A Peaceable Kingdom for Farm Animals

Imagine waking up each morning to the sound of roosters crowing back and forth between the barn and the chicken house just a few yards from where you are lying in your trailer. Imagine it's time to fling on your bathrobe, steal out into the cool morning air and unlatch the barn doors so that the farm animals—tucked inside by you the night before—can come outside and start to enjoy their day. A pastoral fantasy, you say? Not unless I dreamed the five weeks I spent last summer working as a volunteer intern at the unique haven for farm animals, now in its third year, called Farm Sanctuary.

Located in Avondale, Pennsylvania next to the Delaware state line, and comprising about ten acres on a hundred-acre organic vegetable and hay farm, Farm Sanctuary is a non-profit enterprise that provides permanent shelter as well as adoption services for animals rescued from factory farms, stockyards, and slaughterhouses. Here you will find pigs, turkeys, ducks, geese, rabbits, chickens, sheep, goats, and a cow—all receiving the round-the-clock personal attention of Sanctuary founders and directors Gene and Lorri Bauston, along with their single fulltime assistant, Blanche Kent. At Farm Sanctuary, despite notched ears, clipped beaks and toes, and other deformities and mutilations identifying them as former agroindustrial production units, farm animals really do appear to have a truly "nice day."

As is probably the case for most people growing up in post-World War II America, my personal acquaintance with farm animals had been practically nil, other than for some brief encounters with baby "Easter" chickens and rabbits way back in childhood, a long suppressed witnessing of a brown hen beheaded on a chopping block with an axe by a playmate's father, and tears shed over some neighbors' white duck getting run over by a car.

Speaking of Easter, when some friends and I first drove to Farm Sanctuary on Easter Sunday last year, one of those present, on spying at a distance the dark brown sheep whom I now know to be Jelly Bean, shouted, "Hey, look—a buffalo!" And most of us more or less shared the surprise of the person who said she had not known that sheep have tails. It struck me then that for the likes of us, these farm animals were on something of a par with fabulous beasts.

"Yes, Virginia, there really is a turkey."

"Is it OK to pet the pig? Do pigs bite?"

Not long ago I got a letter from a woman who said, "Let's hope Farm Sanctuary improves the image as well as the lot of farm animals." As we know, farm animals have a tremendous "image problem" to overcome, and it could be getting worse. The traditional complacent view that farm animals are "contented" has made it easy for agribusiness to plant reassurances that they do not suffer very much from being treated in ways that would drive the rest of us out of our minds. Is it any wonder that Farm Sanctuary's educational task is to get people to see that "farm animals are animals, too"? Such teaching is necessary in a culture that has put farm animals so far out of sight and mind that most people living in this society know them only as food on their plates. The vegetarian joke about a lot of folks thinking chickens are a kind of vegetable is no joke!

While it is not necessary to have actual contact with pigs, ducks, and turkeys to be concerned about these animals, such contact can be the magic touch that inspires one to a greater commitment on their behalf. It isn't necessary to be an animal caretaker to have a sparking encounter with one or more of the animals at the Sanctuary. As a visitor, one can have an experience that will create new emotional ties. Let me cite one memorable incident. It centers around a turkey named Milton.

A man paid us a visit one day, along with some other people. Inside the barn he said to me, when he first arrived, "I don't eat red meat anymore, but I still eat chicken and turkey." Along comes Milton, ponderously slow, burdened by the overweight and arthritis that have become standard in birds bred for meat. Pretty soon this man was exclaiming, with Milton there beside him, "I didn't know that turkeys could—could"—could what? He was looking for a word or phrase to describe whatever it was he had thought turkeys couldn't do, but which they obviously *could* do, since Milton was just then doing it. I think what he was trying to say was *be companionable.*

I do not know if this story has a "happy ending," i.e., if the man adopted a humane diet from then on. All I know is what I saw: a person being touched—"tamed"—by a turkey, a farm animal.

It is by providing the opportunity for encounters like this that Farm Sanctuary makes a unique contribution to creating in people's minds a more enlightened perception of farm animals. Very simply, Farm Sanctuary allows these animals to "speak" for themselves, though in the case of the turkeys, I should rather say "sing"—the fluty pathos of their voices is something that cannot be described, just listened to.

As to whether Farm Sanctuary is improving the *lot* of farm animals, I believe the best answer can be found in one of its newsletters: "Imagine living your life in a small, filthy cage constantly in pain, unable to stand or lie down comfortably. After months of agony, your torture finally ends, but not at the slaughterhouse. Instead, two gentle hands reach down to lift you out of the darkness, and bring you to a safe, loving place. For the first time, you can stretch your wings and legs and feel soft straw and cool grass beneath your feet." This captures it, at least as far as words can tell.

by Karen Davis

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