

STEVEN WISE TRIBUTE, PART I TRIBUTO A STEVEN WISE, PARTE I

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ABSTRACT

Steven M. Wise lived an extraordinary life. A lawyer, litigator, scholar and teacher, he developed the first litigation approach to establishing personhood for nonhuman animals. This article traces his early years, his character, and the traits that enabled him to build the legal case for animal personhood.

KEYWORDS

Nonhuman animals; Animal legal rights; personhood; chimpanzees; elephants; Nonhuman Rights Project.

RESUMEN

Steven M. Wise vivió una vida extraordinaria. Abogado, pleiteante, erudito y profesor, desarrolló el primer enfoque jurídico para establecer la personalidad de los animales no humanos. Este artículo describe sus primeros años, su carácter y los rasgos que le permitieron plantear la cuestión jurídica de la personalidad animal.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Animales no humanos; Derechos legales de los animales; personalidad; chimpancés; elefantes; Nonhuman Rights Project.

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Steven Mark Wise ("Steve") was born on December 19, 1950 to Sidney and Selma Rosen Wise. Both of his parents worked at the Aberdeen Proving Ground, a U.S. Army military installation that carries out research, development, and evaluation of weapons. Sidney, who was trained in mathematics, worked in the Test and Evaluation Methodology area, where he analyzed how military equipment would function in different physical environments and under conditions of combat. Selma engaged in clerical and secretarial work there.¹ The Wise family lived in Aberdeen, Maryland,² then a small town of less than 3,000 people,³ that is in relatively close proximity to such large cities as Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Maryland and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.⁴

Steve was popular in school; other kids liked and respected him. He was smart and athletic, playing baseball from a young age.⁵ He was also a voracious reader, a habit he shared with his father. Steve had a profound stutter, a frustrating condition that challenged his ability to express himself and his full intelligence. And yet, in true Steve fashion, that stutter also provided him with an early lesson that life is full of uphill battles and conquering them requires a backbone made of steel.

Steve and his younger brother, Bob, were both in choruses and sang all of their lives. Steve had a lovely tenor voice, and he didn't stutter when he sang, which must have been a relief for him. Anecdotes from Steve's childhood show the presence of sensitivities and traits that would take clearer shape later on in his animal rights work. For example, once per month, the family would drive forty-five minutes to a farmer's market where various and sundry items of questionable value were available for purchase. At one of the booths, 11-year old Steve noticed caged chickens for sale. His brother, Bob, noted that Steve "became deeply offended" by the conditions that the chickens were kept

¹ Telephone interview with Robert Wise, Steve's younger brother (May 9, 2024) [hereinafter, R. Wise interview]. *See also* SMITH, H. Steven M. Wise, legal force for animal rights, dies at 73, The Washington Post (February 20, 2024), https://www.washingtonpost.com/obituaries/2024/02/20/steven-wise-dead-animal-rights/ (last visited May 17, 2024) [hereinafter, SMITH, H.].

² See The Official City of Aberdeen, Maryland, https://www.aberdeenmd.gov/ (accessed May 17, 2024).

³ Aberdeen, Maryland Population 2024, World Population Review, https://worldpopulationreview. com/us-cities/aberdeen-md-population (accessed May 17, 2024).

⁴ Cities Near Me – Aberdeen, Maryland, Travelmath, https://www.travelmath.com/cities-near/Aberdeen,+MD (last visited May 17, 2024).

⁵ R. Wise interview note 1.

in; he felt that they were suffering.⁶ Steve was so distressed that he contacted Senator Joseph Tydings, who, at that time, represented the State of Maryland in the U.S. Senate. Steve reported the poor conditions the chickens were in and requested help. While the chickens did not receive the sought-after relief, Senator Tydings wrote back to Steve, and that letter was framed and hung on Steve's bedroom wall.⁷

Another trait that showed up early was Steve's "laser focus," his ability to devote his complete attention to the task at hand, to the exclusion of everything else. His brother, Bob, recounted that Steve joined the cross-country (running) team in high school, "and when he got something into his system, he would push it to the limits."⁸ At one of the track meets, his mother watched helplessly at the end of the race, as Steve, having exerted himself beyond what his body could tolerate, vomited and then blacked out. An ambulance was called. His mother was traumatized by the incident, but Steve was unphased. He showed up at the next team practice and stayed with the sport.

That focus and passion rose to the surface again while Steve was studying chemistry and earning his bachelor's degree (from 1968 to 1972) from the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. But, his passion project was outside the classroom. Like some of the other lawyers who formed the first generation of animal law advocates, Steve was actively involved in efforts to end the Vietnam War. Steve became very animated and angry when discussing this topic. In the process of arguing vehemently against the continuation of this generation-defining American war, Steve practiced the advocacy skills that would later serve him well as a litigator and scholar. After college, he moved to Boston, Massachusetts, and when he was not accepted into medical school, he shifted his focus to law school, earning his law degree from Boston University in 1976.⁹

In 1975, Steve met Jeff Fraser, a student from another Boston law school and they became friends. After graduating and passing the Massachusetts bar exam, they decided to open a law practice together. In order to attract clients through referral services, Steve focused on criminal defense work, while Jeff focused on landlord tenant and family law. But, it was dangerous dog cases¹⁰ that were the most intriguing to Steve, because they offered him the opportunity to think creatively about how to convince judges to consider that the dogs could be trained or housed in such a way that they would not be

⁶ Id.

⁷ Id.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ See SMITH, H., supra note 1.

¹⁰ Under Massachusetts law, a dangerous dog is currently defined as a dog "that either: (i) without justification, attacks a person or domestic animal causing physical injury or death; or (ii) behaves in a manner that a reasonable person would believe poses an unjustified imminent threat of physical injury or death to a person or to a domestic or owned animal". Mass. Gen. Laws, ch. 140, §136A.

of danger to people or animals.¹¹ Steve took a number of these cases, fought hard and gained a reputation for saving the dogs from death sentences.

In 1980, Steve read Animal Liberation, the groundbreaking animal rights book authored by Australian philosopher, Peter Singer, and it was a lightning rod for him. For people who had a natural inclination to care about other animals, Singer's book provided a much-needed philosophical underpinning that enabled them to question the traditional exploitative views and treatment of nonhumans. Steve read it over and over, absorbing its ideas and pondering how he could put those ideas into practice as an attorney.¹² One day, at lunch, he announced to his law partner, Jeff Fraser, that "I may be able to make a difference in how people think about animals. I think I want to do that as my life's goal." Steve's mind was set. All that was needed was for him to work out the details. A few years later, he told Jeff, "there's no one like me; I'm in a unique position to lead this movement."¹³

On November 27 and 28, 1981, the first animal rights law conference was held in New York City, and Steve attended it, meeting the handful of other attorneys who were interested and active in working to protect animals through the use of the legal system.¹⁴ Now, he had found a group of attorneys with whom he shared common sacred ground. Soon after that conference, Steve joined the first national Board of Directors of a two-year old group called Attorneys for Animal Rights ("AFAR"), which changed its name to the Animal Legal Defense Fund ("ALDF") in 1984.¹⁵ This small group formed the corps of what would become the field of animal law. Steve, joined by Laurence Kessenick, Jolene Marion, David Favre, Roger Galvin, Marcelle Philpott-Bryant, Arthur Margolis, Laurens Silver, Nancy Ober and me (Joyce Tischler), made up the initial Board and, along with Sarah Luick and other Board members who joined soon after, this group spent hundreds of hours engaged in discussion, analysis, research, and planning for lawsuits that would challenge the treatment of nonhuman animals.¹⁶

Steve and Sarah started a local chapter of AFAR/ALDF in Boston, Massachusetts (hereinafter, "Boston chapter"). They were eager to dig their teeth into their first lawsuit, and Steve, the passionate litigator, was at the helm of the effort. An activist campaign to

¹¹ Telephone interview with Jeff Fraser, Partner, Fraser & Galanopoulos (May 13, 2024) [hereinafter, Fraser interview]. Telephone interview with Debra J. Slater, founding Partner, Slater & Small PLLC (May 14, 2024).

¹² Telephone interview with Mary Lou Masterpole, LICSW social work care manager with AZA Care Management (May 11, 2024); Fraser interview note 11.

¹³ Fraser interview note 11.

¹⁴ HOLZER, H.M. Editor's Comment, Animal Rts. L. Rep., Jan. 1982, at 15.

¹⁵ Certificate of Amendment of Articles of Incorporation, Animal Legal Defense Fund (filed Nov. 5, 1984).

¹⁶ TISCHLER, J. The History of Animal Law, Part I (1972-1987), Stan. J. of Animal L. & Pol'y 1 (2008) 24, https://www.animallaw.info/sites/default/files/tischler2008.pdf.

ban the production and sale of veal from male calves kept in intensive confinement and fed an iron-deficient diet that rendered them anemic, was gaining momentum. European animal advocates were making great strides in passing legislation to protect farmed animals, but the American farmed animal movement lagged far behind. The Board of ALDF had been discussing veal calves and its frustration that these animals were treated so badly, wondering what could be done to help them.¹⁷ Steve proposed developing a lawsuit to challenge that egregious practice. Because all of the chapter members had full-time jobs, progress on the development of the lawsuit was slow: they were volunteers, working in their spare time. The chapter members spent a full year researching the many harms done to the calves, the human health risks to humans ingesting animals fed antibiotics, the ever-present thorn of standing to sue, and the potential application of various state and federal laws. They could viscerally feel the suffering of the calves and deeply wanted to use this lawsuit to establish viable legal precedent that this practice was harmful and illegal. If they could accomplish that, it would mark an important step in ending the abuse of dairy calves and could have valuable ripple effects.

Finally, a complaint was drafted relying on Massachusetts consumer protection laws. The facts were strong and using consumer protection laws was an innovative approach to animal protection. Steve felt deeply that he was doing the work that he was meant to do. Steve and Sarah did the most work on the case and this was Sarah's first experience of the drive that Steve always brought to his work. "He had a spirit in him to keep going."¹⁸ As lead counsel, Steve directed the lawsuit. The defendant was the Provimi Corporation, the originator of the special fed, intensive confinement system for calves. The legal team asked the court to enjoin Provimi from selling the meat of the calves raised in this system, because it violated the anti-cruelty laws of the state and the meat lacked iron, making it tainted and unhealthy. They also asked the court to mandate any seller of special-fed veal in Massachusetts to include on the package a truthful description of how the calves were raised, so that consumers could make an informed purchasing choice.

The Boston chapter combined the lawsuit with an educational and media campaign, helpful approaches that later became an integral part of a litigation effort. This early lawsuit was at the forefront of efforts to attack the conditions in which dairy calves were raised. The publicity that they were able to attract was quite positive and they took every opportunity to educate the public about the suffering of the calves and the public health risk of eating animals raised on antibiotics.¹⁹ The Boston Globe ran a full-page story about the lawsuit, the short miserable lives of crate-raised, special fed veal

¹⁷ Telephone interview with Sarah Luick (May 15, 2024) [hereinafter, Luick interview].

¹⁸ Id.

¹⁹ Id.

calves, and included a photo of the lawyers, with Oscar, a calf who was in sanctuary.²⁰ The approach of using consumer protection law was a sound one. Yet, as with many of the early litigation efforts, the result was not what Steve and the chapter had hoped for. In 1986, the trial judge held that the state consumer protection law was preempted by federal and state laws regulating labeling, packaging and marketing of meat.²¹ For what it was worth, Steve disagreed and felt that even though there were federal laws, the state consumer protection laws could mandate that consumers be informed about the cruelty and the human health issues.

Again, there were lessons to be learned and Steve was a dedicated student. He realized, as did the other Board members of ALDF, that relying on volunteer efforts by attorneys was self-limiting; opposing counsel were on salaries, and able to do this stressful, deadline-oriented work during their normal business hours. The Boston chapter members were exhausted by the pro bono litigation effort and the chapter stopped holding regular meetings once the case ended. This brought home the fact that a well-funded national effort, with paid staff, was needed. Steve was also learning that in a legal system that reveres the status quo, representing the interests of nonhuman animals was completely alien to judges, and he was intrigued by the question: how do I get through to these judges and help them see that they have the power to enforce laws that will protect animals?

Steve not only litigated, he assumed the duty of serving as the President of the Board of ALDF from 1985-1995, working very closely with me in building ALDF and its programs. This involved a great deal of administrative work, and quarterly in-person meetings with the Executive Committee of the Board, the group that worked mostly closely on guiding the agency. My recollection is that Steve and I spent hours on the telephone on an almost daily basis (computers and the Internet were not in common use yet). His Board work was completely pro bono, and I have no idea how he managed to fit it in while working for his private practice clients. He never complained.

On top of that, Steve was doing a lot of work with Boston area activists, and became the President of a Boston activist group, Citizens to End Animal Suffering and Exploitation, Inc. ("CEASE"). The activists were thrilled to have a lawyer involved with their work and Steve enjoyed working with passionate people who were frustrated by the plight of animals in various exploitative situations.²² Working with CEASE brought Steve opportunities to flex his creative muscle, to see how far the law would go and sample what he could do.²³ He didn't care that judges would laugh at him or yell at him,

²⁰ Id.

²¹ Animal Legal Def. Fund Bos., Inc. v. Provimi Veal Corp., 626 F. Supp. 278 (D. Mass.), aff'd, 802 F.2d 440 (1st Cir. 1986).

²² Luick interview note 17.

²³ Id.

or that opposing counsel didn't like him. "He became immune to people telling him that he was wrong."²⁴ "He was sure that he was right, and he had found a way to use the legal system to do what was right."²⁵

Almost every lawsuit that animal protection lawyers brought faced a standing to sue challenge. Steve wanted to test the waters of naming a nonhuman animal as a plaintiff and took the opportunity to do that in Citizens to End Animal Suffering and Exploitation, Inc. v. The New England Aquarium,²⁶ filed in the United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts, which is part of the federal court system. The organizational plaintiffs in the lawsuit were CEASE, ALDF, and the Progressive Animal Welfare Society, Inc. ("PAWS"), but the first listed plaintiff was Kama, a captive dolphin who was at the center of the controversy. Kama had been born at Sea World in San Diego, California, in 1981, and transferred to The New England Aquarium in Boston, MA in 1986 for breeding and public display. According to the Aquarium, Kama did not fit in well and could not be displayed. Therefore, in 1987, both the Aquarium and the U.S. Navy contacted the U.S. Department of Commerce and requested authorization for the Aquarium to sell and transport Kama to the Naval Oceans Systems Center in California, where he would be used in sonar experiments. Instead of issuing a permit, the Commerce Department sent the Navy a "Letter of Agreement" to authorize the transaction.

On behalf of the plaintiffs, Steve claimed that the Letter of Agreement constituted a "taking"²⁷ of a protected marine mammal under federal Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), 16 U.S.C. § 1362, and as such, was a violation of the MMPA. The result of the litigation was disappointing: the court held that all of the organizational plaintiffs lacked standing. With regard to Kama's standing to sue in his own name, the court reviewed the few U.S. decisions that discussed nonhuman animals and standing, and held that the MMPA "expressly authorizes suits brought by persons, not animals. This court will not impute to Congress or the President the intention to provide standing to a marine mammal without a clear statement in the statute."²⁸ The court granted summary judgement to the defendants and that was where the case ended.

But, once again, the litigation formed part of the continuing education of Steve Wise. To paraphrase what was claimed by the prolific American inventor, Thomas Edison,

²⁴ Fraser interview note 11.

²⁵ Luick interview note 17.

²⁶ Citizens to End Animal Suffering & Exploitation, Inc. v. New England Aquarium, 836 F. Supp. 45 (D. Mass.1993).

²⁷ The MMPA defines "taking" to include "harass, hunt, capture, or kill, or attempt to harass, hunt, capture, or kill any marine mammal." 16 U.S.C. § 1362(13).

²⁸ 836 F. Supp. 45, 50 (1993).

Steve wasn't failing, he was simply finding another way that wouldn't work.²⁹ He pulled away from local activism, and began to devote more time to ALDF, which was developing public interest litigation aimed at creating change on a broader level.³⁰ Steve was focusing more on public interest lawsuits that would impact a greater number of animals and challenge harms committed by large corporations and institutions.³¹

Yet, at the same time, Steve was starting a very personal academic journey, searching for a deeper understanding of personhood, standing, and the severe limitations placed on the ability of an individual nonhuman animal to seek redress of wrongs done to them within the legal system. He took a deep dive in the ocean of what legal rights were in place for humans, how those rights had developed over the millennia and expanded to groups of humans who had been rightless (e.g., enslaved humans, women, children, mentally ill people), always asking the underlying question: how could these serve as models that would work for animals? As Steve explained,

> For the next seven years, I haunted the Boston University libraries, immersing myself in the history of law, especially Western and ancient law, drawing from sources as far back as the time at which law had first been written down, Mesopotamian, Hebrew, Greek, Roman, Civil, and Common law, while seeking to understand where law came from, where legal rights originated, who had rights and who did not, and how rights were attained by those who lacked them. I grounded my arguments in the values of "liberty" and "equality" as they were enshrined in Anglo-American common law, in the United States and state constitutions, and in the constitutions of numerous other countries, as well as in numerous post-World War II international human rights treaties.³²

He loved doing the research. He would get excited about his legal discoveries, which helped lead him closer to understanding: how do we do this? There was no stopping him.³³ He took this enormous knowledge base and developed one extraordinary law review article after another at a dazzling pace.³⁴ As a result of this academic work, Steve was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the limitations of focusing on welfare and

²⁹ The quote attributed to Thomas Edison is, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." RATCLIFFE, S. Thomas Alva Edison, Oxford Ref. (2016), https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00003960 (last visited May 19, 2024).

³⁰ The PILS Project, What is Public Interest Litigation?, https://pilsni.org/what-is-public-interest-litigation/

³¹ Luick interview note 17.

³² WISE, S. Introduction to Animal Law Book, Syra. L. Rev. 67 (2017) 7 [hereinafter S. Wise].

³³ Luick interview note 17.

³⁴ WISE, S. How Non-human Animals Were Trapped in a Nonexistent Universe, Animal L. 1 (1995) 15; WISE, S. The Legal Thinghood of Non-human Animals, B.C. Env. Aff. L. Rev. 23 (1996) 471; WISE, S. Legal Rights for Animals: The Case for Chimpanzees and Bonobos, Animal L. 2 (1996) 179; WISE, S. Hardly a Revolution--The Eligibility of Non-human Animals for Dignity-Rights in a Liberal Democracy, VT. L. Rev. 22 (1998) 793; WISE, S. Animal Thing to Animal Person—Thoughts on Time, Place and Theories, Animal L. 5 (1999) 61; WISE, S. The Entitlement of Chimpanzees to the Common Law Writs of Habeas Corpus and De Homine Replegiando, Golden Gate U. L. Rev. 37

protection lawsuits. He constantly questioned himself and pushed himself in a direction that others did not. He had come to an important realization, "I could take all these animal cases and it would be only a slight drop in the bucket of animal abuse. I would spend an entire career nibbling at the edges. The only way I could make a substantial impact was to focus on making systemic change."³⁵

By the mid-1990s, Steve had decided that he needed to shift course once again, and devote himself full-time to promoting the legal theories he was writing about in the law review articles, but to a wider audience.³⁶ His laser vision was now focused on writing his first "trade" book, which later became titled, Rattling the Cage. No one else was stepping forward to do that sort of intensive work. He had entered the next phase of his animal law career, starting with the law review articles, and then the books,³⁷ in which he offered readers a comprehensive understanding of the property status of animals, and in which he painstakingly advanced groundbreaking theories about personhood for nonhuman animals. But, this meant separating from the time– consuming work of ALDF, where the Board and I were immersed in the development of major impact welfare/protection litigation. We all realized that that we had reached a fork in the road, and that it was time for Steve to separate his trajectory from that of the ALDF attorneys, a group that included his close friends, as well as his colleagues. Sometime around 1995, Steve departed from ALDF and ventured into an exciting new stage of his career and his life.

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³⁵ Telephone interview with Steven Wise (Dec. 6, 2010). See also TISCHLER, J. A Brief History of Animal Law, Part II (1985-2011), Stan. J. of Animal L. & Pol'y 5 (2012) 27, 48.

³⁶ S. Wise note 32, at 10.

³⁷ WISE, S. M. Rattling the cage: Toward legal rights for animals (2000), Drawing the line: Science and the case for animal rights (2003), Though the heavens may fall: The landmark trial that led to the end of human slavery (2005), and An American trilogy: Death, slavery and dominion along the banks of the Cape Fear River (2009).

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