

Human education for animal emancipation

Hidden curriculum

It is a teaching truism to say that students will 'hear and forget, see and remember, do and understand'. Put another way, there is much more to education than simply presenting students with good, honest information upon which to base their own opinions, decisions and actions, and then stepping back and leaving them to get on with things on their own.

As educators we must encourage students to wrestle with ethical issues and moral dilemmas. We must help them to explore, to question, to reflect, and, to apply what they have learnt. And, just as significantly, we must be willing to do the same – and to be seen to do the same! – ourselves.

All teachers have a moral obligation to consider the values they promote, whether explicitly or implicitly. The things teachers say and do, and the things they do not say and do not do, help to shape students' ideas about the world in which they live. This is the case, whether we plan it or not. The lessons we unintentionally teach can be every bit as powerful as the ones we teach intentionally.

elephants are trying to tell us that zoos and circuses are not what God created them for

Freeman Wicklund's parents instilled in him a respect for all life by taking him on camping and hiking trips. As a boy, he fell in love with the wildlife and the wild-lands, and knew they had to be protected.

Freeman was raised as a Christian. Today he continues to strive to serve others and follow Jesus' example of love, mercy, forgiveness and peace.

Freeman is a workshop facilitator for the Institute for Humane Education (www.humaneeducation.org). A free teacher's lesson plan and DVD about the ethics of animal use can be ordered, free of charge, at: www.justchoices.com

School-organised field trips to zoos and animal circuses – often spurred by aggressive marketing campaigns that include free tickets and promotional materials disguised as 'educational' literature – send out the message that chaining and caging animals, as well as denying them everything God designed them to be and to do, is acceptable or desirable. In such an environment, students learn nothing real or honest about these magnificent animals. What they do learn, however, is that dominating and intimidating another creature is 'normal' and, from a human perspective, can be thrilling and fun.

Created to be free

Such 'education' is the antithesis of sound Christian doctrine, which is exemplified by reverence, compassion and respect for God's creation. God's purpose is spelled out in the Bible's account of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1) and in the visions of the prophets like Isaiah, Amos and Micah. In every instance, God's ideal is one in which there is no animal exploitation.

Animals used to entertain the public are condemned to a lifetime of intensive confinement and deprivation. They are housed in cages that don't come close to the jungles, deserts and forests that are their natural homes. Birds are denied free flight; aquatic animals are relegated to small, chlorinated pools; and free-roaming species are restricted to pens, boxcars, chains or cages.

Even animals who have been caged since birth feel the strong desire to move around, groom themselves, stretch their limbs or wings, and exercise. All confined animals suffer from profound boredom – some so severely that it can lead to self-mutilation or other self-destructive behaviour.

As a Christian, I believe that all 'wild' animals should be born free and should live free ... in the 'wild'. I do not believe it makes God happy to see tigers and dolphins in captivity; I do not believe it glorifies God when an orca whale is trained to jump through a hoop or a chimpanzee is applauded for riding a bicycle.





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Zoochosis

In 1992, Bill Travers, founder of the Born Free Foundation, coined the term 'zoochosis' to describe obsessive behaviour in captive animals, and called animals who exhibit this behaviour 'zoochotic'. This sickness is marked by symptoms such as pacing, neck-twisting, head-bobbing, bar-biting, and other repetitive behaviours. Zoochosis is rampant in captive animals.

Ros Clubb and Georgia Mason of Oxford University Department of Zoology's Animal Behaviour Research Group write: 'In an average year, a wild polar bear can roam over an area as large as Greater London, yet their zoo enclosures are typically a million times smaller ... animals that roam over a large territory in the wild ... such as Asian elephants and polar bears, are prone to problems that include poor health, repetitive stereotypic behaviour and breeding difficulties' (*Nature*, Vol. 425, 2 October 2003, p473). Unsurprisingly, animals that, in the wild, roam over greater distances tend to have the highest infant mortality rates in zoos.

The behaviour of animals in zoos and circuses is so profoundly distorted that any information garnered from field trips to such venues is inherently flawed. For example, caribou in their native habitat migrate hundreds of miles; in zoos, they

are given only enough space to pace a few steps forward and back. Sea lions can dive up to a half a mile in their ocean homes; in tanks, they can only swim in endless circles. In nature, elephants do not stand on their heads.

As Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan, *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (2001, Random House) put it: 'It is unseemly of us, who often behave so unfeelingly toward other animals, to contend that only humans can suffer ... The behaviour of other animals ... renders such pretensions specious. They are just too much like us.'

We have not been listening

Using animals in performances also jeopardizes public safety and puts children at risk. People have been seriously injured when captive animals 'snap' from stress and fear. A 12 year old boy lost both of his hands after a bear bit them off at a Ukraine zoo. A high school principal in Texas suffered two broken ribs and was nearly trampled when he fell from a circus elephant. Blaine Doyle, a Florida police officer who had to shoot 47 rounds into a rampaging elephant, noted: 'I think these elephants are trying to tell us that zoos and circuses are not what God created them for. But we have not been listening.'

Children and animals are the most vulnerable among us and should be afforded particular care and protection from harm. Andrew Linzey, a professor of theology at Oxford University and an Anglican priest, is quoted on the Christian Vegetarian Association website: 'Animals are God's creatures: not human property, nor utilities, nor resources, nor commodities, but precious beings in God's sight ... Christians whose eyes are fixed on the awfulness of crucifixion are in a special position to understand the awfulness of innocent suffering. The Cross of Christ is God's absolute identification with the weak, the powerless, and the vulnerable, but most of all with unprotected, undefended, innocent suffering.'

Traditions can enslave us. And tradition is certainly responsible for enslaving animals: but that is changing. Towns and municipalities all over the world are enacting bans or restrictions against the use of animals in entertainment, including Sweden, Denmark, Finland, India and Switzerland. In the UK nearly 200 town councils have banned animal circuses from council-owned land. In a move that

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was once unimaginable, eight US zoos and five UK zoos have acknowledged that they could no longer adequately provide for elephants and closed their elephant exhibits. In India the Supreme Court has banned breeding programmes at zoos, citing that zoos are inherently unkind environments for animals.

Liberation theology

There are compassionate alternatives to animal displays with legitimate educational value. Wildlife documentaries show animals as they engage in their natural behaviours in their natural habitats. Several are produced specifically with children in mind, resulting in lively, fast-paced narratives that are as fun to watch as they are educational. Because videos can be watched and re-watched year after year, they are much more cost-effective, and they don't have the administrative headache of parental permission slips. Also, many IMAX cinemas show animal documentaries such as *Deep Sea*, *Sharks*, and *Wild Safari* that make a visit to a depressing zoo pale in comparison.

As Christians, we all strive to pursue a compassionate path, one that encompasses all of God's creation. Why? Because we love God. In his foreword to *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern*



and Action (2000, Inter-Varsity Press) John Stott, founder and honorary president of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, puts it like this: 'God intends our care of the creation to reflect our love for the Creator.'

If we want to teach our students humane values consistent with compassionate Christianity then we, as Christian educators, must live out compassionate lives in full view of our students. But if we put our stamp of approval on exhibits that offer harmful and inaccurate lessons about animals, we do our students a grave disservice.

■ Freeman Wicklund

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