

Seeing Animals

Sermon from November 3, 2019

Buckman Bridge UU Church

Jacksonville, Florida

Elizabeth DeCoux

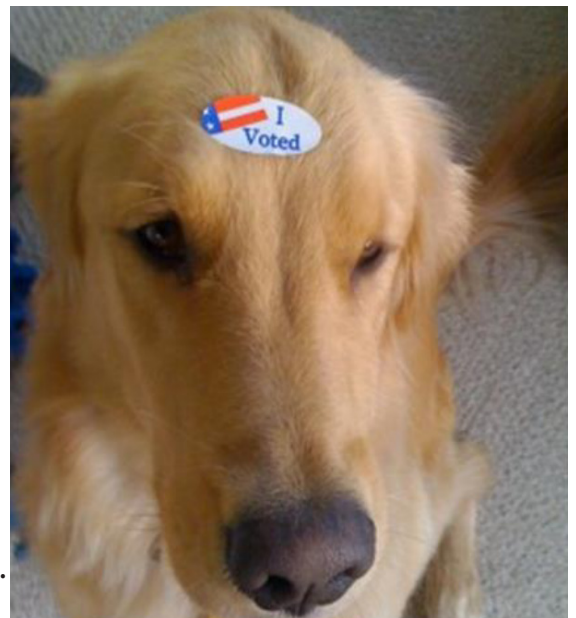
Seeing Animals

I grew up in McComb, Mississippi, in the heart of the Bible Belt. As an adolescent, I knew somewhere deep inside that I was gay. But I could not acknowledge that, even to myself. My church and my family would have turned me away if they had known I was gay. Eventually, in my 20s, I left the church. I came out a few years later. I never joined another church.

So, it's hard for me describe how it felt to come here, to meet you, to feel your warm welcome. The first time I visited BBUUC was right after you had stepped into the gap and hosted the GLBT prom. The rainbow-colored archway from that prom was still right there the first Sunday I came here. You have welcomed me with open arms and open hearts. I am no longer an outsider. Thank you.


Before we begin our discussion of animal rights, let's clarify a couple of the things that we're not talking about.

No one thinks your dog has the right to practice law, although I know a few people who might prefer your dog to their current lawyer.



And no one is suggesting that animals have the right to vote.

So what rights are we talking about?



Mystery on the Farm

Let me begin with a true story, a mystery. I think one or two of you might solve the mystery before the story ends. If you do, please raise your hand and tell us. A cow named Bella lived on a dairy farm in upstate New York. Bella was pregnant. The only way to get milk from a cow is to impregnate her and take the calf away when he is born. There's no calf to nurse, so the cow's milk can be sold instead. A cow's maternal love is very strong; she and the calf cry out for each other when they are separated, sometimes for days.

Bella gave birth in the field and brought her calf to the barn. Within a day or two, the veal truck took Bella's calf away. Later, Bella was attached to the milking machine, but she gave no milk. The next day the same thing happened. Her udder was dry. This happened every day. No one, including the veterinarian, could figure out why.

After eleven days, the farmer solved the mystery. Does anybody know what happened?

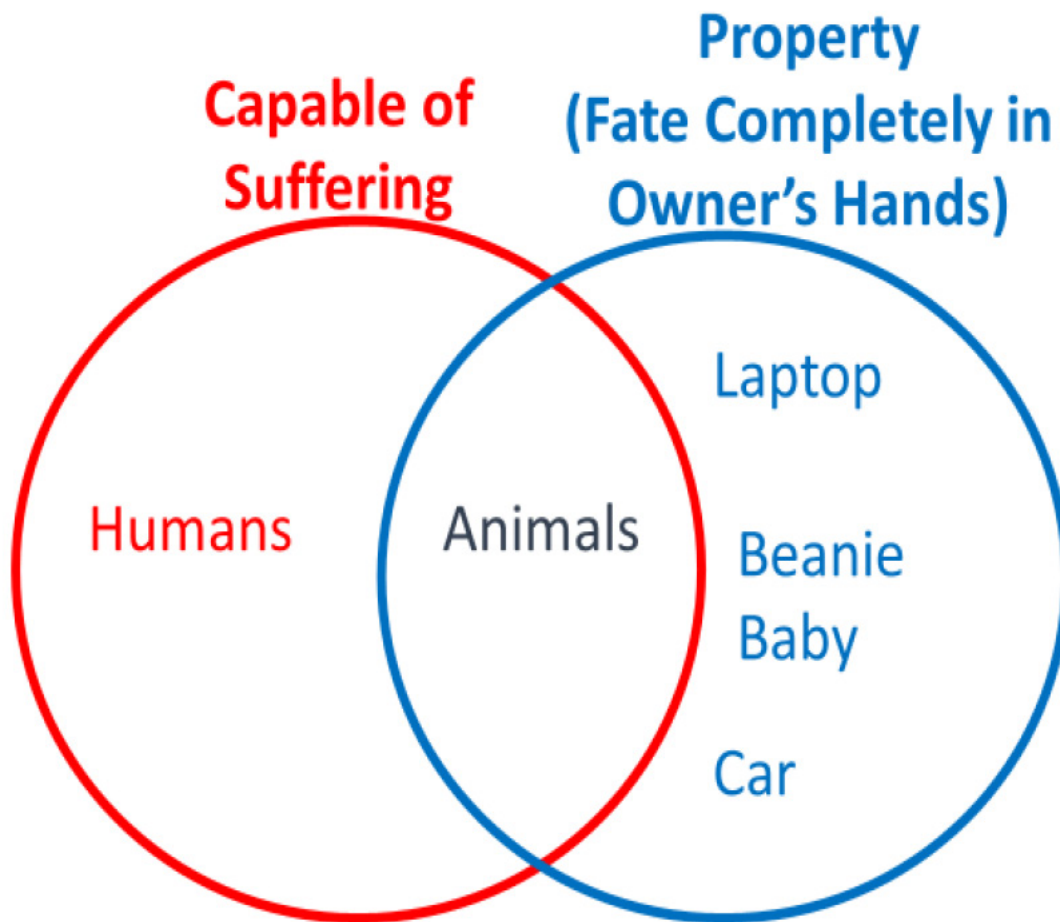
The farmer found another calf, hidden in the tall grass.

Bella had given birth to twins. The veterinarian explained what Bella had done. This was Bella's fifth pregnancy, and she remembered that with her first four births, her calf was always taken away. But this time she had two. So, she made her own Sophie's choice and took one calf to the barn to satisfy the farmer. But she hid her other baby in the tall grass like Jochebed hiding Moses in the bulrushes.

And she nursed him. She and the calf had the sweetest eleven days of their lives, even though it ended in heartache, when the farmer found the second calf and put him on the veal truck, too. Over the years, Bella's calves were all separated from her. The males were slaughtered for veal; the females were sold to other dairy farms. Eventually, Bella stopped giving milk, as all cows do, and was slaughtered for hamburger. The suffering and death of Bella and her calves happened because in the eyes of the law they are property.

In fact, animals are the only beings capable of suffering whom our law classifies as property, to be treated in whatever way the owner wants.





And this next part is so important. Because the law does not protect them, their fate depends on each of us, on our individual ethical choices. We decide what happens to them. I am here today to respectfully suggest that all of us as individuals end the exploitation of animals in our lives. I know that some of you are vegan, so with you, I'm preaching to the choir. For those who aren't vegan, maybe you've wondered, what is this all about? Why are people vegan? Why would anybody turn down meat, eggs, and dairy? I would like to offer, for your consideration, one of the primary arguments in favor of including animals in the moral community. I realize that when I have presented this argument, then it's your choice whether to accept it or reject it. I ask only that you listen with an open heart and an open mind.

Why do I say the law doesn't protect animals? Don't we have statutes prohibiting cruelty?

Yes, but of all the animal cruelty cases reported, only 2 to 5% result in criminal charges. And even when charges are brought, and the defendant is convicted of a horrible crime, the sentence is typically a slap on the wrist, involving no jail time.¹

And of course, cruelty and killing are the daily business of factory farms and slaughterhouses and laboratories. After much soul-searching, I have decided not to speak in any detail about this cruelty or show any pictures of it this morning. The truth is so horrific that it would be an assault on unsuspecting worshipers who just showed up for Sunday morning services. But if you are, in the words of

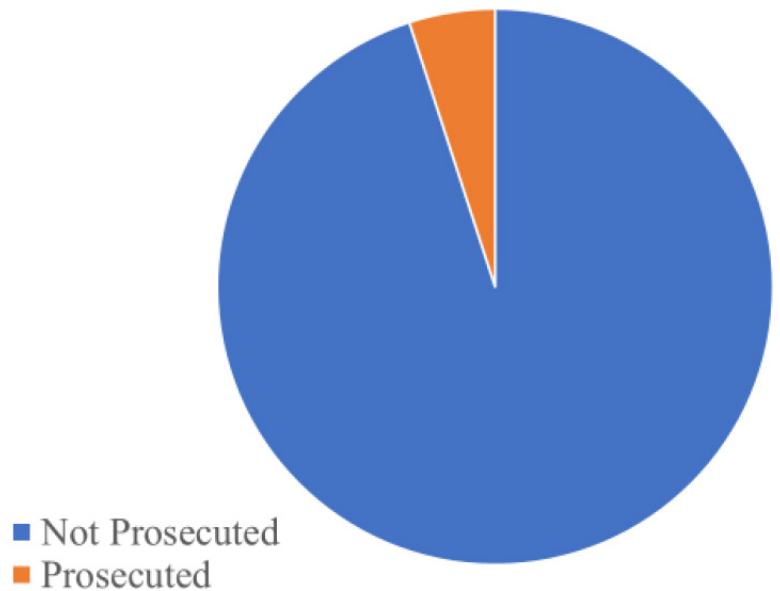
Ted Kennedy, someone who sees wrong and tries to right it, who sees suffering and tries to heal it, I invite you to read Peter Singer's book, *Animal Liberation*. Several copies are at the back of the church. Take one; it's yours to keep. It's also in our library. In a couple of minutes, we'll give you a handout, which includes a web address where you can watch the film, "Dominion," online, for free. If you are willing to see wrong and try to right it, to see suffering and try to heal it, that book and that film are waiting for you.

What is the philosophical, theoretical basis for the argument that we should not exploit animals?

The question is not, "Can they reason?" nor "Can they talk?" but rather, "*Can they suffer?*"

Jeremy Bentham, 18th/19th Century philosopher and social reformer

Cruelty Cases



¹ [Rackstraw, "Reaching for Justice," 9 *Animal L.* 243 (2003)]

As philosopher Jeremy Bentham said about animals, "The question is not 'can they reason,' nor 'can they talk,' but rather, 'can they suffer?'"

Ability to Suffer as the Characteristic Entitling A Being to Non-Exploitation?

Many People Resist That Idea, Not
Because It Lacks Merit, But Because Eating Animals
Is So Strongly Ingrained
in Our Habits, Traditions, and Taste Preferences.

When the suggestion is made that we should not exploit anyone who can suffer, our minds begin to cast around for some other qualifying characteristic for non-exploitation—a characteristic that lets us exclude animals. Our minds do this because eating animals is so ingrained in our habits and traditions and taste preferences. Meat was in our baby food, and we were eating it before we could talk! We don't want to give up fried chicken, or Grandma's pot roast, or Uncle Ed's souffle. And these industries enable us in our desire to keep eating animals. We never see the slaughterhouse or the factory farm. We see neat, bloodless packages wrapped in cellophane at the supermarket. These industries have even lobbied successfully for legislation making it a crime for activists to take video inside a slaughterhouse or factory farm. They have created vast programs of deceitful marketing to make us feel better about exploiting animals: words like "organic," "humanely raised," "free-range." Don't be fooled. Everything inside us and outside of us conspires against seeing these animals. The only way to see them is to make our minds up that we will see them.

So, what suggestions does your mind have for us today, to allow us to continue eating animals?

So Our Minds Reach Out for Some *Other* Characteristic as the Qualification for Non-exploitation—a Characteristic That Will Exclude Animals.

- adequate intelligence
- ability to speak
- ability to participate in the social contract by owing duties to others
- souls
- they were put here for us
- what about the suffering plants? we shouldn't eat them, either!
- status as humans

You might say the characteristic that matters is intelligence, the ability to speak, or the ability to participate in the social contract by owing and fulfilling duties to others. But do we give greater rights to more intelligent humans at the expense of less intelligent humans? No. Also, please consider a human who has suffered a severe brain injury.

They may experience profound cognitive deficits, they may be unable to speak, and they may be incapable of fulfilling their duties under the social contract. But that does not mean we can exploit them. We can't conduct painful experiments on them against their will.

What about the soul? Isn't that the characteristic that matters? Well, let me ask you. When in the long history of evolution did the soul develop? Did all the great apes evolve souls, or did the soul appear as a mutation just as our species arose, so that none of the animals have souls but all humans do? I remember our wonderful celebration a few months ago of the fact that we are all stardust. The animals are stardust, too. Darwin also demonstrates the fallacy of the argument that animals were put here for our use. If they were put here for our use, what were they doing for 250 million years before we arrived on Earth? I mean, were they practicing being here for us?

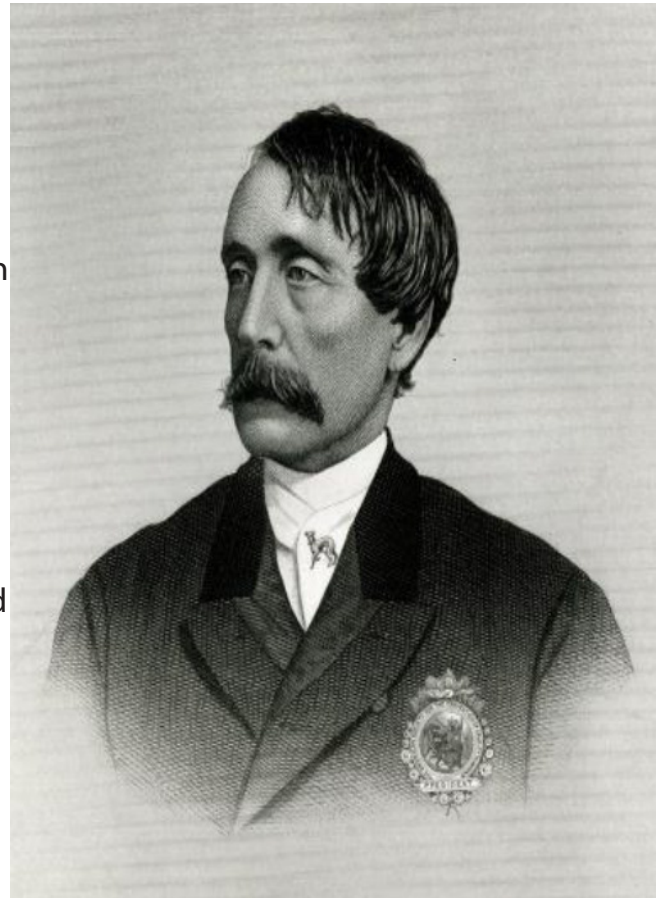
Don't plants suffer? So, isn't it just as wrong to eat them? There is no evidence that plants have a central nervous system, which is a prerequisite to experiencing pain. And even if plants could suffer, we should still eat plants instead of animals. Why? Because animals eat plants. If we eat an animal in this imaginary world where plants suffer, then we cause the suffering of that animal, and we cause any suffering experienced by the plants which that animal ate.

What about the fact that we are human? Doesn't that entitle us to exploit animals? We are humans, and they are not. Let's eat them. Is that idea anything more than rank tribalism: the notion that we should only take care of our own, that we owe no duties to anyone different from us? In the final analysis, I suggest that it IS the ability to suffer that matters. The purpose of pain is to avoid injury and to preserve life. So, the animals' capacity for pain is precisely the characteristic that should exempt them from exploitation.

As we stop exploiting animals, we must keep in mind the intersection of oppression. It is essential to guard against sexism, racism, and homophobia in the animal rights movement, for example. So, should we wait to help animals until we have ended those other oppressions entirely? I do not believe we should wait. All oppression is linked. To say that the animal question should wait until we have solved racism, sexism, and homophobia is like a person who says, "Hmm, I'm still having a problem with my sexism. I'm working on it, and there's been improvement, but it still crops up from time to time. So, I know what I'll do. I'm going to focus exclusively on my sexism and not worry about my homophobia." We don't do that. We address all oppression. If you accept this argument that we should not exploit anyone who can suffer, then there is no hierarchy of oppressions, and there is no chronological order in which we should address them.

What does all this have to do with Unitarian Universalism? We can be proud that a bright thread of animal advocacy runs through our history.

Henry Bergh, who founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, was a Unitarian. Among his strongest supporters were Unitarian newspaper executive Horace Greeley, and Bergh's own pastor, Unitarian Henry Whitney Bellows. Bergh was deadly serious about ending the suffering of animals. He once climbed up on a roof and dropped down like Batman through a skylight into the middle of a dogfighting ring, with a dogfight in progress, to save the dogs and arrest the perpetrators. He physically placed his body between a cruel driver and the horse the driver was viciously beating. Animal-abusing industries called him "The Great Meddler," and he wore that title as a badge of honor.





“You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity.”

Our Great Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson was an ethical vegetarian. He wrote this regarding humankind’s violence toward animals: “You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity.”



Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau believed that we should not eat animals. He wrote, “Every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition, has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food.”

“Every man who has ever been earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food.”



Bronson Alcott was an educator, a Transcendentalist, and the father of Louisa May Alcott. He was close friends with the others shown here, Emerson, Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Together, they were known as the Concord Quartet of Concord, Massachusetts. Bronson Alcott had the further distinction of being vegan 100 years before the word was even invented. Alcott, in his own words, believed in the fundamental rights of animals to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He said the milk belongs to the calf, and the chicken has a right to its existence.

Ahimsa

the principle of non-harm, recognized in
Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism.

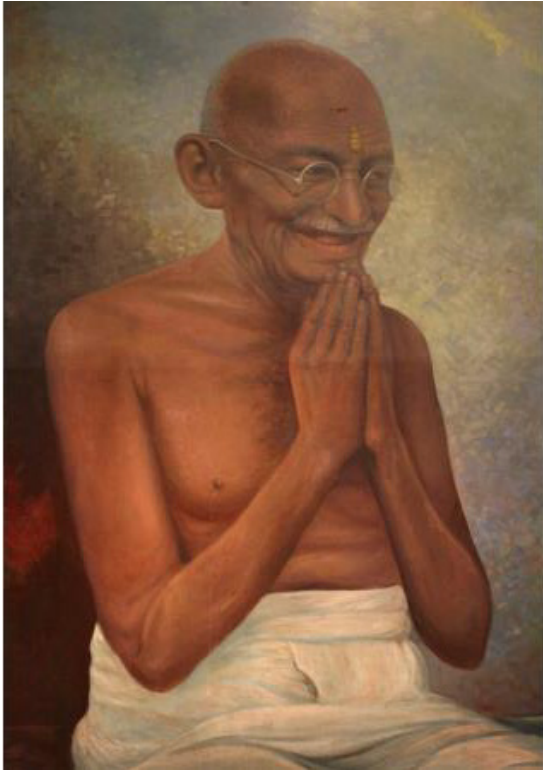
From some of the other traditions we honor comes the concept of ahimsa, the Sanskrit word for non-harm. Those who adopt ahimsa as their moral code seek to avoid harming anyone, including animals. Ahimsa is recognized within Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as Jainism. The Jains are so devoted to ahimsa that they wear a mesh cloth covering the mouth and nose, so that they do not even risk killing a tiny insect by inhaling it. There is so much more in our traditions and our sources, but time is fleeting.

I have made my argument that we should not exploit those who can suffer, and that we should not pay anyone to do it for us, on a factory farm, in a slaughterhouse, or in a research lab. I have given a brief introduction to animal advocacy in Unitarian Universalist history and thought. Now let's get down to brass tacks. What exactly am I asking you to do?

The ask, of those who agree that the capacity to suffer is the basis for freedom from exploitation:

1. Go vegan (no meat, eggs, dairy) for 21 days.
2. Permanently change to vegan, cruelty-free cosmetic, personal care, and household products.

If you agree with my position that the ability to suffer is what matters, then I'm asking you to do two things: First, go vegan for 21 days. That means avoiding all meat, eggs, and dairy. Can we give people the handout? The handout shows all the delicious things you can eat. If you start tomorrow, the 21 days will end the Monday before Thanksgiving. I hope you'll go vegan for life, but my specific request today is that you go vegan for 21 days. Second, if you agree that the capacity to suffer is what matters, I ask that you permanently switch to cruelty-free cosmetics, personal care products, and household products. If you want to know why, read about product testing in Animal Liberation. By the way, if you decide to go vegan, or you're already vegan, you are in good company. Other vegans include:



Mahatma Gandhi

James Cromwell - Actor - became vegan after starring in Babe

Woody Harrelson - Actor - Taxi, Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri

Thich Nhat Hanh - Vietnamese monk, peace activist

Sandra Oh - Famous actress - Gray's Anatomy, Killing Eve

Cory Booker - Famous politician and presidential candidate

Jon Stewart - Comedian - The Daily Show, Comedy Central

Casey Kasem - Famous DJ

Carl Lewis - Nine-time Olympic gold medalist

Al Gore - Former vice-president of the United States

Emily Deschanel - TV star - Bones

Joaquin Phoenix - Actor - Hotel Rwanda, Walk the Line

You have been so generous to let me make the case for these animals. Will you allow me to conclude with some personal observations?

These animals love their young. They try to escape suffering. They love life. They fear death. Just as I was a stranger in a strange land in small-town Mississippi, these animals are outsiders, currently beyond our understanding of that sacred mandate to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with all that has life. People refuse to even see these animals, refuse to look at their suffering. Please don't turn away. They desperately need us to open our hearts to them. They live in unrelenting anguish, and we are their only hope.

Thank you so much for letting me speak from my heart today.

