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Not by Bread Alone: Symbolic Loss, Trauma, and Recovery in Elephant Communities

ABSTRACT

Like many humans in the wake of genocide and war, most wildlife today has sustained trauma. High rates of mortality, habitat destruction, and social breakdown precipitated by human actions are unprecedented in history. Elephants are one of many species dramatically affected by violence. Although elephant communities have processes, rituals, and social structures for responding to trauma—grieving, mourning, and socialization—the scale, nature, and magnitude of human violence have disrupted their ability to use these practices. Absent the cultural carrier groups (murdered elephant matriarchs and elders) who traditionally lead and teach these healing practices, humans must assume the role. Trauma theory has brought attention to victims' severe, sustained psychological damage. Looking through the lens of trauma theory provides a better understanding of how systematic violence has affected individuals and groups and how the pervasive nature of traumatic events affects human-nonhuman animal relationships. The framing of recent trauma theory compels conservationists to create new relationships—neither anthropocentric nor power based—with nonhuman animals. The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, Kenya, shows how humans, taking on the role of interspecies witness, bring orphan elephants back to health and help re-build elephant communities shattered by genocide.

In the West, relationships between human and nonhuman animals have been largely defined by a power differential. This differential has denied nonhuman animals agency and a psychological life (Scully, 2002). Increasingly, however, culture and emotions are no longer viewed as exclusive property of humans—evidenced by an accumulation of personal testimony, scientific literature, and emergence of diverse animal rights groups (Cavelieri and Singer, 1993; deWaal, 2001; Bekoff, 2002).

The recent epistemological re-orientation and attitude change are related to the development of an environmental ethic that sees nonhuman nature as something more than a commodity (Goodall & Bekoff, 2002; Singer, 2003). Further, there is a growing realization that European anthropocentrism and the Enlightenment's project of progress have exacted a tragic cost to all beings (Deloria, 1999). A significant number of human and nonhuman animals live in severely degraded physical and psychological landscapes far different from the cultures and places from which they historically derive.

Certainly, neither stress nor trauma are new to human and nonhuman animals. The effects of colonialism, genocide, and the overwhelming capacity for global destruction are, however, unprecedented (Hinton, 2002). Social and ecological violence is increasing, and the cultural mechanisms historically employed for mediation of trauma—mourning, ritual, a sense of community coherence—are no longer vital in many societies (Caruth, 1996; Oliver, 2001).

Impacts of human actions have made deep changes in the way of life of many species, even in areas considered as "wilderness." Death by hunting and traps, injury, maiming, disease, pursuit, habitat degradation, and fragmentation are common conditions (Bradshaw & Marquet, 2003). Everyday encounters with nonhuman animals attest to the prevalence of violence and trauma:

1. a dog rescued from a Humane Society;
2. a kitten extracted from a garbage can and left for refuse;
3. a hunted deer;
4. chickens with mutilated beaks packed into small enclosures;
5. a captive polar bear swimming in a zoo's tepid chlorinated pool;
6. a pacing lion confined by concrete and bars;

7. a chimpanzee dressed in human clothing at the circus;
8. an eagle at a wildlife rehabilitation park with an amputated wing resulting from entanglement with telephone lines; and
9. a rhinoceros filmed by a television film crew, darted and netted for transport.

Sanctuaries and rescue centers continue to be established to address this crisis but are overwhelmed with increasing numbers of injured nonhuman animals. Many of the centers are much more than first-aid stations: They are psychological and cultural rehabilitation facilities.

Here, I describe how trauma has become an increasingly commonplace experience among elephant communities and how sanctuaries such as The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, Kenya, are engaged in the re-building of these cultures in crisis. Poaching and habitat loss have decimated elephant herds and broken the intricate social structures that govern and guide elephant culture and threaten the future viability of the species. Like many recovering post-colonial human communities, there is an "absence of, or great destruction of, psychological structure" among the traumatized elephants (Homans, 2000, p. 29).

Through individual care of the orphans, the elephant keepers at the Trust play a critical role in helping rebuild elephant communities shattered by violence. By restoring the psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing of young elephants toward their reintroduction to outside herds, the keepers are re-creating the bonding needed for reconstituting the elephant's sense of community in the midst of genocide. These rehabilitation processes provide a valuable example of a conceptual framework and practice currently lacking in conservation and in ethology that "incorporates the vital ingredient of compassion and animal welfare" (Sheldrick, 2004).

Elephants: Communities in Trauma

Elephants are the subject of numerous legends and myths. They play a critical role in African communities and ecosystems at large. Among many tribes, the elephant is attributed with "superintelligence and almost human feelings for its companions" (Moss, 1992). Elephants are known for their intimate and intricate social organization, spending much of the time in community where

family members act as a coordinated body of a larger, affiliated group. There is a marked lack of territoriality among males, and the elephants alternately move together and apart in aggregate throughout the course of the year. The females move through the bush eating, playing, drinking, and grooming as a structured group of cows and calves lead by a senior matriarch who is "responsible for making all the decisions" (Sheldrick, 1992).

Elephants' communication system is well documented. Within sight of each other, two or more elephants can rely on and utilize myriad combinations of trunk waving, positioning of head and bodies, tail and feet, and vocalizations. African elephant researchers now realize that elephants use subsonic patterns to communicate over large distances (Payne, 1998). Elephants can hear and produce frequencies in the region of 14-16 Hz, well below the range of the human ear. This mode of communication often is used to broadcast the death of a community member or announce any sudden changes (Payne, 1998). Community coherence is maintained through close physical contact among generations and communication within, and between, elephant social groups.

The importance of visible intimate contact among elephants cannot be overemphasized (Sheldrick, 1991). Birthing mothers are tended attentively by other females, and calf care is shared by the entire group. Young calves are constantly being touched, guided, snuggled, and provided with reassurance intensively throughout the first years of life. There is always "good enough" mothering for young elephants. "The cow-calf bond is extremely strong and the mother will go to her child's rescue (and to other calves' as well) at any sign of trouble, and she will not abandon her calf under any circumstances" (Moss, 1975, p. 16). Even in the event of a mother's death, there are ample aunts and grandmothers to raise the calf. Female elephants reach menopause only in their early 50s and continue in the role of babysitter and grandparent well beyond their reproductive years. Because of this longevity, elephants' relationships are maintained for decades, and communities generally remain intact for these periods. It has been only since the extensive and intensive killing that has occurred dramatically over recent decades that fragmented groups and dysfunctional behaviors have been observed with increasing frequency (Sheldrick, 1992; Moss, 1992).

Group bonding is engaged in everyday activities of eating, playing, and drinking and demonstrated in times of illness. When any member ails, others gather around and try to rouse the sickened member to health. In the case of a middle-aged female named Polly, a family male, after unsuccessful attempts with other members to raise Polly to her feet after she had collapsed, mounted her in a last effort to revive her (Poole, 1996). When a young elephant, Ely, was born crippled with poorly articulated carpal joints, the herd stayed with him, assisting, prodding, and giving physical therapy by massaging and nursing.

The threesome [Ely and two herd members] headed toward us through the picturesque palms of Ol Tukai Orok. As the two older elephants walked, they continually turned to look back at the calf that was shuffling along behind. Every few feet they stopped and waited for him to catch up before moving on. Their progress was very slow, but they showed no impatience. It was a poignant sight and highlighted the incredibly caring nature of these nonhuman animals (Moss, 1992, p. 72).

Eventually, months later, the therapy worked, and Ely became capable of walking unassisted.

Perhaps more than any other quality, the elephant is thought of as having understanding of death. Grieving and mourning rituals are an integral part of elephant culture. Mothers often are observed grieving over their dead child for days after the death, alternately trying to bring the baby back to life and caressing and touching the corpse. Poole (1996) observed a mother grieving over her stillborn child for several days: "As I watched Tonie's vigil over her dead newborn, I got my first very strong feeling that elephants grieve. . . . Every part of her spelled grief" (p. 95).

The death of a matriarch is particularly difficult for the community. The senior females form the pillars of elephant communities; when they die, the entire community is affected. Emily, a matriarch in the "EB" group studied for many years by Cynthia Moss and Harvey Croze, died in 1989: an "event that would have profound repercussions in the family. The deaths of calves are distressing for their mothers but the death of an adult female disrupts the whole family" (Moss, 1992, p. 30). In the case of Emily, the group participated in several,

observed mourning rituals with her body and, later, her bones. When Emily was found and examined, it was discovered that her stomach contained massive amounts of bottle caps, glass, batteries, and plastic that had come from the trash of nearby ecotourism resorts. The aftershocks of Emily's passing were observed for months and years later when the group visited Emily's bones.

The animal[s] stopped and reached their trunks out. They stepped closer and very gently began to touch the remains with the tips of their trunks, first light taps, smelling and feeling, then strokes around and along the larger bones. Eudora and Elspeth, Emily's daughter and granddaughter, pushed through and began to examine the bones. And soon after Echo and her two daughters arrived. All elephants were quiet now and there was a palpable tension among them. Eudora concentrated on Emily's skull caressing the smooth cranium and slipping her trunk into the hollows in the skull. Echo was feeling the lower jaw running her trunk along the teeth—the area used in greeting when elephants place their trunks in each others mouth. The younger animals were picking up the smaller bones and placing them in their mouths before dropp[ing] them again. . . . Several years before, I had also seen the EBs start to bury the carcass of a young female from another family who had died of natural cause^^ (Moss, 1992, p. 61)

The combined pressures of encroaching human habitation, land conversion, and genocidal levels of hunting have brought elephants to the edge of extinction (IUCN, 2003). Many of the areas to which elephants are now confined are too small for viable residence, and elephant groups are severely limited in their ability to migrate through the region and continent that are part of their natural heritage.

In these transformed landscapes, the life of an elephant is fraught with violence. Poaching is intensive, and the larger elephants of a group are culled systematically for their ivory. It is increasingly more difficult to maintain elephant community coherence. Orphaned elephants are left to die unless they can be rescued. The marks of trauma are found everywhere. Sheldrick (1992) who has spent more than half a century caring for orphaned elephants in Kenya writes: "[T]he poaching holocaust has disrupted Elephant society and plung[ed] their social structure into chaos. It has left them traumatized, rudderless and even more vulnerable and fragile."

Increasingly elephants are observed to have "intrusive behaviour" indicative of trauma (Caruth, 1996, p. 5). In each case, some manipulation of the elephant group involving the forcible disruption of social bonds, denied participation in ritual, or an extremely violent experience has occurred. Reintroduction of elephants typically entails bringing in unfamiliar elephants and the fragmenting of existing groups and families. In South Africa, such social shuffling created a culture of young, violent males. Translocated juvenile male elephants rampaged throughout the reserve killing rhinos, charging tourist trucks, and even threatening the older female elephants. With the introduction of senior male elephants the young males desisted, and "the population settled down to, what we describe as, a normal population structure, in terms of the social behavior" (Slotow, 2001). Reflecting on this experience, Slotow, a biologist, notes that "[n]ot only should one consider what the elephants eat, is their food present, etc., but also, what the sociological consequences would be for animals such as elephants."

Many zoos have reported incidents involving similar intrusive behavior. Recently at the Denver Zoo, Hope, an Asian elephant suddenly became aggressive and injured another elephant. This behavior was ascribed to her reaction to the death of another elephant and repeated disruptions in the group because of transferring of elephants between various zoos (Good, 2001).

Some zoos are becoming more sensitized to nonhuman animal emotions. Several years ago, a zoo called a well-known, nonhuman animal communicator to consult with their elephants because of similar irregular behavior. In conversation with the elephants, the consultant learned that a resident elephant who had died was removed before the remaining elephants could mourn the body of their dead companion of many years (Varble, 2001; Khury, 2002). When the skull of the deceased was brought back to the elephant group, the elephants immediately gathered around and began a ritual of touch and caressing much as described by Moss (1992). Thereafter the elephants resumed "normal" behavior.

Violent conditions have become the norm for elephants both in what was called "the wild" and in captivity. The rapid destruction of social structure and ecosystems in which these nonhuman animals have evolved has left a fractured and psychologically damaged community at levels that western culture is only beginning to appreciate. "Considering elephants' ability to

communicate over long distances, the tentacles of pain and agony may stretch farther than we know" (Ellis, 2002, p. 135). At the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust, each rescued orphan elephant has been highly traumatized. This is illustrated by the story of the orphan Dika.

Dika demonstrated despair and heartbreak graphically. Some of his family were gunned down en masse, others fled, wounded amidst gunfire, and Dika had raced through a thorn thicket because when he arrived [at the Preserve] he had hundreds of long acacia thorns protruding from almost every square inch of his body. For four long months we could get no sparkle from him and there were times when we wondered if he was, in fact, mentally normal. Even the other elephants could get no response from him as he stood by refusing to play, reluctant to eat, tears staining his cheeks, unable to sleep—so obviously tragically distraught (Sheldrick, 1991).

Most orphaned elephants at the Trust have witnessed the slaughter or mutilation of their entire family. As a result of this shocking experience and disorientation, the young elephants become lost. When one orphan, Ndume, strayed onto their land, tribesmen beat him unconscious. "When he regained consciousness, he was extremely confused, and spent days searching for his family, rushing around the bush, and crying pathetically" (Sheldrick, 2003). Often in the course of wandering with no elder to guide them, young elephants are caught in deep wells in search of water or are found near starving and dehydrated. Because of land erosion, overuse, and drought, farmers must dig very deep wells that normally exist as shallow ponds in which young elephants can wallow safely. Here, they remain in psychological and physical shock, starving and doomed to a painful death unless they can be rescued.

Such scenarios are by definition traumatic and tragically have become commonplace. Trauma is "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, and repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). The magnitude of the trauma is so great that elephant culture is endangered. Not only are the processes that create social bonding broken by the traumatic events but also the capacity to recover and renew these processes is lost or, at best, severely impaired because of the selective killings of elder and matriarch elephants.

One can speak of traumatized communities as something distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons. Sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way as the tissues of mind and body... but even when that does not happen, traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds (Erikson, 1994, cited in Homans, 2000, p. 28).

Trauma becomes a culture unto itself. "Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity" (Alexander, 2003, p. 38). In this context, elephant rehabilitation means more than healing an individual: Rehabilitation is faced with the task of renewing a culture as well.

Unfortunately, most ethological and conservation models do not integrate sufficiently the nonhuman psyche at the individual and cultural levels to address these situations adequately. In the tradition of western science, most conservation has focused on the state of the biophysical environment. Ethology while concerned with nonhuman animal behavior, has, until very recently labored under a limited interpretation of a nonhuman animal emotion and psychology. Now, however, at places like the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust the practice of elephant conservation is attempting to breach traditional barriers of psyche and soma.

Interspecies Witnessing: Alternate Models for Human-Nonhuman Relationships

At the Trust, care of orphaned and injured elephants extends beyond the immediate treatment of shock and nourishment to include the re-building of elephant communities. The rescue center is designed to support recovery processes that aid in the restitching of the emotional and social aporia—gaps—created in the elephant psyche by human violence. Immediate, and sometimes chronic, physical injuries are treated, but equal attention is directed toward the healing of the young elephant's emotions and re-socialization. Like humans, child-adult bonding is considered critical for the development of a healthy psyche. At the sanctuary, the elephants live among their family of elephants and keepers:

During the day, the elephants and their Keepers go as a group free ranging, but at night one keeper will sleep with each elephant in its stable, rotating. It is important not to allow too strong a bond to develop between individuals, because when the man has time off, or is sick, the elephant will grieve and go into a decline, losing another family member. If they are fond of all the Keepers, they do not miss the presence of any particular one too acutely because there are others of which they are equally fond (Sheldrick, 2003).

Gradually, as the young elephants revive, they are reintegrated into elephant groups and learn to engage in routine patterns of life while interacting with both humans and other elephants.

The elephant keeper becomes closely tuned to each elephant, such that species differentiation recedes into a secondary feature. "Elephants are 'human' animals, encompassed by an invisible aura that reaches deep into the human soul in a mysterious and mystifying way" (Sheldrick, 2002). This capacity extends beyond the confines of speciesism and, like one of the keepers, Mishak Nzimbi, evokes the "elephant spirit" in each.

To an elephant youngster, the tight community of matriarchal herd into which it is born represents safety, food, knowledge, and a link to the past. Their reality is shaped by their childhood experiences in the herd. Replicating that reality for the orphans is a formidable task for the keepers. Head keeper Mishak Nzimbis seen by the babies as their surrogate matriarch, and in his gentle confident manner exudes enormous influence over them (Ellis, 2002, p. 53).

It is important to note the critical role played by the humans in the rehabilitation process at the Trust. Orphan elephants necessarily are adopted, nursed, and re-socialized by humans because of an absence of such capacity within the elephant community. Either the entire family-group has been massacred or dispersed or the orphan elephant has been so badly traumatized that intensive care is necessitated. The human caretaker is an essential facilitator in bringing the orphan to health. Sanctuaries like the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust are islands of human-mediated healing which, because of their own state of trauma, bridge a deep chasm and fill a role that even other elephants are not always capable of filling.

Keepers at the Trust are in every sense witness as defined by Camth (1996). Many trauma treatment clinicians and theorists today argue that alternate models for the healer-victim relationship are necessary. Using the same structures responsible for creating the violence—power and anthropocentrically based human-nonhuman relationships—merely reinforces the experience of trauma. It is, instead, necessary to go beyond the dichotomous structures that characterize colonial thinking, to go where Oliver (2001) calls "beyond recognition" to a stance of witnessing. To "re-conceive of ourselves, what it means to be a self, a subject, to have subjectivity, to consider oneself an active agent" is prerequisite to working through rather than repetition of violence and trauma" (p. 18). Witnessing is relating to an individual not as the object of a traumatic event nor as an identifiable symptom or problem. As many truth and reconciliation commissions attest, recognition alone is often experienced by victims as yet another replay of the traumatic event (Hayner, 2001; Tutu, 1999). Victims of "oppression, slavery and torture are not merely seeking visibility and recognition, but they are also seeking witness to horrors beyond recognition" (Oliver, 2001, p. 8). It is only in the place of witnessing that deep communication can take place:

Communication would be impossible if it should have to begin in the ego. . . to whom every other would be a limitation that invited war, domination, precaution and information. To communicate is indeed to open oneself, but the openness is not complete if it on the watch for recognition. It is complete not in the opening to the spectacle of, or the recognition of, the other, but in becoming a responsibility for him (Levinas, 1993, p. 119).

Dismantling the perceptual mode of differencing to one of subjectivity provides a portal for communication across species' lines and allows a "remapping [of] the borderlands between nature and culture" (Haraway, 1989, p. 15).

Witnessing is an ethical journey to a third space of subjectivity: a deconstruction of the subject-object incarnation that defines most human-non-human relationships in the West. In the role of witness, the keepers at the Trust provide the structure and pathway that supports the process of bringing back meaning to a disjunct experience and bridging past, present, and future.

These people are motivated by the calling of a heart ethic. "We must liken the emotional trauma of the Elephants to that of humans under similar

circumstances of hardship and deprivation. To deny this is simply to display gross ignorance born of human arrogance" (Sheldrick, 1992). This willingness to go beyond species' differences makes elephant rehabilitation possible. To move beyond language and otherness is to walk a different ethos. "[E]thical obligation at the heart of subjectivity is inherent in the process of witnessing. Moving from recognition to witnessing provides other notions of ethical, social, and political responsibility entailed by this conception of subjectivity." (Oliver, 2001, p. 15).

Here, the connection between witnessing and political action becomes evident. As Herman (1997) states: "The systematic study of psychological trauma. . . depends on the support of a political movement" (p. 9). The departure for new meanings of difference beyond the dichotomy of speciesism makes the topic of trauma a political issue of the times because it deconstructs the fundamental assumption of human privilege. In this light, then, interspecies witnessing is neither psychological triage nor a temporary "fix" but a re-creation of elephant-human relationships as partnerships.

Elephant Orphan Sanctuaries: Bridges to Rebuilding Community

The pervasive nature of trauma has sown seeds for a potentially very different notion of culture and social contract among diverse human and non-human cultures. The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust offers a model for how interspecies community can function where human and nonhuman animals learn new ways to live together in transformed landscapes. However, although clearly the Trust is highly successful—to date, over fifty elephants have been hand-reared and already are, or in the process of, being reintroduced to wild herds—the fact remains that entire sets of cultures have been shattered. A recreation of life before the trauma usually is not possible. As Sheldrick (1992) observes, the marks of trauma always remain to some degree:

The Elephant Matriarchs of today are young and inexperienced. Many are trailing a long line of orphans who have been left with no living relatives of their own. The bonds of these groups are not as resilient as those of real family. Some of the young Matriarchs snap under pressure of responsibility forced upon them at such a young age and they abandon their charges, opting out and causing further emotional stress with youngsters confused

and at the mercy of predators. . . . This would be unheard of in a normal elephant family that enjoyed the luxury of peace and stability.

When home, family, and land are shattered and cultural genocide becomes the shocking reality, going back to the "way it was" is not always possible. Survival into a post-trauma world—Lacan's (1973) "trauma of waking"—has changed even the perception of what reality seemed to be. Rehabilitation may help bring elephant communities to health, but it is unclear how this culture will resemble traditional elephant societies.

The experience of the Trust seems to indicate that the process of rehabilitation, while perhaps unable to reconstruct elephant life to pre-genocide conditions, nonetheless engenders the hope of an interspecies culture beyond the confines of orphan care. In some cases, former orphans bring their wild-born young to introduce to their former human families at the sanctuary (Sheldrick, 2003). Ndume, the orphan who lost his family and very nearly was beaten to death, is now grown and independent of the Sheldrick Trust Keepers, fully integrated into the wild herds. Ndume, nonetheless, returns periodically to keep in touch with his erstwhile human family (Sheldrick). The Trust keepers are not only caretakers of elephant young but also guardians of elephant culture. Through their work, they nurture the seeds of elephant culture that allow for continuation of the species.

Conclusions

Trauma theory has brought attention to the severe psychological damage that victims of violence experience. Here, elephant communities have been described through the lens of trauma theory to understand better how they have been affected by systematic violence. By addressing individual and cultural trauma of elephants, The David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust is taking part in the creation of a new interspecies epistemology and ethic based on partnership. The framing of trauma "[a]llows collectivities to define new forms of moral responsibility" (Alexander, 2003, p. 38). Further, by its "holographic" framing (Grotstein, 1994), trauma theory brings attention to the shared suffering that human and nonhuman animals experience with the widespread social and ecological violence promulgated by colonization. By acknowledging the validity of nonhuman animal subjectivity—their psychological and cultural lives—

conservation ecology can become a natural history: the narrative of human and nonhuman nature.

Traditionally, nature has served as a source of healing for humans. Now, humans can participate actively in the healing of both themselves and non-human animals. Although the tragedy of these elephants cannot be erased, places such as the David Sheldrick Wildlife Trust offer a way in which the beginnings of healthy and equitable interspecies communities can develop.

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Notes

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- ² Moss and others have also noted that elephants do not behave in the same way with other species' bones except in the case of a human who has been killed by an elephant (Moss, 1975, 1992).

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