

The Winds of Change

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This article was written in the 1980s at the request of Animals Voice magazine (and also appears on their website). While progress has been made since then (at the time this was written, Michael Vick would not have been arrested, let alone prosecuted) there is still much to do. Animals still languish in laboratories and factory farms. Too many healthy dogs and cats are still being put to death because we cannot control their population or find good homes for them. Habitats for wild animals are shrinking daily. The progress should give us hope and energy; the work left to do should keep us from complacency.

The suffering of animals is a deep and quiet thing. In the past only a few individuals and a handful of cultures could see it and hear it. The problem was not an absence of morality or laws, but the size of the circle in which they were applied. Justice and equality were long accepted as desirable, indeed necessary, for "civilized society." But they did not, of course, apply to women, whose rightful place was in the home (or convent or brothel) under the protection (subjugation) of men. They certainly did not apply to black people who were ordained by God to be slaves due to their inherent need for control and correction. Obviously they could not apply to Jews who were, not only inferior, but deserving of persecution because of their own misdeeds.

Understandably, no one thought to apply them to aboriginal or native peoples who needed taming (stood in the way of material progress) and civilizing. Animals are exempt from just treatment because they need breaking, managing, protecting, and, frequently, killing, and can be used according to human whim because...well, they *need* it – just as women, slaves, Jews, and native peoples *needed* it.

In truth, it was, and is, the needs of the oppressor that were, and are, being fulfilled in excluding all of these groups from the circle of moral consideration, not the needs of the oppressed and excluded. We are witness to the fact that human rights, though far from a reality for all, is now an issue that is taken very seriously.

Years ago, the world watched as the Moskva, a Soviet ice breaker, toiled its way through ice-blocked winter seas to save trapped beluga whales. Ice had closed around the belugas cutting them off from the open sea, from food, and if the Moskva didn't reach them in time, the ice would have cut them off from air. Local human inhabitants fed them by hand and worked around the clock to keep breathing holes open for them. Some of the whales were lost, but the Moskva cut a channel through the ice in time to lead most of them out to sea to the cadences of classical music being broadcast over her bow. It was a marvelous outbreak of sanity, sanctioned by the government and carried out with dedication by the people, in a hitherto repressive, whale-killing country.

The wind blowing across Siberia that day carrying the commingled strains of human and whale music was, I like to think, the beginning of Glasnost.

Racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and homophobia are blinding and deafening. But slowly, the blinders are dropping from our eyes and ears. We are more and more able to see and hear the suffering of those who are different from ourselves, and to care.

Still, even in the realm of human rights, the steely-eyed realists among us will point out that yes, we have seen the end of human slavery in America, but not, alas, of racism. Women have the vote but remain not quite equal. Native Americans are no longer systematically hunted down or denied the practices of their religions, but despair among many surviving tribes is endemic. The ovens of the Third Reich are cold, but anti-Semitism is rife. In Eastern Europe repressive regimes have crumbled into dust, yet dark patches of tyranny still fester over the globe. And never mind the saving of an occasional whale or the liberation of a handful of laboratory animals; nonhumans are, even as I write these words, even as you read them, being imprisoned, tortured, and killed by the tens of thousands.

Yet...there is a new wind blowing. We may be standing hip-deep in snow, but the light caress of the Chinook is upon our cheeks. Where we stand we are freezing and are surrounded by the unbroken landscape of winter, but in the wind is the promise of spring.

And if we listen, we can hear voices on that wind, voices that span the ages, from Moses to Harriet Tubman, Spartacus to Margaret Sanger, from Crazy Horse to Raoul Wallenberg.

These are not just the echoes of saints, though there were saints among them, but of ordinary people who made extraordinary choices – unselfish choices – to further the causes of justice.

And if we look up we will see a galaxy of stars, for even those who are not remembered by name, and those who were swallowed up in the turbulence of their struggles, left their lights. The nameless farmers, merchants, housewives who made up the underground railroad for escaping slaves; the men and women beaten and killed as they defied the British in India to make salt; the "Righteous Gentiles" who helped save Jewish men, women, and children from the Nazis – the galaxy is infinite and filled with lights.

And if we gaze long enough we will see a new constellation in the corner of the sky, not yet as bright as the others, but sharing some of their brightest stars: Gandhi, George Bernard Shaw, Leo Tolstoy, Leonardo Da Vinci, Henry Bergh, and a host of others who made incalculable contributions to enrich humankind and were outspoken in their concern for nonhumans. This galaxy of lights, these voices on the wind, belong to our mothers and fathers. The animal rights movement is the logical outcome of the evolution of human consciousness and expanding compassion.

And when we get discouraged because our movement is still young and we have, as yet, no hindsight to guide us, we can look up and listen and take heart that we can overcome the outside pressures and prejudices and maybe even the internal strife that tends to dim our purpose – that of improving the lives of animals here and now – and for the future.

We must keep working with hope and courage for we have proof from the human rights movements that, though we may not immediately change hearts and minds, we can change what people are allowed to do and get away with. The wind is rising, and we are, as yet, but a dim constellation in a galaxy of stars. But without us there would be a dark empty space in the spring sky.