

**Critical Ties:  
The Animal Rights Awakening of a Social Justice Educator**

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For more than fifteen years I have been an activist, educator, and scholar of human rights and social justice. This work has been my passion, my spirituality, my vocation. I've participated in street protests, infiltrated corporate symposia on globalization and capitalism, taught courses related to social justice education, and written about the ways in which economic injustice, racism, sexism, poverty, and other atrocities affect educational experiences for disenfranchised communities.

Nearly a year ago I met Jennifer, my partner, whose passion for animal rights drew me in immediately. I'd talk about the work I was doing to expose and unsettle relationships between corporate capitalism, high-stakes testing, and class inequities in schools. She'd talk about her work to eliminate factory farming, entertainment animal abuse, and dog racing. Whereas she was interested in the relationship between animal rights and environmental justice, I was interested in the ways in which environmental injustice and social injustice overlapped.

And something clicked.

The worst human rights offenders, systemically speaking, are the worst animal rights offenders and the worst environmental offenders. Yes, there are individual oppressors of people, animals, and the environment. But when I consider local, national, and global systems of power—the kinds of systems which can socialize masses of people to comply with, or ignore, certain practices and policies or which have the economic sway to pressure the state into sponsoring (such as by loosening regulations on) these abuses—what I find is the same, regardless of whether I'm targeting animal, human, or environmental injustice: corporate interests.

A simplistic but illustrative example: I consider the corporate interests that have a stake in me not knowing how KFC chickens are raised and slaughtered (animal rights). I notice that these are the same interests that have a stake, as well, in me not knowing about the conditions in which underpaid, low-income, largely-immigrant workers who, due to a lack of humane and living wage employment opportunities (human rights), raise and slaughter those chickens, work. And I can't help but acknowledge, as well, that these are the same interests who do not want me to raise questions about the ways in which such practices contribute to environmental degradation. Alternatively, they sell buckets of chicken so cheaply that people choose not to wonder about any of this. Or worse: they use their economic muscle to socialize the public into thinking they—this corporate powerhouse—are *the victim* of a terroristic, radical animal rights agenda. In other words, they help to socialize a population *that doesn't even know that they ought to wonder about any of this.*

This, in essence, is the somewhat-depressing story of how I, a social justice educator, have come to see animal rights, social justice, and environmental justice as movements that, separately, cannot be whole. And I can not be whole in a spiritual sense, nor in my roles as an activist and educator, if I don't understand deeply, and work at the intersections of, all three, or if I fail to see their shared ties to the economic injustice pressed upon us by the corporate elite.

My philosophy on animal rights, then, is informed largely by the point in this triangle at which I have the most experience: social justice. Just as every human has the right to dignity and justice by virtue of being human and nothing else, so does every

animal (and every living being). Where animals are abused, the soul of humanity is torn. Where I participate in animal injustice by inaction or by action, I injure my own spirit. I remember bursting into tears one weekend morning as an eight-year-old when the Wide World of Sports program featured calf-roping. But this, to me, is secondary. Every animal by virtue of *being*—that is what a commitment to animal rights means to me.

As I type this I realize that my philosophy might sound, to some, heady and impersonal. There is a human element to my commitment, as well. I have two adopted cats, Unity and Buster. I found myself in tears a couple months ago when CNN aired a story about a bear who, abused into performing in a “Bears on Ice” show, mauled one of her trainers. To clarify, I was outraged by the animal abuse, disturbed but somewhat satisfied by the mauling, and devastated to hear that the bear was shot and killed simply for responding like any abused creature might rightly respond. So this is personal to me in deep ways.

And so I enter the discourse on animal rights, intellectually and emotionally, with the intention of becoming more deeply informed and critically conscious as an activist and educator preparing to be of service to all liberation movements. And I enter it knowing that I cannot be of full service to any liberation movement without being informed by, and seeing the critical ties linking, all liberation movements.

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I would like to acknowledge, and encourage everybody to explore the work of, Julie Andrzejewski, who found, and starting working at, the intersections of animal rights, environmental justice, and social justice education, years ago.