

AWAKENING THE HUMAN HEART

Servers who devote their wisdom, time, skills and passion to healing humanity's relationship with the animal kingdom are amongst the pioneers of the culture of the heart. We have only to look to the central role of animals in the imagery of religion, language, art, dream and myth to see the great importance of the animal/human relationship. Those who work in this field of service are calling into question fundamental notions about our role as a species, how we live and how we see the world.

For most indigenous cultures, the world is a place in which humans are meant to live out their lives in harmony with nature. Chief Luther Standing Bear, for example, said of the Lakota¹ peoples' view of the world: "Kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky and water was a real and active principle. For the animal and bird world there existed a brotherly feeling that kept the Lakota safe among them. And so close did some of the Lakotas come to their feathered and furred friends that in true brotherhood they spoke a common tongue."

Most of the religious teachings of the world address the need to treat animals with respect. However, while Eastern religions have developed this theme, Christian churches in the past have interpreted the Bible to mean that animals were of no moral concern to the human being. Even as late as the mid-19th century Pope Pius IX refused permission for the founding of a society for the prevention of cruelty to animals in Rome on the grounds that, if permission was granted, it would imply that human beings had duties to the animals. The great awakening taking place in human consciousness today is reflected in the very different view of Pope John Paul II who, in 1982, spoke of the "sweet name of brother and sister" by which St. Francis addressed every created being and called humanity to a similar attitude of "solicitous care". We are to be as "intelligent and noble masters and guardians of nature and not as heedless exploiters and destroyers".

The denial of great good

It is to our collective shame that humanity's role throughout this century has been so often that of heedless exploiter and destroyer. Vivisection is the most dramatic example. Most animal experimentation is hidden away from the public eye so figures are hard to come by, but conservative estimates of the number of animals "sacrificed" to research each year range from 100-200 million. Modern production methods and the demands of big business have created farms that are no more than food factories. In a typical factory farm for poultry in Europe, birds spend their entire lives in wire-mesh cages with a floor space of 450 square centimetres per bird — the size of an average sheet of typing paper. The picture is bleak for all farm animals subjected to modern intensive farming in which the animals are treated as a commodity, as "production units", where concern is first and foremost to lower production costs and maximise profits. Transport to slaughter houses and the methods of slaughter often involve unnecessary stress and cruelty.

The scale of modern high-tech operations can have a

devastating effect. In an information document to the U.N., Greenpeace reports on the "wall of death" which extends for thousands of kilometres across the northern and southern Pacific Ocean each night during the fishing season. A single driftnet vessel can deploy up to 60 kilometres of driftnet to a depth of about 15 metres below the sea surface in a single setting. Since the early 1980s hundreds of boats from Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have been fishing for tuna, squid and salmon in this way. Under international pressure, South Korea has now stopped driftnetting and Japan, too, has reduced its fleet. Even so, Greenpeace estimated in November 1989 that there were still 32,000 kilometres of nets in use in the North Pacific and 10,000 kilometres in the South Pacific. The daily toll of marine life snared and killed in the nets is enormous, and it includes whales, dolphins, seals, sea turtles, sea birds and many slow reproducing species of fish.

There are stories like this on every side, whether you look at vivisection, the factory farm, the slaughter house, the growing number of species on the endangered list, blood sports, cruelty in trapping, the neglect of family pets. Animals suffer. Humanity is brutalised. These practices impoverish the earth because they deform and obstruct the contribution that the different species of animals can make, each in its own way, to the enrichment of the planetary life. We, too, are impoverished by our disregard and denial of the great good which right relationships with the animal kingdom will make possible.

Expanding the circle of ethics

Since the mid 1970s, however, there has been a dramatic upsurge in support for animal rights and in the effectiveness of animal rights campaigns. One significant contribution to this revolution in the way we think about animals was the publication in 1975 of the book *Animal Liberation*, by Peter Singer, an Australian philosopher. He revealed to the general public the extent of animal suffering in factory farms and in animal experimentation. Peter Singer argues that the treatment of animals represents a moral blindspot and is logically inconsistent. We have been, he says, guilty of "speciesism", of the belief that all humans are somehow infinitely more valuable than any animal. He urges us to expand the circle of ethics to embrace the animals. They have, he argues, the right to equal consideration. The philosopher, Mary Midgley, gives as an example of the way our civilisation is becoming "altogether more sensitive to this topic", the fact that while before 1975, no philosophy student in the USA took courses on the subject of the treatment of animals, over 100,000 do so today.² The different philosophical debates now emerging on animal rights and welfare explore the vision of humanity's guardianship of the world of animals based on respect for animals in their own right.

Education is, of course, the key. Although attitudes vary enormously in different societies, the findings of an extensive survey carried out in the USA by Stephen Kellert on the public attitude to wildlife suggest that "wildlife values are undergoing a period of some confusion and transition" and that the transformation of the present rather naive, emotional "bedrock of affection" for animals to a "more ecological and