



THE FREEDOM TO CONNECT

By John Williamson, Tim Stoffel and John Burkitt

RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES:

According to the *Declaration of Independence*, the pursuit of happiness is a divine right, freely and permanently given to all men. Yet the liberty to enjoy that right thrives only where defended. Liberty is now safe from foreign threats, but faces bold challenges at home as the line between true democracy and simple majority blurs. Traditionally, America extended very liberty to a man that did not harm his neighbors. Now all too often the values and priorities of 51 percent of the people are allowed to oppress the opposing 49.

Americans once pursued happiness as the ultimate goal of a free man, not safety or prosperity. Now America with its heritage of freedom weighs new laws by how much safety and prosperity they could create, with little thought given to their price in liberty. Once the British imposed tight legal restrictions on behavior that even that included an official religion and official morality. Today animal rights groups are pursuing ever tighter restrictions defining an official relationship between man and nature. Their official morality forbids direct interaction and any form of captivity, however benign. These groups push their biased views and outright deceptions on the American public, secure in the thought that their means are justified by the ends.

Consider the so-called *Captive Wildlife Safety Act of 2003*. Who is safer because of this act? Not the caretaker whose whole reason for safety was to achieve happiness. Certainly not the endangered species whose options have been restricted. In the aftermath of laws like this, animals are unable to enjoy their newfound rights and humans are as unable to practice their lost liberties. Important social contact across species lines is broken, and new thinking in conservation is thwarted. In a manner reminiscent of the gun control debate, only the innocent lose their liberty. The guilty continue to destroy animals and their habitat. All the animal rights in the world will not help a leopard hold onto his hide while poachers abound. All the poorly defended "preserves" in the world cannot shield habitat from charcoal burning and illegal crops.

And how do the more extreme animal rights groups respond? If these animals cannot "live with dignity" in the wild, they are "better off dead" than "chained in captivity." These are their own words, not ours.

THE CALL OF THE WILD

According to the massive cross disciplinary study *Hardwired to Connect*, humans are predisposed to connect with others in close relationships and to find meaning in them, including our morality and customs. Primitive cultures survived and thrived without our modern conveniences because they tapped into the joy and self-worth that comes from being part of nature. Their schedules, cultures, and spirituality were linked to the rhythms of the natural world and they never arranged their lives around television shows or staff meetings. Rather than advocating separation from all things wild, they traced their tribal origins to wolves, bears, tigers and eagles and showed them respect. They saw Western rejection of the natural order as anti-social and ungrateful. "If all the animals died," warned Chief Seattle, "mankind would die from loneliness."

The cradle of human spirituality was the wonders of nature. In the passage of time and seasons marked by the sun and stars, early humans saw a greater order and pattern to which they belonged. In the following of winter's sleep with spring's awakening, they saw the promise of life beyond death. The scattering of countless stars across the night sky was their first contact with infinity. We humans crave these connections because they validate our deepest sense of self, reminding us that we are not an isolated body but an integral part of a greater whole in which everyone and everything has inherent worth.

Larry Gates wrote that human beings have been cultivating a spiritual relationship with nature for thousands of years. In 1914 a cave was discovered in southern France. It ended in a giant hall covered with pictures of animals that lived in Europe 12,000 years ago. That underground cathedral was used for thousands of years as a place of transformation and rebirth. Apparently rituals were performed there which were analogous to the Christian Eucharist."

In her book, 'Ecstasy,' Laski said that the most frequent trigger reported for mystical experiences is nature, with nature art being the second. A national survey found that almost half of all the people who have had mystical experiences consider the beauties of nature as their primary inspiration.

IS CONNECTION A HUMAN PHENOMENON?

Dr. Franklin Loehr, a Presbyterian minister and scientist, carefully designed an experiment to test the effects positive and negative mental energies have over living matter. He took three pans of various types of seeds. A control pan was set aside. A "positive energy" pan was exposed to regular meditation sessions where Dr. Loehr contemplated prosperity and life. A "negative energy" pan was exposed to the same amount of contemplation, but the topic was misery and death.

Time after time, the results indicated that concentrated positive thought helped speed germination and produced more vigorous plants than those in the control pan, while concentrated negative thought suppressed growth in some plants and even halted germination in others. All of the plants were behind glass to prevent carbon dioxide from his breath from altering the growth environment. The connections among living things are very real and are measurable through tests that stand up to scientific scrutiny.

THE HUNTERS OF SOULS

Profound connections are possible between humans and animals. Animals show people unconditional love, and studies demonstrate positive physical and mental benefits on both sides. Animals are widely used for therapy in healthcare environments. Even such unlikely exotic animals as African servals are used as therapy animals to treat emotional and physical problems, and this therapy sometimes works where other modes of treatment have failed.

The mutual strength of this relationship is clearly evident. We know of three instances where a lion intervened directly to save a human life. In one of these cases, the lion received burns from a fire while saving "his" human. Dolphins have been renowned since ancient times for rescuing people lost at sea. Cats show the classic outward signs of grief when separated from their human companion, and in some cases stop eating entirely and die.

Some critics wonder why exotic animal handlers do not only connect with mainstream animals like dogs and cats. That is like wondering why we cannot fall in love with a particular person deemed by society to be right for us. Different species have different general temperaments, and within a species different individuals exhibit a wide range of diverse traits. Any child instinctively understands this and feels outrage when a parent offers to replace a dead pet with "another one" as if all English setters or calico cats were interchangeable. Our hearts choose whom we will love, and it is not a process dictated by logic or swayed by practicality. Companionship with large carnivores becomes for us a lifestyle issue that cries out for tolerance and acceptance as surely as any other. Our lifestyle is not defended and promoted by its own well-funded advocacy group, but should America only provide tolerance and freedom to those groups that can afford them?

Others may argue why we can't simply make these connections with others of our own kind. That presupposes that we are socially flawed and use other species as pale human substitutes. That also presupposes that connections with others of our own kind obviate the need to reach out to other species. What arrogance presumes that one species—or one culture—possesses every spiritual, familial and cultural benefit possibly needed by a human being?

There are certainly wrong reasons to associate with large carnivores, but no more or less than the number of wrong reasons people marry or have children. Every form of relationship is open to possible abuse. Further, loving another in general involves a certain degree of risk. The only way to have absolute safety and ultimate certainty is to exclude love entirely from one's life, to exercise one's inalienable right to flee happiness. Even the most responsible pet owner has the bittersweet realization that a dog, a cat, a lion or a wolf is ageing five times faster. Anyone who watches the light in an old tiger's eyes fade and die knows all about vulnerability. That some people allow themselves to be in that position, often repeatedly, is proof that there are worse things in life than being vulnerable. Well-meaning laws seeking to protect us from ourselves are irksome intrusions into our basic, private humanity.

THE MIRROR

There are certain facets of spirituality people only experience through animals. One seeks pieces of the greatest puzzle—what the Creator is like—by studying all of creation rather than our species alone. Otherwise one is tempted to find God made in man's image rather than the other way around. Human spirituality cannot exist in a vacuum, and our race will wither and die if plucked from the fertile soil of its birth. We must not turn our backs on nature and fail to learn its lessons.

SELF-IMPOSED EXILE

Some people are unable to forgive their own species for past mistakes. For them all of nature is an Eden from which we must be forever banished, and every companion animal a slave which must be liberated. Why exactly an elk in his herd is not a slave to a companion elk but an elk in a pasture can only be the slave of a companion human, they do not say. Why a tiger confined by a fence is imprisoned but a tiger confined by surrounding territories is not, they do not say. In this system of thought, what is our sin, our fall from grace that banishes us from Eden? Quite simply the intelligence necessary to change the environment around us and the will to do so.

Self imposed exile would destroy the human race. In *The Web of Life Imperative*, Ecopsychologist, Michael Cohen shows that denying our natural legacy ignores the destructive results of living almost entirely indoors, stressed, frustrated or injured by the disconnection of our psyche from its nurturing origins and support in natural systems.

From Dennis Prager's book: *Happiness is a serious problem: A Human Nature Repair Manual*...Prager asserts, "Not only do we have a right to be happy, we have an obligation to be happy. Our happiness has an effect on the lives of everyone around us -- it provides them with a positive environment in which to be happy and thrive themselves."

Is it too much of a stretch to believe that our constitution's founders truly understood the broader aspects and extension of individual freedom and pursuit of happiness? Is it too much to expect our present leaders to understand, or even care, as our country's moral and ethical structure crumbles?

IN CONCLUSION

Animal rights should be seen as a philosophical belief rather than a legal issue. As such the freedom of people to believe in animal rights should not be abridged or forbidden by the government. But in like fashion those who believe connection with exotic animals is important to our spiritual development should also enjoy the protection of Federal and local law. Those who chart new approaches to conservation through compassionate, responsible private ownership should not be demonized and hobbled.

If you do not sense that the threatened liberties of exotic animal handlers is your personal problem, think again. Liberty must not be served a-la-carte, but rather extended along the lines of broad, general principles of idealism and vision, lest the nation of the people, by the people and for the people becomes another footnote of history.
