



It may sound odd but accurate to say, a gorilla changed my life. I find myself looking back quite often when I think about why I do what I do for animals and why I choose the topics I write about. Sometimes I'm asked those very questions at readings or book signings. My mind always goes to the same time and place; that warm, spring afternoon in Washington, DC more than twenty-five years ago when I shared meaningful moments with a massive, Silverback Gorilla. You must be thinking, "a gorilla . . . in DC?" No, there wasn't anything "King Kong - Faye Ray" going on. I was at The National Zoo. Since childhood, everywhere splendid animals are I want to be. I had reached

adulthood by then and was engaged in an activity seeking excitement, exhilaration and entertainment, all for me but found so much more that day; an enlightenment that changed my life forever. While walking a zoo path, I noticed a khaki, uniform shirt pushing a cart of vegetables and fruit toward a side door and realized I happened to reach the gorilla's public viewing enclosure right about feeding time. I walked inside the visitors' entrance and straight to the glass for an up close and personal look. Everything behind the glass was gray, expect for a few mountainous black gorillas. Although the enclosure was not esthetically appealing, it was probably easy to hose down. There were steps to different levels, resembling a theme park attraction, very Disney World or King's Dominion like, which is far different from the tropical or subtropical forests of a gorilla's homeland. The outside area, I remember, was more closely habitat related, although small. I don't know what about me, since there were so many people there, caught a large Silverback's attention, but he slowly knuckle-walked toward my way and sat down right in front of me. He remained quite still and my surroundings became quiet. We just looked at each other for the longest time, as though he was studying me just like I was studying him. Most wild animals don't make eye contact with humans, it's too confrontational. His gaze lingered on my face. He was magnificent and appeared gentle, although I was not naive to the ferocity a gorilla is capable of. I loved looking at him that close, but his speckled, brown eyes, although studious, seemed sad to me. They never turned away until the food was introduced through a gated window. (I'm happy to say, feeding time for wild animals in captivity has become a more enriching experience over the years than just plopping food in front of them.) Two gorillas quickly surrounded the pile and began to eat. My gorilla's giant torso turned to look at the colorful food presented and then back to me for another minute or two. I cocked my head and gave him my best non-confrontational, Mona Lisa smile. He stood, towering over me, becoming a dark, massive wall. I moved back a step. He lifted his left hand and with gently curved fingers, his forefinger extended towards me, like he was pointing at me. I was stunned. He turned, and I watched him slowly head for the food. Only then do I remember hearing anything around me; the noise of the children and other visitors echoed in the vacuous round room. The Silverback selected his food carefully. He picked up cantaloupe, bananas and cucumbers, as well as a pile of greens that I'm not quite sure what to call. He held all the food in one arm close to his chest and climbed to the highest level in a corner of the display area, then turned his back to everyone to eat his lunch in peace and privacy. That's the moment that sticks with me the most. I realized he wasn't so different. I found myself grappling with the assessment of the truly higher order animal, whether it's the one who chooses to cage other animals or those who are caged. Over the years and in light of the animal atrocities occurring worldwide, I've grown to justify the Zoo system's existence because, at least, the animals are physically safe there. I still visit Zoos or Sanctuaries and love seeing the animals, but my main focus now is to ensure habitats are appropriate, animals look healthy and are well treated. If not, I move to action. Looking back is a good thing if it helps you look forward.

Hope everyone had a Happy Easter and a Gorilla of a Special Day!!

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author of “Save Them All”