



## A PROPENSITY TO CARE

A DISCUSSION WITH DR. DAVID WIEBERS, PROMINENT NEUROLOGIST, CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF HSLF AND FORMER CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF THE HSUS

**What first inspired your work as an advocate for animals?** Although I've always had a propensity to care about nonhuman beings, I received an important lesson from a companion animal mouse named Larry as I was going through my neurological training in Rochester, Minnesota. Upon getting to know him very well and interacting with him closely, it became clear to me that he had a very well developed personality and that his sentience and neurological function were of the same fabric as that of a human. It became clear that these aspects also applied to all other sentient beings.

What followed was a growing sense that, although curbing human suffering and death clearly continued to be compelling for me as a physician, the huge majority of suffering, mistreatment and wanton destruction of sentient beings on this planet was occurring in nonhumans and that

this represented the widest gap in what would be an ideal world of harmony among earth's creatures and the world as it existed.

**You joined the board of The Humane Society of the United States in 1990. How have you seen the organization change over the years?** Since my first introduction to the HSUS board by then-President John Hoyt 25 years ago, I felt an immediate and growing sense of belonging, of common purpose and of resolve to make things better in this world for nonhuman beings. The board and organization very rapidly became like an extended family and it has been that way ever since.

Over the years, the organization has grown considerably in size and influence and has become more active politically and internationally. Its role within the animal protection community has been to serve as a large tent for broad numbers of people with varying degrees of knowledge and commitment about animal protection issues. The organization endeavors to be inclusive rather than exclusive and has evolved over the years along with our society toward more progressive and active stances on a wide range of issues involving nonhuman beings. As more of humanity has become aware of the importance and significance of these issues for humans as well as nonhumans, the calls for action and the opportunities to have an impact in the field of animal protection have increased.

**You served as chair of The HSUS from 1999 to 2008. What was your proudest accomplishment of that tenure?** All of us who were on the board at the time were very fortunate to have been part of a very formative period in the organization's history, and the accomplishments of that period were a team effort on the part of the board and staff. Collectively, we experienced a period of incredible growth in the membership and assets of the organization while transitioning The HSUS to new executive leadership, overseeing numerous major corporate combinations and helping to create a new and highly effective 501(c)(4) entity, the Humane Society Legislative Fund. Accompanying these organizational changes were a wide range of

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substantial legislative successes and other positive developments for animals in society, nationally and globally, including the passage of Proposition 2, the landmark farm animal legislation in California.

All of these aspects enhanced the prospects of making this world a better place for nonhuman as well as human beings long into the future, and, in the final analysis, that would have to be our proudest accomplishment during that tenure.

**What is your history with the Humane Society Legislative Fund?** In 2004, it was clear that the animal protection movement needed a strong 501(c)(4) political entity to allow us to function on the same playing field as many of our adversaries in the political arena in the United States. Wayne Pacelle had just been elected as our new CEO and Wayne had a strong political background in our field, having served for 10 years as the HSUS's chief lobbyist and spokesperson. Although the idea of such an entity had been entertained in prior years, Wayne's coming on as CEO proved to be a great catalyst for completing the process.

The organization started out small but has been surprisingly effective throughout election cycles starting in 2006. It has benefitted enormously from corporate combinations with The Fund for Animals that brought with it individuals like Mike Markarian who serves as president and Marian Probst who serves on the HSLF board, and the Doris Day Animal League that brought with it individuals such as Sara Amundson who serves as executive director. These are all wonderful, talented and deeply committed individuals, as are the rest of our HSLF staff and board. I was the founding chair of the organization and continue to serve as chair.

**Why do you feel that the work of HSLF is so important?** As I alluded to earlier, HSLF and its associated HSLF PAC [political action committee] allow the proponents of animal protection to get onto the same playing field as many of our adversaries in the political arena. These organizations are not limited in their lobbying efforts and they may directly influence and participate in political elections, all of which is vitally important to changing soci-

ety for the better as it relates to the wellbeing of animals.

Prior to having such an entity, many adversarial groups had a clear shot against animals in the political arena, and politicians assumed that they simply needed to follow the wishes of the boisterous minority in society who wanted to keep exploiting animals.

More and more politicians are coming to realize that it is not only the right thing to do, but it is also in their best political interest to support measures that protect nonhuman animals. They are paying more attention to our issues than ever before and are following our HSLF Scorecards and Scoreboards that rate politicians according to their performance on issues and votes that affect animals. Twenty years ago or even 10 years ago, this was completely unheard of and we simply didn't have an effective vehicle to compete in this arena with many of our adversaries.

### **Is it important for animal protection organizations to have scientists on their boards?**

There are numerous animal protection issues that interface with science and with human and veterinary medicine including such very fundamental elements as sentience, cognition and the ability to feel pain and suffer. Other broader human and animal health issues overlap considerably as do issues related to the use of animals in research and various forms of educational activities. Often there are various scientific or data analysis aspects to issues wherein the perspective of a scientist has a good chance to be beneficial.

So, yes, I think that there have been some advantages to having scientists on these boards. At the same time, it has been very important to have a great diversity of inputs and mindsets coming from board members trained in numerous other fields as well. Ultimately, I believe that it is the combination of these diverse inputs with the underlying unifying motivation of compassion for all life that proves to be the best recipe for producing high level and inspired decision-making within such groups.

### **Over the course of your career, how did you build bridges between the medical and animal protection communities?**

When I first became involved with The HSUS 27 years ago, the medical and animal protection communities were at terrible odds with one another, largely over the issue of animal research. The rather strident discord between these communities seemed particularly ironic since the primary goal of the medical profession is to decrease the amount of unnecessary death and suffering in human beings—and the animal protection community simply wishes to extend this same goal to beings other than humans.

Over the years, however, I can tell you that I've spent a lot of time in both fields and that some of the most beautiful, caring and compassionate individuals you'll ever meet come out of both of them. There is a great deal of similarity in the spirit of giving and caring, and the enormous fulfillment from helping others.

For these reasons, I have always viewed my work in animal protection as an extension of the work I do in medicine. The key to bridging the two fields is to focus on the common elements and the uniting force of compassion that runs through both of them. Happily, the discord between these two fields has lessened considerably over the years.

### **If you went back in time to talk with your medical-student self, would he be pleasantly surprised or dismayed to hear how far attitudes toward the use of animals in research laboratories have evolved?**

For the most part, I believe that he would be pleasantly surprised. Over the past 30 or so years, the use of animals in research has decreased by around 75 percent in the United States, and the oversight of such research has generally increased considerably. The numbers of medical centers using animals in education has dropped from almost all medical centers 30 years ago to now almost none in the United States. A plethora of alternatives to the use of animals in research, education and testing have been developed and more are on the way. The infamous Class B dealers which were common 30 years ago and used to provide random source animals including some from pet shelters and other controversial sources to research labs are now nearly extinct in the United States. The National Institutes of Health in the United States has finally

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called for a moratorium on the use of chimpanzees in invasive research, a practice that has already ended in all but one other country in the world. The European Union, India and Brazil have all enacted bans on animal testing for cosmetics and we are getting close to such a scenario in the United States.

Having said all of this, we must realize that there is still a lot of room for improvement. These types of changes often take time but I'm grateful for the progress that has been made thus far. I am especially happy for the field of medicine and for all of our medical school graduates in the years and decades ahead regarding the cessation of the use of animals in medical education. The capacity to perceive suffering in other beings and to respond with warmth and compassion is intertwined with scientific knowledge and skill in the complex endeavor we call the practice of medicine. For too many years, animals were used in the teaching of medical science without considering its impact on the student's integration of compassion into the mix, and without adequate consideration of the perception and experiences of the animals themselves.

### **Have you received any push back from your medical peers for your animal activism?**

At the time that I was first active in animal protection there were many in the medical community who were adamantly opposed to our activities and many in both the medical and animal protection communities who saw each other as bitter enemies. There was push back at times from such individuals in the medical community, but I was also amazed and very grateful that many other medical colleagues including many who had been silent on these issues came out in support of what we were doing and saying on behalf of nonhuman beings, and many were clearly able to see through the conflicts to the more powerful underlying element of compassion for all life which is shared by both fields.

### **In your lovely introduction to "Souls Like Ourselves" you suggest humans might achieve inner peace by extending more compassion to animals. Can you talk more about that?**

Extending the circle of one's compassion to

beings other than humans is an important step in the evolution of our species. When a human is born, his or her first and foremost concern is with personal comfort and safety. Usually, with appropriate attention and coaching, this concern and priority gradually extends to include one's parents, followed by one's immediate family.

From there, as a child grows and learns to grant others the same feelings and awareness achieved for his or her own self, the circle of compassion widens. The learning process is not automatic, and the extent to which humans are encouraged to see beyond themselves and are taught to recognize the independent value of other beings is a matter of parental and societal influence.

This influence can be directed at breaking down barriers of difference, teaching people that behind the externalities of nationality, race, economic class, religion and ethnicity, there exists in the other a consciousness and a set of yearnings that demand uncompromising respect. The next logical step in this pathway is to extend one's compassion and caring to other species besides humans.

### **Do you believe animals have souls?**

Yes I do and I think that there is good evidence to support this, some of which comes from science and some of which comes from common sense and observation.

The wiring and organization of the brains, spinal cords and peripheral nervous systems of nonhuman beings are fundamentally the same as the wiring and organization of these structures in humans down to the cellular level—and in mammals such as gorillas and chimpanzees the wiring and organization are essentially identical to that of humans. These brains and nervous systems are the structures that allow the expression of human and nonhuman consciousness to occur on this earth. Without them, we could not meaningfully interact with our environment or with those around us, and without the consciousness and energy that activate the brains and bodies of humans and nonhumans (and instill recognizable "life" into our tissues), our brains and bodies are merely carcasses, devoid of the capability of thinking thoughts, taking actions and feeling pain and pleasure.

I was quite shocked about 25 years ago when I asked a couple of my colleagues at Mayo Clinic (who were world authorities in electroencephalography) about the comparison of the electroencephalogram (or EEG) of a human patient to the EEG of a gorilla and they told me that they could essentially not tell the difference.

The brain waves that are measured by EEGs represent the fundamental, measurable, quantifiable energies that emanate from the brains of human patients or, in this case, from the brain of a gorilla or other nonhuman being.

There is little question that the consciousness that gives rise to these energies and inhabits the brains and bodies of these nonhuman beings must be of the exact same fabric as the consciousness that inhabits and activates all of our human bodies and brains.

Few would deny that the mentally retarded child, or even the child born without cerebral hemispheres (who cannot even meaningfully react to his or her environment) has the same fundamental underlying consciousness or energy (or soul or spirit if you prefer those terms) as other humans, yet there has been a reluctance on the part of many humans to accept that this possibility exists in nonhuman animals. The day will come when our species as a whole will know that it is preposterous not to accept this possibility.

Webster's dictionary defines "soul" as "the immaterial essence of an individual life" and this can most certainly be applied to nonhuman beings.



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