

## Doing the Most Good: A Story About Hope

### I. Breakfast

When I asked my father for a pet of my very own, he came home the next day with a box full of baby chickens. I remember the fuzzy balls that chirped wildly out into the world as if to say, *"Look at me! I am alive!"* My sister and I sat in our living room watching the little clusters of feathers wobble and fall over one another. Life, teeming with so much energy, mesmerized us. Eventually, time passed and my family grew bored of the dozen new lives living in a fourteen-year-old's bedroom. On the ranch hidden in the Texas hill country, life returned to its usual halt. Every night for weeks, I fell asleep staring into the dimly lit box, wondering why these lives were now in my hands.

As they grew out of their fluff and into their feathers, it did not take long before a pecking order was established among the flock. My sister, who had declared herself the official name-giver, waited impatiently for the chicks to begin showing personalities worth noting. Tuffy, the instigator, was a chick speckled with gray spots. Puff, named endearingly after the dragon of the same name, was the only one to stand up to Tuffy. Nugget, named by my father, had a permanent limp. After Nugget, the trend of naming the chicks after assorted food items became the most popular in the household: Nacho, Biscuit, Poach, and Brisket. I was fortunate enough to get to name one.

"Do not name that one. It won't live long enough." My father warned me as I cradled the splotchy ball in my arms. She was the smallest of the flock by far. Chickens, like us, are harsh in their pecking order; the weakest bird is constantly bullied and gets less food. The seller had slipped her into the box for free in an attempt to get rid of her. Even as the rest of the flock had moved on to live in a small enclosure in the backyard, she was too ill to brave the cold. For

weeks, I spent all of my free time tending to her. Late at night, when no one could hear, I gently spoke the only name that could describe what we both needed: *Hope*.

Hope did not act like her siblings. I do not know if it was because of the extended attention she had spent curled up in my bed with me (a neighbor had recommended that my body heat may help her survive). She started to chirp when she needed food or water. Her voice, in her variations of tone, offered a language all her own that I felt blessed to discern. When I would sit in my room and cry from an anxiety attack, she would hop into my lap and press against me. I taught her how to sit and she taught me how to listen. I wondered often if she was just a special chicken. Did I somehow discover the only chicken capable of understanding a human? I spent days observing my flock with a new intent: to give them a chance to communicate. Sitting among the chickens, I interacted with them hoping there was something discernible to their behavior. I found out firsthand that chickens are intelligent creatures that know how to play, cry, and live just as we do.

Hope was not an inside bird. When I was home, she was allowed in the house and would roam about the living room. Seeing her riding on top of my boxer, Misty, was a common sight. Like any other animal a family lets into their lives, Hope became something of an extension of the household. There is a moment when the status of an animal becomes more than simply a pet, but rather a fixture within the familial social ring. Hope filled a spot that we had not known was vacant. After a while, living with chicken feathers strewn about with the dog's hair became the norm of life. This way of life continued for a year and a half until dinner on Christmas Eve.

My father made me do the honors.

## II. Lunch

René Descartes, a seventeenth-century French philosopher, is one of the most influential minds in Western philosophy. Some of his most notable contributions comprise the existence of the mind and soul. Among these notions is Descartes' belief that human beings and no other animals are incapable of having a soul. Descartes describes animals as such:

“This seems to me a very strong argument to prove that the reason why animals do not speak as we do is not that they lack the organs but that they have no thoughts...I have nothing to reply except that if they thought as we do, they would have an immortal soul like us.”<sup>1</sup>

This line of reasoning is quite straightforward. Animals that are not human do not have thoughts because they have the organs to speak but choose not to do so. Because thoughts are an indication of a soul, non-human animals do not have a soul. When I glance at Misty snoozing next to me, I imagine that Descartes would see nothing more than a “natural automata” and how “wonderful that a mind should be found in every human body than that one should be lacking in every animal.”<sup>2</sup>

Descartes' philosophical influence became the crux of the industrial revolution, which inadvertently applied to factory farming. Perceiving animals as nothing but soulless automata simplifies a slaughterhouse to a place of industry. While living on the ranch, I encountered many livestock handlers who simply referred to their animals as "meat" or by their ID number. Rodeos featuring livestock bred for meat frequently featured children holding up their prized pets, completely unaware of the implications of what was happening. A child, not much younger than I was at the time, sat crying next to his lamb as the auctioneer yelled, "Sold." Children of livestock handlers learn to stunt their emotions regarding their animals out of mental sanity. I

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<sup>1</sup> Kalof, 137

<sup>2</sup> Kalof, 138

participated in one of these rodeos and showed Tuffy, the instigator of Hope's flock. To hear the life I raised and cherished reduced to a price tag was too much for me to bear. That was the first and last time I entered. I discovered firsthand that a place like that is where Descartes' beliefs are necessary to survive.

Where does the human end and the animal begin? That is the question Descartes and many other philosophers have struggled to define. Ask Jacques Derrida, and he would describe standing before his cat without clothes on and feeling human shame. The cat is naked as he is, yet we feel ashamed of being seen in such a way. Next, we realize the absurdity of feeling an initial sense of shame, and so shame blossoms further. Derrida states that the initial source of shame is the result of being observed instead of being the observer.<sup>3</sup> That nakedness is uncanny to humankind because we have always been the watchers, separated from the rest of nature. I imagine a nature photographer camouflaged, only to find themselves being collectively watched in the same fashion. I cannot help but wonder if Hope gazed at me while I slept and saw me not as an exposed human but as a companion.

To understand our relationship with animals is to better understand ourselves. Philosophers often approach the human-animal dichotomy with the intent of drawing the lines between us. How are humans different from other animals? Our efforts to define humanity come at the cost of separating ourselves from nature, animals, and even each other. Gail Melson examines the roles animals have in the minds of children.<sup>4</sup> The binary between humans and all other animals is a learned phenomenon. Toys, stories, and symbols revolve around incorporating animals into our everyday lives to a degree where nature never truly leaves us but rather becomes more palatable through domestication. We eventually learn to separate ourselves from animals in

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida, 373

<sup>4</sup> Melson 132-158

a form of domestication called "growing up." By dismissing animals as a product of adolescent behavior, we miss the opportunity to dissolve the walls that separate us from the lives of other animals. I think about that illuminated box sitting in the corner of my bedroom. Had there been something there in that shared space that I had overlooked? Did Hope, and every other animal I have openly let live by my side, fundamentally change the way I see the world?

### III. Dinner

Growing up in a half-Filipino household, much of my culture revolved around the food we eat. When I was sick, I would always find a bowl of batchoy waiting for me on my nightstand. My late Nana would come to visit and would spend hours teaching me how to properly prepare a dish. Through cooking, I was able to bring my culture across an entire ocean and into my small kitchen. Dishes were often improvised with ingredients found in the grocery clearance aisle. Those memories are often the ones I look at most fondly when remembering my Nana and the world she represented to me. Giving up the food I eat would be giving up a part of my identity, and that made my relationship with Hope quite complicated.

When I was young, I asked my Nana, while sitting cross-legged on the kitchen counter, why she always prepared an extra portion. She kept the to-go box ready with her when she went out on her evening walks, and I never saw her come back with it. "I gave it to a person who needed it." When I asked who that person was, she never answered. Instead, she told me what her mother had told her: "*You should do the most good you can do. That way, you have done the least amount of harm.*" My ten-year-old mind did not understand what it meant to stand by those words. These extremely direct and clear words describe how my Nana lived her life. Everything she did could be broken down into easily memorable phrases. As an immigrant, the maxims she

carried with her were often some of the only reminders of the home she had left across the Pacific.

There came a point where I needed to decide between my culture and my morality. What happened to Hope inspired me to delve into the literature about animal treatment, especially in the meat industry. Philosophers like Peter Singer discuss our treatment of animals as "speciesism," and he writes that true equality cannot take place without considering non-human animals. His line of reasoning argues that oppressed marginalized communities are reduced to a status closer to the status of animals.<sup>5</sup> Questions like "What is the most ethical way to butcher an animal?" and "Are animals able to feel pain?" buzzed in my mind late at night. I became obsessed with finding a solution that would prevent another story like Hope's from happening, and I came back with information that overwhelmed me to the point of nihilism. I wished so desperately that there was a simple phrase or answer that would act as a compass just as they did for my Nana. Where was my guide facing a world where Hope would never have a happy ending? Can I, a single person, make a difference in all the noise? I ultimately believed that eliminating meat from my diet would be my best course of action, even if it accounted only for my state of mind. This decision would unknowingly come with consequences regarding my culture. I had not expected just how deeply rooted my consumption of meat was in my Filipino identity.

For years, I had equated my food and my culture without understanding the reasons why food was important to begin with. Sitting in that kitchen with my Nana singing in a language I never learned was my culture. She carried my culture like a torch for all to see. With the food she prepared came the stories of her childhood and the beautiful way she saw the world. Cooking was simply the medium she used to present my culture to me. Cooking and meat were perceived

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<sup>5</sup> Kalof, 18-33

as the source of my culture, rather than cooking as an excuse to express and indulge in my culture. This revelation—that my culture was more than cooked meat—led me not only to become vegan but also gave me the opportunity to learn about my culture in ways that I had not considered before. I decided to learn the history of a recipe and modify it so I could stand by the philosophy my Nana had passed down: "*You should do the most good you can do. That way, you have done the least amount of harm.*" Just like my Nana, who improvised substitutions into the dishes she made, I would follow in her footsteps. Finally, Hope and my culture could coexist.

Remembering the extra portion of food that Nana took every evening, I think about what it meant to deliver the food that my Nana's small hands had tediously crafted. How much harm had been done in one meal? How many lives were exploited and lost? I am sure my Nana thought about these questions. And maybe her simple act of giving a meal to someone who needed it is symbolic of redemption. The little things, especially in a world where even the smallest of actions can feel meaningless, are a lifeline when facing dilemmas that are far larger than the individual. Not everyone, including my family, can afford to feed themselves a diet devoid of meat. Sitting in my kitchen, I would collect and organize the coupons from the newspaper by price, date, and store. Twenty dollars could last a family of four nearly a whole week if stretched correctly. When considering how I would manage to be vegan, I wished to approach the challenge in the same way. Filipino cuisine, I learned, can fortunately be altered to still maintain simplicity and affordability, but that is not the case for many. By being able to create flexible meals, I found a way to balance both lifestyles into one that is feasibly sustainable.

I often imagine a world where everyone decides to "do the most good." Animals and humans alike are built in a community where everyone's needs are met and no lives are exploited

in the process. There is a fairytale quality to this utopian vision where animals walk among us and famine does not exist. Systemic issues are dissolved in favor of creating a symbiotic ecosystem. In a way, some steps have already been taken toward this future. Organizations like Farm Sanctuary dedicate themselves to helping prevent the disastrous effects of animal agriculture. Many sanctuaries such as this double as educational farms for people wishing to learn face-to-face about the animals we often eat. By placing a face on our food, we may better create a link of empathy and reestablish the connection lost between childhood and adulthood. For those who are unable to live in close proximity to livestock, these locations replicate the connection I had unknowingly discovered with Hope.

#### IV. Dessert

When I decided to be vegan, I was met with disapprobations from those around me. My friends and family questioned the values I had only recently begun formulating. “What happens if we find out plants feel pain?” “What do you mean you won’t drink milk?” “Things like crabs can’t feel pain anyways, why bother?” One of the more common responses to veganism is that eating meat is natural for humans. I stood by this myth without question. Yes, eating meat is natural for many species to maintain a balanced diet. Human society has moved beyond the necessity for hunting and gathering (or what most would call "natural"). The typical individual in the 21st Century does not need to hunt their food to survive. Instead, the animals that would have had fulfilling natural lives without the direct intervention of human hands are now be born and raised on a factory farm, slaughtered, packaged, and then delivered to your local grocery store. Over 23 million land animals are killed in the United States every day. Assuming an average reading speed of 4.5 words per second, roughly 8,000 land animal lives have been lost since you



began reading this paragraph (over 50,000 if you include sea animals).<sup>6</sup> Factory farming, like any mass production industry, is destructive to the environment and exists as one of the main contributors to global warming.<sup>7</sup> We, as a species, are eating ourselves to death.

But what can I, a single person, do about this crisis that persists in our day to day lives? I could choose to keep going and pretend that I did not catch a glimpse behind the curtain. I could choose to be a more cautious consumer and only purchase from local small businesses. I could even choose to become an activist and make a grand gesture for better treatment. When faced with little change seen in the better treatment of animals no matter what route of protest is chosen, the desire to give up in the face of something as systemic as the meat industry can be extremely tempting. I think again about what my Nana told me growing up sitting on her lap: "*Do the most good you can do.*" My Nana, an immigrant and torchbearer of my culture, stuck to that philosophy her entire life. I had been so worried about losing my heritage that I had lost the values my people hold hidden behind the veil of cuisine. I learned that the answer to facing the largest dilemmas of our world can be boiled down to a maxim delivered to a child, unaware of the big world problems. I can see why she would share these words at every possible opportunity. She knew she had the answers to the questions I had yet to ask. I now take the time to enact those words in my daily life as little things, whether as a vegan or even something as simple as holding the door for someone. And through living by my Nana's philosophy, I have taken the torch with me. Becoming vegan brought those words to life and encouraged those around me to look at their own lives and question where they can better themselves and the lives around them, human or animal. I believe everyone can share a similar outlook on life by

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<sup>6</sup> Hussain, Grace. "How Many Animals Are Killed for Food Every Day?" *Sentient Media*, 31 Aug. 2022, <https://sentientmedia.org/how-many-animals-are-killed-for-food-every-day/>.

<sup>7</sup> *Thehumaneleague.org*, <https://thehumaneleague.org/article/factory-farming-and-the-environment>.

examining where we can do better, whether as conscious consumers or as individuals, and taking the necessary steps to enact change.

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