One More Chance

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It was the year 2200. The bishop raised his hands to Heaven, closed his eyes and called loudly to his Maker, "Oh God, what is to become of your human creatures? I beseech you, send us an emissary to guide us out of this Hell."

Worn out with continual praying, he dropped into his chair, slunk down and fell into a deep sleep.

When he opened his eyes several hours later, he found himself gazing into the great golden eyes of a Siberian tiger.

Was this some mad dream, where was he, what was happening? He leaped from his chair and started to make a run for the door.

Seeing the terror that gripped the bishop, the tiger said, "Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you."

Now the bishop was more frightened than ever. A talking tiger, whoever heard of such a thing? He sidled slowly along the wall towards the door, thinking that if he moved with great care, the tiger wouldn't leap out and grab him. Just as he had almost reached the door, the tiger jumped gracefully in front of him and barred his way.

"Oh please, please, dear God, save me from this ferocious beast," said the bishop. "I don't want to die being rent limb from limb by a wild tiger."

"Nobody's going to rend you limb from limb," said the tiger. "Just go back to your chair and sit down so that we can talk sensibly. I am here at your request, the emissary from God that you pleaded for."

Not taking his eyes from the tiger for a moment, the bishop slowly felt his way backward into his chair.

"How can this be?" asked the bishop. "How can an animal represent the Holy One?"

"Why not?" said the tiger. "I and all the other animals were created as perfect thoughts of God and are eternally a part of the Divine Mind, even as you are. If God chose me as his emissary, he must have had good reason."

"But I've never talked to an animal before. Indeed, I beg your pardon, but I've never thought of one as having the intelligence to understand me."

The tiger twitched one ear, then the other, took a long deep breath and settled down in a comfortable reclining position. He could see that this wasn't going to be an easy nut to crack.

"Understanding must work both ways," said the tiger. "We must understand each other, and intelligence is not the only attribute required for this."

"Then what is required?" asked the bishop.

"It takes something that earth people seem to have lost. It takes heart. Many, many years ago there were people on earth whom you others called 'bleeding hearts.' Most of them are gone, along with the animals

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and plants. They were your hope. Had you listened to them, you wouldn't be in the decline you're in today."

"Bleeding hearts! I remember that term, but I forget what they did, what they said. But I fear that what we're in today is much worse than a decline. All you have to do is look out my window at the bleak landscape. All is mud-gray—the sky, the land, the pond. No birds fly, no animals move, no green tree or plant shimmer in the distance. Our land, once so green and vibrant with every species of plant and animal life, is now covered either with concrete or dark, leaden soil, stripped of its nutrients."

"I'm well aware of the desperate situation," said the tiger, "but those on earth are in such a fix simply because they wouldn't listen to the bleeding hearts when they tried to teach you about your place in the universe."

"I still can't remember," said the bishop.

"Since prayer is your metier, I'll quote a prayer from the writer Dostoyevsky. He said it all better than I can":

Lord, may I love all Thy creation
the whole and every grain of sand in it.
May I love every leaf,
Every ray of light.

May I love the animals.
Thou hast given them the rudiments
Of thought and joy untroubled.
Let me not trouble them.
Let me not harass them,
Let me not deprive them of their happiness,
Let me not work against Thy intent.

For I acknowledge unto Thee
That all is like an ocean,
All flowing and blending,
And that to withhold any measure of love
From anything in Thy universe
Is to withhold that same measure from Thee.

"That's beautiful, but what can we do now? It's too late to do what Dostoyevsky suggested. There's nothing left to work with. Now that most of the animals and plants are gone, the people are dying, too. Who would ever have believed that Armageddon would be so gradual and painful? Instantaneous destruction would have been far preferable," said the bishop.

"I'm afraid that would have been too good for you, an easy way out. This way you are able to observe and

live the results of your ignorance. You are the victims of your own selfishness."

"But what did we really do to deserve such a fate as starvation and choking on the very air we try to breathe?"

"Your main problem was the central belief of your Judeo-Christian religion, that man was the center of the universe. Even years ago, after Copernicus proved differently, you held to the belief that the sun revolved around the Earth. When science advanced to the point where this was universally recognized as an idiot belief, you still clung to the notion that the human animal was the center of everything on earth around which all other animals and plants revolved."

"But the Bible told us that we were to have 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowls of the air, and over the cattle and over all the earth.' We have only followed through on this precept."

"Yes, you have always been clever in interpreting the Bible to your own selfish advantages. Did it ever occur to you that 'having dominion over' meant that you were placed in the role of caretakers? It certainly didn't mean that you were given carte blanche to abuse and destroy all forms of life different from your own."

"But we are the creatures with souls. Naturally, we believed that such superiority gave us rights over other animals."

"I can't believe that you're drawing that tired chestnut out of the fire. Back in the thirteenth century St. Thomas Aquinas came up with the idea that animals don't have souls. How St. Thomas decided that he possessed the superhuman quality of knowing whether animals have souls or not remains a mystery. He couldn't prove it scientifically. It had to be accepted on faith. So why can't the many Biblical allusions to the 'souls' of animals, as in Job 12:7-10, lead to an acceptance of animal souls as readily as to an acceptance of human souls? Just look deeply into my eyes," said the tiger. "Then tell me that I have no soul."

The Bishop turned to stare into the tiger's eyes. Never had he seen such great, golden orbs. As he continued to look, he became mesmerized. He saw many different colors, glinting and glimmering inside those magnificent eyes. It was like looking into a many-colored kaleidoscope. The colors moved and changed from cerulean blues to ambers, from turquoise greens to the clearest blues. Deeper and deeper they drew him until he had no power to look away. He felt himself drawn inexorably closer and closer to those eyes until he had a sensation such as he had never had before. He

was leaving his body. His essence, his soul, whatever one wanted to call it, was entering into the eyes and ultimately into the mind of this tiger.

At first the bishop tried to draw back, to stop the procedure, but it was as though he had no will. Finally, he let himself go. He entered the tiger's brain.

And now the bishop was the tiger. He had no awareness of his previous self. He had become a strong, handsome Bengal tiger, an emissary of the Holy One, sent to study the last vestiges of life on the planet earth.

His next stop was at the home of a hunter, a man who had spent the better part of his life hunting down and killing wild animals on two continents. The walls of his home were lined with the heads of bison, lions, zebras, deer, moose—every animal that had once roamed the wilderness.

The man sat in his study, his head in his hands, his eyes closed. He was bereft. With no more animals to kill, his life had become meaningless.

The tiger stopped in front of the hunter, opened his mouth and let out a lusty roar. The sound literally knocked the hunter off his chair, and when he saw the tiger, he began to shake uncontrollably. Never had he been so close to a wild animal, and worst of all he had no gun. He began to tremble so violently that his teeth clattered.

The tiger sat still and looked at him for a while, rather enjoying the spectacle of a hunter with no gun. Finally, for fear the hunter might literally die of fright, the tiger said, "Things are very different when you are caught without your gun, aren't they?"

If the hunter was scared before, he was terrified now. What was this tiger doing using human speech?

"Oh, please, please mighty tiger," he said. "If you will spare my life, I promise never to kill another tiger."

"That's safe enough to say," said the tiger, "since there are no more tigers. All have been hunted to extinction by people such as you. There are also no more elephants, no more bears, no more whales and any number of other magnificent creatures who once populated this earth."

"Oh, but I didn't kill them all," said the hunter.

"Perhaps not, but such decimation was the result of your way of thinking that God's innocent creatures were put here solely for your sport, entertainment and exploitation. Such belief could only end in disaster."

"But this is what I was always taught. How else could I believe?"

"You could have used compassion. You could have opened your eyes and looked around at what was happening before it was too late. You would have seen that life and all its creatures from mouse to man to elephant are linked together and are interdependent. As soon as one is driven to extinction, it affects another and so on up and down the line. With no more animals and plants, the human being, who has caused all the destruction, is now nearing his own end."

"Can't something be done?" asked the hunter. "As they say 'where there's life there's hope.'"

"You're a fine one to talk of life when you have spent yours dealing in death," said the tiger. "If you had a gun you'd shoot me now."

"No, I wouldn't because you can talk, so you must have some kind of brain like mine."

"All animals have brains," said the tiger. "Just because we have different ways of communicating doesn't mean we don't have cognitive powers. Remember, the human being is only a small minority of the animal kingdom. The rest of us are creatures endowed with senses that humans don't even possess, and with abilities you can never attain. We are complete in ourselves and roamed the earth many centuries before you were even thought of. You need us, but we don't need you in the least. Just look deep into my eyes and tell me that I have no brain."

The hunter, despite his reluctance, felt himself drawn toward the beautiful eyes of the tiger. As he looked into them, he was confused. The eyes were certainly those of a tiger—round, gleaming and magnificent—but there was something human about them, too. What kind of beast was this part tiger, part man?

"When I look into your eyes," said the hunter, "I seem to see a human being as well as a tiger. Is this why you are able to talk?"

"You have more insight than I would have given you credit for," said the tiger. "I am indeed an unusual tiger in that I am God's emissary. That is why I speak your language."

"God's emissary! But I've never really been religious, never even believed much in God," said the hunter.

"Your not believing in him has very little to do with His existence. Since you constantly broke the First Commandment, I naturally suspected that you weren't a believer."

"What do you mean? I've never killed a man, except in war when I was supposed to."

"There you go again, interpreting the Bible to your own advantage. The commandment doesn't say 'Thou shalt not kill human beings'; it says 'Thou shalt not kill—period.'"

"But that's plain silly," said the hunter. "Nobody ever believed that we weren't supposed to kill other species."

"There were some people who did, but no one listened to the bleeding hearts."

"Your eyes are straying away from mine," said the tiger. "I want you to keep looking and tell me what you see."

As the hunter stared hard into the tiger's eyes, he saw a strange thing. Someone, it seemed to be a priest or religious person, was sitting on a green grassy knoll and enfolding in his arms many domestic animals—sheep, cows, pigs, goats, chickens—all were moving into his arms and he was looking at them with a most loving expression.

"How very odd," said the hunter, and as he continued to look, he suddenly felt a great desire to join this loving group.

He no sooner had this sensation than he felt himself leaving his earthly body and moving happily and willingly into the eyes of the tiger. Soon, he, like the bishop, became a part of the tiger's mind.

"I have many stops to make," thought the tiger. "Perhaps I'm spending too long with each individual. I still must visit a zookeeper, a circus owner, a slaughterhouse owner, a trapper, a whale slaughterer and all the others who exploit and kill animals for sport or profit."

It took many days, but finally the tiger had lured into his eyes at least one example of each animal abuser.

"I have done what my Master told me to do," he said. "Now I shall return and receive further instructions. I must say, I do hope He will relieve me of this motley crew. I don't feel myself with such people becoming a part of me."

"Tiger, you have been a superb emissary. I know the work was tedious and that you had to use much restraint in dealing with such people. How many times you must have wanted to take them in your teeth," said the Master.

"I'll admit, sometimes it was hard, especially with that hunter. I'm afraid if it had been left up to me, I would have felt he deserved what he feared—being rent limb from limb."

"You shall receive your reward for what you have done. You probably don't realize it, but you are carrying your reward right within you."

"I thought I was carrying a bunch of animal abusers," said the tiger.

"We shall see," said the Master.

And then the strangest thing of all happened.

Right while they were talking, the tiger felt himself somehow growing lighter and lighter, and happier, too. "What is happening to me?" he asked.

"Look behind you," said the Master.

When the tiger turned, he saw a wondrous sight. A smooth grassy hilltop had sprung up and some familiar people were walking toward it. The bishop came first, leading his flock of domestic animals. He looked wondrously happy, and every once in a while, he'd stop to pick up a young lamb or chicken that was having trouble keeping up. He was tending them all with care and love.

Next came the hunter, a transformed man. Perched on his shoulder were a pair of doves, and following behind were deer, rabbits, elk, lions and one great elephant. He, like the bishop, had become caretaker of these animals. His devotion to them shone through his eyes.

Thus it went with all the former animal abusers. Each seemed to have been reborn in a new mold. Each was happy. Each knew his mission in life.

As these troops of people and animals ascended the green mountain, the tiger said, "But this is amazing. How could such a transformation have taken place?"

"It is really quite simple," said the Master. "These people had to see the world through an animal's eyes and brain. This was the only way to get them to understand the evils they had been perpetrating. Once they truly saw, they changed. They will never return to their old ways."

"This is all wonderful, but there is still one thing I don't understand. What will happen to these people and animals on an earth that is dying?" said the tiger.

"It will not die, not this time, at least," said the Master. "I had made a beautiful planet, perfect in every detail, with each part linked to every other part, all operating smoothly. Thus it remained until my creation, the human being, destroyed it. I decided not to allow this one small human link in the great chain to cause the end of everything. Human beings are being given one more chance. With their new understanding, they should be able to build a better world. We shall wait and see."

"But you've given them so many chances before," said the tiger, "and each time they have betrayed their trust. How can you forgive them still another time?"

"I can do it because I am God," He said.