhinos are facing extinction in Zimbabwe and the African nations that are her neighbors. David's report, supplemented by moving and emotional video images, tells a tale of corruption and manipulation of these marvelous creatures for the short-term profit and plunder benefiting a few individuals who see the worth of an animal in terms of the value derived from its death.

David shared with me his tracking a female elephant approximately 30 years old who had a young calf. She had an old wound on her leg, perhaps the consequence of a poacher's snare, that caused her to constantly fall behind the herd as it was difficult for her to keep pace with the group. Describing this mother's relationship with her young, David talked of the constant touching, the low rumbling of voice that would reassure the calf when some sound or movement would startle her. He watched in fascination as this mother would pull a mopani tree down with her trunk and hold it low to the ground so the calf could enjoy the delicate and tender leaves that grow on the tree tops. The love and affection between cow and calf as they bathed in the river and moved through the African countryside was compelling

imagery which reinforced his appreciation of the complex social relationships found among this giant and gentle species.

David then went on to describe the despair and sorrow he experienced when three days later he came upon the bullet-ridden carcass of this same mother, dead in the forest. Her face now disfigured where poachers had cut away her ivory; her calf nowhere to be found. The death of the mother would certainly assure the death of the calf who would quickly fall prey to lions or hyenas—all this for two pieces of white ivory that some people prize as carved figurines to be placed on a mantle. As heart-wrenching as this story is, the greater tragedy lies in the knowledge that as long as this type of horror continues, the human species is further diminished and the human spirit is ethically on the verge of bankruptcy.

In conclusion, I want to share with you a very moving experience related by Alice Walker in her essay "The Universe Responds."

"One night after dinner," she begins, "as some friends were leaving my house, I opened my front door, only to have a large black dog walk gratefully inside. It had obviously been waiting quietly on the stoop. It came into the hallway, sniffed my hands, and prepared to make itself at home, exactly as if it had lived in my house all its life.

"There was no nervousness whatsoever about being an intruder. No, no, I said, out you go! It did not want to go, but my friends and I persuaded it. It settled itself at the door and there it stayed, barking reproachfully until I went to bed. Very late that night I heard its owners calling it. George! they called. George! Here, George! They were cursing and laughing drunk. George made no response.

"I suddenly realized that George was not lost. He had run away. He had run away from these cursing, laughing drunks who were now trying to find him. This realization meant the end of sleep for me that night as I lay awake considering my responsibility to George. For George obviously 'knew' which house was at least *supposed* to be a stop on the underground railroad, and had come to it; but I, in my city house, had refused to acknowledge my house as such. If I let it in, where would I put it?

Then, too, I'm not particularly fond of the restlessness of dogs...George had run away from these drunks who 'owned' him, people no doubt unfit to own anything at all that breathed. Did they beat him? Did they tie him to trees and lampposts outside pubs while they went inside and had drink after drink? Were the 'lost' dogs one heard about really runaways?

"Or suppose George was a woman, beaten or psychologically abused by her spouse. What then? Would I let her in? I would, wouldn't I? But where to put George anyway? If I put him in the cellar, he might bark. I hate the sound of barking. If I put him in the parlor, he might spread fleas. Who was this dog, anyway?

"George stayed at my door the whole night. In the morning I heard him bark, but by the time I was up, he was gone.

"I think I am telling you that the animals of the planet are in desperate peril, and they are fully aware of this," concludes Ms. Walker. "No less than human beings are doing in all parts of the world, they are seeking sanctuary. But I am also telling you that we are connected to them at least as intimately as we are connected to trees. Without plant life, human beings could not breathe. Plants produce oxygen. 'Magic,' intuition, sheer astonishment at the forms the Universe devises in which to express life—*itself*—will no longer be able to breathe in us. One day it occurred to me that if all the birds died, as they might well do, eventually, from the poisoning of their air, water, and food, it would be next to impossible to describe to our children the wonder of their flight.

"But what I'm also sharing with you is this thought," she continues: "The Universe responds. What you ask of it, it gives....I remember when I used to dismiss the bumper sticker 'Pray for Peace.' I realize now that I did not understand it, since I did not understand prayer; which I now know to be the active affirmation in the physical world of our inseparableness from the divine; and everything, *especially* the physical world, is divine. War will stop when we no longer praise it, or give it any attention at all. Peace will come whenever it is sincerely invited.

Love will overflow every sanctuary given it. Truth will grow where the fertilizer that nourishes it is also truth. Faith will be its own reward. ...whatsoever you do to the least of these, you also do unto me—and to yourself. For we are one."

Several weeks ago there was printed in one of the local newspapers a Peanuts cartoon in which Linus and Charlie Brown are seated out of doors looking into the

vastness of the night sky. Linus is saying: "Carl Sagan says there are a hundred billion stars in our galaxy and there are a hundred billion galaxies, and each galaxy contains a hundred billion stars! Sort of puts things in perspective, doesn't it Charlie Brown." To which Charlie Brown replies, "I miss my dog."

"I just wanted to say," writes Witold Starecki, "that our awakening....will begin at the moment when instead of hitting the dogs on the head, we shall start stroking them." So be it!