



RUTH OSTROW

If they could talk

WATCHING A MAG-pie on my balcony filled me with joy.

I threw out some bread and felt truly exhilarated when it flew down from the rail and trusted me. It was an every-

day encounter but there's nothing as lovely as getting close to an animal.

Many people reading this would agree. So how, then, can people detach and eat animals bred and slaughtered cruelly? This is my issue: not the eating of meat, but the brutal way we handle animals. What's the mechanism that allows our brain to shut down at the table and see not the bird, only a meal? Is it expedience, the sheer force of appetite overriding empathy?

I had the same question for my father, who while I was growing up went from working in a butcher's shop to owning butcher's shops to running an abattoir. As I got older, to my great sadness, I realised the "farm" I was taken to was a slaughterhouse. Meanwhile, my father adored his labrador and loved animals, so much so that he finally lived in a house with budgies flying freely and breeding in cereal boxes. "I hate see-

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ing animals in captivity," he said, making daily pilgrimages outside to feed the wildlife that ventured to his porch.

He never explained the anomaly adequately and I grew tired of asking. I've never understood it, just like I don't understand friends who donate to the Wilderness Society while eating non-free-range meat. Prominent businessman and animal rights activist Brian Sherman, of Voiceless, told me that the animals cry all night before they are killed and they run up to anyone who walks into their pens, desperate for soothing. I remember this well from my visits to "the farm". How can people be moved by an elephant or their pet, but not by the suffering of a cow or sheep bred and kept in captivity and separated from their young?

Of course, it's about detachment. We all experience it when we watch the news; fear-mongering and the depersonalising of others helps us tune out cruelty. We use the term "livestock" so we can mistreat animals and see them as food or income. It seems the mind can segregate most efficiently by dousing empathy in the face of self-interest.

Most of us can't make the connection to sentient life as we dig into our meal. Even I find it difficult at times. But it's worth letting these ideas percolate for a while as we pat the dog. Who knows what good may eventually filter down from that simple act of awareness? 🐾

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