

CURLY, MY LITTLE ORPHANED AND STARVING CALF Hungry for Food and for Love

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As a boy — long before I'd learned any of the things that later prepared me for my 40 year simultaneous careers as a family counselor and a biological-science educator — I learned something from animals. Growing up in a troubled home, my dogs and the orphaned animals I rescued from the nearby woods began to teach me something I desperately needed to know: even though serious suffering is real — so is compassionate love.

Hiking *alone* through the woods and grasslands near my home was one of my most peaceful escapes from a dysfunctional home life. Nature became my place of solace, and animals became some of my most trusted sources of love. My dog Missy was literally a lifesaver during some of my darkest childhood nights.

One day, when I was about ten years old, I was on one of my long solo hikes. Far across a field I could see a herd of cows. I remember enjoying the birds crossing the blue sky and the sound of the grass moving around me when suddenly I heard something coming up from behind.

I turned around and was startled to discover a very young, very tiny calf following me.

He was covered in thick curly hair and had unusually short legs that made him look almost like a little stuffed toy. So, as a ten-year-old boy naturally would, I gave him a name. *"Hello, Curly, my little friend. Why are you so far away from your group? And why did you come all the way over here to me?"*

At first Curly was timid, but he clearly seemed to want something. I slowly reached out my hand and waited. Gradually, step by step, he moved toward me until his little wet nose touched my hand. We stood there quietly for a moment, looking at one another. Then he began licking my fingers. I gently rubbed his nose, face, ears, and body. As I massaged his shoulders, back, and hips, his eyes gradually closed and his muscles softened beneath my hands.

For those few moments, Curly seemed peaceful. And so was I.

But I knew that what this little calf really needed was his mother and his herd. So I slowly walked with him back toward the other cows.

It didn't go as I had hoped.

Curly began calling as he tried to approach them. No mother came to him. As he attempted to get close to the adult cows, they pushed him away. Again and again he called. Eventually Curly came back to me.

I didn't know what had happened to his mother or why the herd wouldn't accept him. I understood even as a boy what babies need — that this tiny calf was alone and needed food, protection, warmth, and companionship. After spending more time rubbing and playing with him, I left Curly near the herd and *ran* home to do some “bellowing” of my own.

I begged my dad to find out who owned the cows. Maybe the owner could help Curly. Maybe somehow we could help him.

Dad said no. He cared about animals in the ways common to his generation, especially our dogs, but cows in his mind belonged to a different category. Besides, he explained, we couldn't keep a cow in our residential neighborhood.

So over the next several days, I kept returning to the field. Curly was still there, wandering around the edge of the herd and calling. Then one day I found his little body lying in the pasture. I knelt down in the grass beside him and sobbed. Not only was I grieving for my little calf friend Curly, but I was also struggling with questions much larger than Curly — questions that, in one form or another, have followed me throughout my life.

Why is there so much suffering in the world? Why can we human beings feel such deep compassion for another suffering being, yet at other times we seem almost indifferent? Is compassionate love something real that we can ultimately trust? And if there is a God—a Mind behind this enormous Cosmos—what does Curly's suffering tell us about that God?

I certainly didn't have answers when I was ten. More than half a century later, I still wouldn't claim certainty about them. So much of life, love, and reality are a mystery. But little Curly and so many other of my domestic, wild, and exotic animal friends have helped make me want to spend a lifetime asking the questions and seeking answers.