"How Can Anyone Do Something Like That?"

Pet's Wildlife

By Roger Caras

Very often my mail carries a sense of outrage. Almost inevitably there will be the question, "I don't understand it. How can anyone act that way toward other living creatures?" The wording varies but the sense of frustration doesn't. I see it in the mail and I feel it no less than my correspondents.

How can anyone act that way? How can anyone train a greyhound with live rabbits? How can some people in the rodeo industry abuse animals? How can a hunter visit a so-called game farm in Texas and kill animals innocently walking toward them looking for the meal they have come to expect from the farm vehicles? What about "coon-on-a-log" or dog fighting and all the other cruelties? How can anyone not get their dog or cat spayed or altered? How can anyone abandon a pet or starve it?

What is the answer? Psychotic behavior aside, I think people do things because they are used to doing them. Every time we do something we are faced with positive and negative incentives. If we cross the room, the positive incentive is the attraction prompting the move. The negative incentive is the attraction prompting the move. The negative incentive is using up energy and leaving a position. If you stand up you can do what you want to do but you must give up sitting. All of life is like that—including the treatment of animals by so many people.

A greyhound race, if you are a bettor, is probably very exciting. Excitement is a positive incentive. If you are a wild west buff a rodeo may be a satisfying experience. If you are in either game—greyhounds or rodeo—the incentive can be income. Even if the people in rodeo and dog racing know they are involved in something cruel, the positive incentive outweighs the negative in their value system. They get used to the cruel and pretty soon it isn't cruel to them any more. That is how citizens become soldiers in wartime.

I recently visited a veal raising operation in Connecticut. I was enraged by the tiny wooden pens holding calves immobile for 14 weeks in a darkened room while they were fed an anemic diet. The man running the place told me very matter-of-factly that by keeping the animals from moving he kept them from muscle development which (he claimed) made the veal more tender. He was so used to what he was doing he no longer saw it as cruel. Perhaps at the beginning he did think about the cruelty but the positive incentive of monetary reward eventually outweighed the negative one.

Perhaps we are all potentially cruel. Perhaps for each of us there is a balancing point where a positive incentive of reward or satisfaction would outweigh and tip the scales in favor of what we now know to be cruelty. It would be dangerous indeed for any humanitarian to ever claim to be humanely fool-proof. That is the way the people we have been talking about probably started out. "Not me", they said, "I'm a nice person".

What does all this add up to? Two things. We had better keep a careful check on ourselves. I have known humane people who would not allow euthanasia when it was the only humane thing to do. Also we had better understand the people we oppose. It is not enough to be angry, outraged, incensed, or to suffer any other emotional reaction. It is not right to hate. Hate lowers us to the bottom rung of the ladder in human behavior. What we have to do is find a way back into these people's souls. We have to find a way through or over or around the wall they have built up to protect themselves from seeing themselves for what they are. Rage and hate are not the ways to reach them. It is going to take a more sophisticated approach. More on this later . . .