

Ahimsa Award Speech
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I want to first thank the Institute of Jainology for honoring me, and the cause for which I work, with this award. And I would also like to thank them for their efforts to help create a world in which one day ahimsa will no longer be worthy of such recognition, because nonviolence will simply be the norm.

This award is a step in that direction. For it is often those with the greatest vulnerability to violence who are the most exploited and the least protected, and whose victimization remains invisible. Recognizing my efforts to illuminate the violence inherent in animal agriculture, and the violence in the consciousness that enables this practice, is a powerful statement legitimizing farmed animals as vulnerable others, as victims who are therefore deserving of protection from harm.

I am deeply honored and profoundly grateful to be receiving the Ahimsa Award, but this award does not belong to me alone. The platform on which I stand has been constructed by the tireless animal advocates and activists, the unsung heroes, whose courage and commitment to speak the truth in the face of overwhelming social denial – to demand compassion and justice for all beings – is perhaps the greatest example of ahimsa I know. And in particular I stand here because of the efforts of my team at Carnism Awareness and Action Network, all volunteers whose dedication frankly humbles me. So I accept this award on behalf of those whose work has made mine possible. And I accept this award on behalf of the pigs and chickens and cows and fish and sheep and rabbits and ducks and everyone else who has been or will be an invisible victim of agricultural violence.

Thank you.

And now I'd like to share with you how I came to be here today, the story of how my search for truth and my discovery of love helped teach me the meaning of ahimsa.

From the moment I was weaned, I was taught to both seek and deny the truth. I was taught to apply the Golden Rule – to consider how I would feel were I on the

receiving end of my actions – but also to systematically violate others. I was taught to keep an open mind and a caring heart, but also to block my awareness and shut down my empathy. I was taught to practice compassion, but to participate in cruelty. I was taught to love, and I was taught to kill.

And so I learned to be a psychological acrobat, walking the tightrope between denial and truth, juggling facts and fictions in an elaborate – and deadly – act I didn’t even know I was performing. And it was my journey across that precarious mental highwire that led me to where I stand today.

My first memory of what I would later realize was my acrobatic training was from when I was just two years old, and we adopted a puppy who my parents named Fritz. Fritz became my first friend, my best friend. And Fritz and I were inseparable; he would bound by my side across the open expanse of the local golf course, under an impossibly vast, cloud-swept sky; he lay contently at my feet as I chronicled my adventures in my private journal, nestled in our secret fort in the woods; he good-naturedly pulled me across the little frozen pond between the trees that I had declared my personal skating rink; he aided and abetted me when I smuggled my unwanted dinner from my mouth to my napkin and then to him, at his station under the table, my partner in crime.

And Fritz and I understood each other. When he stepped on a shard of glass and sliced his paw, I cringed in pain. When he caught wind of his Christmas bone and wagged his tail so hard it pulled his backside along with it, my heart swelled with joy. When I lay feverish and aching he held vigil by my bedside. And when he died, at the age of 13 of cancer, I wept with grief for the loss of my brother.

I am the person I am today in part because of my relationship – my connection – to the dog with whom I grew up. Indeed, the relationships we form with others, human and nonhuman, shape our hearts and minds in profound and powerful ways, for better or worse. They wound us and they heal us. They teach us how to be givers, takers, leaders, users, performers, abusers, nurturers. My connection with Fritz helped teach me how to love.

My connection with Fritz taught me to identify with others. When we identify with another, we see something of ourselves in them, and something of them in ourselves, even if the only thing we identify with is the desire not to suffer. My connection with Fritz taught me to empathize with others. When we empathize with

another, we look at the world thorough the their eyes, so when we make choices that impact them we ask ourselves, what would he or she ask us to do? Indeed, empathy is central to our psychological wellbeing, and to the wellbeing of our planet. It is the antidote to all forms of violence – from judgment to hatred, from domestic abuse to genocide – as it is the seed from which compassion blooms.

My connection with my dog taught me to be a compassionate witness, to look deeply into the truth of another's experience, and into the truth of my own experience – even when the truth broke my heart. After Fritz was diagnosed with cancer and his dash to greet me after school was replaced by a hobble, his once overactive tail swaying limply and his once bright eyes clouded in pain, I still wanted nothing more than to keep him alive, even if just for another week. But I loved him. And my relationship with him had helped teach me that to love someone is to truly *see* them, and that loving another means making choices that are in their best interest. Love and denial cannot coexist.

And so my relationship with Fritz taught me to honor the truth.

But my relationship with Fritz also taught me to deny the truth. It taught me how to play my role in the circus of the absurd, teetering atop that perilous tightrope.

Somehow, throughout all those magical childhood years – years of wonder and adventure and best friendship, of sprinting across panoramic meadows, plunging in towering snow banks, burrowing in fragile, sweet-smelling leaf piles – somehow despite the powerful connection I shared with my dog, there was a deep disconnection within me. Beside my awareness and empathy there resided a numbness of mind and heart. Truth and denial lay side by side, uneasy bedfellows.

Indeed, for the first half of my life, I never thought about how bizarre it was that I could pet my dog with one hand, while I ate a pork chop with the other, a pork chop that had once been an animal who was at least as intelligent and sensitive and conscious as my dog and who – like all of us – had a life that mattered to her. The internal disconnection that caused me to unwittingly support extensive – and completely unnecessary – animal suffering was as powerful as the connection that caused me to love my dog enough to break my own heart to end his suffering. But I simply juggled these contradictions like the acrobat that I was, sleepwalking along the fine line of truth and denial.

It wasn't until a decade after the death of my beloved dog that I woke up. I first awoke to find myself hospitalized, after having eaten what turned out to be my very last piece of meat – a hamburger that had been contaminated with the foodborne bacteria, campylobacter. And then I awoke to the truth. I awoke to the truth about what is perhaps the most entrenched and brutal industry in human history, an industry that permeates virtually every aspect of human and nonhuman existence and whose very survival depends on denial.

The truth is that nonhuman animals are intelligent, sentient beings. Pigs, for instance, are as intelligent as three-year-old humans; and scientists have demonstrated that fish and certain crustaceans have pain receptors, such that some food manufacturers no longer sell live lobsters and crabs on the grounds that boiling them alive is inhumane.

The truth is that approximately 95% of the meat, eggs, and dairy that make it to our plates comes from animals who lived and died in abject misery. (And the other 5%, from so-called organic or humane farms is, I assure you, far from cruelty-free.) For instance, baby animals are routinely castrated and have their horns and beaks cut off without any painkiller whatsoever. They are born and raised in crowded, filthy, dark environments where their existence is one of torment and terror. The females may be hooked up to so-called rape racks, where they are forcibly impregnated, over and over, only to have their offspring taken from them just hours after birth. (There are few sounds as haunting as the wailing of a cow on a dairy farm, as her baby is carried off.). And when it comes time for slaughter, these beings are shackled by their ankles, dragged along a conveyor belt, sliced open, and plunged into boiling water, often while fully conscious.

The truth is that, according to the United Nations, animal agriculture is one of the most significant contributors to the most serious environmental problems facing the world today. Consider, for instance, the fact that greenhouse gas emissions caused by so-called livestock exceed that caused by all cars, trucks, ships, buses, and airplanes combined.

The truth is that there is overwhelming evidence linking the consumption of animal products with some of the most prevalent and debilitating diseases in the western world, including cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.

The truth is that those on the front lines of killing – the meatpackers and slaughterhouse workers – are economically and physically exploited and are often traumatized by an industry whose business is violence. Human Rights Watch states that the working conditions of these individuals are so appalling they violate basic human rights; (source) and not surprisingly, such violence begets violence. For instance, one worker stated (and I apologize in advance for the brief profanity):

“One time I took my knife...and I sliced off the end of a hog’s nose, just like a piece of bologna. The hog went crazy for a few seconds. Then it just sat there looking kind of stupid. So I took a handful of salt brine and ground it into its nose. Now that hog really went nuts, brushing its nose all over the place. I still had a bunch of salt left...and I stuck the salt right up the hog’s ass. The poor hog didn’t know whether to shit or go blind.”ⁱ

The truth is that, globally, 124,000 farmed animals are slaughtered...not every day, or even every hour....but every, single, minute. And so I would like to take a moment of silence, to honor the victims on whose behalf I stand here today, and to commemorate the 124,000 of them who will be killed during the next sixty seconds.

(Sixty seconds of silence)

Thank you.

And the truth was that an entire society of rational, caring people – just like myself – had somehow checked their hearts and minds at the door to enable a global atrocity that has caused more bloodshed than all wars, genocides, famines, and natural disasters combined, in what could only be called a collective madness.

We tearfully bury the bodies of deceased dogs, yet we contentedly consume the bodies of dead pigs. We stop in our tracks to return a fallen bird to her nest, while our chicken nuggets await us back home. We laugh beside our children as they reach toward the calf in the petting zoo, though we feed them the very milk that was taken from this baby, milk that was taken along with his mother. We would call it abuse if a happy, healthy golden retriever were slaughtered just because people liked the way her thighs taste, and yet, when the very same thing is done to individuals of other species we call it humane. We don snorkels and masks and fins to stare in awe at the sundry creatures of the sea, balm to our busy minds, yet we may also soothe ourselves by tricking these same beings into impaling themselves

to death on the ends of our sharpened hooks. And the methods of mass destruction....How many times had I heedlessly driven past the squat, elongated factories – windowless sheds in remote locations in which hundreds of thousands of individuals were caged and confined, castrated and cauterized and cut open – factories that bore a haunting resemblance to other architectures of the darker chapters of our history? And how many times had I cheerfully hummed to my radio as truckloads of terrified animals passed me on their way to slaughter, the whites of their eyes flashing from behind dark little slats?

Something was horribly wrong.

How on earth had such a glaring truth been so fully eclipsed by denial?

It was after awakening but before understanding that I was compelled to seek what I would discover was an even deeper truth. And so, to make sense out of the atrocities and absurdities and acrobatics I could no longer un-see, I immersed myself in the study of violence and nonviolence, ultimately writing my doctoral dissertation on the psychology of eating animals.

And what I discovered made everything suddenly clear. There was in fact a rational explanation for the pandemic insanity that had laid claim to an otherwise sound populace.

What I discovered was that there is an invisible belief system that conditions us to eat certain animals. This belief system is woven through the very fabric of society to shape all social institutions and it is therefore internalized, shaping the very way we think and feel – or, more accurately, don't think and feel – about eating animals. It is a system of oppression that requires us to act against our core values, our own interests, and the interests of others. The system must therefore use a set of social and psychological defense mechanisms so that rational, humane people participate in irrational, inhumane practices without fully realizing what they are doing. And the core of the system is denial.

Carnism, the name I gave to this system of denial, is constructed around an elaborate narrative that presents fiction as fact and distorts our perceptions so that

we fail to see the contradictions that are right in front of us. Carnism is the ringmaster that keeps us ungrounded.

Carnism teaches us to deny the fact that eating animals is based on a mythology, on what I call the Three Ns of Justification – eating animals is normal, natural, and necessary – a mythology that has been used to justify violent practices throughout human history, from slavery to male dominance.

Carnism teaches us to deny the fact that in much of the world today, many of us eat animals not because we need to, but because we choose to. And ironically, carnism robs of us of our ability to make such crucial choices freely – because without awareness, there is no free choice.

Carnism teaches us to deny the fact that animals are individuals, with their own personalities and preferences, and to instead to see them as abstract members of a group: a pig is a pig and all pigs are the same. And as with other victims of violent ideologies, we give them numbers rather than names.

And carnism teaches us to deny the fact that eating animals is not merely a matter of personal ethics, but rather it is the inevitable end result of a deeply entrenched oppressive system. So we fail to see that eating animals is in fact a social justice issue.

So there it was. Nearly two decades after the death of my cherished canine companion, I had finally come to understand the very strange – and very dire – nature of the circus act I had been performing. And I knew that if I didn’t share what I had learned I would be colluding in carnistic denial rather than speaking my truth.

So I wrote a book based on my research – entitled “Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism” – which sold tens of thousands of copies and whose content has been translated and disseminated around the world, and which eventually formed the basis of my organization, Carnism Awareness and Action Network, now a hub of global carnism awareness activity. I have witnessed the spread of carnism awareness across nearly every continent, as more and more

individuals are adopting the cause as their own and as I continue on what is now the third year of my international speaking tour.

And along this most recent phase of my journey, as I travel the world meeting thousands of people from an array of backgrounds, whose lifestyles fall all along the carnistic continuum, I have learned what is perhaps the deepest of truths. Yet unlike the tragic truth about animal agriculture, or the unnerving truth about carnism, this truth is inspiring, for it is the very reason the other truths must remain shrouded within the protective cloak of denial.

The truth is that we care. We care about animals, we care about justice, and we care about the truth. And carnism depends on our not caring, and the system is built on deception. Carnism is a vulnerable system that needs a strong fortress to protect itself from its very own proponents – us. Why else would we need to go through all the psychological acrobatics if not because we care?

The truth is that there is a way off the tightrope. Awareness sweeps out the fictions that clutter our inner worlds, creating space for truth to emerge. We can thus reclaim our authentic thoughts and feelings, and with them, our freedom of choice. With awareness we can choose to be conscientious objectors to the violent system that is carnism, and we can choose to become active witnesses in the transformation of this system.

The truth is that more and more people are waking up. The vegan movement, which is the counterpoint to carnism, is in fact thriving; it is burgeoning in cultures around the world. And the movement is growing precisely because its principles are our principles, its mission is what we all wish for. Veganism is centered on justice, and compassion, and above all it demands an end to the carnistic game of Let's Pretend.

Veganism, of course, is not *the* solution to global violence and injustice, but no true solution will be possible without it. For when it comes to systems of oppression, although they can never be equated, as the experiences of each set of victims will always be somewhat unique, they can and must be compared. Because all oppressive systems are structurally similar – the consciousness that enables such oppressions is the same. It is the mentality of domination and subjugation, the mentality that causes us to turn beings into things, lives into units of production. It is the might-makes-right mentality that makes us feel entitled to wield complete control over the lives and deaths of those with less power, just because we can. And

to feel justified in our actions because they're only: savages, women, animals. It is the mentality of meat, the carnistic consciousness.

And so the truth is that, as a powerful man – Hitler – once said, “Make the lie big, make it simple, keep saying it, and eventually they will believe it.”

But the truth is also that, as a more powerful man – Gandhi – once said, “all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall – think of it, always.”

So it was the love of a dog that taught me the true meaning of ahimsa. My relationship with Fritz taught me that love is not merely a feeling, but a practice, a practice that – like all practices – reflects our state of consciousness. It taught me that love should not be limited by arbitrary boundaries such as species; indeed, whenever we place limits on our compassion, we diminish ourselves and damage our world. And so it was the love of a dog that led me to my life’s work, to transform the violent system that is carnism. For transforming carnism is not simply about changing behavior, but about shifting consciousness. It is about shifting from ignorance to awareness, from apathy to empathy, from callousness to compassion, from denial to truth – and from violence, to ahimsa.

Thank you.

ⁱ Gail Eisnitz, Slaughterhouse: *The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the US Meat Industry* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1997), 102-104.