

Hog heaven: Preaching to swine farmers

by [Bernard E. Rollin](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

As we hurtled toward Shakespeare, Ontario, I felt a familiar cold visceral tightness and fear. "Shakespeare," I brooded. "I hope the name isn't an omen. 'Shakespeare' suggests tragedy. Or worse, comedy."

I was scheduled to give a keynote speech on ethics and animal welfare to the swine producers of Ontario. Tim Blackwell, the chief swine veterinarian for Ontario, had asked me to speak, and I could not say no to him. Not only was he the editor of my ethics column in the *Canadian Veterinary Journal*, a magazine that he had built into a stunning success. He was a tireless fighter for animal well-being. Fifteen years earlier he had led a large campaign to produce "humane" pork. He was also a cherished friend and, at six-foot-six, a charismatic and benign Cuchulain.

While I had given over 300 lectures to all kinds of audiences, I had never spoken to pig producers. I had known similar fear the first time I spoke to western cattle ranchers, but that fear vanished when I realized that virtually all of them were solid believers in the ethic of animal husbandry and care. To them, ranching was more a way of life than a way of making a living. Consequently, they cared deeply about how they managed an animal, even if it meant losing money or sleep treating a sick creature. "If I had to raise animals the way the pig people do, I'd get the hell out of the business," the president of the Colorado Cattleman's Association told an agriculture audience.

But the group I was about to address were the pig people, those converted to high-confinement, highly intensive, highly capitalized, highly industrialized production methods that replaced husbandry with industry, and traditional agricultural values with an emphasis on efficiency and productivity. This had occurred in the '70s, so it seemed that a whole generation of swine farmers had failed to absorb the ancient biblical agricultural values of animal care and stewardship.

Most small pig producers had been relentlessly eliminated by competition from large corporate entities (up to 60,000 sows per operation) that were run by accountants and executives who viewed their primary obligation as being to investors, not to animals. The few small producers who remained, including those I was going to address, had converted to confinement. If an animal got sick it was killed, often with a blow to the head, because it was not worth treating just one animal. The confinement system destroyed small rural communities of independent farmers, polluted land and water, and ignored individual animal welfare for the sake of the operations as a whole. These small Ontario producers were also hanging by a thread economically, and had limited money to pay off loans on expensive, high-confinement buildings.

The worst thing about confinement production is that the animals never see the light of day until they are shipped to slaughter at roughly six months of age. The sows are breeding machines. From the time they are bred to a boar until they give birth (at three months, three weeks, three days), these 600-pound animals are totally confined in pens or “gestation crates” with recommended dimensions of seven feet long by two-and-a-half feet wide by three feet high. (Sometimes the producers make the crates narrower, to squeeze more of them into a building.) The animals stand on slotted concrete, through which their waste drops to catch pens. The concrete creates foot and leg problems in animals whose feet have evolved for soft pasture. When the sows are ready to farrow (give birth), they are moved to a farrowing crate, which differs from the gestation crate only in having “creep rails” for the piglets to crawl under to escape being crushed by the sow.

In many cases, the crates are too small for the sow to lie fully stretched, so she lies at an angle. She cannot turn around or groom herself. Although she is a social animal, she cannot interact. She is by nature a clean animal, but she cannot build her nest on a hillside so that excrement rolls away. She cannot root or search for nesting materials. She cannot trade off piglet care with other sows so that she can root, forage and find nesting materials. She cannot do the things that pigs do, so she goes mad and exhibits repetitive, compulsive, aberrant behavior, what producers with unconscious irony call “vices.” The smell is horrible. In some farms, the workers wear respirators.

What could I say to these producers? What nerve could I touch? I had always operated according to Plato’s dictum that when dealing with ethics and adults, one could not “teach,” only “remind.” Or, to use my own metaphor, when confronting a

more powerful adversary, one needs to employ judo instead of sumo. With cowboys, I could appeal to the husbandry ethic. What could I use here? I finally decided that the only choice I had was to try the same tactic and hope that an ember of the husbandry ethic still burned in these producers, even after a generation of industrialization.

Tim woke me up from my neurotic musings. I had gone over this a hundred times. It was too late to think of a different strategy; in any case, there were 200 people waiting for me. The meeting was being held at a fairground. People were seated outdoors at picnic tables, and would eat lunch at the end of the morning session.

As always, my fear began to dissipate as I started speaking, and was replaced by a rhythm generated by content and form. Because I am nearsighted, I removed my glasses. In this venue, I could not see the facial expressions of those in the audience, a crucial requirement for gauging their reactions and making adjustments in my talk. But given the picnic table setup, people were spread out. I was more or less tethered to the podium with my wired microphone.

As I recall, I had an hour and a half for my speech, with a half-hour for questions and discussion. I began in my usual fashion, with a few jokes, a few anecdotes, some autobiographical comments about being a Brooklyn kid lecturing to farmers and ranchers. People laughed in the right places. So far so good.

I continued as I had planned, discussing the differences between social ethics, personal ethics and professional ethics. Professional ethics, I said, is the responsibility to important subgroups of society to govern themselves in a way that accords with social concerns, so that they are not regulated by others who do not understand the pressures of their profession. I said that the society was becoming increasingly concerned about animal treatment—in research, in zoos and circuses, and in agriculture. This was due to many factors: urbanization, media attention to animals, the relentless ethical searchlight illuminating hitherto disenfranchised elements of society. But most of all it was due to the supplanting of an agriculture of husbandry—the practice of reciprocity and symbiosis between animals and people—by an exploitative agriculture in which animals do not benefit from being domesticated by humans.

I reminded them that biblical injunctions to care for animals and respect their natures had served us well until the 1950s. I also reminded them of the 23rd Psalm,

and of the metaphor that the psalmist uses when he wishes to create a conceit for God's ideal relationship to man—the shepherd. The things we wish for from God are the same things that the good shepherd provides to his animals. I beseeched them to look into themselves, examine what they were doing, and see if it accorded with their own ethics. Then I quit.

At first there was no applause. Oh-oh, I thought. Silence—my perennial nightmare. But then the applause began, and grew. I still could not see their faces, but Tim moved toward me, grabbing my hand. “You’ve done it, you son of a bitch, you’ve done it.” “Done what?” I asked. “Touched their hearts! Can’t you see the tears in their eyes?” Stupidly, I replaced my glasses and saw that he was right.

Suddenly one man climbed atop a picnic table and began to speak. “This was it!” he shouted. “This was the straw that broke the camel’s back! I have been feeling lousy for 15 years about how I raise these animals and so, in front of my peers, so I can’t back out later, I am pledging to tear down my confinement barn and build a barn I don’t have to be ashamed of! I am a good enough husbandman that I can do it right, make a living and be able to look myself in the mirror!” This was Dave Linton. Tim whispered to me, “If Linton says it, he means it!”

A year and a half went by. Periodically I received progress reports from Tim. Linton had broken ground. Linton was building. Then Tim called. “Do you have time to visit Dave Linton’s new barn? He would like you to—it’s attracting a lot of attention. The Canadian Broadcasting Company has done a story on it.”

“Of course I will,” I said. Tim took me to the Lintons. With eyes dancing, Dave and his wife spoke of the new barn while serving us what is arguably the best strawberry-rhubarb pie in the universe. Finally his wife said, “Enough talk, Dave—let the man see for himself.”

We walked to the barn and opened the door. We went in. *Mirabile dictu!* There was sunshine! “The roof is hydraulic,” Dave explained. “On nice days, we retract it so the animals are, in essence, outdoors. And look! No stalls, no crates.” Indeed, in place of the crates were huge pens, lavishly supplied with straw, with 15 or so animals to each pen. The sows lay around on beds of straw, chewing it as a cowboy chews tobacco. “They look . . . they look,” I groped for words. “Nonneurotic. Happy! That’s it! Happy!” Tim said, “I’ve been a pig vet for 20 years, and this is the first time I’ve seen sows smile.” “And,” I marveled, “the air is sweet; at least as sweet as it could

be!”

The three of us shook hands. Linton was effusive. “I’m a religious man,” he said. “And God has already paid me back for doing the right thing!”

“How so?” I asked. “It’s my boy,” he said. “My son.” “When we had the old barn,” he explained, “my son dropped out of school and did nothing but play video games. I couldn’t interest him in the business or even get him to set foot in the barn. Since I built this one, I can’t get him out!”

I continue to try to persuade farmers to remember their ethic, though my score is a resounding “zero” with corporate entities. Tim is making a film showing producers that they can do what Linton did and have a much smaller debt load than if they build high-confinement barns. And Dave Linton’s pigs are still smiling.