

## Or Would You Rather Be a Fish?

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Once when I was visiting a church, a young boy asked me if I could be any animal I wanted, what animal would I be. I told him I thought I would like to be a lion. I'm not fast on my feet. I like to think things out ahead of time and this was not a question I had thought about very much. So, a lion was not a bad choice for me. As a child, one of my favorite animals in children's literature was Aslan, the great lion, in the Narnia series, after whom we had named our yellow cat. And although we were a family with numerous animals which resided in our home over the years: turtles, frogs, lizards, salamanders, tropical fish and gold fish --- just to name a few --- we always had a cat. So I tended to admire the catlike traits of independence and strength, as well as admiring their athletic, sinewy, shapes. So why wouldn't the largest cat of all, be particularly appealing? Lions have it over Tigers in that they are sociable animals living in prides, and I would enjoy the company.

However, that summer, as I was doing one of my regular bouts of swimming laps, I realized that I probably had given the wrong answer, at least for me. Because I really love the water. I love the way it feels. I love playing in it. I love the sights and sounds of the ocean. My idea of a perfect vacation would be to spend a week snorkeling around a coral reef. I never go home without visiting the Oregon aquarium. I love the ocean, I love swimming, I love the incredible variety and beauty that you can see at any coral reef. "I know!" I said to myself, "What I would really like to be is a porpoise!"

It was not so odd to ask or to ponder such a question. There are lots of stories about people going back and forth between the animal world. In one of my favorite novels when I was young, The Sword in the Stone, part of E.B. White's, The Once and Future King, Merlin, the wizard, turns Wart, the boy who will grow up to be King Arthur, into many different kinds of animals in order to teach him wisdom. In one chapter Arthur is a perch, in another a hawk, then a snake, then an owl.

Many of the mythic stories of the world's religions involve animals --- in fact in many cultures the creator was an animal. Among the Inuit it was the Raven who created the world, for the Creek tribe in was an aquatic beetle, in the Southwest Coyote had divine powers. And there is nation founding. We all remember the story of Romulus and Remus whose foster mother was a wolf and grew up to found Rome. We may not know the story of Tan-gun, the founder of Korea. Tan-gun's mother had once been a bear, but was so attracted to the life of the local human beings that she went to a God, Hwanung, to find out how that transformation could be accomplished. It took much patience and a hundred days, but the bear was transformed into a beautiful young woman --- so beautiful that the God, Hwanung, fell in love with her, and from their union came baby Tan-gun, the founder of Korea, all of whose people are, according to the legend, thus descended from a God and a bear.

Cultures all over the world have many stories of powerful and sacred animals, as well as a porous boundary between species --- with animals becoming human and visa versa. A clear recognition of porous boundaries between human animals and all the rest.

Although Western Tradition has biblical stories, myths and legends which include animals: there is the serpent in the Garden of Eden, there is the Big Fish which swallowed Jonah, there is Daniel and the lions, and, of course, Noah's ark, --- animals in Jewish, Christian, Greek, and Islamic traditions do not seem to have the same place in the world as they do in so many, more nature-centered religions. They are minor characters, at best, an after thought. They certainly don't have the powers of World creation. They are not intimately connected with the human community. Animals and humans don't cross between one another's worlds. In the Hebrew Testament, there is a lot of animal sacrifice, as well as the notion that all the animals were, in a sense, given to us for our use rather than creatures in their own right.

During my swim in which I decided I might like to be a porpoise, one of my hesitations about my choice had to do with what was happening to the oceans --- and to the coral reefs I fantasized being able to view daily. And I wondered if the oceans would be in as much trouble, if we, like the Hindus, believed we might come back in our next lives as animals.

If we really thought we might be porpoises next time around, would we treat the ocean as we do? Would coral be on the endangered species list? But that thought was quickly dispelled as I remember what we do to our own environment: how we foul the waters we drink, destroy the lands and waters that feed us, pollute the air we breathe, destroy the ozone layer: all actions that harm us in this incarnation, not to mention harming our children. So I figured that believing strongly in our animal future might not keep us from destroying their habitats with our roads and sprawl, nor the oceans in which they swim, with our dumping of waste and raising of temperatures. It is an interesting thought.

Still it got me thinking again about the animal world and how we regard other animals and our relationship to them.

It may surprise some of you to know that I think about this quite a bit. Many people assume I am not an animal lover because I don't have a pet. I acknowledge that I am not an animal lover in the sense of wanting to live with them in my house --- although I do enjoy the little lizards and plethora of wonderful birds nearby. Commonly we gauge people's relationships with animals by how many of them they choose to have in their home. But I am ambivalent about having animals in who are outside their natural habitat. It may sound a little silly, but as much as I might enjoy the beauty of watching brightly colored fish swim around a tank, I always feel a little sorry for a fish that never gets to swim in an ocean, lake, or stream, and I would feel a little guilty being the cause of that. Ditto, of course, the birds that cannot fly free, even the lizard who never gets to sun itself on a big rock in the sun. I wouldn't feel the same about dogs and cats, who, at this point in their evolution are meant to live with humans in a human environment --- but even then I would want them to live in places where they could do the things that make being a dog or a cat's life a good one --- enough room and a chance to be outdoors a lot-- a bit iffy where I live now --- for a dog, especially. Besides, what interests me about

animals is not animals captured by humans, but animals in their own environment living their own lives: lions running on the Serengeti, monkeys swinging through the Guatemalan jungle, whales making their long journeys from South American to Alaska and back.

In my travels, I have been, by necessity, a budget traveler, often staying in places with narrow beds and lit by a single, sixty-watt bulb. On one such journey to Guatemala in which I had mostly stayed in hotel rooms with prices under ten dollars, I spent nearly a week's pay to travel to the jungle and the ruins of Tikal. And although the chance to see the site of the great civilization of the Mayans was exciting, I don't know if I would have gone had it not been located in a place with exotic birds and colorful serpents, a place where the night is rent with the cries of the monkeys and lit by thousands of fireflies. I am, attracted by the other beings in the world. I like to hear them, to watch them. I like to know that we are not alone. I am amazed by their variety. Sea creatures are much more exotic and varied than anything our imaginations could create --- far more original and unfathomable than the fictional inter-galactic beings in our fantasies of Star Trek or Star Wars. Or think of the fact that we know of 350,000 different kinds of beetles and scientists suggest that there are probably as many as a million other species we haven't identified.

My friend, Gary Kowalski, tells the story, of a famous scientist being asked what he had learned about the Creator from his studies of biology. The entomologist answered that he had learned that God must have just loved beetles --- he made so many of them!

Gary, our UU minister in Burlington, Vermont, is one of several people who have got me thinking more deeply about my relationship with the rest of the animals of this earth, and about the human species' relationship with our many animal cousins. Gary, a friend of long standing, is a bright, quiet, big, and gentle man, who has thought and studied a lot about those kinds of questions. He is something of an animal activist, but his activism is more one of persuasion. He's written and published several books on his ideas and concerns, as well as preaching and speaking. Another who challenged me to think was a gentle woman named Phyllis, a long-time member of a congregation I served, whose soft spoken passion for our animal cousins caused me to read and think more about them. Most powerful was Roger Fouts whose memoir about his personal journey of a life spent with Chimpanzees, asks some important questions and presents some challenges.

None of these folks fit the media images of the animal rights activists. Perhaps these three are not typical of animal activists. More likely, the media has treated Gary, Phyllis, and Roger's ideas and concerns with the same dismissive, sound-bite sensationalism, as they have treated so many activists of other kinds: from anti-war folks, to feminists, to black activists, and so on ---- concentrating on the lunatic fringe or distorting concerns by compressing the ideas they contain. The famous media critic Noam Chomsky has suggested that it is not only the corporate ownership of media that tends to make it conservative, but its methodology. Any new idea, he points out, cannot

be presented in a sound bite, and if you try to do so it sounds loony. Anything that is both new and important requires quite a bit of explanation for understanding.

So, without a large forum for their concerns, it has been hard to discern the central arguments of the current activist movement and what I know of it, is therefore, necessarily partial. I have been impressed by some, turned off by others. Still, the people who have impressed me have challenged me to think more clearly about the questions of our relations to the animal world.

Certainly the central idea of the movement is one we all have some sympathy with. It is that animals are not things. And we do not have a right to treat them any way we choose. This is a principle that, in theory, most people agree with to an extent. There have long been laws on the books forbidding needless cruelty to, and torture of, animals. And, indeed, the laws against cruelty to animals were passed and enforced before there were laws against child abuse. I learned, back when I was a child welfare worker, that Humane societies set up for the prevention of cruelty to animals were the first organizations to do work rescuing children from abuse. However, even though we have those laws, they are not vigorously enforced, nor are they enforced against organizations with clout or who claim to have a purpose. Many of us who would be shocked if a neighbor kept a dog in a way that was un-hygienic, cruel, and made the animal crazy, look the other way when scientific researchers do the same with dogs or even chimpanzees.

“Doing it for science” has such an aura of authority that we look the other way at cruelty, even when the science has little value or when the cruelty is unnecessary to the science involved. Most of us recognize that scientific advances with animal experimentation has benefited us or someone we love. And yet, most of the hurt suffered by animals is not in search of insulin or a cure for polio. As undergraduate, I was involved in a discipline in which thousands of animals were used in research. I know first hand that almost none of the researchers who were cruel to animals were doing anything life-saving and little of the cruelty and hurt was essential to the work being done. Indeed, it is hard to think of a moral justification for cruelty to research animals, since even in the hard case, the case of medical research to save lives, there is no reason that animals couldn't be treated as humanely as we would hope humans would be treated, in clean, species appropriate, environments, kept comfortable, pain free, and amused. But beyond that question is a harder question. Why shouldn't animals have the right to live their lives completely free from harm, if they are not harming us? Is a chimpanzee, an animal that differs in the tiniest respect from us genetically --- its DNA is a 98.6% match to human DNA --- is our closest cousin without any right to his life and home? They can do everything we can except vocalize, including speak in sign language, and they are more intelligent than we are in some areas. Even by human measures of intelligence an adult chimp is more advanced than a young human child. So what ethical argument can be given for treating a chimpanzee worse than we would treat that child? To use them as we would never use a child no matter how damaged. None really. All we can say is that we do it because we can, and it benefits us ---- the argument of the bully but not the ethicist.

The other side of this, of course, is that we cannot live in the world and hurt no living thing. We eat to live. We kill the microorganisms that attack us, as well as some of the larger beings such as mosquitoes or rats that are likely to bear disease and harm to us. That fact, however, is not, I think, an argument for refusing to be more reverent of the lives of other beings and presuming that they have a right to exist and flourish in this world. It ought, I think, to be merely a caveat against an extremism, a search for purity beyond possibility. Thus, I don't entirely agree with the animal rights movement's emphasis on vegetarianism, except in so far as they are protesting the cruelty done to animals on most large, industrial, farms --- not an insignificant concern ---- or except for the practical environmental reason that it takes geometrically more energy and resources to create a pound of beef than a pound of vegetable-based protein.

Another way in which most of us have become more sympathetic to the well-being of animals and their right to exist and live well apart from our needs, is our increasing awareness of the damage we have done to them --- not individually, but as species ---- and our increased commitment to the environment. Whole species of animals are disappearing at the fastest rate in human history, due largely to us. We are shaping the world in ways that is so encroaching on the habitats of other species that they are disappearing at alarming rates. Some, such as the American buffalo and the American passenger pigeons, two species that once numbered in the millions were killed off directly by human hands.

Today, it is our suburban lifestyle, our technologies, our pollution, our cutting down of the forests, our over development, which steals the homes and very lives of the other animals of this earth. We have tried to turn this around in some ways --- such as declaring endangered species. And most of us are sympathetic with the urge to preserve our earth for all. Ethically, we tend to want to preserve the natural world and all its residents ---- although most of us are not willing to make the lifestyle changes required to do so.

One of the ironies of our lives may be that many of us who most love the natural world, choose a lifestyle more damaging to that world than folks who love it less. People who want that greenery and woodsy feeling to surround their homes, are harming the earth and its creatures far more than the couple who lives in an apartment in the city. People who love the ocean are often the ones damaging the coral and sea life with their boats and their waste. They are despoiling open spaces where the animals live and the spots they use for their migrations. They drive more and in larger vehicles, poisoning the air and contributing more to global warming. But we do believe that all this is not a good thing, that we don't want to be without the rich variety of life that, despite all, still surrounds us. Indeed, I am quite convinced that a person who lives an environmentally conscious lifestyle does far more for the well being of animals than many of the animal activists covered in the media. A recent story in the paper which told of a planned protest of a pig roast by members of PETA, had me reflecting on whether they weren't doing far more damage to animals by driving their SUV's, or even Honda Civics, out to that small town, than the people planning to roast a single pig.

I have come to believe that the kind of relationship we ought to have with the other animals is one of respect. That we should not regard bio-diversity as a virtue because of what it might do for us, but rather that we should regard the other beings of

this world as having their own claim to the world and a place in it. We should not think of ourselves as owners of wild animals, with a right to treat them in any way we want, rather they own themselves. I have come to believe that to love God is to love creation, not just our little corner of it. I think the Native American hunters, who used to give prayers of thanks to the animals whose lives they took that they might eat, had it more correct than the religions of the Middle East in which animals had no souls and were killed without thought. I think the Native American religions that saw animals as sacred co-inhabitants, even co-creators of the world had it more right than the religions which saw them as chattel.

My friend, Gary, says that human beings' moral development increases as we draw the circle of concern larger, from self to family, from family to tribe, from tribe to a larger community or nation, from nation to all humanity, from humanity to all creatures and creation. In a time in which we seem to be drawing circles smaller, rather than enlarging them, perhaps he is foolish to hope.

And yet, he and people like him have helped me draw my circle a little wider. Where I once scarcely noticed the bird I met as I went into my yard --- Now, inwardly, I greet it, thinking: "Here we both are alive in this marvelous world together." Where once I accepted the notion that a concern with animals meant wanting them as a part of my family, I now realize that it is perhaps an even greater demonstration of concern when we celebrate them as they create their own families, in their own places, and in their own ways.

The one story from the Western Tradition that really celebrates animal life, is the story of Noah --- A story that recognizes the necessity to save all creatures to re-birth the world. Gary suggests, and I can't help but wonder if he isn't right, that if we humans could live more humanely with animals, we might also live more humanely with the earth and with each other. What I have always liked about his approach, is that it is such a positive, loving, savoring approach. He doesn't tell us all what we mustn't do, although he may imply it. He tells us of the beauty of all the creatures that live with us on this earth. He tells us of the beauty, and he hopes that as we learn to truly savor all creation, we will be moved to save it.