

Creative Maladjustment: From Civil Rights to Chickens' Rights

By Karen Davis, PhD, President of United Poultry Concerns

“There are some things to which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will.” – Martin Luther King



As long as I can remember I've hated cruelty and helpless suffering. Growing up in a family and community where men and boys were expected to hunt, I watched my father and his friends pile their dogs into the trunks of cars in the morning and return at the end of the day with the animals they had shot to be skinned and plucked in the cellar.

Around thirteen I started arguing with my father at the dinner table about hunting – to no avail since he always had ready answers like “everything hunts the rabbit.” We'd yell back and forth over prime rib or baked ham since it had not yet occurred to me that “meat” meant “animal” and murder.

A few years later, a teenage magazine ran a story called “Them!” in the mid-1950s. “Them” referred to black students who were trying to enter the all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas in a hate-filled atmosphere. I remember asking my father about the cause of this hate, which I could not understand based on the writer's depiction of the students. I don't recall his answer, but later when I was in college in the early 1960s and starting to consider the racial problems there, he said that if I ever brought a colored person to our house, he would not let them in and that colored people didn't want to come to our house anyway.

When I challenged my father's attitude, my mother said I should respect other people's opinions, but I replied I was only obliged to respect other people's right to hold an opinion, not the opinion itself.

The opinion at Westminster College was that Separate-But-Equal was God's will. It was God's will that the school choir's prize soprano, June Singleton, who was black, had to stay

in separate hotels when the choir toured the South. The college chaplain explained this to me and my friends when we urged him to take a stand against racial discrimination on campus.

Such moments marked the beginning of my conscious dissent from many conventional ways of thinking and acting. My sensibility began to take shape in the form of ideas and values that were often at odds with prevailing sentiments.

At Westminster I became immersed in Russian and German history, above all in Stalin's slave labor camps and Hitler's concentration and death camps. So preoccupied did I become with these camps that I had to leave school. I dropped out of college, unable to cope with my growing obsession with the human-engineered suffering of people, which was like a cancer, eating me alive.

During those years, I don't recall ever thinking about animals in the light of concentration camp victims and racial bigotry, but just as I had become obsessed with injustice and cruelty to humans in the early 1960s, so in the early 1970s I began to agonize over the suffering and abuse of nonhuman animals. A trip to the Gulf of St. Lawrence where baby seal clubbing was going on unbeknown to me when I signed up for the tour, along with a visit to a large dark warehouse in Maryland filled with thousands of parrots stacked in tiny cages waiting to be sent to pet stores, awakened me to the links of oppression. These experiences affected me so deeply that for ten years I avoided animal issues because I felt I couldn't handle them emotionally.

World Laboratory Animals Day in Lafayette Park in Washington, DC in 1983 was the turning point. As I looked at posters with scenes of dogs and other nonhuman animals in laboratories, the look on their faces and the suffering in their eyes transfixed my attention. I pledged never again to abandon nonhuman animals to the iniquity of our species because I couldn't bear the knowledge of their suffering. From that moment I became an animal rights activist, a creatively maladjusted person who seeks, works, and calls for a remedy.

In 1990, a crippled and abandoned chicken from the meat industry, named Viva, whom I'd met five years earlier, led me to found United Poultry Concerns, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the compassionate and respectful treatment of chickens and other domestic fowl and a compassionate vegan diet and lifestyle.

When I met Viva in 1985, I was an English teacher at the University of Maryland expecting to teach English for the rest of my life. Yet I was devoting more and more time to animal



issues, especially to the plight of farmed animals. The number of these tortured beings was astonishing. At the bottom of the pile were billions of birds on an ocean of fish. Farmed animals were dismissed by environmentalists and others as beyond the pale of moral concern because, they said, these animals were bred to a substandard state of intelligence and biological fitness and were "just food" that was "going to be killed anyway."

My experience with Viva showed otherwise. Though crippled, Viva was sensitive, affectionate, and alert. She already had a voice including the sweetest trill when I gently stroked her feathers and talked to her softly, but her voice needed to be amplified within the oppressive system in which she and her sisters and brothers were trapped. This system included some animal protectionists who suggested that I'd be wasting my time trying to get people "to care about a chicken."

Working for chickens is an uphill climb in this ill-conceived world; yet many people care deeply about chickens and the number who care about them is growing. Creative Maladjustment means that you never adjust to bigotry or naysaying even among your colleagues. Instead you keep faith with those you have chosen to speak for and affirm what you know is right.

KAREN DAVIS, PhD is the President and Founder of United Poultry Concerns, a nonprofit organization that promotes the compassionate and respectful treatment of domestic fowl including a sanctuary for chickens on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Her essays appear in *Experiencing Animal Minds* (2012), *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation* (2011), *Sister Species* (2011), *Animals and Women* (1995), and many other publications on the lives and feelings of animals and trans-species psychology. Her books include *Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs: An Inside Look at the Modern Poultry Industry*; *More Than a Meal: The Turkey in History, Myth, Ritual, and Reality*; *Instead of Chicken, Instead of Turkey: A Poultryless "Poultry" Potpourri*; *A Home for Henny*; and *The Holocaust and the Henmaid's Tale: A Case for Comparing Atrocities*. Karen and UPC are the subjects of the Genesis Award-winning article "For the Birds" in *The Washington Post*. In 2012 Karen was profiled in "Won't Back Down" in the *Altoona Mirror* in Pennsylvania where she grew up. In 2002 Karen Davis was inducted into the U.S. Animal Rights Hall of Fame "for outstanding contributions to animal liberation."

BIO: <http://www.upc-online.org/karenbio.htm>

WEBSITE: <http://www.upc-online.org>

ABOUT UNITED POULTRY CONCERNS: http://www.upc-online.org/more_about_upc.html

Contact

Karen Davis, PhD, President
United Poultry Concerns
12325 Seaside Road, PO Box 150
Machipongo, VA 23405
Office: 757-678-7875

Email: Karen@upc-online.org