

My First Memory of Life

By Eric Collins

It was warm under the sheets, and I had no interest in getting out of bed. I enjoyed sleeping late. I was about five years old, so I did not have very deep thoughts at that time. I was probably contemplating what cartoon I wanted to watch once I got out of bed. I heard a loud knock at the door, and realized my dad was telling me to get up. What seemed like the passing of five minutes was probably more like twenty. I had not moved. I almost wished I had dreamt the first wake-up call.

The second wake-up call was a little more urgent. My dad had planned for my brother and I to go fishing with him, so it was important to get up early so we could make the two hour drive to Virginia Beach. My only consolation was that my brother, who I looked up to, would also be going. I also knew that I could sleep in the car. At that age, it was not my priority to go fishing at five o'clock in the morning.

I was awakened again. This time it was much later, and we were arriving at our destination. It was still cold outside and I could think of nothing better to do but look at comics in the car or go back to sleep. However, my father was ready to go and had purchased worms for us to use. We got out of the car, grabbed tackle boxes, and walked towards the pier. A sense of urgency swept over me as I walked down the pier. For one thing, I was surrounded by water and I could not swim. Also, my feet were small so I kept worrying about getting them stuck between the wooden planks or falling straight through the planks and into the water. When there were large gaps between the planks, I felt that I had to jump from plank to plank to avoid the gaps. I am sure my brother and father thought I was just playing a silly game. I moved forward as fast as I could, suppressing the fear and stress I was feeling. Perhaps I was overreacting: my dad had given me no reason to believe the pier was unsafe.

As we approached the spot where we would fish, my dad took on the task of hooking the worms and setting up our poles. Blood ran down his finger as he pierced the worms. I did not like the sight of blood, and I felt sorry for the worms since they were often my playmates. I avoided stepping on worms on rainy days when they made their way to the concrete. Sometimes I picked them up and placed them near a tree or some tall grass with the hope of saving their lives. I often thought, "You don't know where you're going little worm. This way is safe." The strong connection I had formed with my childhood dog extended to all living creatures. I felt that on some level, all living things could understand me.

My dad reached inside the small plastic bag for another worm. He continued to do so until all of our poles were set and each fish was caught. Inside I felt sorry for the worms, but I said nothing. All day long, my father and brother caught fish while I looked down at the waves and prayed that the fish would get away. I wanted to send out a signal for the fish to avoid the worms. Once in awhile, my dad asked me if I caught any fish. Sometimes I did get a nibble. Whenever I caught a fish, I hoped that the fish would be too small and we would have to throw it back in the water. There were a few times that we threw some fish back. In other instances, my dad said "good job" and put the fish into our cooler. While I hoped no fish would come my way, it seemed that my brother and father were competing to see who could catch the most fish.

This continued all day long, and my mind drifted away from the scene in front of me. Couldn't I just sleep and watch cartoons? The fish would look frightened as their gills inflated and deflated in succession. They would flop around on the pier as if struggling to survive. It seemed like a painful way to die. "They can't feel anything", my brother commented. "They are not like people. We have emotions and an intellect." Regardless of my limited understanding of animal brain activity, emotions, and fishes' experience of pain, it appeared to me that they were indeed experiencing fear and pain. I did not take pleasure in killing fish- or any creature, for that matter.

On the way home, I could hear the fish flopping around in the trunk because they were packed in ice. Secretly, I thought of returning the fish to the ocean dead or alive just so that they could be with their families. I could see the theme of “respect for life” reflected in many movies I had watched. During particular scenes, I would think, “This person does not deserve to die like this. They deserve a proper burial.” I entertained the idea that maybe it was not too late, and I could still save a few of the fish. Even though they may have died on the pier, the occasional sound coming from the trunk made me think that they were enduring a slow death. I figured that, to some extent, fish must have lives and families much like my own. Why should I take pride in removing them from theirs? Many people believe that humans have always been hunters, and it is not an immoral practice. Another popular belief is that animals were put on earth for humans, so humans can do what they please with animals. I had enjoyed eating things I had been told were alive, but I felt differently about taking part in the act of killing.

Later that day, my mother de-scaled the fish and prepared them for dinner. I sat at the dinner table picking at my plate, trying to remove all the bones from the fish. It seemed like I had been there for hours playing with my food. “Is there anything wrong? Aren’t you hungry?” my parents asked. I did not know how to answer them. I wanted to be excused from the dinner table, but it was not customary for me to leave without finishing all of my food. Besides, I was very hungry but I was not sure if I wanted to eat fish. But, what choice did I have? I was not the one buying and preparing the meals. I was not even sure why I felt this way; everyone else seemed to be enjoying their meal.

The day I went fishing, I realized something that I could not verbalize. What I had been told was an acceptable practice by my parents was disagreeable to me. I trust my parents, but if someone does not agree with the current societal norms, then he/she can always choose to do things differently. By the age of five, I had already realized that life should not be taken lightly. I learned – by handling the fish with my two little hands- that when a meat product was prepared and packaged for our consumption, it was easier to justify our act of killing. That meat product has often been “reinvented” so that it no longer resembles the life it once contained. For over twenty years, I accepted this as the necessary truth even though I felt it was wrong in my heart. Remembering this childhood experience allowed me to appreciate life and to stop supporting the consumption of meat.

On that momentous day, I began to understand how connected I was to life around me. On some level, the worm and fish are the same as me, and I would never want to experience what they

went through. Although it took me several years to become a vegetarian, I made the decision to become vegetarian on that day. This is my first vivid memory of understanding death. I also consider it to be the first memory of my appreciation of life. Our experiences shape who we become.



Illustration by Eric Collins
