

Circus, Zoos, Animals... and Us *What Have We Lost in the Name of Compassion?*

By Lev Neymotin, PhD

This essay is based on the recollections of my childhood, when a circus in the town was an exciting event, and the frequent visits of our local zoo in Almaty, Kazakhstan was a source of fun. And of reflection and imagination...

This essay, titled "Circus, Zoos, Animals... and Us: What Have We Lost?" has a reflective, dramatic, and philosophically musing tone. Focus more on narrative and musing rather than on numbers and history – just mention that in passing.

The Vanishing Tent

When was the last time you stepped into a big-top tent, its canvas breathing with life, lights flashing, music pulsing through the air, clowns stumbling about, and lions pacing behind the curtain? Chances are, not recently. Because the circus, as we knew it, is gone. The great American spectacle, built on showmanship and animal partnership, has become a ghost of itself, shuttered under the rising moral tide of animal rights activism. But what did we actually lose when we lost the circus? And the zoos, increasingly sterilized or abandoned altogether? Did we, in our ethical fervor, discard something deeper and more essential?

The Fall of the Greatest Show

In 2017, Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, once known as "The Greatest Show on Earth," closed its doors after 146 years of performances. The company cited declining attendance and high operating costs, worsened by the removal of elephants due to public pressure. But the truth is simpler: society no longer had the stomach for bears on bicycles or lions leaping through fire. And yet, did anyone stop to ask: could there have been a middle way?

A Lost Chance to Adapt

Could we not have reimagined the circus and the zoo as spaces not of exploitation, but of cooperation? Of wonder, rather than domination? Instead, we found it easier to abolish than to adapt.

The New Animal Captivity

Oddly enough, even as we "freed" the animals of the circus and shuttered elephant exhibits at zoos, we exploded a new, multibillion-dollar industry of private animal ownership. As of 2023, Americans owned approximately 86 million cats and 65 million dogs. Exotic pet ownership, including reptiles, primates, and even big cats, has also risen, despite ethical and environmental concerns. These animals, many stolen from their ecosystems or bred in captivity, now live leashed, crated, or confined to suburban homes—fed kibble and affection, but far removed from their natural lives.

Companionship or Surrogate Connection?

Why this contradiction? Why ban elephants from a ring but tolerate cheetahs in a backyard? The answer may lie in the psychology of modern life. As social bonds fray and real communities dwindle, many turn to animals to fill emotional gaps. Our dogs and cats are no longer just pets; they are "fur babies," companions, emotional support anchors. In a society drifting into isolation, they become proxies for human connection. Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov saw it coming: the future would be lonely,

mechanical, and filled with artificial relationships. The uncanny warmth of a talking dog in a Pixar film speaks volumes about our internal void.

The Animated Illusion

Indeed, our entertainment has replaced reality. Animated films now present animals with perfectly human speech, logic, and values. Children growing up with these portrayals may feel closer to talking giraffes than to the real thing. In doing so, we've blurred, or worse, erased, the majestic gap between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom. Gone is the awe of watching a living creature, alien in its instincts and form, yet responsive to human gesture. Instead, we see ourselves—mirrored, flattened, anthropomorphized.

The Vanishing of the Real

This erasure has consequences beyond nostalgia. From an ecological standpoint, removing animals from public life hasn't saved species; it has, in some cases, endangered them further. Global livestock populations reflect a practical truth: species flourish when they are useful to humans. There are over 1.5 billion cattle and 1 billion pigs alive today—because they are part of our food system. Compare that to the fewer than 415,000 African elephants or the approximately 3,900 tigers remaining in the wild. When humans no longer see value in preserving a species, it quietly disappears.

Lost Laboratories of Nature

Even science suffers from this shift. Circuses and zoos once offered a unique opportunity to study animal cognition, behavior, and learning. The ability of dolphins to learn tricks, or of elephants to paint or solve puzzles, held clues about intelligence—natural and artificial. With these "playgrounds of cross-species cooperation" gone, we have lost access to crucial insights into brain plasticity, emotion, memory, and problem-solving. In an age racing toward AI supremacy, we abandoned one of our best comparative models: the trained animal mind.

A Final Bow

Can we reconsider? Perhaps not. The public sentiment has hardened, the institutions dismantled, and the performers dispersed.

The Real Tragedy

But shall we regret what we've lost? Without a doubt. We didn't just ban circuses and declaw the zoos. We distanced ourselves from a once-living thread connecting man and beast, intellect and instinct, civilization and nature. In protecting the animals, we may have unwittingly impoverished ourselves.

And that, perhaps, is the real tragedy under the collapsed tent.

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Please present my essay, titled "Circus, Zoos, Animals... and Us: What Have We Lost?" while retaining its original tone—reflective, dramatic, and philosophically musing while following historical facts, statistics to deepen the impact.