

JUNE ONLINE COLUMN – *THE ANIMAL ANGLE*

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Let's drop this ugly, unfair image!

If people are told to 'watch their language', one might assume that they are being reprimanded for swearing or for sounding prejudiced or uncivil. But what about the times when people think they are using ordinary appropriate language, but in fact are being inaccurate and even offensive?

One common usage that really gets under my skin is the tendency to refer to brutal criminals, or cruel human beings in general, as 'animals'. It is even more offensive when the word is used in this abhorrent way by people in public office, like judges, politicians, educators, spokesmen for the police, and individuals in the media.

What a happier world we would live in were human beings, ironically seeing themselves as superior to all other animals, to behave more like almost all the animal species with whom we share a planet on which most of those remaining in the wild are fighting for survival.

We tend to use words carelessly, forgetting how powerful they are: that they create mind pictures and give rise to attitudes that can pervert the way we view the world.

The Austrian-born Jewish existential philosopher, Martin Buber, best known for his compassionate philosophy of dialogue, warned us about how the words we use acquire a kind of existence that makes them seem real even when they are inaccurate. **"Basic words,"** he said, **"do not state something that might exist outside them; by being spoken, they establish a mode of existence."**

In other words, the language we use plays a influential role in the way we create our reality, and it will be a great day for animal welfare, and for humanity, when people, especially those who communicate in public, stop referring to brutal individuals as 'animals', as though cruelty were not a trait of human beings but of the rest of the animal world. It simply is not so.

A decade of love and sweetness

Almost eleven years ago, I adopted my two precious dogs, Bonnie and Gaby, from the Durban & Coast SPCA. Bonnie, a small cross Border collie/Papillon, kept hurling herself at me when I stopped in front of her kennel. She licked my fingers and tried so hard to get to me. I knew immediately this was my dog. Gaby was chosen for me by our SPCA dog whisperer, Richard Madlala. I was looking for a second dog when he brought out a magnificent young cream Labrador on a lead. He said this was the animal I should take and that he would be perfect for Bonnie. He estimated that they were both about two years old.

Both had been picked up as strays, and neither had been claimed. It was hard to wait a week before taking home my new pets. I had recently lost both my dogs to cancer, my Boxer, Bouncer, and my female Boerboel, Cadie, both beautiful, sweet-natured dogs.

Bonnie still leaps onto couches, window ledges and the verandah table and races up and down the stairs like a small missile, but Gaby began to be arthritic about eighteen months ago. He was on a special diet and had lost six kg. It was clearly painful for him to get up and down, and medications and supplements didn't seem to be helping, but he was able to lie comfortably, slept and ate well, and was still enjoying his walks with Bonnie. Both dogs slept in my bedroom, Bonnie on my bed, and Gaby on his bed next to mine.

When I went to see my Australian family at the end of April, and to be at the wedding of my granddaughter, Andrea, I felt that Gaby was not going to last more than a few months, but I did know that we would give him all possible love and attention until his final moments.

What I did not expect was that he would die while I was away, but he was being looked after by a close family friend, Edward Sutton, who always stays in my home when I go away and has loved our family dogs over the last forty years.

Gaby died on a Saturday morning with Ed sitting with him, stroking him, and using a syringe to spray water into his mouth over the last hours. On the Thursday he had gone for his walk, and then later that day had not seemed himself, but appeared to recover on the Friday and ate his food. He slept well, but appeared to be exhausted when he awoke. He died quietly at eleven o'clock on Saturday morning. He had been the dearest creature all his life. I had never once heard him growl or be anything other than sweet-natured and impeccably behaved. Dear Gaby. You are missed so much. Bonnie looked for you for days.

Bonnie was always a bit bossy towards Gabe, and he just wanted to please her, but they were never far from each other, and she was forever checking to see where he was.

I so appreciate that Gaby was comforted by Ed to his final moments and that his death was treated with such dignity and compassion. His body was cremated. His memory lives on in our hearts and always will.

The rise of the Cat Cafés

Amsterdam now has a cat café where cat-lovers can be with cats and stroke them while they are having their coffee. The café is “crowd-funded”... 975 people donated the total sum of 33,000 Euros to found the café.

The first cat-petting café originated in Taiwan in 1998. Since then, cat-petting cafés have opened in many places, including London, Paris, Montreal and New York. Cats are usually chosen from animal centres and are available for adoption. In Amsterdam, customers pay a €3 entrance fee, which gives them two hours of cat company along with their coffee.

Montreal's Le Café des Chats opened in August 2014, and there are three other cat cafés in Canada. America has at least fifteen. The first cat café in London was Lady Dinah's Cat Emporium that opened in 2014. It is so popular that bookings are recommended. Time allowed is ninety minutes. People pop in after visiting Brick Lane Markets or for a relaxing quiet session after work.

We remind our readers that our SPCA has its own Coffee Cat Café... which has no entrance fee and no time limit! Visitors can make a fuss of any of our yard cats that happen to be passing or are found snoozing away in a comfortable spot. And the coffee is really good. Our bright, eye-catching cattery, specially created for cat comfort and their entertainment, is also worth a visit if you would like to adopt one of our beautiful cats.

Shrews

One doesn't see shrews in one's garden very often, but they will almost certainly be there. My little Bonnie recently brought in a shrew and deposited it at my feet. The tiny body was still warm, and there was not a mark on it. I think it might have died from fright. Hoping that it was playing dead like a possum, I put it in a safe place in the sun,

thinking that it might just show signs of life, but it soon grew cold. A couple of times, Bonnie has presented me with a dead mole, plump and warm and seemingly without injury. How fragile these little creatures of the underworld are.

Shrews seem to be somewhat tougher than moles. I remember reading an article by naturalist Alan Defoe years ago in which he said that the fiercest of all animals and the most voracious predator was one of the smallest of mammals: the garden shrew. A shrew can attack and kill (and devour) an animal twice its size. Its appetite is so voracious that it can actually die of starvation unless it feeds several times a day.

Searching through my notes from years ago, I came across a story Defoe tells about a naturalist friend who kept snakes and fed them live mice. Feeding live animals is a reprehensible process as far as most animal-lovers are concerned. I once saw a couple of shivering, traumatised mice cowering along with a couple of snakes in a large glass cage at a snake park. The snakes were taking no notice of them, but it was clear that the little mice sensed what was coming. That image is etched in my mind. In America, in a pet shop, I once saw packs of frozen mice being sold as snake food. I asked one of the staff how the mice were killed. "Frozen to death," he said nonchalantly. Defoe's naturalist friend once made the mistake of giving one of his snakes a shrew. The following day, the cage contained only the shrew. One can't even put two shrews together, he says, because "within minutes there would be only one". That raises a question about reproduction, so it can't always happen!

Although there are likely to be shrews in your garden, you might never have seen one. A shrew looks like a very small mouse with a sharp, pointed muzzle. It gobbles its food at an astonishing rate. Since it eats a great many insects, it is one of the most useful of animals.