

The Hoarse Whisperer

David Milo Kirkham

Innocence

“Little Lamb, who made thee?”—William Blake¹

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.”—John 10:27

“Discussing Eastern art and dramas with intellectual llamas”—Dr. Dolittle²

I was thirteen when I first talked to animals in earnest. I don’t mean calling to Cuddles, our cat, or sharing a word with Max Goolis, our dog. I mean trying to *communicate* with species nonhuman. Our four acres of fruit trees bumped up against the Ferrins’ much larger orchards, fenced in to keep their sheep. On typical summer days, the Ferrin sheep ran together through the apricot and Bing cherry trees, bleating their way from one oasis to the next of low-hanging leaves or green tufts of grass. In harder times, they poked their noses through the fence toward the always greener grass on the other side and became a familiar presence to me in the process.

One afternoon while burning trash in our rusty backyard fifty-gallon-drum incinerator, I found myself in the near company of the Ferrin sheep. A bit bored, I decided to strike up a conversation.

“Baaa,” I said in my best ruminant voice.

They stopped their munching and looked at me.

“Baaaa,” I repeated, this time in a more elongated tone.

“Baa,” came a short reply.

Encouraged, I tried again: “Baaaaaaaaa.”

“Baaaa. Baaaa. Baaaa,” came at least three responses.

I tried again, this time at a higher pitch. The lambs joined in reply. Each time came a few more voices. We kept up this “baanter” until we had a veritable chorus of call-and-response going, me the baritone lead bleater with an occasional cracking voice, and twenty-something stuttering counterpoint tenors and altos in reply.

I happily repeated the experiment on other occasions to similar effect. Once during a Boy Scout fishing trip, however, I made the mistake of telling my friends about my communion with the neighbors’ talkative bovids.

“Hoo, hoo, hoo,” came a much different chorus of taunts and jeers from my peers. “David talks to sheep!”

“Hey, Bruce, d’ya hear that? Kirkham talks to sheep.” Har har.

“What do you say to them? ‘Here, sheepy, sheepy’?”

“Hey, Kirkham, stick your head down in the water and call us some fish!”

I laughed and learned. Some things are better left unshared with even your friends.

Since at least then, however, I have occasionally wondered about the “souls” of animals. Latter-day Saints learn in section 77 of the Doctrine and Covenants that animals, like humans, are spiritual as well as temporal beings. Sacred writings are replete with stories of animals doing unusual things: Balaam’s ass talked. Noah’s animals lined up two by two—and if he had trouble prodding them onto the ark, he spared us those details. Jonah was swallowed by a large fish and lived to tell about it. Daniel’s lions shut their mouths. That Daniel was not food for the lions should provide us food for contemplation.



After the breakthrough with the sheep, I experimented on occasion with other animals. My sister Kathy had a small Appaloosa mare I would ride two or three times a summer. Athena, however, was difficult to catch and bridle. I hated the long ritual we’d go through whenever I approached the corral: she would see me and dash to the other side, I would circle around only to have her run off again, until finally, maybe fifteen minutes later, I would outwit her or she would tire of the game and let me grab her halter—a prelude to a new struggle to put on the bridle.

One day, preparing to ride, I stopped and watched for a moment as Kathy’s beautiful, gray, spotted pony pranced around the corral. My annoyance softened, and I decided on a new approach.

“You really are a pretty little thing,” I said. She watched me warily. I looked back with admiration, saying nothing more. I began to think good thoughts about Athena.

I won’t hurt you girl. You’re beautiful.

She snorted, shook herself, and maintained her vigil from across the way. I stayed where I was.

Can you understand me? I tried to telepath.

She shook herself again.

I held out my hand, still thinking peaceable, admiring thoughts toward the mare; she strutted a bit more, watching me. Finally, after three or four minutes, she sauntered over to me, let me stroke her sleek gray neck, and took the bridle without protest.

Enmity

“They know not the voice of strangers.” —John 10:5

*“You got yer dead skunk in the middle of the road
Stinkin’ to high heaven!” —Loudon Wainwright III³*

*“And what shoulder, and what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?” —William Blake⁴*

I was fifteen when I first killed animals in earnest. I don’t mean tormenting and trampling on fire ants or the one regrettable time when, as a preteen, I shot a robin with my BB gun for no good reason. I mean the first time I set out to kill living mammals.

My target, with malice aforethought, was skunks. Stinking, malevolent, beautiful skunks. One day Mr. Ford, my former scoutmaster, told my friend Doug and me that skunks were wreaking havoc in the neighborhood chicken coops even as they *reeked* havoc in our olfactory nerves most summer nights.

“How would you boys like to be neighborhood heroes and see how many skunks you can get rid of?” he proposed.

We laughed. *Like sure, we’re gonna go catch skunks.*

“I’ve got traps,” the scouter explained. “You set them out in the woods over by Charlie’s Pond with some raw hamburger on them. Next day you come back, check the traps, find your skunk, and shoot it. It’s simple.”

“So what d’we do with a dead skunk?” I asked.

“Put it in a stream or irrigation ditch for a day to get rid of the smell, then bring it to me.”

“We’ll do it.” *Sure, something new. How many kids will return to school in the fall and be able to say they trapped skunks over the summer?*

Mr. Ford provided us several iron leg traps “strong enough to break the skunk’s leg” and keep it from wandering, even if the trap came loose from its stake. We set them about in thickets of damp brush off the trail in the darker parts of the woods, each a few hundred yards apart.

For the next two weeks, we had a skunk every other day or so. We could usually tell before we reached the trap, as the skunk's instinct was to release its odiferous protective fluids upon the shock of the trap's snap. When we came across our unsuspecting prey, Doug and I took turns shooting our .22 caliber rifles at its head—thud, thud, thud—until it was indisputably dead.

“Way to go, Doug! You got ‘im first shot.”

Or

“That little critter doesn’t want to die.” Thud.

We’d then hold our breath, drag the trap to the stream, chain it to the bank, drop the carcass in the water, and watch for a moment as the moving current expiated our acts, cleansing the crimson stains from the fine-looking black-and-white pelt.

Thud, thud, thud. It wasn’t the bang of the rifles that stayed with me. It was the thud of the bullet striking the soft body of a breathing, living creature. Chicken killer. Striking beauty. Stinky beast. Living creation.

Thud, thud, thud. Job well done.

About two years later my mom came to me one night as I relaxed in front of the TV.

“David, Dad’s not home and Mrs. Flynn just ran over Happy’s kittens. Three of them are still alive, but they’re badly hurt.”

“What can I do about that, Mom?” I asked, disturbed.

“I need you to end their suffering.”

I dragged myself to the edge of the driveway to find two dead black kittens; three others writhing, flailing. I raised my .22.

Thud, thud, thud. Job well done.

Tears.



How could the same boy mimic sheep, “telepath” to horses, shed tears for dying kittens, and yet brutally trap and shoot skunks? It’s not a great mystery. It was part of growing up in a semirural environment. Having been raised around hunters and some neighbors who slaughtered animals for food, oversentimentality toward animals was not really part of my upbringing. Sure, we loved our pets, but they were pets, beasts, never to be confused in their value with human beings. My older brother wouldn’t let me kill a snake we found in the wild because it was “one of God’s creatures” doing no harm, and he eventually became a zookeeper at Salt Lake’s Hogle Zoo—yet he was an avid hunter. When it came to skunks, I was simply taught they were a problem, a threat to domesticated animals and, hence, to a comfortable human lifestyle. They could be eliminated without remorse.

And yet I feel remorse.

Interlude

“Take a whiff on me, that ain’t no rose.”—Loudon Wainwright III⁵

At seventeen years, I was a night watchman at Cherry Hill Campground at the crossroads of Farmington and Kaysville, Utah. It was mostly a dull job, wandering the orchards where the campers stayed, watching for the rare pilferer of picnic coolers or unusual happening. One night about midnight, my good friend Bruce, whose dad owned the campground, was standing watch—horsing around—with me. We caught movement in the grass.

“Hey, a cat!” Bruce noted as we glimpsed a furry little creature enter a sprinkler pipe. “Let’s have some fun.”

Bruce picked up one end of the pipe; I picked up the other, and we took turns sliding the animal back and forth from one end to the other. But it was fun that quickly lost its charm. Feeling sorry for the cat, I decided not to return the beast to Bruce on the next go-round. I let it slide in my direction, and soon what popped out, at the level of my chest, was a big bushy, black-and-white tail, aiming straight at my solar plexus.

“Skunk!” I yelled, dropping the pipe.

Too late. A stream of poison gas hit me in the chest, making me a casualty in a war I had abandoned long ago. I smelled so bad it hurt. Tears. From the gas. The next morning I laid my shirt in the irrigation ditch. Chalk one up for the polecats. Small vengeance, I know, but a token of what I deserved.

Reconciliation

“Did He who made the lamb make thee?”—William Blake⁶

“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.”—Isaiah 11:6

I have not for many years killed animals out of malice or mischief. I encourage most insects to leave the house peaceably. I’ve treated our pets with compassion. Sometimes I yap back at the neighbor’s dogs when they harass my wife, Judy, and me on the way to our early morning jog, but mostly I try to befriend them.

This is not to say I have honed my attitudes to Albert Schweitzer-like reverence. I will still usually step on a spider if it’s in the house. “They have to stay in their domain,” a friend and I once agreed.

We’ve often had birdfeeders. One day a few years ago, very unexpectedly, a blue-hued hummingbird, a most elusive winged creature, landed on my arm and remained for about two minutes. I was happy it found me a suitable companion while it regained its strength.

"Hey, little fella, are you tired?" I said, recalling words I had once heard quoted by President Kimball in general conference:

Don't kill the little birds
That sing on bush and tree,
All thro' the summer days,
Their sweetest melody.⁷

I still am no great friend to mosquitoes or mice—though I have been known to catch the latter alive and release them far from our home. And last summer I destroyed a hornet's nest on my house and two in my mailbox. For three years running, I have been a reluctant accomplice in my children's biology projects, which have demanded the capture, murder, and identification of ten species of insects. None of the family takes pleasure in freezing a praying mantis or a dragonfly or chloroforming a butterfly or a beetle.

I still like sheep. When I hear the old Seekers' song "I Know I'll Never Find Another You," I tell my children, "It's the song of the lonely ram."

"Huh?" they ask.

"He'll never find another ewe."

Each summer we have a snake in our backyard that we leave unmolested. I call him "Sneaky." On days when I am home, I will often stretch out in the shade on a patio chair with my books while he lazes likewise in a sunny spot four feet away.

Joseph Smith, during the Zion's Camp experience, once challenged brethren who were killing rattlesnakes, "How will the serpent ever lose his venom, while the servants of God possess the same disposition and continue to make war upon it?"

I'm not a vegetarian and doubt I ever will be, but I do try to put into perspective our reliance on the flesh of other creatures for our sustenance and be moderate in meat consumption.

As a family, we spent four happy years living near Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, just north of the Austrian border. The sharp, jagged peaks of the Bavarian Alps that surrounded us, engulfed by flowing skirts of rich, ever-verdant countryside, etched a permanent place in my mind for their majesty and grandeur. Wildlife was abundant. We were awakened each morning, beginning in early spring, by a plethora of voices—birds of all varieties singing a wake-up call; squirrels, black and brown, chirping and chattering in accompaniment. No alarm clock was necessary. Indeed, the choir often began before we were ready to rise.

Early morning jogs through the open fields brought sightings of deer, raccoons, rabbits with straight ears, rabbits with floppy ears, badgers and, most of all, foxes. Hardly a morning went by without our seeing a fox or two—my favorites for their striking red coats, plumed tails, and noble demeanor.

Most mornings Judy and I ran together. Sometimes she'd take a day off, however, leaving me to wend my way solo through the open meadows and catch the sunrise, far from the annoyances of civilization. On those mornings, alone and uninhibited, I did what I've pretty much always done when jogging by myself. I talked to God.

One morning at about five thirty, I found myself alone, embraced by the newly rising sun, talking aloud to my Maker, enjoying the beauty of the hills, the green earth, and the chorus of birds. My heart and thoughts were transported. For a time I was scarcely aware of my mortality.

Then I saw it. Poised before me, at some fifty yards distance, stood a large, handsome fox, erect and dignified, watching me jog in its direction. I stopped.

"Now aren't you a beautiful thing?" I said aloud. I watched, enthralled, as it watched me. Then it moved—in my direction. It jogged ten yards closer, stopped, watched me some more.

"That's right," I said. "I won't hurt you."

It came closer. I continued to talk to it gently, calmly as it approached. Another ten yards, another halt, a few more soft words, another ten yards. Soon the fox was within six feet of me.

"I don't recall the last time I was so close to such a majestic animal," I said, partly to the fox, partly to the Heavenly Creator. The fox looked at me with seeming curiosity—head cocked, tender eyed.

We continued to watch each other for a few moments. I was beginning to toy with the idea of stroking it when my reverie ruptured. The absurdity of the situation struck me. Like Peter, who began to sink when he realized he was walking on water, my faith began to shake.

What are you doing, talking to a fox, you silly man? Don't you know foxes are wild animals? They can be dangerous. Why did it approach you? Maybe something's wrong with it? Maybe it's rabid? Leave it alone.

My doubts came tumbling out. I stood for a moment more.

"I've got to be going," I said, not wanting to insult him with the rabies suspicion. "This is nice. I'm glad we shared this moment. But we belong to different worlds."

Someday we may romp these fields together. The leopard may lie with the lamb, the kid with the lion, and you and I can take a morning jog. But for now we should go our separate ways.

With that, I turned and jogged away, and the fox did the same.



Who are the animals? Our relationship to them seems complex. I know some people see it in black and white: kill them, dominate them,

or protect them all at any cost. But to me it is not so simple. They and we share this world. We have powers that *en gros* exceed theirs. So many species have blessed mankind at our beck and call: for food, clothing, warmth, labor, transportation, protection, combat, or companionship. As we find alternatives to animal products for these functions, will our relationships change? Will an end time come when all things achieve their proper place, when predators lose the taste for their prey, when the lion shall eat straw like the ox? Will it be sudden and miraculous and amazing? Or will it happen gradually as human beings grow in wisdom, compassion, and capability and animals grow less wary of us?

I am unsure about it all. Mine is not a clarion call to animal rights, to treating our dogs like children, or to wearing surgical masks like the Jains to avoid swallowing a gnat. Mine is a softer voice, an ambivalent whisper perhaps, suggesting thoughtfulness and respect in how we interact with those other species that share with us this planet.

This essay by David Milo Kirkham (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) won third place in the *BYU Studies* 2010 personal essay contest.

1. William Blake, "The Lamb," *Songs of Innocence and Experience with Other Poems* (London: Basil Montagu Pickering, 1866), 8.
2. Leslie Bricusse, "Talk to the Animals," *Doctor Dolittle* (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation, 1967).
3. Loudon Wainwright III, "Dead Skunk," *Album III* (New York: Columbia Records, 1972).
4. William Blake, "The Tiger," *Songs*, 53.
5. Wainwright, "Dead Skunk."
6. Blake, "Tiger," 53.
7. "Don't Kill the Little Birds," *Deseret Sunday School Songs* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Sunday School Union, 1909), no. 163, quoted by Spencer W. Kimball, "Strengthening the Family—the Basic Unit of the Church," *Ensign* 8 (May 1978): 45.