

25th ANIMAL LAW CONFERENCE, October 13-15, 2017

PANEL: Gender and Race Redux: Identifying and Fixing the Racist and Sexist Realities of the Animal Protection Movement, Saturday, October 14, 1:45 – 3:15 p.m.

BLOGS by lauren Ornelas, founder and executive director, Food Empowerment Project

Each of these BLOGS is available on the Food Empowerment Project website.

Reprinted by permission of FEP.

<http://appetiteforjustice.blogspot.com/search?q=My+Scariest+Halloween>

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 7, 2015

My Scariest Halloween: Racism at an animal rights protest



I have been attending (or organizing) animal rights protests since 1987, and I have cried at them due to the cruelty that is inflicted on animals – from the rattlesnake roundups in Oklahoma to walking with the elephants back to the railroad cars. But I have never left a protest in tears because of comments I heard from an animal rights activist until now.

This Halloween, I was among about 30 other activists protesting an amusement park that offers both rides and animals in captivity for entertainment. After leafleting at this location for years, we know that many people go just for the rides and not the animal abuse.

As a Black family walked past us toward the park's entrance, I heard (but did not see) one of my fellow

activists make a comment to them. Someone from the family replied, “We are just a Black family trying to enjoy ourselves.” Although I did not hear what the family said first, I did hear part of what the activists said in response: “It doesn’t matter; we are all the same” and “We are all Earthlings; we are no different.”

I watched the family’s response, and the husband laughed to his friends and said, “They say we are all the same.”

Looking at two activists nearby (a Latina who I knew and a white woman), I said, “This is the problem when animal rights activists say shit like this.”

They were confused as to why I had a problem with this and then I realized that they were the ones yelling this rhetoric.

Recognizing that I initially did not handle the situation in the best way, I tried to recover quickly and show patience, and that was when I realized that nothing I said mattered. What I’d heard was only the tip of the iceberg.

They continued to say, “It is true; we are all the same, and all of the oppressions are the same.” I said that saying things like that and “All Lives Matter” is problematic.

I tried to explain that we as animal people need to show that we are not racists (well, at this point I had not realized what I was in for) and that we need to fight the image that we care more about non-human animals than human animals.

What followed were some of the most racist comments I have ever heard. They told me that they (meaning Black people) complain about everything, they all say they are too busy with their own lives, they are always rude and angry, they don’t care about animals, they like to eat meat, and they are not special.

When I tried to relate to the Latina about how people say horrible things about our people as well, she looked shocked and told me it was not true. She said, “Yeah, but our lives were different,” and I said, “Yes, for some of us, this was our land— but they were brought over as slaves.” She said, “They need to get over that – it was a long time ago.”

I truly believe I was in shock, and my mind could not process what was happening.

I continued to try to relate to the Latina from our perspective by using the word “we,” but it was clear they thought I meant animal activists. Eventually I had to tell the white woman I wasn’t talking to her, to which she let me know what she thought of me, and the Latina told me she didn’t care about me and she only cared about the animals.

I tried to explain that if they truly cared about helping the animals, then we needed to relay the information in more effective ways in order to connect with more people.

I did mention how the Black community is taking the vegan and animal rights causes to heart, with vegan hip-hop dinners, etc.

I also apologized for this venue not being the best place to talk about these issues, and the white woman said she didn’t need me to tell her how to think.

I also tried to continue to explain how when I speak to people of color about being a vegan and an activist, I have to dispel the notion that we do not care about people. (In hindsight I wonder why I continued.)

I have dealt with racist people in the animal rights movement before (people not knowing I was a Chicana and over the phone telling me not to move to particular areas because Mexicans lived there), not to mention racist comments when issues like charreadas come up, or Sheriff Joe, and of course, there was the time I was speaking at Boston University and a white woman interrupted me to insist that farm workers love their work. (The brilliant Dr. Breeze Harper reminded me the next morning that many white people have a romantic notion of what farm work is like.)

But I admit that it absolutely horrified me to have someone defend their racism to my face.

I was going to apologize for how I handled the issue to begin with, but by that time I was crying (I don’t think I realized it at first) and my wonderful husband asked if I wanted to leave.

I decided I needed to leave, mostly because I could not imagine staying at an event where these types of comments were being yelled at people of color.

The Latina asked me if I was leaving and I told her I was.

She seemed shocked and tried to explain to me that there are plenty of people helping people, but not many people to help the animals (she said this repeatedly). I tried to explain how untrue that was (and what came to mind was Hurricane Katrina), but I mentioned farm workers and she said there are always people to help people and the government could help the farm workers. I tried to explain many were undocumented....and just had to walk away. Sigh.

I was there for the non-human animals and this campaign is one I have been intimately involved with for two years, but I just couldn't stand by and be complicit in these racist comments, so I left.

I am still sick to my stomach writing about it. And not because they were telling me that they cared more about non-human animals than human animals –I have been doing this long enough and unfortunately know how common this is.

Clearly, I should have started the conversation off better.

But did I do the right thing by speaking up? I felt outrage and I would hope if I am not around people would defend me with the same passion as I have always done for non-human animals.

Would I have felt better now if I continued with an angry outburst of shock and incredulity?

Some of the irony of this is that these activists were trying to tell me (and the Black family) that we are “all the same,” and yet they said all of these racist things about Black people and how they were different.

You can't have it both ways. It reinforces to me how problematic it is to say things like All Lives Matter (or those types of comments) and worse, what people really mean when they say this.

Halloween is by far my favorite “holiday,” and part of me wondered if I should have allowed myself to get so physically upset about this, but sometimes, you just can't help it.

The best part? Other than seeing so many activists out for the animals and a beautifully put together event was the fact that a Black family with two kids walked by while all of this was going on. I handed them two leaflets, to which the Black little girl turned to me and said, “I agree.”

When I pointed that out to the two women, there was no response. But did I do right? I might have been better off trying to speak with that little girl more, but instead I wanted to prove my point.

I have continued to self-reflect about why such an incident caused me to cry even an hour after the interaction. Part of me wonders if it is because she was a Latina, or because this was at an animal rights event (having done animal rights since I was 17, I do consider animal rights activists “my family”), or because they felt comfortable defending their racist beliefs in person.

Mark and I spoke about it last night, and he said he sees these types of racist comments on social media. I am not on Facebook, so I guess I am spared, but I do know there are a number of animal rights groups that are indeed racist and promote this under the guise of “animals first.”

I realize it was probably a combination of all of these things as well as my overall feeling, Am I doing enough? Food Empowerment Project works on a number of issues impacting people of color to demand justice, but what do you do when racism is at the core?

Recently, I attended a vigil for the two-year anniversary of the killing of Andy Lopez (a 13-year-old boy who was killed by a cop in Santa Rosa for holding a toy gun), and a colleague of mine in the living wage campaign reminded me how prevalent white supremacy is. And I wondered, Am I doing enough?

When I think of all the excuses animal rights people use to treat each other with disrespect and at times act with cruelty – many excuse such behavior in the name of the animals – it reminds me of how some people use religion as a shield to hide bigotry. I can’t imagine the animals truly wanting us to be so cruel toward one another because, if nothing else, if we can’t live with solidarity among our own species, how can we save them?

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2012

Chipping Away at Injustices



I consider myself a fan of sci-fi, but I also consider myself a Trekkie, though I don't know the name of the grain that kills the Tribbles, and I am really more of a fan of the original and *Deep Space Nine*. Real fan or not, I do like to watch it. Those of us who like sci-fi know that one of the beauties about it is how cleverly writers can weave in commentary about things such as racism, animal exploitation, sexism, etc. – setting these issues in another time and place while making them relevant to the here and now.

My husband and I have been watching all of the *Twilight Zone* episodes, and one struck me that I can't shake. The episode is called "He's Alive," and the description from IMDB is this, "Around 1960, a tiny neo-Nazi organization struggles pathetically to succeed in a big city. A mysterious figure begins to ruthlessly guide a young, insecure U.S. Nazi leader, and the group begins to draw more attention."

An old man who survived WWII is speaking to a bartender across the street.

The bartender says, "*Used to be people would laugh at him, and lately he gets the crowd and not many people laugh either.*"

The old man says, "I've seen it before. I have seen it all before."

Bartender: "That was another time, another place, another kind of people that doesn't go here."

The old man: "That is what we said, too. They were brown scum, temporary insanity, part of the passing scene too monstrous to be real, so we ignored them or laughed at them because we couldn't believe there were enough insane people to walk along side of them. [Sigh]... and then one morning the country woke up from an uneasy sleep and there was no more laughter. ... But not again. It must not happen again. I can't let it. We simply can't let it happen again. All that nightmare. Oh, no. No, not this time."

I guess it had me thinking about how people treat various forms of discrimination from racism, homophobia, cruelty to animals and the treatment of immigrants. You have those who speak hate and vitriol, those who listen and are uncomfortable with it but laugh as they do not know what to say, those who agree and those who speak against it.

I often think many of us are put into these situations, mostly with people we don't know well or work with.

I was faced with this when my husband and I chose to protest Prop 8 in California (Prop 8 made marriage equality illegal) by having our wedding in Massachusetts, which has legalized marriage equality. I was asked, and continue to be asked, why we married out of state. People want to know if it is because we had family there or if we met there.

Every time someone asked, I knew this was an opportunity. An opportunity to make a statement against hatred and discrimination. I told the truth and said it in a way that would assume that any decent person who does not believe in discrimination would agree with me and understand why we had to make this choice. Did everyone agree with us and embrace what I had to say? Certainly not. Should I worry about offending people whose point of view is different? To me, that would be no different than being silent and not speaking up about other forms of discrimination.

And that is a small way in which we all can use our voice. It doesn't mean we have to scream (although clearly there are times when this is necessary), but we must not be silent. We must not laugh or ignore the hatred that is being spouted these days. We should not listen to these shock jocks and laugh. We should not give them anything.

Why should those with the most constant and loudest voices be those who speak such absolute disgust? Even if we don't have the microphones they do, we must use our voices because collectively we can be loud.

I remember when I started Food Empowerment Project and explained to fellow animal rights activists about some of our goals. I was told that racism isn't that bad. Well, I don't think that anyone can deny now the blatant racist comments and actions that are taking place across the country. The time is up for us to ignore it; we must constantly use our voices to speak out against it.

Now most people who are reading this (if you have continued to read) are not ones who would remain silent when animal cruelty is involved. However, I start to worry that this trend is creeping into our movement in an insidious way. Every time someone talks about "humane" meat or cage-free eggs, it is as if the discussion of the reality of the actual suffering, cruelty and deaths of these animals is erased, because the conversation, for the most part, stops there.

Why is it that those who bring up these injustices are seen as not allowing others to have a good time? Why are not those who make homophobic, racist or sexist jokes seen as the killjoys?

These conversations, as uncomfortable as they might be, must see the light of day and not be overshadowed by laughter or the thought that it will all go away if we don't talk about it.

I don't want to have to worry that my group will lose support because a racist or a homophobe reads this. Enough. We must take stands against those who seek to oppress people, even if they support animal issues.

We must use our collective voices to speak out against all forms of injustice if we think we can ever chip away at it.

And below is the end of that episode from the wise and talented Mr. Rod Serling:

*Where will he go next, this phantom from another time, this resurrected ghost of a previous nightmare (Adolph Hitler) - Chicago; Los Angeles; Miami, Florida; Vincennes, Indiana; Syracuse, New York? Anyplace, everyplace, where there's hate, where there's prejudice, where there's bigotry. **He's Alive.** He's alive so long as these evils exist. Remember that when he comes to your town. Remember it when you hear his voice speaking out through others. Remember it when you hear a name called, a minority attacked, any blind, unreasoning assault on a people or any human being. He's alive because through these things we keep him alive.*

<http://appetiteforjustice.blogspot.com/2011/02/been-down-this-road-before.html>

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2011

Been down this road before...

Food Empowerment Project has recently thrown our support behind AB 376, which would ban the possession of shark fins in California.

But unfortunately, this blog isn't about why sharks are one of my favorite animals (oh, but let me know if you want me to elaborate on that), it is about a situation nearly as grim as the one that sharks are facing now.

The bill has stirred up controversy – it is co-authored by a wonderful Assemblymember in my county, Assemblymember Fong, but it is being blasted by a State Senator Yee

from San Francisco, who is running for mayor. And unfortunately, he is attempting to make this an issue about Chinese culture.

As a person of color, I find two things incredibly distressing about these situations:

1. When ethnicity, race, or whatever you want to call it, is used to condone any form of animal exploitation or cruelty.
2. When people who defend the animals expose themselves to be racists.

Food Empowerment project was started to show the interconnections of both human animal and non-human animal injustices. One of my main mottos is “Oppression is oppression no matter what form it takes.”

Now, as someone who attended the charreada when I was young, I often speak out in opposition to the cruelties involved in these traditional rodeos (not the beauty of other parts of these events, just those involving animals). My memories of attending are of complete sadness. I am appalled when people call that our “culture.” To me, every cruelty and injustice, even under the guise of cultural tradition, needs to be stopped (including many of those in the U.S.).

Regardless of how strongly I feel about the animal cruelty at these events, I am just as disgusted by the vitriolic comments against my people (for example Mexicans are lazy and are just cruel to animals). In order to comment along with the people who are opposed to the animal cruelty I have to speak against their hateful comments otherwise I would feel as if I am siding with absolute racists.

Those of us who do not tolerate animal abuse can still be proud of our culture.

When I worked on the law in California to ban the production and sale of foie gras, the race card was brought out again. The producer (of El Salvadorian descent) claimed it was a race issue. I quickly reminded the legislators that the cruelty involved in the production of foie gras had nothing to do with culture.

And here it is again with the shark finning bill. The race card is dropped and people who are working on the bill are at a loss since it is such a simple and clear issue of

preventing a form of cruelty as well as protecting species who are currently threatened with extinction. And yet, I read comments on blogs that absolutely sicken me with their xenophobic, racist remarks about the Chinese people.

My initial reaction of course is to worry about how incredibly prevalent racism is – even in California’s Bay Area. How can people who care about non-human animals be so filled with hatred? And what do they think they accomplish by expressing this?

This is the road I would never like to go down again. But I know it is inevitable in a society where the we are often pitted against one another.

I just hope that those reading this will stand strong and speak out against both. Please do not allow any comment in favor of the animals with even a tinge of racism go without speaking up for the animals and speaking against racism.

We, as advocates for justice, for compassion and for the animals, cannot allow it to continue.

For information on sharks, please see our webpage: http://www.foodispower.org/shark_finning.htm.

END
