

I thought a lot about suffering, specifically the relative amounts felt by animals versus people. My concern with animal pain was a luxury their culture couldn't afford.

Ethics Lesson

Standing up for a dog in Haiti | By Jayme Moye



IT WAS A STRANGE PLACE TO CRY, but I had no other place to go. In Haiti, a 10-by-12-foot classroom in a small schoolhouse served as a makeshift hotel for the evening. I sat down on the end of the bed—a green army cot beside a laminated poster of the human eyeball—and sobbed. My tears lacked the grace of my 35 years; childlike, inconsolable, they were tears of shame. I felt that I'd done something wrong.

I also sensed I was not alone. Chest heaving, nose running, I turned and checked the skeleton on the wall behind me. It stared back with empty eyes, its jaw unhinged in a perpetual state of laughter, or maybe horror.

Then I saw them, or rather, the tops of their heads. All three of my host family's children were on tippy-toes outside the window, a square hole in the cinder block wall, listening. Their presence made me want to cry even harder, but instead, I forced myself to stop. They'd already seen and heard enough of my Ugly American behavior for one afternoon. I pulled a book out of my backpack and pretended to read.

The incident began with a dog. Or maybe it started with my decision to backpack across the Central Plateau of Haiti. An adventure-travel journalist, I was on assignment to cover the inaugural trek of Expedition Ayiti, a new adventure tourism company. Instead of camping, our small group of Americans and Haitians stayed in rural settlements along the remote route, paying local families for a meal and a place to sleep. The idea was to provide a source of income for some of Haiti's poorest communities and to foster cultural understanding—or in my case, cultural misunderstanding.

We'd arrived earlier that afternoon in the tiny village of Lamarre after a seven mile hike. I was dozing in the schoolroom-turned-hotel when a dog disturbed me. The rest of the group had gone to check out a church built by American missionaries. Feeling sluggish in the 100-degree heat, I stayed behind. I'd been napping for only a few minutes when the dog began to bark. I shifted in

the cot so my back was to the window, yanking a pillow over my head. It didn't help. I heard scuffling in the dirt beneath the window, a boy's voice, a dog's yips, more barking and then a dog's cries. I winced. It was clear my nap was over.

Pushing open the wooden door, I stepped outside into the humid heat. Instantly, a layer of sweat formed on my brow. Around the corner beneath the window, a boy of about seven, my host family's son, struggled with a skinny orange dog. It was a horrid game of tug-of-war. The boy yanked a rough piece of twine he'd knotted around the dog's hind foot. The dog alternated between trying to pull his leg back and letting himself be dragged, crying and whimpering all the while.

I yelled "Hey!" or something to that effect. Startled, the boy dropped the string and looked up. The dog limped away. The boy moved to chase him. I stepped between the two. "Stop it. Can't you see you're hurting him?" I said.

The boy didn't understand. In rural villages, children speak only Haitian Creole, not French, and certainly not English. He lunged for the dog. I

blocked. The boy looked confused, but backed off. The dog scampered around the back yard, licking at the twine tied around his foot, which the tug-of-war had cinched down painfully.

My work wasn't done. I needed to get the twine off the dog. But every time I moved toward him, he scurried nervously away. The boy watched, having found an even better source of entertainment than bothering the dog. I caught the dog once, but when I touched his back foot, he nipped at me. I cursed out loud. The boy giggled. By now, his mother and two sisters had come out of the house to watch the action.

The dog and I went round and round the back yard, each time garnering more laughter. The few scrawny chickens scattered. The goat tied to a tree bleated in alarm. Frustrated, I stood and faced my human audience, wiping the sweat and grime from my forehead. I knew they wouldn't understand, but that didn't stop me. "It's not funny," I said. "This dog is hurt." More laughter. I searched each face for a sign of compassion. Their eyes were empty.

Finally, I caught the dog by the scruff of his neck, and he nipped at me again. I began to shout at my host family. I don't remember exactly what, but it was aggressive and accusatory and, due to the language barrier, irrelevant. The dog was the only one who seemed upset. I let go of him and burst into tears.

The mother ducked back inside her concrete home and emerged with a leg bone—part of the soup we'd later be served for dinner. She lured the dog easily, and I realized that he belonged to the family. She untied the twine and shooed him away. I waited for her to look at me, for a moment of understanding to pass between us. But she didn't. It didn't.

I retreated to the schoolroom to finish crying. My clothes, soaked in the pungent sweat of adrenaline, stuck to my skin. I was disgusted with my host family, but more so with myself for losing it over a dog. What's worse, a bored seven-year-old abusing his dog or an Ugly American throwing a fit because of it?



A week later, I returned home to Boulder, Colo. During my time in Haiti, I'd lost 10 pounds and

found an intestinal parasite and a heat rash. It was a challenging trip, on many levels. After a few days, the weight came back and my digestive system recovered. The rash, along with the nightmares of impoverished people in a ravaged landscape, faded. But the incident with the dog stayed fresh.

I thought a lot about suffering, specifically the relative amounts felt by animals versus people. The Haiti dog was suffering, and I'd wanted to alleviate that. But could I really blame my host family for their indifference? They had been dealt more than their fair share of suffering—scarce food, rudimentary shelter, parasites, cholera, devastating natural disasters. My concern with animal pain was a luxury their culture couldn't afford. Who cares about a dog when you can only feed your family two meager meals per day?

I was ashamed of my behavior, my cultural insensitivity. And even a bit guilty about my privileged perch at the pinnacle of Maslow's "hierarchy of needs." My basic needs are so well satisfied that I have nothing better to worry about than lofty concepts like self-actualization and animal suffering.

Surely I wasn't the first person to lament such things. During a restless night in Boulder, I turned to the soothing search engine of Google. I typed "animal ethicist" and found Dr. Bernard Rollin. It turns out that one of the world's experts on the ethical treatment of animals teaches at Colorado State University, an hour away in Fort Collins. Desperate for closure on my

experience in Haiti, I sent him a long, late-night email.

Dr. Rollin called me the next day, which surprised me. His response surprised me even more. He told me that abuse of animals is a hallmark of an abused culture... But that doesn't make it right. "What you did was absolutely the right thing to do," he said. "Not only as a 21st-century American, as a human being. Why should an animal be allowed to suffer to gratify the whim of some child who hasn't been taught any better?"

His forceful words that morning served as a literal wake-up call. I realized what was really keeping me up at night: I was trying to justify my host family's behavior, telling myself that it was somehow acceptable, and that I was the one who was out of line. Dr. Rollin turned me around. Animal suffering shouldn't be tolerated just because the person abusing the animal has also suffered. Nor should my privileged position in the world be reason to feel guilty about passing judgment on those in a less fortunate culture, or acting on my own ethical responses.

Dr. Rollin told me that Americans are so afraid of being labeled culturally insensitive that they become overly tolerant. "Even if an entire culture condones an unethical behavior, you should try to educate individuals out of it," Dr. Rollin said.

I couldn't take back my outburst in Haiti, but maybe that was okay. Maybe it was appropriate to show my host family how upset another human being was over animal suffering. Dr. Rollin perhaps put it best: "The last thing I'm worried about is offending people. We're not here to be loved. We're here to leave a better world than we found."

Maybe that family is still talking about the crazy American woman who tried to help the dog. Maybe those three kids will hesitate before abusing their dog again. And maybe, just maybe, one of those kids will step in someday, the way the crazy lady did. 🐾

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