

THE JOURNEY HOME RECOVERY AND RENEWAL IN SANCTUARY

by G.A. Bradshaw and Jill Robinson

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Viktor Frankl

Jasper is a moon bear. For 15 consecutive years, he lived trapped in a cage no larger than his body. Flattened to the bars, he remained tethered to a five-inch metal tube surgically implanted in his gall bladder to collect bile for use as human medicine. By miracle, Jasper survived to be released to a sanctuary where he has lived for more than a decade. Similar to other rescued bears, Jasper's journey to recovery is the struggle to overcome prison's physical and psychological trauma.

What and how someone recovers from trauma are as person-specific as the meaning of life itself. Even definitions of recovery are unique. Trauma comprises a violent confrontation with the essentials of existence where the survivor is faced with making meaning out of a bewildering past, an uncertain present, and unknown future. Like a butterfly from chrysalis, the survivor emerges fragile, disoriented, and unsure of new surroundings.

Decades of testimony from human political prisoners, concentration camp survivors, and victims of domestic violence reveal that trauma of incarceration differs significantly from repercussions of a single event that are often associated with a diagnosis of "simple" Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The nature of psychological impacts on individuals subjected to multiple, extended, highly invasive traumatic events such as Jasper's led psychiatrist Judith Herman to create the diagnostic category, Complex PTSD.

Traumatology has had a huge effect on the mental health profession by its open insistence on understanding those afflicted by PTSD as victims. While symptoms of Complex PTSD are referred to as disorders, psychologists consider traumatic mental states and behavior as normal responses to abnormal circumstances that have been imposed by another person or institution. "When," as concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl wrote, "we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves," and changed

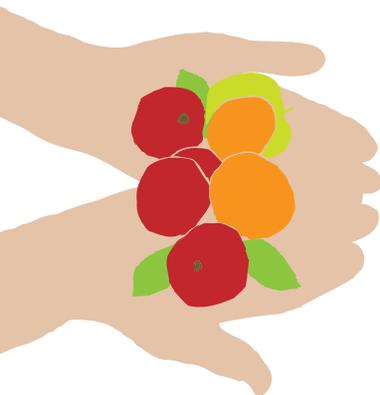
indeed are animals made captive.

Infanticide, stereotypic swaying, bar biting, hair-picking, lethargy, self injury, incessant screaming, and hyper-aggression are commonly observed in zoo and circus animals. Because they are so typical, these behaviors are often confused as normal ways in which tigers, elephants, orcas, parrots, bears, and other caged animals act. In reality, they are expressions of desperate anguish employed to combat prison's corroding effects. Deprivation and disempowerment distort the prisoner's reality into a house of mirrors whose edges relentlessly scar mind and body until one day, when the strain becomes too much, total collapse ensues. One bear at a sanctuary, Maureen, succumbed to such collapse: biting down to the bone of her own limbs, impervious to limitless medication and loving care, until the decision was made to gently release her from the misery that saturated her mind.

Those fortunate enough to be rescued and welcomed to sanctuary have the opportunity to reverse some of the pernicious effects of harsh confinement. However, sanctuary is still captivity. If captivity is institutionalized trauma, can there be hope for recovery in sanctuary? What makes sanctuary different from other captive settings?

In a word: attitude. Skilled sanctuaries are different from other captive institutions because of what they provide physically—good food, friends, natural vegetation, healthy living spaces—and also for the emotional and psychological atmosphere that sanctuary workers foster. Sanctuary is not just a place; sanctuary is a way of being.

The design and care of skilled sanctuaries share much in common with human trauma therapies. Both allow individuals such as Jasper or the political prisoner, whose lights were nearly quenched by captors, to reignite their soul sparks and rejoin life anew. Many healing properties of sanctuary are invisible to the casual eye. Sanctuary embodies qualities that many of us take for granted: freedom of choice, living with a stable community, exploration and nourishment of the senses, and being an integral part of the natural world. Denied to the prisoner, these essentials of everyday living are vital ingredients for cultivating recovery in human and other animals alike. We refer to them as the **10 Basic Sanctuary Principles**.



10 BASIC SANCTUARY PRINCIPLES

First and foremost, **recovery builds on the foundation of a healthy environment (1)** – nutritious tasty foods and novel living space that conform as much as possible to species and individual specific needs to restore psychological and physical damage. Healthy, variable nourishment, and habitat are essential to restore body and mind. However, **a healthy environment also entails social and emotional support (2).**

The trauma of incarceration comprises a profound rupture and betrayal of the social contract, the innate sense of belonging and connection with those around us that inform our very identity. In most cases, the captive is separated from family and loved ones, sometimes living in complete isolation. As a result of this relational void, the natural inclination to form a relationship creates vulnerability. The total dependence of the prisoner on the captor makes the captor an omnipotent, larger-than-life figure in the prisoner's eyes, someone who is both the agent of life and, potentially, death.

Subsequently, making and reviving healthy relationships in sanctuary are vital for recovery. A sense of belonging and emotional connection with another is key to revive the injured soul, but with whom and how that relationship is formed lies with the trauma survivor. For some, such as Billy, who lived in sanctuary at the Fauna Foundation, emotional support came not in the guise of fellow chimpanzees but with human caregivers. Billy was raised as a young human who enjoyed car rides and human foods with his surrogate family. His sense of self was tuned to the nuances of human psychology and culture. Fauna Director Gloria Grow painstakingly designed and modified Billy's living area and community to match his needs and values. In contrast, Tom, who was reared by a free-ranging chimpanzee mother until his capture, was far more able to integrate into chimpanzee society at the sanctuary. Remarkably, given his horrendous three-decade experience with humans as a biomedical laboratory subject, Tom retained a magnanimous capacity to form a deep friendship with a human in sanctuary.

Implicit to a healthy environment is the absence of threat and domination (3). One of the key elements that Carol Buckley, founder



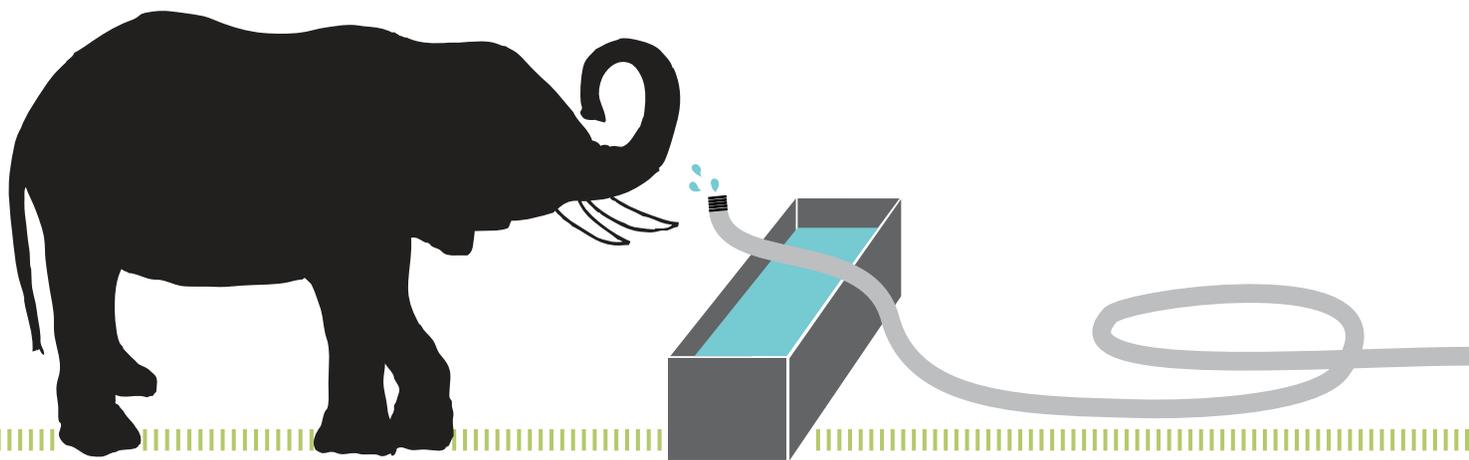
After being captive on a bile farm for 15 years, Jasper now lives free in sanctuary.

of Elephant Aid International and co-founder of The Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee, instills into sanctuary design was an elephant's ability to move, think, and be in her body without fear. In contrast to standard zoo and circus protocols, sanctuary caregivers ask, not demand, that an elephant cooperate with routine procedures such as foot soaks and trunk washes and do so on elephant time. **Creating a threat-free environment fosters what psychotherapists refer to as a safe container (4).**

Everyone needs a space of retreat, where s/he can take stock and center when the environment overwhelms or threatens. It may be a special place at a park, or sitting on the bed in the comfort of a teddy bear. For someone who has lived at the mercy of captors with little to no privacy, a safe space is even more essential. A place of safety carries a sense of inviolability that helps steady the transition from fear to security. In sanctuary, this space may be a room, a den, or branch where the survivor can control his environment completely and be certain to find rest and peace. A safe container provides refuge and a sense of control that allows the sanctuary resident to assess the meaning of



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environmental change at his/her own pace.

Everyone has his/her own way of relating to surroundings that may ebb and flow and evolve over time. Effective sanctuary provides for such flexibility and tailors care for resident **individuality (5)**. In addition to being socially isolated, the hostage has been denied self-determination. Needs and desires are subordinated to those of the captors. The hostage is silenced, her voice emerging as pained symptom: stereotypic rocking, self-injury, and impotent roars of grief and frustration. Subsequently, **the ability to give voice and be heard (6)** in sanctuary is integral to moving from a victim's sense of powerlessness to recovery. Part of being heard entails having one's needs and values met: receiving healthy foods, safe housing, and opportunities to form intimate, lasting relationships. Being heard promotes **a sense of agency (7), the ability to make decisions and control events that affect one's life**. Knowing that one can ask for something and receive it—wanting and getting more branches to make a nest, choosing to eat fruit, and being provided with a choice—is a revival of the core self. Years after being released into sanctuary dens and enclosures, previously farmed female bears will come into season, or build nests, as if slowly waking into the instincts they were long denied on the farms.



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Carol Buckley teaches staff that “the elephants know that we are there listening, seeing, and responsive. For example, we are there when Barbara (a former circus elephant) wants to drink out of the hose. It's her right to choose not to drink out of the trough. We are their servants. People in the [elephant] industry call it ‘spoiling’ and [say that] banging on the water trough is not acceptable. But we celebrate when someone bangs on the trough. They [sic] should be allowed to demand.” This attitude of deep listening reinstates **a resident's**

authority and avoids her marginalization (8).

Similarly, some of the bears at the sanctuary in China learn to bang their food flaps in expectation of food—it is this demanding of food that shows us they are responsive to how the sanctuary itself lives around them, providing opportunities for the bears to interact with the daily routine of their care.

Sanctuaries designed to reflect these principles model what psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott calls a facilitating environment, the creation of “a dialogical space of security and creativity.” When Jasper arrived in sanctuary, he was treated carefully and tenderly to provide him full flexibility and the capacity to secure his sense of control in new surroundings. For the first time in a decade, Jasper encountered an environment responsive to his moon bear needs and values. He was able to renew his competence, the ability to do bear things once again: climb trees, roll in fresh grass, and dig with a growing vigor over time, **to experience life fully (9), and celebrate life with a renewed sense of hope and future (10)**. Jasper also became the “peacemaker” of the house he shared with 20 other bears. Conspicuously breaking up the odd disagreement, welcoming new bears into the fold, Jasper plays with them today in his late twenties, as if a bear in his teens. Appearing to have a sense of humor, he will often sidle up to an unsuspecting bear, nip her rump, and walk away, always with one eye glancing sideways as if anticipating the game that then often ensues.

We learn that creating a healing sanctuary involves more than a place where animals live. Sanctuary entails human self-transformation from an attitude of authority, domination, and privilege to one of learning, parity, and humility. It is within that relational space with animal kin that humanity may begin anew to create a shared culture of compassion and open a pathway for change together.