

I do not believe organisms are algorithms or that the ends will ever justify our meanness. In 1823, Jeremy Bentham wrote “the question is not, Can they reason? nor, Can they talk? but, Can they suffer?”²⁰ and I agree. We might plan a sustainable future, but if we walk a road of cruelty paved with us and them, we will never reach our goal. There are no externalities in a world that’s *intertwined*, and repression doesn’t work. As we lose face to the superior algorithms of corporations and computers, our suffering may teach us to value consciousness over intelligence. Need we wait so long for kindness, compassion, and wisdom? Our children see the truth. I feel therefore I am.

Sentient Sanctuary

Do you remember those golden daffodils and the man who walks with dogs? If you stroll down the path, you’ll see a sign for *Humane Society of Huron Valley* and guess what’s going on. I’m a volunteer. Once a week, I walk a few dogs. On occasion, I feel fear upon entering the kennel of a 65 pound pit bull, but mostly I feel happy to walk and play with my spirited friends.

This story bares a green branch on my life path. I am not in the habit of help. I’m good to family and friends, but outside those concentric circles, I’m no more generous with time or money than the next guy. When I told Susan and the girls my plan to volunteer, they laughed and bet I’d last a couple of weeks. But a year later, I’m a faithful dog walker, and do not plan to stop.

For a quarter century, I’ve worked with organizations to plan software and websites. I love what I do, but in nearing the age of fifty, I also wonder what’s next. For years, I suffered from a failure of the imagination. My childhood dreams were limited to being a soccer player and having a horse. As an adult, all I had was “maybe I’ll teach.” But insight came in time. Instead of planning the next few years, I decided to design Life Three.

If the first was education, and the second family plus career, how might I spend my third quarter century? This time frame opened my mind. I imagined a variety of possible futures, yet one calls out with spirit and depth as a vision I wish to share.

There's a place I call *Sentient Sanctuary* in a land of rivers, hills, meadows, and trees. On a summer's day, you may see folks seek shelter in the shade of a solar barn. Cats, dogs, chickens, horses; it's a little like Noah's ark. As a boy plays with a goat, and a girl with a robot, we all explore the meaning of *sentience*.

A sentient being is able to think or feel. All animals, including humans, are sentient. As subjects, not objects, we fear pain and desire pleasure. We bear memories, plans, and goals. Robots are not sentient yet, but that's a good question to ask. In the edges are the plants. Trees, for instance, have plans.²¹ Acacias use ethylene gas to warn neighbors of hungry giraffes. Mother beech trees use root systems to pass sugar to hungry children. Oaks plan together for acorns years in advance. We're unsure how much plants think or feel. I predict we have a lot to learn.

Gandhi believed Ahimsa. This principle of nonviolence in word or deed applies to all living beings. He also understood to do no harm is impossible. We all suffer and cause suffering. It's the fearful truth of life. But if we accept our responsibility and act with compassion, we may yet discover joy and wonder in the diversity of sentience, and its universality too.

The sanctuary is a refuge from and for change. Folks may visit for an hour or a week for tours, classes, conferences, meals, art, concerts, and experiments. It's a sacred space to plan together, so I can't know yet what it might become. Perhaps you will be there one day to listen, unlearn, and speak new myths. I write of it now so that you may help in a way only you know how.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass* Robin Wall Kimmerer tells a lovely story in a chapter on collateral damage about saving salamanders in upstate New York. Once a year, en masse, in the dark of night, black and yellow amphibians, seven inches long, migrate from

burrows to ponds. So, flashlights in hands, Robin and her daughter spend hours together helping them cross the road. It's like the fable of the boy who throws starfish back into the ocean, but with a potent twist. As a citizen and student of the Potawatomi and a professor of environmental biology, Robin uses indigenous wisdom and science to look for levers. She imagines culverts to channel salamanders beneath the road, and writes a story to engage us in reciprocity and gratitude.

What crazy species leaves a warm home on a rainy night to ferry salamanders across the road? It's tempting to call it altruism, but it's not. There is nothing selfless about it. This night rewards the givers as well as the recipients. We get to be there, to witness this amazing rite, and, for an evening, to enter into relationship with other beings, as different from ourselves as we can imagine.²²

This is my hope for *Sentient Sanctuary*. I wish to create a small place of happiness with the potential to make a big difference. My dream lives in the union of path and goal. I don't know I'll get there. It will take time to think and feel my way into who I am as a helper. So I walk with dogs on a well-trodden path.

Organizing the Future

In the story of Noah's ark, elephants are safely aboard, yet in the last hundred years, we have reduced them by 99 percent. Our lust for ivory is a problem, but so are roads and farms.

To survive now, many elephants must abandon exactly the learned traditions and knowledge – the cultures – that have kept them alive: ancient migration routes, and centuries old, handed down paths to known reserves of food and water, reserves that themselves are vanishing as people occupy and replace them.²³

In an era of disruption, isn't this our problem too? As cultures shift, traditions lose meaning, wisdom loses value, and we lose our way. Uncertainty, chaos, and disinformation challenge our will to plan. But despair makes trauma worse. We will answer with truth and hope. The truth hurts yet we can handle it, and