

GHOUlish REALITY

BY SALLIE W. COMBS

On an early-morning walk one cold Thanksgiving Friday, I happened to look up from my feet before stumbling over it: the large dismembered head and neck of a white-tailed doe sitting upright on the road, her eyes open, glazed over, and staring straight at me. My breath caught in my throat; my walk ended there abruptly. Frozen in place from shock, one hand pressed against my chest and the other against my stomach, I stared at her for several seconds. As I turned away to make my way back home, I learned why the doe's head was sitting in the middle of the road. The rest of her body had been skinned and was hanging from a nearby tree. I surmised that because she wasn't a prize buck with magnificent antlers, her head had been discarded and forgotten, only to be discovered by dogs and dragged about until they tired of toying with it. It was a ghoulish coincidence that they had left her head upright in the middle of the road. When I finally headed home, I was uncertain as to whether I felt anger, fear, or sadness. I knew that I felt desperately alone and out of touch with reality.

That chilling Thanksgiving spectacle took place a few years ago. More recently, on a route I take about once every other week, a horrible sight has invariably grabbed my attention. On a farm fence at the entrance of a driveway (what the driveway leads to is out of sight from the road) hang the bodies of two long-dead animals. They've been strung up there for weeks. I didn't get a good look at them early enough to find out what kinds of animals they are. I can tell that they are two different species, but by now their bodies are too decayed to identify. The stench of death is long gone.

Why would someone hang two dead animals' bodies on a roadside fence for all to see and let them rot until there is nothing left—a process that takes months? What is the point? How and why did the animals die? How many children pass the carcasses every day?

The sight disturbs me greatly. It angers me. The act was disrespectful, pompous, arrogant, and rude. It smacks

of ignorance and contempt.

The sight also frightens me. I believe that such a display is abusive not only to the animals whose bodies are hanging there but also to the children who encounter it. They are being taught a lesson by it: animals' lives are not to be treated with any kind of respect, dignity, or humanity.

Were I acquainted with the people who hung the bodies on their fence, I would be frightened by their cruelty and repulsed by their obnoxious behavior. The primitive fight-or-flight response would kick in, and I would want to attack them. I'd want to fight to uphold the dignity of those two animals and that of all animals, including this animal called a human: me.

Such thoughtless, cruel, inhumane acts against animals cause me to not be proud of being a member of the human race. Can we have come so far in other areas of our lives and still not perceive our cruelty to animals? Cruelty doesn't begin and end with overt acts of violence against animals. Subtle and socially acceptable forms of cruelty to animals are often the most frightening.

I think of being in a group of churchwomen as they nonchalantly explained how their husbands corral herds of rattlesnakes. They use an instrument akin to a pitchfork to catch the snakes, and they skin each one alive. They collect walls full of skins to be made into boots, because in addition to the "fun and sport of it," corralling and skinning the rattlers themselves is cheaper than buying snakeskin boots from the store! Inside my head I heard a voice say, "Give me a *break!*" But I remained silent.

I think of being at a neighbor's barbecue and, as people were admiring the beauty of a baby rabbit nibbling foliage nearby, hearing an eleven-year-old spout, "Aw, he'd be an even prettier sight hoppin' and poppin' in a frying pan!" Every adult there, including me, patiently ignored him.

I want to shout, "People, can't you hear yourselves? Don't you see how cruel your behavior is?" but I don't. Instead, I let the ugliness and terror of animal abuse get to me. It breaks my

heart. I contribute to animal-related causes to help alleviate my pain. I house more than my fair share of animals, giving them a wonderful life, to help alleviate my pain. But I do not educate anyone. I don't knock on the door of a house where a doe has been strung up and voice my concern over the residents' disrespect for life. I don't follow the driveway beyond the fence where the rotting bodies of two animals hang to find out why and voice my concern. I don't speak up in a women's church group. And, worst of all, I don't look an eleven-year-old in the eye and tell him, "What you just said about that rabbit disturbs me." I don't take the opportunity to teach the next generation to be smarter and kinder and wiser and more humane.

If I am going to do anything real and lasting about the pain I feel, I have to begin to speak up and be heard. Giving to animal-related causes is great, but I have to do more. It is cowardly to be present when people are speaking offensively about the treatment of animals, feel fear and despair in the pit of my stomach, and not say anything. It is irresponsible to hear children "mouthing off" about abusing an animal and not challenge them to think about what they are saying. To end animal abuse, we have to act with our pocketbooks, our conduct, and our words.

I am challenging myself and all who read this to face the kind of action feared most. Which one is the most difficult to pursue? For me, it is coming to the defense of animals with words—in person and face-to-face. I will keep that realization at the forefront of my thinking so that the next time I am given the opportunity to defend an animal with my words, however feeble I may at first sound, I will do it. I will continue to do so until voicing my interest in the humane treatment of animals is as much second nature to me as are opening my pocketbook to animal-protection organizations and opening my home and yard to animals. ■

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