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Repenting of our inhumane treatment of animals

Carol Meyer | Apr. 12, 2011 Eco Catholic

Humans versus animals. Humans superior to animals. Humans exploiting and killing animals. It?s not a pretty picture. What has gone wrong? Why are we at enmity with our closest kin in creation?And what is it doing to the health of the earth and of our souls?

The wellbeing of animals is rarely talked about in religious or environmental circles. Only a few animal rights groups seem to care, and they are often deemed radical and excessive in their concern. After all, people are hurting and our priorities clearly ought to reside there. What most fail to see is that the welfare of animals is tied to our own. We can?t mistreat them without harming ourselves in the process, both physically and spiritually.

St. Paul?s analogy of the body and its parts all needing to work together because they suffer together (1 Corinthians 12:12-26) fits beautifully here.
This pervasive attitude of disregarding animals has been disastrous on a number of fronts. We?ve caused terrible suffering for these intelligent, beautiful, feeling creatures. In our hubris we?ve considered them ?below us,? and thus felt justified in exploiting them without mercy for our own ends. Just think of all the animal testing labs that inflict immense pain without a flicker of remorse. Or the baby seals beaten to a bloody death. Or the billions of animals caged and tortured on factory farms. Or the animals hunted, poisoned and trapped to die a slow, agonizing death. Or the dolphins and sea turtles who experience suffocation, crushing, or evisceration because of modern industrial fishing methods.

We?ve always thought of animals as expendable, as nuisances, as dangerous, so if they got in our way, they were eliminated. As simple as that. Because we haven?t reverenced animals as a necessary part of the web of life, we?ve thrown off the balance in nature, and everything has gone askew. We?ve had no idea what grand design of God we were messing with.

But the consequences of our sin are starting to rain down on our heads. For instance, right now the demise of the humble bee might bring us all down--at least to our knees.

Our sense of superiority over animals has been misguided at best and a disgrace at worst. Who gets to decide who is superior to whom? Based on what criteria? And even if we were superior (which I don?t buy for a minute), that should never give us a right to mistreat what we deem inferior. On the contrary, being superior should mean we are more moral and kind than animals, which we are clearly not. The animals are not wrecking the planet. We are. They have not killed a hundred million of their kind in the last century out of hatred and fear. We have.

Just because humans have a higher level of reasoning and consciousness doesn?t make us better than animals. Cheetahs can run 68 miles an hour, birds have a built-in navigation system, eagles can spot rabbits from several miles away, and pumas can jump 40 feet horizontally, but they don?t gloat and look down their noses at us. Every species has unique qualities and abilities. How much better to honor each than developing hierarchical systems and judging who is better than whom.

We?ve often justified our terrible treatment of animals by declaring that they don?t have souls. Who gave us the right to decide who has souls and who doesn?t? Seems like I recall St. Thomas Aquinas saying women didn?t have souls, nor did Blacks when plantation owners needed an excuse for their enslavement. We humans have also set ourselves apart from animals by arrogantly declaring that we are made in the image and likeness of God and are children of God, but animals are not. My reasoning is: How can God have created anything not in God?s likeness? Sounds impossible to me. It?s like my painting a picture and saying it doesn?t reflect anything of me. Of course it does. So animals too are made in God?s image and are God?s children.

My guess is that such talk is repulsive and abhorrent to some. And there?s only one reason why. We think God is a human being, when God definitely is not. God is spirit and takes no form. We are not literally God?s children. It is simply a beautiful metaphor describing a relationship of love and care, and can equally be applied to animals.

I thought that humility was a Christian virtue. Since when has this haughtiness towards different life forms been considered acceptable or godly? Most of us dislike people who puts on airs and thinks they are better than everyone else. But we don?t mind taking on the role of the most exalted one in creation. Feels kinds nice in fact. Boosts up the old battered ego to be able to lord it over helpless animals.

As the Lenten season is winding down, I suggest that we examine our personal and collective consciences about how we have sinned against animals. And often it?s not direct abuse that we must examine, but how we have participated in, benefitted from, and condoned systems that oppress animals. Do we wear furs, buy tickets to the circus, eat meat and animal products, kill squirrels, fish and hunt for fun, use products tested on animals, and more? We also need to ask whether we have tried to protect and save animals through public policy or by joining an animal rights organization. Part of our repentance can be raising our awareness by reading the book, The Missing Peace: The Hidden Power of Our Kinship with Animals(available from Amazon), comprised of powerful stories and testimonials about how people came to value animals.

Let us also meditate on these words by seventh-century Christian mystic St. Isaac the Syrian, ?What is a charitable heart? It is a heart which is burning with love for the whole creation, for people, for the birds, for the beasts?for all creatures. The one who has such a heart cannot see or call to mind a creature without their eyes being filled with tears by reason of the immense compassion which seizes their heart; a heart which is softened and can no longer bear to see or learn from others of any suffering, even the smallest pain being inflicted upon a creature. That is why such a person never ceases to pray for the animals ? moved by the infinite pity which reigns in the heart of those who are becoming united with God.?

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