The Joy and Tragedy of PIGS

Have you ever given a belly rub to a pig? If not, you don't know the fun you've missed. And you probably wouldn't qualify for the Presidency under Harry Truman's eligibility test: "No man should be allowed to be President who does not understand hogs."

If we abided by Truman's criteria, though, there'd hardly be any candidates. You see, there is no creature on this earth whose reputation is more undeserved. If it were possible to measure our all-too-common misunderstanding of other animals on some giant scale, our ignorance of this particular animal might well be the greatest of all. This is an animal who, because of our mistaken beliefs, has been abused and violated by people for centuries. But when they aren't mistreated, pigs are remarkably friendly, forgiving, intelligent, and good-natured creatures.

To call a man or woman a "pig," is considered by most of us to be a grievous insult. This doesn't say much about these animals, but it says a lot about us. After all, we always accuse others of our own vices. Pigs do not "eat like a pig." Far from it, they are virtual gourmets who profoundly enjoy their victuals. Pigs never bolt their food, but chew it slowly. I've watched pigs in natural conditions eat and I've watched people eat, and I can tell you the average pig savors food with more discernment than most humans. Pigs will often shove their food about with their snouts to more fully release the aroma they so thoroughly enjoy. And unlike dogs, horses, and humans, they will never dangerously overeat even when given access to unlimited food. The sole exception is when they are fed drugs such as Hog-Crave, which the pork industry uses to fatten them faster for slaughter.

The stereotype has it that pigs are insensitive creatures, but they actually have one of the highest measured I.Q.s of all animals—surpassing even dogs. Not only do they clearly recognize individuals, but if treated kindly often develop sophisticated and subtle relationships with their human companions. They can be exceedingly sociable, affectionate, and fun-loving friends.

The naturalist W.H. Hudson lived with a wide variety of animals, and reported: "I have a friendly feeling towards pigs generally, and consider them the most intelligent of beasts, not excepting the elephant and the anthropoid ape....I also like his attitude towards all other creatures, especially man. He is not suspicious, or shrinkingly submissive, like horses, cattle and sheep; not an impudent devil-may-care like the goat; nor hostile like the goose; nor condescending like the cat; nor a flattering parasite like the dog. He views us from a totally different, a sort of democratic, standpoint as fellow-citizens and brothers, and takes it for granted, or granted, that we understand his language, and without servility or insolence he has a natural, pleasant, camarados-all or hail-fellow-well-met air with us."

The common image of pigs has it that there is something vile or disgusting about them, but in fact the only thing disgusting about pigs is our
usual attitude and behavior towards them. They are playful, sensitive, friendly animals with a marvelous curiosity and enthusiasm for life. Sir Walter Scott had a pig as a “pet.” So did pop singer James Taylor. In fact, a rapidly increasing number of people are today discovering the pleasure of scratching behind a pig’s ears, and the joy of their friendship. As one young Manhattan executive put it, “You can be yourself with a hog!”

Why this sudden surge of “pigmania”? You could chalk it up to a fad, perhaps influenced by Porky Pig of Warner Brothers cartoons, Miss Piggy of Muppet fame, Walter Brooks’ marvelous Freddy the Pig books, or E.B. White’s endearing young pig Wilbur in Charlotte’s Web. But whatever the reason for the increasing interest, the growing number of people who are keeping pigs as companions are learning how out-of-step with reality are the cultural stereotypes.

Miss Piggy  Porky Pig  Wilbur

For example, you may not think it possible for a pig to save a drowning boy. But a couple of years back, United Press International carried a photograph and story that was picked up and printed in many of America’s major newspapers. The photo was of Carol Burk, her 11-year-old son Anthony Melton, and a pig. What made the story newsworthy was that mother and son were swimming in a Houston, Texas lake when the boy inadvertently strayed from shore, panicked, and began to sink. A pig named Priscilla—who had been brought to the lake for a swim by her human companion Victoria Herberta—happened to be nearby and evidently felt Anthony’s distress, because she rushed into the water and began to swim towards him. While Anthony’s anguish mother watched awestruck as Priscilla the pig, evidently fully understanding everything that was happening, proceeded to pull the terrified boy safely to shore.

Many other people who have pigs as companions discover what fine friends they can be. A North Carolina neurosurgeon, Dr. Raymond Sattler, has for years kept pigs who not only go swimming with the family, but watch television, go for walks, and enjoy rides in the family station wagon. In Hyde Park, N.Y., Chris and Kelly Jones take their pigs on picnics and play music to them.

Many of us think of pigs as being unclean, but this is simply another case of our being wrong. The fact is that these animals will never foul their living space if they can possibly help it. In fact, they are remarkably considerate in this respect, as the Davidson family of Green Horizon Farms in upstate New York discovered when pigs try to immerse their bulk (“rather pathetically” she noted) in a dog’s water bowl. Realizing how much they wanted to be in water to cool off, she hooked ropes up to shower taps, and before long these astute animals had learned to turn on the water so they could have a shower when they wanted one. Two weeks later, they had also developed the knack of turning it off when finished.

Pigs are not obedient creatures, but we shouldn’t hold that against them. It is not their nature to be servile, but neither are they arrogant or disdainful towards people. In fact, they are that rare animal who appears to view human beings as on their level—as something of an equal partner in the task of enjoying life to the maximum. One woman who appreciates this aspect of pigs, Sharon Oblin of Taylors, S.C., told me, “They won’t do just anything you want them to. They think about it, and if they don’t want to do it, they don’t do it.” Oblin is obviously favorably impressed by her experience with pigs. The first time I spoke with her, she gleefully pointed out to me that without the B’s, her last name would be “Oink.”

The stereotype has it that pigs are lazy, but here again we miss the mark. It’s just that they see no need to get excited about doing something simply because humans deem it important. They are extremely industrious when it comes to expressing their nature, which includes exploring the earth and digging therein. They evidently appeared on earth some 36 million years ago (which makes them many times our seniors), and one might say they have been rooting for themselves ever since. The sheer gusto with which they nose about in the soil is a sight to behold. One writer, Stephen Hall, was moved to poetic heights by such a scene: “The awe and excitement of a hefty Hampshire as it espies

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a virgin tract of land, particularly in the springtime, may be likened to Balbo's reaction when first he glimpsed the Pacific. And the ensuing grunt of contentment may be likened to a large body of water emptying through a drain. Once loosed on unspoiled terrain, pigs will methodically excavate until, in the words of one veteran observer, 'It looks like a World War I battlefield, trenches and all.'

Further testimony to the considerable intelligence of our porcine friends comes from animal trainers, who report that pigs are natural performers who can easily be taught to dance, tumble, retrieve, dive, fetch things, and pull carts. These professionals state emphatically, however, that in training pigs, you can only use affection, food, and other rewards. Punishment will get you absolutely nowhere, and will only serve to make the animals belligerent. It seems these creatures will not comply with anything that insults their dignity. They are happy to play with us and be our friends, but only so long as we respect them.

People who have had companion pigs invariably report examples of their unique intelligence. Kent Britt of Washington, D.C., for instance, tells of putting a bolt lock on the door of his condiment cabinet to keep his pig Fido out. But it didn't work. When he came home, there was ketchup all over the place, because Fido had figured out how to open the lock. Melanie Choukas-Bradley of Montgomery County, Md., has closely observed the way pigs go about solving problems, and finds the evidence for their intelligence undeniable. She concludes: "I'm convinced that if pigs had digits like primates, they could be taught to talk in sign language."

Despite the unmistakable intelligence, friendliness, and sensitivity of pigs, the vast majority of people still hold them in low esteem. Even self-proclaimed "pig lovers" often remain fixed in an attitude of profound disrespect towards these sensitive creatures. This became painfully apparent to Sharon Obbink when she joined the Short Snout Society of Greenville, S.C., a few years back. She was appalled to discover that the organization, which was then composed of over 500 people who claimed to love pigs (many of them had bumper stickers "Have you hugged your pig today?" sporting "I'm convinced that if pigs had digits like primates, they could be taught to talk in sign language"

which misguided disdain for these animals is rampant. The corresponding exploitation of them is so pervasive as to seem "natural" to many.

One finds the disrespect everywhere. At the University of Missouri's Sinclair Comparative Medicine Research Farm for the Study of Chronic Diseases and Aging, biochemist Dr. Myron Tumbelson spent many years turning pigs into alcoholics. One poor pig was named "Friendly" because he could be taught to consume the equivalent of four quarts of 86 proof vodka a day. At Animal Behavior Enterprises in Hot Springs, Ark., Bob Bailey surgically implanted 25 pounds of "all sorts of things—wooden blocks, ball bearings, aluminum cylinders" in the abdomens of pigs to see how much they could manage to carry around. Bailey says the military funded these experiments. He doesn't know why. I could guess, but I'd rather not. Other researchers have fed massive quantities of poisons to pigs, battered them at regular intervals with hammers, blowtorched them, deprived them of sleep, and starved them to death for the supposed benefit of humans.

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I know what sensitive, intelligent, and friendly critters pigs can be.

Many "modern" pig stalls are built on slatted floors over large pits, into which the urine and feces of the animals fall automatically. Thousands of this type of confinement system are in operation, in spite of the fact that many serious diseases are caused by the toxic gases (ammonia, methane, and hydrogen sulfide) that the excreta produce, and which rise from the pits and become trapped inside the building.

Pigs have a highly developed sense of smell, and their noses are—in a natural setting—capable of detecting the scents of many kinds of edible roots, even when those roots are still underground. In today’s pig factories, however, they breathe night and day the stench of excrement of the hundreds of pigs whose stalls are in the same building. No matter how much they might want to get away, no matter how hard they might try, there is no escape.

The type of pig farm I'm describing is, unfortunately, not an isolated bad example. It's "par for the course" today. Just a couple of years ago, the owner of Lehman Farms of Strawn, Ill., was chosen Illinois Pork All-American by the National Pork Producers Council and the Illinois Pork Producers Council and the Illinois Pork Producers Council and the Illinois Pork Producers Council and the Illinois Pork Producers Council.
On factory farms, breeding sows and boars are kept in concrete and metal stalls so narrow they can hardly move.

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Illinois Pork Producers Association. The Lehman farm is considered an industry model, and it is, in fact, one of the more “enlightened” swine management programs around today. But it seems to leave a little bit to be desired from the point of view of the pigs who call it home. When a “herdsman” at Lehman Farms, Bob Frase, was asked about the effect the ammonia-saturated air had on the pigs, he replied: “The ammonia really chews up the animals’ lungs. They get listless and don’t want to eat. They start losing weight, and the next thing you know, you’ve got a real respiratory problem—pneumonia or something. Then you’ll see them huddled down real low against one another trying to get warm, and you’ll hear them coughing and gasping. The bad air’s a problem. After I’ve been working in here awhile, I can feel it in my own lungs. But at least I get out of here at night. The pigs don’t, so we have to keep them on tetracycline…”

Over 80 percent of pigs today have pneumonia at the time they are slaughtered. The air gets so bad that it kills them. At one factory I visited, I heard the anguished screams of pigs in trouble. I looked into the nursery and saw dead and dying pigs. Over 40 pigs died that day alone from the elevated levels of hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide.

It was hard, in my visits to pork factories, not to think about pigs I have known under more felicitous conditions. I would remember their friendly grunts and their obvious enjoyment of human contact. Knowing what is done to them to produce pork products is difficult to bear. These living animals are treated entirely like machines. In fact, the trade journal Hog Farm Management specifically advises producers to: “Forget the pig is an animal. Treat him just like a machine in a factory. Schedule treatments like you would lubrication. Breeding season like the first step in an assembly line. And marketing like the delivery of finished goods.”

Modern pig farmers, who like to be called “pork production engineers,” pride themselves on pursuing a clear purpose without sentimentality. That this purpose happens to involve the mutilation of millions of sensitive creatures is, to their way of thinking, quite irrelevant. As Hog Farm Management puts it, “What we are trying to do is modify the animal’s environment for maximum profit.”

The result is an environment that is a living torture. Standing on metal slats or concrete, pigs develop painful lesions in their feet. Attempting to relieve the pain, they contort their posture, eventually becoming crippled from the strain. The producers know that providing straw bedding would solve the problem. But bedding is rarely provided the pigs destined to become America’s pork chops, because straw costs money, and the pain and
suffering the pigs endure from damaged feet and legs is not figured into the financial equations that determine policy. Of course, the pork producers are aware that the animals are crippled by the flooring, but they are not disturbed. As the editors of Farmer and Stockbreeder explain, “The slatted floor seems to have more merit than disadvantage. The animal will usually be slaughtered before serious deformity sets in.” In other words, the pigs are usually slaughtered before their deformities become so extreme as to affect the price their flesh will fetch. One producer summarized industry thinking rather colorfully: “We don’t get paid for producing animals with good posture around here. We get paid by the pound.”

It is difficult for us to fathom the suffering of pigs today. They are crammed into cages in which they can hardly move, and are forced against their natures to stand in their own waste. Their sensitive noses are continuously assaulted by the smell of excrement from thousands of other pigs. They are fed a diet that often features their own manure, and is always filled with drugs. Their skeletons are deformed, and their legs buckle under the unnatural weight for which they have been bred and fed.

I have looked into their eyes, and I can tell you it’s a terrifying sight. These sensitive, tormented creatures have been literally driven mad. In their frustration, the animals will often try to bite each others’ tails. The factory manager’s solution is as simple as it is cruel; cut off their tails to prevent the temptation, while doing nothing at all about the conditions that cause it in the first place. This practice, known in the trade as “tail-docking,” is now standard operating procedure in the U.S. pork industry—despite the fact that it causes severe pain to the animals and drives them even crazier. I asked one pig farmer about tail-docking, and he replied, somewhat angrily, “They hate it! The pigs just hate it! And I suppose we could probably do without tail-docking if we gave them more room, because they don’t get so crazy and mean when they have more space. With enough room, they’re actually quite nice animals.”

But today pigs are not given enough room. Nowhere near it. Under natural conditions, a pregnant sow will travel up to three miles to collect nesting materials. But in factory farms, she is not only prevented from making any kind of nest, she is confined to a gestation crate so cramped she cannot even turn around. In a barnyard setting, a sow will produce about six piglets a year. But modern interventions have cranked her up to over 20 a year, and researchers predict the number to reach 45 in a short time. Producers rave about the prospect of being able to force sows to give birth to over seven times the number of children nature designed them for.

Federal industry supports

The inhumanities of modern pork production go on and on, but the irony is that keeping pigs under such unnatural conditions actually creates so many problems that it isn’t even cost-effective. Yet it’s the trend today, due to misguided tax legislation that encourages it. The Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) explains, “A total confinement building can be wholly deducted as ‘equipment,’ but if a farmer uses an existing building for his swine and provides humanely for them, he will not be able to deduct as ‘equipment’ the improvements he makes in the building... Federal tax policy has, for years, enabled gigantic producers, many with a base of massive financial support in non-agricultural businesses, to make huge profits through tax shelters when they invested in the buildings and installations of total confinement farming.”

It is hard to overestimate the contribution of Federal tax subsidies and research programs in promoting the growth of factory farming. AWI reports, “Tax supported agricultural research paved the way for hog factories by developing the drugs and medication practices without which the confinement of large numbers of hogs would be impossible. Tax-supported land grant research, often leveraged by small, strategically designed hog industry grants, continues to work on hog factory technology and genetic redesign of the hog.”

The gigantic corporate-owned factory farms are particularly good at taking advantage of Federal tax legislation. An example is Tyson Farms, the single largest producer of pork in the U.S. This monstrous enterprise also provides

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Though still far from acceptable, this is a “better” farrowing, or birthing, crate. The floor is made of plastic-coated expanded metal, which is easier on the sow and piglets. This design also includes heat lamps.
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duces more poultry than any other American outfit. Yet Tyson Farms defines itself for tax purposes as a “family farm,” thus making itself eligible for generous tax breaks intended to protect small family operations.

Environmental burdens

Today’s pig factories take a toll on the environment which matches the pain they cause the animals. In a week, a relatively small operation with 2,000 pigs will produce close to 30 tons of manure and more than that of urine. One producer I spoke with complained to me that his neighbors “got all hysterical about the stench.” Having appreciated the unique bouquet permeating the place, I know why.

People whose unfortunate plight it is to live in the vicinity of modern hog factories are also generally displeased with the huge quantities of excrement that end up polluting the waterways and water tables. And it’s hard for anyone to be delighted with the waste of food involved in growing grain for feedlot hogs. Pigs are unable to digest forage or roughage, and so directly compete with humans for food. The amount of grain fed to U.S. hogs could by itself easily feed every single human being who will die of starvation on our planet this year.

Signs of change bode well for pigs

Thanks to the dedicated efforts of concerned individuals, however, there are some signs of change. The second largest pork producer in the nation, National Farms, was blocked in early 1988 from its attempt to build a $60 million hog confinement facility in South Dakota. In spite of its desire for the business development, South Dakotans foresaw the massive environmental problems implicit in corporate-owned pig factories, and resoundingly said, “No thank you!”

July 1, 1987 marked the first time a pork producer was thrown out of business for cruelty to animals. In Morning View, Ky., Judge William Schmaedecke ordered pig farmer Paul Frisch to shut down his operation or else spend 90 days in jail. This inspiring case may set a precedent for future farm animal abuse cases. Currently, though, a level of pig abuse is considered normal in factory farms that would be profoundly unsettling to any sensitive person who saw what was going on.

For those who respect life and want our society to embody compassion for all creatures, it’s tempting to become discouraged. But I see grounds for hope. If you heat a large volume of water from 35 degrees to 210 degrees Fahrenheit, there will be no visible changes. The amount of energy needed to raise the water a total of 175 degrees may be enormous, but the eye will not be able to perceive the difference. But then a comparatively small amount of energy can heat the water over the threshold of 212 degrees, and drastic changes will be apparent. The water will boil and turn to steam.

The volume of mistreatment to pigs in today’s pork factories is indeed enormous, and we may not see appreciable results for awhile. But there are many fine people working to change attitudes and generate the conditions necessary for the much-needed transition to materialize. Though the

At right: Pigs being fattened up for slaughter are housed in crowded concrete pens that are normally coated with excreta.
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Above: Approximately 80 million pigs are killed for food each year in the U.S. alone. It is estimated that another 24 million die of injury and disease prior to slaughter.

results of this work may not be immediately perceptible, a different ethical climate is being created and the culture is moving towards compassion. I take solace in knowing that we are not as alone as we may sometimes feel. We are connected in the great web of life to all who live. Just as we can feel, and must respond to, the pains of others, so can we draw on their strength.

I can tell you the pigs are rooting for us.

John Robbins is author of Diet for a New America.

Recommended reading on factory farming: Diet for a New America by John Robbins, available from The ANIMALS’ AGENDA for $10.95 plus $2.00 shipping and handling; Animal Factories by Jim Mason and Peter Singer, available from The ANIMALS’ AGENDA for $9.95 plus $2.00 shipping and handling; and Factory Farming: The Experiment That Failed, available for $3.00 from the Animal Welfare Institute, P.O. Box 3650, Washington, DC 20007.