

How Much is that Doggie in the Window Worth?

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As a kid I lived on a farm so I was used to animals coming and going pretty freely—both livestock and cats and dogs appeared and disappeared frequently enough that I took them for granted to some degree. Still, I felt deep affection for my dogs. So when I first heard the old song, “*How Much is that Doggie in the Window, [sing with me!] the one with the waggily tail, how much is that doggie in the window, I do hope that doggie’s for sale...*” I thought: what are they talking about, for sale? I honestly didn’t know you could buy a dog. How could anyone put a price on a dog?

Throughout this year we’ve been talking about life and death, values and choices—mostly about humans. Today we’ll expand into the wonders of our connection to the entire natural world...and the magnitude of responsibility that this entails.

GATHERING SONG *We Celebrate the Web of Life* #175

CHILDREN’S FOCUS *Everyone Poops*

REFLECTIONS

Some of you have met my dog Lia. She’s been one of a series of dogs I’ve loved since childhood, dogs that, now that I’m off the farm, have not just floated into and out of my life...but have entangled themselves within our family web...and our finances.

Our dog prior to Lia was a black lab named Daisy. Daisy got kidney disease when she was only eight years old. When we first learned this, and considered the possibility of veterinary treatment, I was worried about the kinds of financial choices we might face. The calculus of the value of any life is difficult or maybe impossible. We imagined—if we could just get over this hump—Daisy had a lot of life still ahead of her. But she died quickly and we didn’t have to face the tough choices.

A few weeks later our cat Olivia died. She was 14 and she declined rapidly. I brought her to the vet and held her while she was given a lethal injection. And I cried for a long time.

Since that time we’ve adopted and raised additional animal companions, thereby raising additional values questions.

Even though almost all of our pets have come from the Humane Society, their costs are not insignificant. Lia routinely eats our Tupperware and the library’s hardback books. With her shots, collars, food, and grooming, not to mention the demands of daily attention and clean up, and the psychic cost of noise and aggravations—could all of our money and energy be put to better use?

I once read an article by a guy who went all-out to save his cat, Fritz, from cancer.

[Frederick R. Lynch, “Saving My Cat: Why No Price Was Too High, in *Newsweek*, July 30, 2007]

He wrote: “Costly technologies for prolonging human life are...revolutionizing veterinary care.

American pet guardians spend more than \$20 billion annually on health care for their furry pals.”

Pacemakers, kidney transplants...the ethical questions that these technologies raise are not just, “can

we afford it?” and “should we?”...but, “how do we know if our pets even want to go through with the potential miseries of chemo, or surgery?”

The author faced a dilemma: “I had to choose between mutilating Fritz [amputating a cancerous leg] or leaving him at high risk for premature death....” He chose to pursue treatment...and to follow up the treatment with weeks of at-home monitoring and administration of multiple medications. The total bill came to \$11,000.

This cat owner felt an obligation to maximize care for an animal he considered a self-conscious, spiritual being. But he also acknowledged that the choice was easier for him as a well-paid single person with a flexible schedule. He wondered how most parents could ever tell their kids that they couldn't afford to treat a beloved pet.

Consumer Reports this month has an article on pet health insurance and whether you'll get back as much as you put into it. Apparently routine vet care cost dog owners, on average, \$235 per year, while accident and illness insurance costs more than twice this much. Of course you never know when your pup's gonna need some extraordinarily expensive treatment. Like life and love, it's all a gamble, and involves factors more complex than economics.

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When the Toyota Prius first came out, we needed a car. But the waiting list was about 9 months, so our decision was simple. The economic factors, however, were interestingly complex. It was a comparatively expensive car (at the time) that would save money on gas. But back then they needed an expensive battery replacement periodically. With each new model, each of these variables has shifted, the alternatives have made the choices more complex. But we haven't even begun to ask the most difficult question of all: what does it *cost* to burn a gallon of gas?

If economic costs could be calculated for the impact of today's choices on our neighbors and grandchildren generations from now... and the costs to nonhuman beings and to ecosystems... should these costs be taken into account? Should they be decisive?

There is a growing movement among environmentalists to pay attention to what are called “ecosystem services.” Ecosystem services are benefits provided by nature that remain undervalued because they are rarely quantified. Ecosystem services include pollination, flood control, water purification, disease control, recreational value, and so much more. An argument for economically quantifying the value of all of these things is that, until we do, their value remains invisible and therefor poor decisions are made by businesses, consumers, and governments...leading to the loss of many trillions of dollars in natural capital every year...with the poor in third world countries disproportionately affected because their livelihood is especially dependent upon healthy soils for farming and healthy fisheries.

An argument against quantifying the value of ecosystem services is that we could end up commodifying all of our public wealth—even the air we breathe—and end up with all of our natural resources consolidated into the hands of the rich. Another concern is that nature's valuation shouldn't be subjected to the volatility of human markets.

Or there's the argument that we shouldn't play god by making such grandly consequential calculations. But let's face it: this is unavoidable. Even by setting international environmental goals

like keeping global temperature change to no more than 2 degrees Celsius, we have collectively condemned coral reefs to extinction. We cannot help but make value judgments, so is it possible to make them better?

It is. In the 1990s, New York City made some choices that were good for both the natural neighborhood, and for taxpayers' immediate interests. The EPA had ordered the city to clean up its water supply. So they could have built a filtration plant for \$6-8 billion dollars. But instead they spent a small fraction of that amount to protect the watershed from which their water originated in the Catskills -- using incentive programs, land purchases, and improving sewage treatment plants upstate. Decades later, nature's tireless efficiency is going strong.

And quantifying the value of recreation to the economy also helps us to make good public choices. To know that, in Whatcom County, \$700 million dollars per year is spent on outdoor recreation, creating thousands of jobs, gives us all the more reason to take care of our priceless natural assets.

And hunters—let's not undervalue the financial contributions they make to conservation organizations like Ducks Unlimited to protect natural habitats—hundreds of millions of dollars nationally. Without hunters a lot of animals would be dead. That was a cheap joke but really, I'm not being sarcastic, we need hunters. Every year nearly \$2 billion is collected on hunting and fishing licenses, and for taxes on fishing and hunting equipment. [Source: "Hunters: Conserving the Land, National Geographic 11/07]

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But if we try to calculate the value of these things, are we simply determining what they are worth *to humans*? That is, do we care only about their *instrumental* value (their value to us) and ignore or deny the *intrinsic* value of animals or natural systems?

We think of indigenous people as being deeply connected to the earth. So do they treat the animals on whom they depend as having instrumental value, or intrinsic value? Well, a prayer from a First Nations hunter to the salmon concludes this way: [Thank you]...now I will do to you *what you came here for me to do*. [Source: *Life Prayers From Around the World*, "Kwakiutl Women's Prayer"] Thank you for serving your purpose...as my meal. Thank you for being of use.

Pets too are of use. It's generally good for our health to have them around. Just touching them can lower our stress hormone levels. So how much should we spend to keep them alive? What would be excessive? Is it strictly a cost/benefit analysis?

Do we need to be of use to be of value? I'd like to read a responsive reading with you, #567:

I want to be with people who submerge in the task,
Who go into the fields of harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along
Who stand in the line and haul in their places
Who are not parlor generals and field deserters but move in a common rhythm when the food must come in or the fire be put out.
The work of the world is common as mud. Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil, Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums but you know they were made to be used.

The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real. [Marge Piercy]

That reading has been of use to me, and us, many times, and I appreciate its message. I know that many dogs also long for *work* that is real. Whether they are conscious of it or not, whether it is just the stirrings of an ancestral call, they feel it.

But how far do we take the value of usefulness? Are working dogs no longer to be cared for when they are no longer able to work? What do you think of Sea World's recent decision to stop doing shows with orcas?

Are beautiful things of value only if they are useful? Is there not an inherent, intrinsic worth to human and animal beings...and even to inanimate beauty?

SHARING OUR GIFTS

REFLECTIONS, Part II

Contemporary ethicist Peter Singer has come to some highly controversial conclusions based on 4 propositions that seem reasonable. These are printed inside your order of service:

1. Pain is to be avoided unless it comes with benefits that outweigh it.
2. Non-human animals feel pain.
3. Taking a life is serious. Before we do so we should consider the kind of life that the individual is capable of leading, and how much it desires to continue to live.
4. We are responsible not only for the things we do, but also for the things that we could have prevented, but chose not to. [Source of this and all Singer concepts below: *Writings on an Ethical Life*, Peter Singer]

Singer does not suggest that there is no difference between humans and animals. Clearly there are. And there are vast differences *within* the animal kingdom. The question is: "Which differences should we pay attention to?" When it comes to ethical considerations, which differences are relevant?

Among humans we generally acknowledge that skin color and gender are real distinctions, but they are not relevant—at least not legally—when it comes to rights and responsibilities.

Singer says that species is also a real distinction. And it is also not relevant. It's not that he's concerned about pets (he doesn't have any) and he's definitely not into protecting that which is cute and cuddly. He draws the line at *suffering*. And that line—the capacity to suffer—is clearly not the same line that divides human from non-human animals. This doesn't mean that every snail must be treated equally with every human, but that sentient beings are to be given equal consideration.

What is equal consideration? I think there is a parallel in our first UU principle: "...respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Respect for the worth and dignity of every person is not about drawing lines between those who *deserve* respect because they are "good," because we like them, or because their personal characteristics or opinions are similar to ours. It's not about them, but about how we're going to treat them. Treating everyone with equal consideration could mean that we lock 'em up, or even take away some of their rights...but not without fair, reasonable consideration.

It's a useful principle. But it doesn't answer the question: "Who counts as a person?" Who counts as "everyone?"

Do we have a duty to protect the interests of animals? Which ones? First it was thought that only humans could use tools. When that was shown to be false the definition was revised: only humans could *make* tools. When that was shown to be false the definition was revised: only humans could communicate. But over and over these lines are shown to be arbitrary and false. We've learned that apes can communicate in sign language, show affection to pets of their own, even consciously lie in their communication to trick their human handlers. You may have heard this week about Inky, a surprisingly intelligent octopus who made a complex escape from the New Zealand National Aquarium. So where do we draw the line?

DNA shows humans to be more closely related to chimpanzees than chimpanzees are to gorillas. And it's likely that the more we learn, the fuzzier these lines will become.

So where do we draw the line?

Whose interests do we include in ethical decision-making?

The interests of those who are powerful?

The interests of those with the capacity to make choices?

Those who contribute to the common good?

Those who know what it MEANS to die?

Those who can give or receive affection?

Those who are alive now?

Those who might yet exist?

By Singer's criteria, an animal with the capacity to suffer has a higher value than a human without the capacity to suffer. I'm not sure if I have the nerve to follow all of the implications of this, but "suffering" does seem to be a more rational and observable criterion than some of these other blurry dividing lines.

We have laws regarding cruelty to animals, so we clearly do consider interests beyond the human species. But is it cruel to use pesticides? What about herbicides? What about bulldozers? Aldo Leopold suggested a reverence for all life; by this he meant a "Land Ethic" which would enlarge the boundaries of the community to include not only animals and plants but even waters and soil.

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Years ago I had the good fortune of hearing biologist Stephen Jay Gould give a talk about jellyfish. I came away with a much better understanding of where I stand on abortion. He would probably have been surprised to hear this, because he went nowhere near that topic. Or did he?

Jellyfish, Gould said, are an odd animate assemblage. To some degree their parts, their organs, operate together, acting as a unit, an individual, "one jellyfish." But the jellyfish may have come into its present form not as an individual but as a collection of independent organisms working together symbiotically. And jellyfish, he speculated, are not the only living things that came together this way.

In many ways, the jellyfish, with its countless tentacles and other blobby things is less like an individual than it is like a community—a mixed collection of individuals in a symbiotic relationship. So when we see millions of jellyfish swarming together, we see a really fascinating continuum of

life: molecules, sub-cellular organelles, cells, tissues, organs, individuals, communities, species, ecosystems...a continuum without sharp divisions.

Then add another dimension: time. The continuum from long ago, to not so long ago, to now, tomorrow, and the distant future.... Where is the line between any of these?

So where does life begin? Where does it end? Does it begin at conception? Yes. At birth? Yes. Does life begin when we learn to connect with the world beyond us? Yes. Does it begin at the age of reason? Yes. When we mature? Yes. / Does life begin when we are about to die? It's hard to tell.

And does life begin Before conception? Yes. It began in our ancestors and their ancestors. And it began in their nonhuman ancestors, and before that in our inanimate ancestors.

Consider our gathering song, in which we sang: "*Of ancient dreams we are the sum* [not the apex, but the sum as of this moment, still accumulating experience]... *Of ancient dreams we are the sum, our bones link stone to star / and bind our future worlds to come with worlds that were and are.*"

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Back to the value of nature: one study has calculated that the dollar benefit of all that we derive from nature is much higher than the average family's economic output. That is, it's more than what we could pay for. That's no surprise.

"Grace" is typically defined as receiving more than we deserve, more than we have earned. And one of the most intimate ways we know grace is through the unaccountable relationships and responsibilities that we have for the communities and landscapes and gardens and animals in our lives. So how do we know when to hold them close and when to let them go?

It's an intimate decision that we might best approach from a much larger perspective, by asking, for example: Will this being's death or life, treatment or ongoing suffering add to, or detract from, the aliveness of Mother Earth?

So how much is that doggie in the window worth? Perhaps we should ask its mother.

SENDING SONG *All Creatures of the Earth and Sky* #203