

## **Animal Lovers and Animal Rights**

**Kim Stallwood**

*Copy of paper presented at the Animal Lovers conference at the NGBK gallery in Berlin on Saturday November 5, 2016, which was part of an exhibition of the same name from October 15 to November 27. The event was organised by a group of artists and scholars (see [http://ngbk.de/development/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=438:animal-lovers&catid=11&Itemid=431&lang=en](http://ngbk.de/development/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=438:animal-lovers&catid=11&Itemid=431&lang=en))*

If you'd asked me in the 1970s and 1980s why I cared about animals, I would have told you that I was against animal exploitation and for animal rights. No sentient being, regardless of species, deserves to be treated cruelly, exploited, or killed, I would have continued. No one deserves to be treated with the violence we subject animals to.

I was proud of the fact that I didn't love animals. Indeed, having taken philosophers Tom Regan and Peter Singer at their word, I would have argued vehemently that you didn't have to love animals in order to be their advocate. Animal rights were moral and political issues, and affection or feelings or an ethic of care had nothing to do with either of these. In fact, to be called an 'animal lover' was, I felt, a slur. As Peter Singer wrote in Animal Liberation,

No one, except a racist concerned to smear his opponents as "nigger-lovers," would suggest that in order to be concerned about equality for mistreated racial minorities you have to love those minorities, or regard them as cute and cuddly. So, why make this assumption about people who work for improvements in the conditions of animals?  
(1990, ii)

Although I wouldn't have called myself an animal lover, I nonetheless became highly emotional and angry when I thought about institutionalised animal exploitation. Singer's stated goal in Animal Liberation to prevent suffering and misery and oppose arbitrary discrimination and treat animals decently animated me. These emotions were essentially directed towards an abstraction. Before I was capable of feeling compassion for animals more deeply, I had to learn how to connect with my true self compassionately and stop my vicious cycle of self-righteousness.

The catalyst was, as it so often is, an individual animal. In my case, the animal took the form of an irresistible Chihuahua with attitude, who stormed into my life in 1989. Boobaa was a giant in everything but size. Although he wasn't as tiny as a teacup Chihuahua, he was still very small, as well as being larger than life!

My adoption by Boobaa transformed the anger I felt about animal exploitation through the Magical Connection. Boobaa and I held a special affinity more real and valuable than all my material possessions combined. The Magical Connection I had with Boobaa enabled me to imagine what it could be like to be him and other animals. As with many people who truly love their

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companion animals, I obsessed over him. I would do anything to make sure he was happy and well. In doing so, I opened myself to the possibility of making myself happy and well.

One might hope this kind of relationship could be possible among us and other animals, including humans—that such altruistic love could be the foundation for our relations with others regardless of species, gender, and all the other ways we divide up those with whom we share the world. Too often, however, we withhold that love and parcel out our affections depending on those closest to us in terms of family or species.

The Magical Connection I felt for the animals who have shared my life with me reminds me that it can never be enough simply to attempt to establish moral and legal rights for animals, or even to rescue them or become a vegan or cruelty-free. We must expand our understanding of animal advocacy from the practical to the spiritual level of personal action.

By ‘spiritual level of personal action’ I’m not talking about following an orthodox religion or set of doctrines, although many traditions contain within them maxims about caring for the vulnerable and unfortunate and extending one’s charity beyond one’s own immediate circle (Kemmerer, 2012; Kemmerer and Nocella, 2011). Nor am I suggesting that it’s necessary to believe in a supreme being or divine force. What I intend by the phrase is to emphasise a relationship that goes beyond the instrumental notion that each of us provides pleasure and company for the other, or even that one enjoys the complete devotion and lack of judgement that a companion animal may offer. I am, instead, suggesting the heart is opened to the possibility of a love dedicated to another, regardless of species, that is selfless and absolute.

My altruistic love for Boobaa helped me to be a little more at peace with myself and with my presence in the world. Boobaa and all the other animals who, as refugees, I have shared my life with, put flesh and blood on my understanding of what animal rights meant. I now saw nothing wrong with claiming to be an ‘animal lover’. As a result, Boobaa made me a better person. His endearing personality reminded me that when I looked at photographs of chickens in battery cages, for example, I wasn’t just looking at institutionalised animal exploitation and all of its attendant violence. I saw, instead, individuals with a life history who, like Boobaa, and all of us, have complex psychological and behavioural needs as well as a desire to live happily and be well. My sense of compassion made it possible to feel what it was like to be locked up in a cage for an entire lifetime. Boobaa also led me to suspect that all animal advocates, even the ones who claim otherwise (as I once did), love animals, too.

In his essay ‘We Need a Philosophy of Generosity’, which I published in *The Animals’ Agenda* magazine, the art historian Steve Baker provocatively challenged animal advocates to think of the notion of ‘animal lovers’ in a similar vein to the above:

Think of the way in which ‘queer’ recently has been boldly reclaimed and proclaimed by gay and lesbian activists, so that its effectiveness as a term of homophobic abuse has been greatly diminished. We live in a bizarre culture in which the media allow animal researchers to declare themselves ‘animal lovers’ in order to distance themselves from the so-called animal rights ‘fanatics’ who challenge their work. This is a clear example

of an anthropocentric culture defending its own meanings, meanings that we must challenge and undo.

Animal advocates could reclaim the notion of ‘loving animals’. He continued:

This personal commitment and involvement is something that feminist writers have generally come far closer to appreciating than have more conventional [sic] philosophers. It is also at the heart of our need for a philosophy that will be seen to be effective, relevant, and generous. One French feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, has proposed that far from being ‘a formal learning, fixed and rigid, abstracted from all feeling,’ an ethically responsible philosophy is better understood as an ongoing ‘quest for love’ (Baker, 1996, 44–45).

I agree with Baker and Irigaray. A ‘quest for love’—or as I prefer to call it, the Magical Connection—goes to the heart of what animal rights means: an association not only with everyone else, regardless of species, but also with ourselves.

As difficult to summon and stringent as the Magical Connection may seem, it is, I believe, present in all of us. In fact, many people other than so-called activists experience altruistic love for animals. They share their homes and their lives with cats, dogs, and other companion animals, and for the vast majority of them one of the most difficult and emotional situations their household experiences is when a beloved animal companion dies. These poignant and distressing situations resonate with powerful emotions, such as grief, loss, and guilt (over keeping an animal alive when he is in pain, or putting her to sleep). These emotions are sometimes infused with the dynamics of the compromise and concealment of our confused and contradictory relations with animals.

The gap between animal activists, who are, I believe, closeted animal lovers, and members of the general public, who are usually seen as animal lovers, is not as great as it would first appear. In fact, I’ve been disappointed that the animal rights movement hasn’t been able to articulate more effectively the shared emotional bonds that advocates have for animals with those held between folks and their companion animals. It’s surely a missed opportunity to awaken the consciences of those who’d never consider themselves ‘activists’.

Singer and Regan wanted to provoke a rational debate about our instrumental use of animals. Singer wrote in Animal Liberation that ‘[t]he portrayal of those who protest against cruelty to animals as sentimental, emotional ‘animal-lovers’ has had the effect of excluding the entire issue of our treatment of nonhumans from serious political and moral discussion’ (1990, iii). Regan himself concurred in the preface to The Case for Animal Rights:

Since all who work on behalf of the interests of animals are more than a little familiar with the tired charges of being ‘irrational,’ ‘sentimental,’ ‘emotional’ or worse, we can give the lie to these accusations only by making a concerted effort not to indulge our emotions or parade our sentiments. And that requires making a sustained commitment to rational inquiry’ (xii).

Finally, as a reminder for everyone who care cares deeply about animals, Tom Regan warns:

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Not only are animals incapable of defending their rights, they are similarly incapable of defending themselves against those who profess to defend them. Unlike us, they cannot disown or repudiate the claims made on their behalf. That makes speaking for them a greater, not a lesser, moral undertaking; and this makes the burdens of one's errors and fallacies when championing their rights heavier, not lighter. (1983, xiv)

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Kim Stallwood is an author, independent scholar, consultant and speaker with more than 40 years of personal commitment as a vegan and professional involvement with the international animal rights movement. He wrote Growl: Life Lessons, Hard Truths, and Bold Strategies from an Animal Advocate with a Foreword by Brian May (Lantern Books, 2014). His client organisations include Alley Cat Allies in the USA and Compassion In World Farming in the UK. He is the (volunteer) Executive Director of Minding Animals International. He became a vegetarian in 1974 after working in a chicken slaughterhouse. He has been a vegan since 1976. His website is [www.kimstallwood.com](http://www.kimstallwood.com).

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