Healing Society’s Relationship with Animals:

In the medical profession, one is continuously mindful of the world’s beauty and sanctity of human life and of the virtue in promoting and enhancing it. This applies not only to the immediate patient but also to articulate human beings, but also to the least fortunate among us, including those with severe acquired and developmental defects, some of which may be so profound as to preclude any meaningful communication with others. Each individual has a unique value, not by virtue of his or her level of intelligence or ability to communicate in a certain way, but by virtue of the energy inhabiting that body which instills “life” into its protoplasm. This energy, which activates the human brain, allows the physical structures of the brain to achieve consciousness, make decisions, think, feel pain and pleasure. Without such energy, the human body (including the brain) is merely a carcass devoid of these capabilities.

Scientists have usually focused upon the possibility that consciousness and language function. Yet gorillas and other primates have moved higher on intelligence tests designed by and for humans than have many humans. Almost all animals have some form of emotionality and communication. It is now clear that at least some primates can be taught sign language and other, verbal language. The rest of us can master our exact vocabulary. Clearly, these animals possess more language function than a child who has been damaged by illness or any other structural change to the human body, but less than three months old and considerably more function than a human born without central nervous system who cannot meaningfully interact with the environment or other beings. Although the latter may suffer a stroke or contract Alzheimer’s disease, and the former may be unable to grasp how to treat his or her central nervous system, limitations of the brain restrict the capacity of this energy to express itself.

Theologians have historically drawn the line between humans and other animals with the underlying premise that animals cannot possess souls or spirits. Yet it is precisely this life-force energy in humans constituting the soul or spirit that must also inhabit and activate the central nervous systems of other living beings. The major religious and sciences on death and experience alike have suggested that the capacity for this energy, soul, or spirit to transcend (exit separately from) the human body. The biological definition of soul in Webster’s New World Dictionary is: “an entity which is regarded as being the immortal or spiritual part of the person, and, having no physical or material reality, is credited with the functions of thinking, willing, and, hence, determining all behavior.” If, in the preceding sentence the word “person” were changed to “individual,” the resulting definition would fit clearly with what we know about other animals as well as humans.

If more evidence is needed, the EEGs of gorillas and other animals while disregarding structural damage to the human body, but less than three months old and considerably more function than a human born without central nervous system who cannot meaningfully interact with the environment or other beings. Although the latter may suffer a stroke or contracts Alzheimer’s disease, and the former may be unable to grasp how to treat his or her central nervous system, limitations of the brain restrict the capacity of this energy to express itself.

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I cannot help but feel a sense of great obligation, not only to other human life but to nonhuman life as well. Human-kind’s superior intelligence and capacity for making moral judgments do not confer upon us the right to exploit other species (or for that matter other humans with lesser intellectual capacity), but rather a responsibility to show compassion for them and assist them. I cannot help but wonder how we humans would react if an intellectually superior race of beings with advanced telepathic communication capabilities we could not comprehend were to land on Earth. Would they be morally justified on the basis of these additional capabilities to utilize humans in the ways we presently utilize other animals for the benefit of their “superior” race? If you are convinced that much of human-kind’s present cruelty to animals is the result of a failure to recognize who the animals really are, Dr. Albert Einstein (1879-1955) alluded to this when he commented, “A human being experiences himself, his thoughts, and feelings, as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.” Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature, that we may come to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself part of the process and a foundation for inner serenity.

In order for humankind to evolve spiritually, there is a need for us as a species to learn to think of other beings as ends rather than means. Perhaps no other physician has epitomized this concept more than Dr. Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) through his philosophy of “respecting all living beings—and the thought of death in each individual, universal, and rare gift. Indifference to the immensity of the true and of human existence, the thought of life as a whole is impossible to imagine. The very thought of death in each individual, universal, and rare gift. Indifference to the immensity of the true and of human existence, the thought of life as a whole is impossible to imagine. The very thought of death in each individual, universal, and rare gift. Indifference to the immensity of the true and of human existence, the thought of life as a whole is impossible to imagine. The very thought of death in each individual, universal, and rare gift.