



Learning to Care

A Green Hearts Essay by Ken Finch
August 2007

During my youth in southern California, the annual visiting carnival gave out, as prizes, small "chameleons" that had a tiny collar on their necks, attached to little chains with safety pins on the other end. For a few days after each year's fair, boys gleefully wandered around town with these lizards pinned to their shirts and riding on their shoulders. Of course, the lizards — which were actually common anoles, not true chameleons — inevitably died within a few days. Their use as prizes left an enduring memory, but it seems terribly cruel now.

Truth be known, abuse of small animals has long been a common part of children's nature discovery and play. Flying June bugs on threads, frying ants with magnifiers, pulling the wings off butterflies — all have been routine bits of childhood for eons. Typically such actions are not done out of any evil intent, but rather out of a mixture of curious experimentation and misplaced love.

For instance, I once heard a fellow environmental educator relate her childhood story about earthworms. She wanted to be a veterinarian when she grew up, and thought it would help to practice. The form of practice she chose was to take a bottle of Bactine™ and a hypodermic needle (who knows where she got it!) and inject worms with the liquid! A colleague sitting near to her immediately added her own story: she loved worms so much as a child that she used to tie them together into bracelets that she would wear on her wrist! Were these two girls brutes-in-training? It would seem not, since both of them grew up to dedicate their lives to teaching children and adults about nature.

Young children do not fully understand death, or how much power they have over other life forms. Vicariously hearing about this power on a TV show or reading about it in a book is not real to a child; it only becomes real and meaningful when they experience it directly. After many years of hearing stories of seemingly well-adjusted children injuring animals, I have come to believe that such unintentionally cruel behavior is actually an important part of the process of developing empathy for other life forms. For some children, I think, it is only after they graphically discover their own harmful power that they start to be careful and caring in their interactions with nature. It seems a painful

route to this learning, but I believe it is a fairly normal one. Parents and teachers should never encourage such behavior, of course, but neither should they react to it as though it's a portent that their child will grow up to be a maniacal killer!

My own related story made such an impression on me that I literally remember every detail, even though it happened over 40 years ago when I was in fifth grade. I was walking to my friend Tommy Vincent's house, where we were going to work together on a school science fair project: making a simple electric motor out of nails, wire, a test tube, a cork, and a battery. A couple of houses down the block from Tommy's, I spied an American robin on a lawn. Being a typical eleven-year-old boy, I picked up a rock and threw it at the bird. It never dawned on me that I would hit it; I'd never hit anything I aimed for in my whole life!

Sure enough, I missed — but the rock hit in front of the bird, bounced up, and struck it from below as the robin was taking off. The bird crumpled back to earth and began running away, with an obviously broken wing dangling from its side. I was shocked and truly mortified, and I immediately began chasing the bird, trying to catch it and help it. I have no idea what help I could possibly have administered, but chasing it around the neighborhood was certainly not a good start! It turned out to be a moot point, since the bird disappeared into a dense shrub thicket and got away from me. It undoubtedly died within a matter of hours or days.

This incident really hurt me. I felt terrible about it — and, in fact, still feel guilty about it today. But the very power of that memory tells me that it made an impact on my conscience and values. None of us should intentionally steer children towards that harsh kind of first-hand learning about life and death, but neither should we begrudge it when it happens. It just might be a uniquely powerful element in learning how to care for and about the natural world. Besides, there are many things that desperately threaten the world's ecology, but children with rocks and Bactine-filled needles are not among them!