

They Put People To Sleep Don't They?

By Dr. Randall Eaton

The last summer she became ill. The doctor said she had cancer and wouldn't live long, maybe a few months, and he couldn't do anything for her, so she came home. Because she was everyone's favorite in the family, there was much sadness. We wept and comforted her. As the weeks wore on she lost vitality, stayed indoors most of the time and suffered more. Twice daily I spent a long time with her, holding her close as I used to do for consolation under the piano in the front room where no one could see us. Even with pain mounting, she felt worse for me than for herself. That's the way Tiff had always been; dying didn't diminish her generosity.

Summer vacation had come and I went without her to the farm to feed the horses and do chores. It was mid-afternoon on a weekday when the car arrived to take me back to town. Oddly, my father was with my mother rather than at work. I jumped across the corral fence, locked the barnyard gate and walked to meet them as my father reached over and opened the backdoor—a rare courtesy.

"Hi, Ran," my mother said sternly but delicately.

"Hi, Mom. What are you doing here, Dad?"

"Randall, we thought we'd better come to tell you."

He called me Randall when he was very serious.

"What do you mean? What's wrong?"

"Well, honey," my mother paused, "you see, sweetheart, we didn't want to hurt you . . . I mean we thought it was best if you didn't know . . . you've got to understand that it was for the best. There was nothing anyone could do for her."

"It's Tiff, isn't it? What's wrong with her. Tell me."

"Now Randall, calm down son. We said there's nothing we could do. She was sick, miserable. We couldn't let her go on like that. "

"Oh my God, she's dead isn't she? Tell me what happened."

My mother began to sob and said that we all loved her, she was part of the family, but she was worried about me most, about how I'd take Tiff's death. When I asked where she was, my father told me that I wouldn't be able to see her, which struck me as strange not only because I couldn't imagine not putting her to rest myself, we had always buried our pets in a small cemetery behind the house. He told me that the veterinarian had taken care of the body, and only then did I realize what had occurred. My parents had taken Tiff to the veterinarian in Rushville and had her put to sleep.

I was shocked that they would "put her to sleep," astonished that they would do so without telling me in advance. I remember running away behind the barn into the pine grove, running until I collapsed from grief and fell on the ground begging Tiff to forgive me for not saying goodbye.

Not until I turned 40, in the middle of teaching a class in environmental ethics did I realize all the resentment I'd carried since that day on the farm. And for the first time it became clear to me why I had always objected to the common remedy for an animal's suffering, "Better put it out of its misery." Neither had I admitted how much Tiff had meant to me. In actual fact, she was the very best friend I'd ever had.

The psychologists can say what they will about such a statement, but there won't be just a few, who, looking over years of association with countless animals and humans, conclude likewise. For them my declaration will come as no surprise; for others, perhaps more fortunate in their conduct with humanity I shall appear as a social misfit. It's not that humans have hurt me more than animals, but simply that when it comes to all the measures of friendship, my springer spaniel dog was incomparable.

The tragedy from which millions of children and grownups never recuperate is that their parents hide them from the truth. Is there an unwritten code that justifies parents slipping away with their children's pet to put them to sleep? Sleep? Why are we so afraid of the truth? Especially the fact of death? Does all this deception alleviate or exacerbate the child's pain? What are the psychological consequences?

No doubt, I experienced as much if not more pain from having been told after the fact of Tiff's death rather than before. My parents wanted to do Tiff a favor, and perhaps they suspected that had I known of their intentions I might have resisted to the point of prolonging Tiff's suffering. Who knows but that I might have run away with her? I can't say I wouldn't have, and the possibility would have occurred to me. It's not that my parents weren't trying to make the best of a bad situation, and God knows they loved Tiff and were acutely sensitive to my affection for her. Still, like so many parents, mine did not know how to handle the death of my best friend. In trying to eliminate Tiff's pain and suffering, they also assumed that mine would be reduced by isolating me from her death, but I have suffered a lifetime for not having been allowed to confront her death—to share it with her. She could have had her best friend there, if not for her sake, then for mine.

After 26 years, my secret shame for the way Tiff died had surfaced, and for the sake of boys and girls, whose conceptions of "sleep" and death, whose deep distrust of their parents and adulthood generally, are a continuing source of confusion, I am compelled to address the dying and death of animal friends.

There is no alternative but to treat of fundamental ethics and the very meaning of life itself.

Tiff wasn't given the opportunity to stay at home and die in her own time with her loved ones because my parents could not withstand her suffering. Actually, they couldn't withstand their suffering. None of us doubted that Tiff was suffering, but the question was never posed, What does Tiff want? How might she prefer to die? It didn't occur to my parents that maybe Tiff would rather die at home painfully than be carted to die "quickly" at the hands of a stranger . . . the same stranger who chopped off the tails of her puppies, my first sight of blood and my first conscious recollection of what was for me wholly unethical.

Tiff had no choice precisely because we humans are afraid of pain and suffering. Which is the principal ethos of the animal rights movement: at all costs reduce, minimize or eradicate animal suffering. Animal rights seems more a matter of painless death than painful life. So we sweep the streets clean of millions of dogs and cats and "euthanize" them—no one says kill because we do it all for the animals, it's their right to die humanely. It doesn't matter that the domestic cat's wild ancestors procreate many times more kittens than the environment can support, that the majority will be victims of starvation, predation and disease. No one has considered that domestic cats domesticated themselves, adopting a niche in human communities as scavengers so successful as to occur in densities of a thousand per square mile in Old World cities where nobody wants them as pets—and nobody kills them in the name of humane treatment, either.

All that matters in our fine cities is that we keep the streets safe for cats who have homes, tags, shots, and a steady meal ticket. A cat that dares be a natural cat, living in the manner to which the cat is accustomed by adaptation and evolution, as a dignified urban tramp, might suffer, for which it must risk the penalty

of death quick and clean. Heaven forbid if one of these exceptional felines dares to procreate because that could mean its kittens could suffer, perhaps even starve. Far better to euthanize them. Here comes the bored, little old lady, enticing alley cats into her arms so she can help by handing them over to the local pound where they'll be put out of their misery. And the local TV station will herald her humane treatment of poor, suffering animals.

The perversion in basing animal rights on the animal's suffering is that suffering can be measured only by the suffering of humans who perceive animals to be suffering. Though it ought to be obvious that many animals suffer, it is not at all obvious that such suffering warrants killing them; moreover, what if all species suffer? The decision to relate to animals based on what they experience is as hopeless as basing it on what they think. Certainly many species think, but whether many others do—or, what they think—remains elusive. The intelligence of a species or an individual animal is no better criterion for our ethics regarding them than sentience or suffering.

If the Nobel laureate Prigogine is right, an electron is aware: it has to be to respond to changes in its environment, such as the proximity of another atom. In which case the Amerindian world view ought to be reckoned as a more authentic ethical premise. Everything from rocks to mountains, to water and clouds, is alive and aware. Atoms are not merely inorganic machines but living things with some degree of consciousness. The debate against carnivory often hinges on the sentience of animals as opposed to plants, but contemporary science suggests that grass and nuts are sentient.

If all of creation proves to be sentient, the question remains what given parts experience in terms of pain and suffering. It is conceivable that a rock or a leaf is aware but incapable of experiencing pain. Nonetheless, the fact remains that most of us seem incapable of experiencing someone else's pain, much less that of other species, be they plant, animal or mineral. As long as animal rights is based on pain and suffering, and these experiences may be only inferred and never subjectively known, the ethical premise is doubtful and open to legitimate criticism.

Even if we actually shared the animal's suffering, we would need to know what the pain and suffering means to the animal itself independent of our values. Who are we to say that another organism prefers death to what we imagine or experience as its painful life? This value judgement imposed on the animal in the name of its rights could be dreadfully inhumane. Inhumane because the animal may not share our values, not to mention that the valuation of painless death over painful living is not considered humane in a strictly human context.

There are humans in this world who make a point of subjecting themselves to what appears to be enormously painful self-abuse. Athletes, exercisers and bodybuilders aside, there are men who hang themselves from hooks and swing until the flesh can no longer sustain the weight of the body or literally dismember themselves without anesthetic or treatment. We forget that the timeless wisdom of all ages speaks in one voice: we create almost all of our pain and suffering through fear of it—from our lack of love. Isn't Jesus on the cross saying just this? That there is nothing to fear? And what of the shamans who endure incredible heat and dehydration in the sweat lodge? Their message is the same, as Wallace Black Elk said, "If your heart is in the right place, your body will not die." If the animal rights ethic were really humane then there would be no alternative but to kill painful, suffering humans . . . it would be our moral responsibility to put an end to their misery.

Some would say, "No, you cannot do that to a human because he/she could, in principle, tell you that he/she prefers living in pain." Humans can lie, of course, and anyone who has observed animals long enough knows that they can, too. But if I am convinced that pain and suffering is the radical basis of moral conduct in relationship to other beings then it would make no difference if the person actually testified that pain was enjoyable. They, too, would have to die, for their apparent pain— if not for their self-deception regarding it.

If we take seriously those human professions of enjoyment of bodily torture then how can we be sure that an animal might not prefer living in pain to a quick, clean kill at the hands of a veterinarian or a crack shot? The confusion of the ethics underlying animal rights is most disturbing in its implications: we project onto animals our own fear of pain and suffering, then kill them to put an end to our pain, not theirs. To take it further, I suspect that it is our fear of death that prompts us to kill millions of animals in the name of humane treatment.

Those fortunate enough to have experienced death—what the deathfearing mechanistic mentality has come to term "near-death experience"—or at least looked death in the face, no longer fear it. Facing death leaves one in fear only of not having lived well. In other words, our fear of death may account for our failure to live well and to die well. Ignorant of the fact that life contains death, it isn't really death we fear but the loss of life. Our fear of losing life is so strong as to be a source of much anguish, pain and suffering. Which is why we think that a suffering animal would be better off dead.

Let me put it this way: if we weren't afraid of dying (loss), we wouldn't be afraid of living, and if we weren't afraid of living, we wouldn't suffer so much, and if we didn't suffer so much we wouldn't project our fear of it onto animals and kill them.

Because we don't accept that death is not a loss, and because we don't accept that living is pain and suffering, our ethics are as perverted as our lives. The problem is that we resist pain and suffering as the radical fact of life, only to create further pain and suffering in futile efforts to escape it. The Buddha said, "Life is pain and suffering," and the basic Christian doctrine is that life is a vale of tears. The Spanish philosopher, Ortega y Gasset defined living as problematical at the core. These doctrines agree and they are right. What isn't right is resisting what is undeniably true.

The ultimate tragedy is that our ignorance of the fact of living is used to justify killing animals. If the prolongation of suffering were legitimately unethical then we would set about killing ourselves after we'd killed everything else.

Echoing the ageless wisdom, Jidu Krishnamuri says, "What is sacred." What is sacred includes pain, suffering, misery and death. It seldom occurs to us humans that we could love our misery as much as our joy. That is because we are afraid of life, and in our insecurity forever trying to change an unchangeable reality. There is only one true freedom and that is fearlessness, the state of loving. If Life were sacred to us, if we considered all there is to be sacred, then many problems would suddenly disappear. Here is the only genuine ethic regarding all our relationships, with humans, non-humans, mountains, oceans and God. What is sacred.

I am not arguing that each animal should be kept alive as long as possible, nor do I pretend to offer discreet rules of conduct other than Pascal's admonition, "The heart has its reasons that reason knows not of." Besides, having worked closely with thousands of animals of many species, I hold the opinion that many of them die when they are ready, and I've never seen one of them fight death, though I've known many that as much as communicated their acceptance of it, sometimes apparently willing death with predictable results. And I know of instances when an animal seemed quite clearly to intend its death, requesting a helping hand from its master, trainer or keeper—even a stranger.

Which brings me back to Tiff, and my feeling that she deserved to stay at home and die there with us, her family. I grant that she may not have enjoyed her suffering, but I would have wanted to be at her side until death parted us, and I suspect that she would have liked that, too. If it had seemed right to help Tiff die then I can easily imagine that it would have been proper for the one who loved her most to kill her. Better that than
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subjecting her to a foreign environment and the killing hands of an indifferent stranger.

One of my students is of Basque ancestry, and according to him the Basque shepherds have an ethic which they adhere to strictly: always kill your own dog. How we die is important, and how we kill is equally important. If we accepted pain and suffering and surmounted our fear of death, we would live, kill and die humanely. By removing our children from the realities of life, we increase their fear of pain and suffering: our hope to relieve suffering increases it. Removed from dying and killing with grace, many people are deprived of crucial lessons in living.

When animal rights no longer rests upon the projection of our fear of pain and suffering, but is placed firmly on the knowledge that all of life including death is sacred, perhaps then there will be human rights as well.

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