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"To Be a Friend to Animals" Children's Book Reading and Discussion

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“TO BE A FRIEND TO ANIMALS”
CHILDREN’S BOOK READING AND DISCUSSION

SAMANTHA KIRSCH

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the University Honors Program
at Bowling Green State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with

UNIVERSITY HONORS

12/6/12

____________________________________ Advisor
Dr. Heath Diehl, Honors

_____________________________________ Advisor
Dr. Rona Klein, English
Compassion Fostered

I have always believed that passion is fostered in childhood: that children, who are so open, curious and interested in the living world around them, are incredibly easily convinced of its beauty, and also of the uniqueness of animals. They are also easily convinced of the connection between humans and animals, who breathe, play, interact and even seem to have languages of their own. It’s almost as if children and animals, each in possession of a special kind of innocence, share a connection that is truly extraordinary, and one that human adults find most entertaining and enjoyable to watch. I also believe strongly that children, when raised to believe that animals are nothing more than objects that humans can possess, use and then dispose of when they are no longer of use, will lose that innocence and therefore lose that connection. It’s a sad and maddening thing to watch, yet it is something that I see time and time again. My own young cousin has said time and time again that he does not want to “eat chicken nuggets,” and instead of fostering that behavior and expanding on it, using it as a teaching moment, my aunt and uncle force the food on him, punishing him until he eats them. Could this be the residue of compassion that is causing him to not want to eat his chicken nuggets? Or is it merely picky eating habits? Sadly, because questions have never been asked of him and because he has never been engaged in a discussion about his tastes, we may never truly know the roots of this behavior. Now, while I am not completely sure whether or not his behavior is representative of his entire age group, I do think that it is evidence enough of a possibility of creating mindfulness out of an aversion he has developed naturally and without provocation. This is where my Honors Project begins.

Authors Phillip D. Zelazo and Kristen E. Lyons discuss the many stages of child development in their article, “The Potential Benefits of Mindfulness Training in Early
Childhood: A Developmental Social Cognitive Neuroscience Perspective” for the journal, *Child Developmental Perspectives*. Within, they state that creating a level of mindfulness during early cognitive development is extremely beneficial for later *adult* development and children who are educated about how the world and society function can be better prepared for handling it when they must experience it free from parental influences (Zelazo 155). Allowing children to engage in activities that increase their mindfulness about societal issues creates within them the ability to critically think and evaluate how they feel about these issues, thus inducing empathy, “cognitive introspection” and curiosity. These behaviors are both healthy and prevailing, staying with children as they develop into adolescents and then, later, into adults. In short, educating children makes them more empathic, pro-socially prepared adults who will be able to carry a more pro-social world on their shoulders. My thought is that in educating children, we can create a better society for ourselves and future generations.

I have always personally been interested in animal rights. In the spring of 2009, after years of feeling guilty for eating animals, I had finally had enough and took the first step towards a life full of activism on their behalves: I gave up meat forever. I had always felt compassion towards animals and eating them was an extremely guilty “pleasure” for me, one that filled me with shame and self-loathing. I kept seeing and hearing the most horrific stories about what happened (and continues to happen to this day) to animals on factory farms, the animals that human beings freely eat and refuse a second thought. Every time I heard a story about an animal being brutally beaten before slaughter or screamed at and brutally mutilated without anesthesia or medical care, it caused me great pain, both physical and emotional. Giving up meat was the end result of the ticking time bomb that was my compassion for animals. One morning, after reading a horror story about the incredibly inhumane treatment of a “Beef” cow, it was the last
straw. Reading about her struggle to walk after exhaustion, the cruel beatings and electric prodding she received from the human workers who were determined to get her move and finally about her being left, bleeding and dying for hours on the side of the highway in the bitter cold only to be “mercifully” killed hours later by a police officer caused me to take a stand. That day in February 2008, my life changed forever. For me, transitioning out of eating meat was not too difficult and therefore, set my life ablaze with the fire of my passion for animals and my desire to end their sufferings. The years passed quickly but not without their share of disappointments and trials. I had always known that most people don’t feel the exact same way about animals as I did and still do, but to what extent, I could never have imagined. My passion and protests were met with disdain and mockery. My classmates and even my own family members turned up their noses and refused to listen to me when I went off on my rants about the atrocities that were being committed towards animals across the world. It occurred to me that the world was a dark and uncaring place and in which I might never get my message across. The people in my life were just so ingrained in their ways, so used to viewing animals as nothing more than food sources, as entertainment, as objects, as clothing. It was incredibly discouraging. I cried a lot and often felt overwhelmed by the hopelessness that was my cause. At times, I was so upset that I wished I could get rid of my passion, throw it away as something incredibly distasteful. However, through my interactions with children, namely my young cousins, I began to see small glimmers of hope that shone brighter than the darkness of the apathies of the adults that I was constantly surrounding myself with. Often, when playing with animals, my cousins would talk about how much they loved them. They were fascinated with them, wanting to touch, to experience, to understand. There appeared to me to be a certain level of curiosity and the beginnings of what
seemed like compassion and I began to wonder what would happen if these behavioral elements were tapped into.

I began to rethink some of my own strategies with animal rights. Maybe screaming, ranting and being abrasive with people was not the best strategy, and maybe adults weren’t the most effective targets. Then, in spring 2010, during my Honors “Critical Thinking About Great Ideas” class with Dr. Heath Diehl, I was challenged to create a “Great Ideas” project and slowly, an idea formulated in my mind that was precisely that: “great.” I wrote, illustrated and put together a children’s book detailing the many ways in which animals are used by humans (circuses, animal testing, the meat industry, pets, dog fighting etc…) and encouraging children to think about animals as friends, sentient, living, feeling beings who are quite similar to themselves. It was not aimed at children in such a way as to frighten them or make them upset. The pictures were not graphic but friendly and engaging: large, detailed, full size 8x10 images of the faces of animals, and the topics ranged from everything from food to circuses to pet ownership to animal testing. I figured if I was to encourage children to consider the specific topics that I was covering, my best bet would be to keep them engaged in the beauty of the animals rather than frightening with grotesque images of the cruelties they faced. My purpose was not to frighten or alienate but to tap into that curiosity children have towards animals and use it to get them to rethink what they are most likely being told about animals from parents, family members and society in general. In her article for Psychology Today, Charlotte Reznick explores the power of a child’s imagination and curiosity and how one can expand upon these uniquely childlike characteristics to foster a pro-social attitude in children. Her article focuses on the issue of bullying and a child’s ability to use his/her imagination to put him/herself in the position of the person being bullied (Reznick 1). The same, however, could be applied with
human-animal empathy, if allowed. Overall, I wanted desperately to ignite a spark of compassion within the children who read it that would burn brightly throughout the rest of their lives. Dr. Diehl told me that the book, expanded upon and edited, would make a good Honors Project, and although at the time, my Honors Project was the last thing on my mind, I considered it.

Flash forward 2 years later and there I was, actually having to contemplate ideas for an Honors project. Spring 2012 was upon me and I was enrolled in HNRS 4980. I never even considered, throughout the Honors Project Development Seminar, doing anything that wasn’t related to animal rights. It’s my passion. There is nothing that I am more devoted to. I am not completely certain wherefrom my empathy came but I do know that it is there. Much if not all of my compassion for animals and my desire to fight for their rights comes from feeling and situating myself in the positions of the animals that are being abused and imagining what it might be like to experience the atrocities that they daily experience. I know in my heart what it feels like to be terrified, to love and fear the ones I love might be taken from me, to experience pain and long for something more. Whether or not animals experience these elements of being in the same way I do, all I know is what I would feel if the experiences they have were my own. I would want help. I would want the world to know what is happening to me. I wouldn’t want to be ignored. Then I realized that this was essentially what I had done in my children’s book: I had put the readers in the place of the animals, purposely putting them into the metaphorical “shoes” of the animals by helping them to associate what was happening to the animals with experiences in their everyday lives (such as when I associated animal testing with getting shots and dog fighting with getting in fights with friends). How better to meet my own needs and goals than to raise empathy by forcing the reader to understand what is happening to animals but in more of a comfortable setting? So when beginning my Honors Project, I looked back at the book
that I wrote for Dr. Diehl’s “Great Ideas” class. It was something new and exciting, in an area that not many people think about. It has potential to make a difference, to, in a small way, change the world for animals. Looking at the ways in which many animal rights groups work and seeing to whom they tend to speak, I noticed that most animal rights literature was directed specifically at adults, showing gruesome pictures of real-life animals being tortured, bloody and diseased, sick and dying. Going for an empathy appeal by appealing to fear, most animal rights groups are attempting to convince a group of people who have already founded strong, heavily societally based ideals and perceptions about animals and how they are to be used: adults. As children are less societally situated, their opinions about animals are not so formed and yet so little literature was devoted to teaching children compassion in their young, developmental years. So, I decided that this would be the project that I would strive for. Yet, perfecting and publishing the book was not enough for me. I wanted something more. Looking back to the lack of conversations that had been had with my little cousin and his aversion towards chicken nuggets, it occurred to me that what might be missing from the project was interaction…conversation.

I decided to host a book reading of “To Be a Friend to Animals,” with a discussion following the actual reading. The goal is to facilitate questions and answers, getting the children in attendance involved with the lesson, seeking information about how they feel towards animals and whether or not the book changed their minds about anything. At the time that I was planning the event in HNRS 4980, I planned on working with the Wood County District Public Library and doing the reading and discussion over the summer when children are out of school and I would have more time. However, the planning fell through as I was not able to get in contact with the woman in charge of the Wood County District Public Library and as my employment with the Office of New Student Orientation and First Year Programs became much more time-
consuming than I had previously imagined. The summer passed before I had time to even realize it and I was left in a whirlwind of confusion and trepidation, feeling exceedingly overwhelmed at the prospect of having to complete my Honors Project on top of the heavy course load that accompanied my senior year at BGSU. By the time Fall semester 2012 started, I was seriously considering dropping HNRS 4990 and thereby forfeiting my Honors Diploma. However, after a motivational conversation with Dr. Diehl, I was encouraged and spurred on to continue with my project and get it back up and going again.

Feeling renewed and revitalized with the project, I started on the busy work…starting with identifying the venue for my reading. After consulting the Wood County District Public Library, I learned of yet another setback: the Library does not allow people to host readings or rent out rooms for events and they had no time in their schedule for my project this semester. So, my original plan had fallen through and it was now time to look for somewhere else to host the reading. While searching, I stumbled upon the idea of hosting it at the local coffee shop in Bowling Green, Grounds for Thought. After several attempts at getting a hold of them with no reply, my venue again had to change. I then contacted the Wood County Humane Society, only to be let down with the biggest stumbling block yet.

At first, the WCHS seemed very interested in hosting an event with me. The woman I spoke with, Erin Jones, the outreach coordinator, was very friendly and personable and told me about an event the shelter was already hosting with the BGSU CDC (Children’s Discovery Center). She told me how they were already planning on bringing dogs in and that I could bring my book and read it for the children there. Her only stipulation was that she should be able to see the book first, so gladly, I obliged. After the meeting, she took my book to show to her supervisor, telling me that she just wanted to make sure that nothing in the book would be
offensive to the children or their parents. However, a few days later, Erin informed me via email that due to the fact that I discussed more issues than just responsible pet ownership such as vegetarianism, circuses and vivisection in my book, I would no longer be allowed to read my book to the children nor participate in the event at all. She told me, however, that if I decided to rewrite the book, she and the shelter would be interested in revisiting and hosting another event in the future.

This refusal of my book and of my project was incredibly disheartening for several different reasons. First was the sheer fact that yet another venue was being pulled out from under my feet. After planning and having every intention of hosting my event with them, I was now being cut from the docket entirely. Second, and even more frustratingly, was the speciesism their refusal displayed. The fact that the shelter wanted me to rewrite my book to focus only on one specific group of animals (dogs and cats) was alarming to me. It is evident to me that the shelter was afraid my book would offend parents and children because of the challenging of social norms that it represents. No parent wants their child coming home from school and declaring that they don’t want to eat meat anymore and no day care center or humane society wants to stick its neck out in favor of something that could lose them funding or community support. Therefore, the only animals that one can claim to care about are the ones that most people already care about…dogs and cats. Yet, my opinion is that no matter how risky it may be, one must face the harsh realities that ALL animals face and make those realities known to the world. The purpose of my book is just that and I won’t change it nor will I rewrite it in such a way as to exclude animals we eat or use for entertainment or research because all of these animals are equally capable of experiencing joy, happiness, loneliness, fear, pain and pleasure and are therefore all equally worthy of our moral considerations. Author Marek Špinka discusses animal emotions in
his article for *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* entitled “Social Dimension of Emotions and Its Implication for Animal Welfare.” He states that in recent studies, animals have been shown to exhibit different types of cognitive emotions such as these, even displaying empathy for injured or frightened comrades (Špinka 173). He also discusses the pro-social behaviors some animals such as dogs and even rats and pigs have shown to attempt to help one another accomplish tasks. Dogs have been known to mourn the deaths of loved ones, exhibiting behaviors such as refusing to leave the side of a dead companion. Yet, Špinka notes that dogs are not the only animals to do this. Animals that we have been routinely using for food, or experimenting on and for entertainment have the ability to experience complex emotions, yet because of the ease with which we can dominate and control them and because of the fact that they are readily available and have been used in these ways for so long, it is easier for humans to ignore these emotional complexities. Špinka believes, however, that knowledge and awareness of the emotional complexities of animals just might make a great difference in the animal rights movement (171). This is the reason why my book’s message is so important to me. I personally have two pet rats, animals that many people believe are dirty and not worthy of moral consideration. Yet, after my experiences with my ladies, Clarabelle and Minnie, I refuse to be “speciesist” when divvying out moral considerations for animals. Clara and Minnie are extremely friendly and interested in spending time with my roommates and I. When we enter the room, they greet us, climbing up the side-bars of their cage and attempting to interact with us. I have even put Minnie to sleep when rubbing her behind her ears. Though different, my interactions with my rats do not prove any less fulfilling or rich than my interactions with my dogs. So it may be more of a challenge this way but that has never stopped me before and when it comes to animals, it will never stop me in the future either.
So again the venues changed, but I would not take “no” for an answer. After countless calls and attempts to reach the Way Public Library in Perrysburg, I finally got through and was able to schedule a room for December 8th, 2012. They sent me a confirmation email and told me that all marketing must exclude the library’s name as they are not sponsoring the event but merely hosting it. Finally, my project was beginning to take form and after I booked the room, a feeling of relief settled over me. However, I know the hardest part is yet to come.

My event has yet to happen but the project is due. My intention is to present the results of the actual event in the spring presentations 2013 and until then, the preparations, goals, failures and successes make up the bulk of my honors project. My goals for the “To Be a Friend to Animals” Book Reading Event on December 8th, 2012 are to get through to as many children as possible, start some strong and challenging discussions, create fliers and pamphlets (one for the children and one for the parents), to not offend anyone but rather make them think differently, to have a decently sized audience (I am hoping for 10 or more children in attendance, although any more than zero should be considered a success due to the subject matter). I am also hoping to be able to publicize effectively, putting up signs in visible places and making them bright and eye-catching enough to arouse interest about the event. I hope also to be able to incorporate my different organizations like SAVE (Saving Animals from Violence and Exploitation) and the Falcon Forensics Speech and Debate Team in order to more effectively facilitate discussions and the smooth running of the event. I hope to be able to bring in some vegan snacks that the children and parents alike can enjoy while listening to the story and then provide the parents with vegan recipes that are easy and enjoyable so they might consider a vegan diet for their families. I also hope to be able to formulate questions in such a way as to arouse the children’s interests and speak directly to them. I at no point want anyone to feel overwhelmed or as if they can’t fully
understand the concepts I am presenting. I then, at the end, want the parents to be able to fill out an event evaluation form, detailing what they think might have made the event (and the book itself) more effective. If anyone was offended, I want to know so that I might fix it and amend it in the future.

So far, my successes include affective planning and organization of my event. I have been able to find a perfect venue and get my posters and advertisements up in enough time and in visible enough places such as Kroger, the Woodland Mall Cinema in Bowling Green, Myles Bakery near Dairy Queen and various places on campus. I also created a Facebook event and posted it in SAVE’s, in the Northwest Ohio Animal Advocates’, BG Veg Club’s and Toledo Area Vegans and Vegetarian’s Facebook pages. I have had a lot of luck with getting SAVE members to help out and with getting some of my friends (college students) to attend. I have been affective at spreading the word. It’s the actual attendance that I am worried about.

My failures have been mostly concerned with the book and the message. Although all of my research has led me to believe that children will be susceptible and responsive to hearing about how to befriend and care for animals, the parents that I have spoken with seem to think that exposing their children to the animal rights message will devastate them or make them scared. Overall, what I have learned so far from my “To Be a Friend to Animals” Book Reading preparations is that animal rights is a touchy subject and when children are added into the mix, it gets even touchier. People do not want to “ruin the innocence” of their children by exposing them to violent imagery and often, that is what the cause is associated with. I personally spoke with several parents when attempting to get them to come to the event and I was met with disdain and criticism. Although my book was “beautifully illustrated,” they said, it was too “scary” and too “direct.” One man I spoke with told me he didn’t want to “scar” his children and
that he would never bring them to an event like this one. According to Robert Davies, in his article for the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, it has been deeply ingrained in the minds of many American parents today that children are deeply innocent and unable to deal with complex educational experiences. However, he states that it is often deeply beneficial to children to be educated, especially where social activism and pro-social behaviors are concerned. He believes this does not eliminate or taint a child’s innocence, but allows it to flourish in a way that might benefit society (Davies 380). After advertising my event on the different Facebook pages of different local animal activism organizations with which I am involved, I began to understand that perhaps the book can serve to many parents as just that: as an aid for parents struggling to teach their children about activism and being kind to animals. Raising children is already hard and expensive. It is difficult to try to get parents to listen and not be offended when one is speaking over them, directly to their children. Often, when children ask questions and desire change, it can get expensive and not just monetarily. Hard questions are never easy to answer…they take planning and tact and often, they are easier left unaddressed. What my book does is force those hard questions into the foreground and demand an answer, thereby rendering those responsible for answering questions that they may make them uncomfortable and perhaps even, full of shame.

Overall, I am looking forward to the event and to the learning opportunity it will present not only for further developing my book but also for further developing my *activism*. Although I heartily believe and all my research has led me to feel justified in believing that children would be benefitted from learning about the ways in which animals are treated as it would help them to grow up to be more compassionate and aware adults, perhaps what I may run into is a parental “roadblock.” And perhaps the direction of my book must change again. Perhaps instead of
aiming it at the children of parents who are not yet activists, I should instead aim it at the children of parents who are activists already…parents who can use the book to educate their children about how they personally live their lives and want their children to duplicate. Having this as a mission would not be so bad. I can personally read it to my own children if I ever have them and my animal rights activist friends have told me that they would read it to their children as well. The project has been such a learning experience and although the end result may not be what I hoped it would be…maybe the learning result was the more important of the two anyway.
Works Cited


Discussion Questions

1. Do you think animals are your friends? What do you think about animals?

2. How are humans and animals different? How are they the same?


4. What is your favorite part of the book?

5. What will you do to be a friend to animals?