

Treating People Like Animals

► By Michael Mountain

Our work for the animals is a work of the soul.



“The greatest freedom of all is being free of our own worst impulses.”

“Most Americans,” notes a columnist in the *New York Times*, “were shocked by the sadistic treatment of Iraqi detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison. But we shouldn’t have been ... we routinely treat prisoners in the United States like animals.”

I wonder if he realized just how accurate his remark is. It is, indeed, pretty much how we treat animals routinely, and most people are only shocked when they see this behavior being applied to fellow humans.

The author Isaac Bashevis Singer, who lived through the Nazi holocaust, wrote that “for the animals, life is an eternal Treblinka.” He knew what it was like to be packed into a cattle truck and transported to a death camp, to see his own people being subjected to medical experiments that would improve life for a “superior” species, and then to be gassed – the most efficient solution to the “problem” of there being altogether too many of them.

All this was considered quite acceptable because the Nazis deemed their victims to be subhuman. (And so, by the Golden Rule of “as you give, so shall you receive,” they promptly became subhuman themselves.)

We have details of what went on at the camps because the Nazis took photos and film of what they were doing. The footage is clinical, bureaucratic, and chilling, but quite unlike what we’ve been seeing from Abu Ghraib. Reaching for new depths, these folks are seen using their charges as props and backdrops for home videos and adding insult to injury by leering into the camera like cheap tourists.

But once again, isn’t that how we routinely treat other animals? Elephants perform for us at circuses; we have our photos taken with trophy fish or dancing bears on

faraway street corners; we bet on dogs and chickens as they fight to the death; and we cheer the antics of sequined sadists as they prance around the bullring in a perverted ballet of death.

So, yes, we’re treating people like animals. And shutting down the factory farms and the vivisection labs, along with the canned hunts, the rodeos and the various other “sporting” arenas might be a good way to start cleaning up our act. After all, it’s well known by now that cruelty to animals leads directly to cruelty to people.

But we also need to understand why we humans behave the way we do. Politicians and pundits try to explain, or explain away, what went wrong: bad apples; bad seeds; bad training; too much training (just obeying orders); more like a college fraternity prank; not as bad as what Saddam did. (Give them 20 years, like he had, and Lord knows what they could graduate to.)

Psychologists know that we’re all capable of these kinds of atrocities. It’s in our nature – as was demonstrated in the famous Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971. The “evil one” is not out there somewhere; he/she is always lurking in the mirror.

There’s no shame in admitting that. The shame lies in pretending we’re not like that, and closing our eyes and our ears to the less-than-heroic things being done in our name to people and animals here and abroad.

In a free country, the greatest freedom of all is to be free of our own base impulses. That enables us to start living a life of kindness – to animals and to each other – which will help build a better world for all of us.

And then we’ll be proud to be able to announce that our children have been treating people like animals.