

Vulnerable Beings

Going from abstract to real requires a closer look.



Three weeks ago on a northern California beach I was watching three white and gray-brown, egg-round birds with needle-thin legs scurrying around a hillock of sand. Their small, rapid-fire steps made them look like shoppers in a 15-minute clearance sale. "Snowy plovers," my bird-watcher friend announced.

Ah, snowy plovers. For years I had read newspaper accounts of controversies surrounding seasonal closure of a few beaches to off-road vehicles for protection of these threatened birds. Now I was surprised to meet the small subjects of these controversies in person. At that moment, the Endangered Species Act came down to this: A law for three particular little birds on one sandy patch of Earth.

I remember the same shock years ago, when I first saw a spotted owl sitting stock still on an old branch in an older Cascades forest. And again last May, when I saw Fender's blue butterflies in West Eugene's wetlands. The pale blue and brown, endangered butterflies were busy. Each had less than a week to eat, find a mate, and, in the case of females, lay individual, tiny white eggs on the underside of Kincaid's lupine leaves.

Having actually met a spotted owl, three snowy plovers, and a small cloud of Fender's blue butterflies, I was doomed to know how our forests, beaches, and wetlands would be poorer without their presence. In print, these creatures can seem to be just another owl, another shore bird, or another small butterfly. But once you meet them in person, on their turf, they are apt to reach into your heart with their existence as a special being.

We humans are perhaps unique in both the vast destruction we can wreak on our fellow humans and other beings following abstract policies or ideas; and the intense sympathy we can feel for the same folk when we meet them close-up.

One evening in a Eugene laundromat, my husband O'B and I were speaking with an older Iranian man who has been living in Eugene for a number of years. We had talked with him in that laundromat several times before, but this evening he quietly told us how Iran's only democratically elected premier, Dr. Mohammed Mossadegh, had been overthrown in 1953 by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency under President Eisenhower on the British suggestion that the democracy might lead to communism. (The British were upset that Mossadegh was proposing to nationalize the British-Iranian Oil Company, which was bringing vast profits to Britain, but not Iran. The British, having failed in their coup attempt, figured the word "communism" would get the U.S. fired up.) We subsequently learned the account of our laundromat friend was accurate.* Our first awareness of this U.S.-led "regime change" that was linked to the U.S. reinstatement of Mohammed Shah; the radical Islamic overthrow of the dictatorial Shah 25 years later; and the subsequent rise of Islamic religious takeovers and terrorism in the Middle East had been brought to us by one sad Iranian remembering how democracy had been crushed in his homeland.

Each of us tends to see so little of the reality behind our votes and policies, whether they involve same-sex parents, working poor, rare plovers, Malawi farmers destroyed by free trade rules, or prisoners. Only a handful of members of the International Committee of the Red Cross had visited Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib to actually check for all of us how America's war on terrorism was playing out in prisons. What they had seen in person had led them to plead with the Bush administration for a year to end the abuse. Then we were all allowed to visit Abu Ghraib through the photos of dogs; naked terror; and a hooded Iraqi man standing on a box, arms outstretched and fingers hooked to U.S.-placed wires. On Nov. 17, we once again encountered a reality of our "war on terror" as Daniel Zwerdling of National Public Radio revealed how immigrant detainees awaiting deportation in New Jersey's Passaic County Jail are similarly being terrorized by dogs.

We all know so many similar stories that by now we should have taught ourselves to *always* be skeptical of supporting righteous-sounding policies that dismiss, deny help for, or threaten the existence of vulnerable beings *whom we have never personally met*. We are capable of unleashing much harm from inside our mental caves; but we are equally capable of much humanity when we venture out to see the world first hand.

*See *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* by New York Times correspondent Stephen Kinzer (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2003). Mary O'Brien of Eugene has worked as a public interest scientist since 1981. She can be reached at mob@efn.org

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The logo is actually the creation of The United Egg Producers (UEP), the primary egg industry trade association, and 80 percent of U.S. egg producers participate in the "Animal Care Certified" program. The guidelines for the program, however, permit producers to: confine birds in cages so small they can't even flap their wings, starve birds to the point where they've lost 30 percent of their body weight in order to induce another egg laying period, and burn off parts of the beaks of chicks without painkiller.

In a rare action, the Better Business Bureau recently turned in a complaint against the UEP to the FTC saying the ACC logo or seal is misleading advertising. The BBB national advertising board cited in their report that it gives the impression the eggs are produced by hens "accorded a more humane level of care than is actually the case."

I would've liked to report that my somewhat perfunctory local investigation into the scam turned up only rotten eggs in the major grocery chains, but some of the natural grocery stores were being yolked as well.

Bob Berman
Elmira

CAUTIONARY WORDS

As a member of the local cat rescue network, I applaud your decision to discontinue the "free pet" classified ads. There are many of us in Eugene and Springfield who deal with the unfortunate results of giveaway kittens on a daily basis. Please continue to print your excellent cautionary statement whenever you can — we need all the help we can get with the overwhelming problem of pet abandonment and overpopulation.

Jill Winans
Eugene

RELIGION & POLITICS

Conservatives blame the U.S.'s decline on immorality spawned by secularizing the Christian republic. Religious fanaticism is the problem, however, according to liberals faithful to rational, expert, scientific, informed, computer-wielding leaders with

"tolerant spirituality."

Yet this vacuous dichotomy serves only Bushers and Kerryans. Republicans and Democrats are both mindless about sacredness, sympathy, prudence, wholeness, and humility.

I'm no Gandhi, but obviously escalating violence consumes peace. Increasing bigness doesn't solve problems of bigness. World trade hurts nature and citizens. And globalization and disproportionate technology are double-edged.

"Leaders" mock this, but to help Earth and this country support *local* farmers, manufacturers, artists and retailers. Adpot Wendell Berry's first political principle: "Landscapes should not be used by people who do not live in them and do not share their fate."

Practice the oldest sacrament: caring for the immediate here, now.

Wil D. Hormann
Corvallis

PIVOTAL ISSUES

Excluding for the moment the argument that this may have been another stolen election, it has been reported that exit polls have concluded that the election may have been swung on the strength of evangelical Christians voting on "moral" issues. The campaign issues of stem cell research, abortion, and gay marriage seem to have been the pivotal issues that brought these people to the polls to vote for their morally upright leader.

This focus on morality begs these questions: Is not war a moral issue? Is not environmental health a moral issue? Is not severe economic disparity a moral issue? Why is having one's uterus scraped considered by these people murder, whereas the death of thousands, and by the time we are done with it, perhaps millions of innocent lives at our hands, simply thought of as "collateral damage"?

What makes George W. Bush such a man of God? Is it because he professes to be "born again" and to be personally informed by God himself?

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