

**ALI, MY FRIEND THE BITTER BLACK PANTHER LEOPARD:
*Transformed From Violent PTSD To Trusting In Love***

Sid Galloway BS, MDIV.

Updated 6-2-26 — — *see the end of this essay for my statement on “Zoos & Captive Animals”*

This is a story about how to wisely love your enemies while avoiding the consequences of foolish risks. You cannot walk up on day one and hug them—especially if they have fangs and a personal vendetta. Love takes time to work its miracle of building trust. Love proves itself through long term actions.

This experience mirrored something I first witnessed in my surrogate “Black” grandfather, Mr. Will Hall, whose quiet courage and openhearted love transformed racist enemies into friends. He opened his arms instead of raising his fists. It also reflects the way of the Good Shepherd kind of Creator “God” taught and modeled by Mr. Hall and by Jesus of Nazareth. The kind of Creator who patiently and progressively reveals the true Divine character over time by humble, self-giving actions.

Of all the carnivores I had the privilege of caring for as a zookeeper—lions, tigers, bears, wolves, hyenas, etc., —none haunted my daily thoughts and nightly dreams like Ali.



He was a black leopard, and to say he was angry would be an understatement. My lions and tigers were bigger, louder, and more dramatic, but none of them carried rage the way Ali did. He sat like a tightened knot of bitterness—pure muscle wrapped around smoldering fury—always ready to explode if given the slightest excuse.

Ali had PTSD, hardened by past abuse from old-school zoo-keeping attitudes and practices — dominance, fear, and force. Harsh hands create hard hearts, whether in animals or people. Those keepers were anti-shepherds—the opposite of the Good Shepherd. By the time I met Ali, he seemed to hate everything that breathed, but humans were at the top of his list.

Every night, we called the animals in from their outdoor yards to eat and sleep safely inside individual “dens”. Most of them came running, because food usually has a way of overcoming reluctance. But not for Ali.

After all my other animals were locked up, Ali would stubbornly stay outside—defiant, unmoving—perched on his tree limb like a bitter gargoye. Since he could not get to us

physically, I'm convinced he was determined to destroy us in psychological battle of wills.

I'd stand at the entrance of his indoor tunnel calling him for what felt like hours. Eventually, he'd descend from the tree, walk slowly to the bottom of the tunnel, stop, *lock his blazing eyes onto mine*, and unleash a snarling spit of raw hatred. Then he'd turn around and walk back out to his yard.

The language of "leopard" is not a difficult language to translate. You already know exactly what he was saying.



Part of me was irritated—but a deeper part of me was grieved. Ali's life had been nothing but competition and threat. So, I decided that no matter how long it took—days, weeks, months—I would convince him that at least one human was not his enemy. I knew that deep inside Ali's soul was the little black cub who could have had a different life if raised by hands of gentle love. I knew it because I too had struggled with a measure of PTSD due to my own childhood.

So night after night, I'd wait, practicing patience, an attitude and habit I needed to learn anyway.

Eventually Ali's hunger would overpower his bitterness. He would come down to the tunnel entrance, then retreat, come again, retreat again. Finally, he'd charge through the tunnel like a cannonball and slam into the wire cage where I stood. His claws raked the wire mesh of his den, deeply growling in a baritone of fury — his message was clear: *Leave so I can eat alone.*

At first, I did. Then one night, I stayed next to his wire mesh.

Food, I knew, was my only bridge. I calmly stood there while he ate, inches from his side, while he growled and sputtered like he was choking on his own hatred. Every few minutes he'd explode against the wire, trying to reach my throat. Every instinct in my body told me to jump back—or leave—but I knew if I reacted in fear or anger it would undo weeks of progress. So I stayed and spoke softly, doing my best to sound like something he had never experienced before: a strong, self-controlled friend embracing risk to reach his heart.

Night after night, we repeated this ritual. Slowly, the growling faded. He began to tolerate me. Eventually, he seemed to enjoy my presence—though if I shifted my weight

too suddenly, he'd remind me that the goal of him trusting my love was still under gradual construction.

One evening, feeling bold, I decided to push the relationship further. I knew that hand-raised leopards, like my other leopard Sheba, loved being stroked. Ali was the opposite of Sheba, but hope has a way of making people creative. So, I subtly snuck a small stick into my pocket and then one night while Ali was laying down eating, I gently slid the little stick through the wire to barely rub his back.

Ali reacted by blasting up against the wire mesh like a black tornado of rage.

All right, I thought. Message received.

But I kept at it. Weeks turned into months. Eventually, Ali tolerated the stick—and then, surprisingly, enjoyed it. One night, he came in and leaned against the wire even *before* eating, clearly waiting for his scratch. That was when I had what can only be described as a questionable idea. There is a fine line between courage and craziness.

If the stick worked, why not my hand?

The only way to touch him with my full hand was through the food slot—arm up to the elbow. I knew the risk. But I wanted Ali to eventually *know*—not just suspect—that my touch meant love and safety. That I was a protector and provider, not a competing predator.

The first attempt was both hilarious and terrifying.

As Ali ate with his back turned, I quietly replaced the stick with my hand and arm. At first, he leaned into it, clearly enjoying the massage. Then he turned and realized what was touching him.

Two things moved faster than physics should allow: Ali's teeth toward my hand—and my arm back out of the slot like I'd been struck by lightning. He missed. Adrenaline is amazing!

That well-meaning attempt set us back a bit, but I persisted. Weeks later, Ali began to accept my hand, really enjoying the full fingered back scratch. Then, after nearly a year, he independently chose to take the next step himself.

Ali would calmly come up the tunnel to the den entrance, look deep into my eyes with a new attitude of trust in love. Then he'd walk over to the wire mesh where I sat, *stand*

and *lean* his huge black body above the open food slot. His communication was clear. He wanting and waited for the touch of my hand. With a feeling of deep satisfaction I'd reached in, rub and scratch his belly with my fingers. A cat's stomach is the most vulnerable part of their body and therefore usually protected as sacred untouchable ground. Occasionally he'd squirm, but his willingness to trust in my character held. He was experiencing connection without threat— something he had never known and now never wanted to lose.

Our relationship had turned completely around. Now as we looked into each others eyes, we truly “saw” one another — soul to soul — through a new bond of trust built by love.

We'd begun as enemies, acting out the ancient script of competitive survival of the fittest, the coolest and cruelest. But through patience, self-sacrificing presence, and mutual communication, we stepped into something better—the Good Shepherd Creator's desire, echoing the ancient idyllic story of a Garden in Eden — a relationship pointing toward the heavenly realm.

Sid Galloway BS, MDIV — sidgalloway.com

* **STATEMENT ON ZOOS & CAPTIVE ANIMALS** — Have you had *negative* feelings about zoos and captive animals? I empathize with you! If you research carefully, you will find that *good*, bad, and very ugly exists across the wide range of facilities and activities. When its bad and ugly, it's sadly easy to see — while the good and *wonderful* is often more subtle and behind the scenes. The best of facilities are motivated and designed around **compassion, conservation, and education**. Their animals are loved and protected by their caregiver keepers, and enjoy far better lives than those in the “wild” who must struggle and suffer violent competitive survival of the fittest, coolest, and cruelest, against predators, disease, drought, floods, fires, etc. Without captive animals, many species would otherwise go extinct. And the educational impact of new generations seeing, hearing, and caring about their local captive animal “friends” motivates actions to preserve and protect the world's natural habitats and inhabitants. For more, see: *American Zoo: A Sociological Safari*, by sociologist David Grazian; and *Zoo Story: Life in the Garden of Captives*, by Thomas French.