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Arlington Street Church
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And the Tiger Shall Lie Down with the Piglets

On May 20th, 2006, at the start of the Preakness Stakes, Barbaro, the great, undefeated race horse, shattered his right hind leg. “Veteran jockey Edgar Prado immediately pulled Barbaro up, and brought him to a gentle stop. He dismounted and leaned his shoulder into Barbaro’s shoulder to support him until track attendants could arrive.”¹ In most cases, a horse in those straights would have been put down immediately. But Barbaro’s people, Roy and Gretchen Jackson, did everything they could do to save him. It wasn’t just that he had won the Kentucky Derby, or that it looked as if he might have a chance at the Triple Crown. It wasn’t just that they were trying to protect their asset. They loved Barbaro.²

The beautiful, young thoroughbred became an object of national adoration.³ His stall was decorated with thousands of get well cards, flowers, and presents, as well as saint medallions and holy water sent in by fans. His condition was followed by news organizations on a daily basis.⁴

On January 29th, 2007, eight months after the accident, when the Jacksons felt that Barbaro’s pain was no longer manageable,⁵ they made the inevitable decision to euthanize him.

I wept.

I wept for poor Barbaro. I wept at the sheer majesty and mystery of the animal bond, human to non-human. I wept for his people and for those to whom he had represented some kind of hope, for the broken promise of recovery-against-all-odds. And I wept in gratitude for our capacity to feel a sense of connection across invisible lines and that magical emotion, empathy.

¹ wikipedia.org

² *New York Times* editorial, 1/30/07

³ b. April 29, 2003

⁴ wikipedia.org

⁵ ibid

All year long, in anticipation of this service, people send me stories about animals. Our favorites are all about this inter-species bonding: First there was the farm cat who suckled six orphaned skunk babies.⁶ And then came the tiger at a California zoo who lost her rare triplet litter. Though physically healthy, she fell into debilitating depression. When no surrogate cubs could be found, desperate zookeepers brought her a litter of five weanling pigs, wrapped in tiger skin. Would they be babies, or pork chops? Beyond all expectations, the tiger cheered up and proceeded to nurse and to mother them. It exceeds the limits of credibility, I know, but you can see them pictured in your newsletter this morning. And the tiger shall lie down with the piglets.

It's adorable! And it's deeply moving. We can relate to the mother who fosters the motherless, and we are moved. We can relate to the grieving mother, consoled by babies to raise, and we are moved. The fact that these mothers are not human doesn't stop our empathy from arising, and bringing tears of joy.

For some of us, it may be easier to feel inter-species empathy than empathy for other humans. That is precisely why the cultivation of empathy is a spiritual discipline; empathy is a spiritual practice. *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, was written by three of my divinity school professors, Cheryl and Jim Keen and Sharon Daloz Parks, joined by Sharon's husband, Laurent Parks Daloz. "Addressing today's tough problems," they write, "... requires people who can shun cynicism and despair, accept new responsibilities, build new connections, and sustain themselves over the long haul....

"What does it take to form and sustain this kind of commitment? How can all of us encourage commitment to society as a whole, both in the next generation and in ourselves?"⁷ One of their answers is *empathy*. They write, "The single most important pattern we have found in the lives of people committed to the common good is what we have come to call *a constructive, enlarging engagement with the other...* It appeared at some point during the formation of the commitment of everyone in our sample."⁸ "Constructive, enlarging engagement with the other" is, in a word, *empathy*.

⁶ Don't miss the photos at <http://www.all-creatures.org/stories/a-catmothers-01.html>

⁷ from the flyleaf

⁸ Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks, *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, p. 63

Here's a true story with empathy at every turn:

Peteris Zieds is an environmental scientist. He was living in Nazi-occupied Latvia toward the end of World War II, when, at sixteen years old, he was drafted into the retreating German army, and assigned to a hospital ship. "Wounded and dying German boys, most of them his own age, lay stashed in the [horribly overcrowded] hold. There were almost no doctors." Peteris recalls, "They were on the floors, you know, like fishes.... Half a head off, leg busted up, infected, ... moaning without help.... So we were running all over the place, trying to help them...."

"The experience was both disorienting and intense. On ... one hand, the Germans were the enemy; on the other, they were just boys his own age, in terrible pain. Something shifted in Peteris."⁹ "Somehow," he says, "it became a human activity.... It was people needing help.... Somehow, it had to be done." Their nationality didn't matter.

"When the ship docked, [Peteris Zieds] emerged from the dark hull just as one of the dead was received by his grieving family - and he saw the whole scene in a larger light. "They put on his jacket," Peteris recalls. "He was full with decorations, you know? Really a hero.... All kinds of ceremony ... [for] a sergeant going home to his native town...."

"For weeks afterward, he struggled to make sense of the contradictions as his unit was moved [toward the front], into the maw of the advancing Russian army." As they marched east, wounded and dying soldiers passed them, retreating to the west. "It was incomprehensible," Peteris remembers, "... and this was not my war." And then one day, he saw his escape, and went for it. With nothing but "a slab of salami and a loaf of coarse bread, extended with finely ground hay and sawdust, Peteris went AWOL."

"A few days later, tired and hungry, he ... [was] walking through a quiet village, miles from the fighting. A small boy, perhaps five years old, sat near the side of the road, holding a large piece of black rye bread, ... [slathered] with butter and garnished with scallions." The boy was fascinated by the soldier; Peteris stopped to talk with him. "I was looking at the bread and looking at the bread," he says. "Then the boy looked up at him, looked at the bread, and asked, 'Do you want it?'"

⁹ John Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, pp. 479-485

He says, “So I took it. And I went someplace quiet to eat my bread. And it was a kind of hope in that spontaneous sharing. For me, he was a giver of bread, a giver of life, and a child. He just offered it. And it pierced ... the cruelty I had seen and was living, the barbaric ways.... It was like a ... sacrament.”

“Fifty years later, recalling that moment, Peteris Zieds weeps.”¹⁰

My spiritual companions, why did Peteris weep? Why do we weep? Barbaro; the cat with the baby skunks; the tiger with the piglets; the experience of compassion for the enemy, of humanity in the face of the brutality of war; the spontaneous generosity of a small child, who reaches out to feed a starving body, bearing light to the spirit: we are touched and moved and changed by the experience of empathy. It just might save our souls.

I close with the words of South African hero, Nelson Mandela, who embodies the highest, most exalted ends of the experience of empathy. Mandiba says of his twenty-seven years as a political prisoner,

“It was during those long and lonely years that my hunger for the freedom of my own people became a hunger for the freedom of all people, white and black. I knew as well as I knew anything that the oppressor must be liberated just as surely as the oppressed. A man who takes away another man’s freedom is a prisoner of hatred, locked behind the bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness. I am not truly free if I am taking away someone else’s freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity.

“When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and the oppressor, both....” He concludes, “The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.”¹¹

I say,

The true test of our empathy is at hand.
May we meet it with open minds, open hearts,
and open hands.

¹⁰ Daloz, Keen, Keen, Parks, *Common Fire: Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, pp. 69-70

¹¹ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, p. 544