

[Speaker 1:](#) Welcome to Office Hours, a production of the University of Pennsylvania's Office of University Communications. Today, we knock on the door of James Serpell, the Marie A. Moore Professor of Ethics & Animal Welfare at the School of Veterinary Medicine and the Director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals in Society. Serpell studies behavioral phenotypes of dogs and cats, a specialty study in the world of veterinary medicine as veterinary behavior itself is a rare expertise to have, with only about 70 veterinarians board certified in the specialty in the United States. Serpell works to broaden access to that well of knowledge while deepening our understanding of our companion's behaviors.

[Speaker 1:](#) Here, Serpell discusses the origins of his interest in animal behavior starting with a parrot and what he's working on right now; plus, his knack for cooking, an odd interaction during a behavior consult involving a dog and a TV, and why we can all stand to be a little less idealistic.

[Speaker 1:](#) So I guess for starters, let people know what is that your expertise is and kind of what you're working, and then I'm hoping we can kind of talk a little bit about how one gets into this work in the first place if you grow up with the animals around.

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah. So what my background ... I'm a PhD. I did my PhD on animal behavior, actually parrot behavior, but I decided there was no future in that so I went into really looking at dogs and cats and their relationships with people. Yes, I did grow up with animals, and in fact, the family mythology is that I'd much prefer animals to people from about the age of two onwards, so that would make sense, I guess.

[Speaker 1:](#) Is that a common thread among people who do what you do?

[James Serpell:](#) I don't know that anyone's ever actually evaluated that. It would be an interesting thing to look at. There's certainly some scientific evidence that people with strong attachments to their animals in childhood tend to go on and be more involved in animal-related issues and more activism, but it's a bit difficult to know what's cause and effect.

[Speaker 1:](#) But you were partial to parrots?

[James Serpell:](#) Well, yes. The parrot thing was one of those strange things where I met a parrot when I was traveling in Indonesia. The poor parrot was chained to a perch outside a police station and looked really miserable, so I decided I would make the police sergeant an offer he couldn't refuse and buy the parrot off him. So I adopted this parrot and it turned out to be the most extraordinary creature, I mean, in terms of its behavior and its strong attachment for me. I took it from Indonesia back to the U.K. where I was living at that time and lived with this parrot for many years. I became fascinated about why this particular type of

parrot was so expressive and histrionic. It had very, very elaborate displays and beautiful colors.

[James Serpell:](#) And so, I actually designed a research project around this one parrot, or I should say, that one parrot was the catalyst for designing a research project on parrots of that genus.

[Speaker 1:](#) Wow.

[James Serpell:](#) And then I got funding to go back and pursue that in more detail.

[Speaker 1:](#) So how old were you whenever you did this pretty crazy impulse purchase by most standards?

[James Serpell:](#) I must have been about 19 and I was traveling with a friend in Indonesia. He was actually a fish biologist. But we wandered into this little town and there was this poor parrot and I just felt sorry for the parrot.

[Speaker 1:](#) Was it kind of strange to do research on your own companion?

[James Serpell:](#) No. Well, I didn't feel it was. At the time, I just became really, really fascinated by this bird and why it behaved the way it did and I thought somebody should study this. So I kind of put together a project and sort of marched around. Eventually found a professor at the University of Liverpool who had some expertise in this sort of taxonomy of these parrot but didn't know anything about their behavior. He turned out to be a very useful ally and he supported this and helped me get a grant to do the work, so it all sort of fell into place.

[Speaker 1:](#) Did you get satisfying answers from your research?

[James Serpell:](#) You know, like with all research, you get more questions than you get answers.

[Speaker 1:](#) Of course.

[James Serpell:](#) But it was ... Yeah, some of it was quite satisfying.

[Speaker 1:](#) What were you mostly looking for?

[James Serpell:](#) I was looking for ... So you have a diversity of species or their really sub-species, and these different island populations in Indonesia, and each species has a very strikingly different color pattern. So I was trying to relate these differences in color pattern to the differences in behavior, how they displayed. One thing led to another and it got very intriguing that, in a sense, I came to the conclusion that the behavior was driving the evolution of the plumage.

[James Serpell:](#)

So birds derive their kind of displays from sort of bits and pieces of ordinary behavior like scratching their head or flapping their wings or things like that and those little components in behavior become more exaggerated as the bird tries to impress a rival or impress a mate or something like that. Once it sort of opted for a particular movement then, I guess, evolution drives the selection for color patterns that accentuate those movements or make those movements stand out even more, and so you get this interesting way in which behavior drives evolution.

[Speaker 1:](#)

Is that true of other animal species?

[James Serpell:](#)

I think it's true much more so than people realize. So the most famous example would be so-called Darwin's finches, the finches that live on the Galápagos Islands. Which the Galápagos Islands, they think were probably colonized by maybe one or two finch species from the mainland. But once they go there, the business of adapting to the different habitats in that environment led to the evolution of all kinds of shapes and sizes, changes in the size of the beak and things like that. So, some of them started to eat insects and got little, thin beaks and some of them started to eat really big seeds and things like that and developed great, big, like parrot-like beaks to crunch the seeds.

[James Serpell:](#)

So again, behavior, in a sense, is driving evolution and that's also to some extent true with things like dogs, which is what I primarily study now. Where, unlike most domestic animals which we've selected for because they produce something useful for us like milk or meat or fur or whatever it is that we want from them, what we really want from dogs is different types of behavior. And so again, we are the environment that's selecting for this behavior and that morphologized the shape of the dog changes in response to that, so we go for the whole package as it were. We select for the behavior and then we select the kind of body shape and size and so on that goes best with that behavior, and you get this incredible diversification of dogs.

[Speaker 1:](#)

What do you think is the desirable behavior? I feel like we often talk a lot about what bad behavior is with dogs, what is good behavior?

[James Serpell:](#)

For humans?

[Speaker 1:](#)

For dogs.

[James Serpell:](#)

Well, I mean, it's very much conditional in what we want. So it depends what you want your dog for and it also depends, I guess, a lot on your personal preferences, your personality, your prior experience, that type of thing is all factoring into it. But deep down, we all want a dog that is sort of well-socialized and sociable, friendly, like us especially, and preferably is okay with other people. I mean, obviously, some people want a dog that's very savage towards other people or very aggressive at the front door or something like that because they maybe feel more threatened than I do, or you do. But for the most part, we

want a dog that doesn't embarrass us or cause us liability or anything like that, but is also rewarding in a social sense and responds to us in a very social way. Of course, that's exactly the ways in which dogs differ from their ancestor, the wolf, that's what we've predominantly selected for.

[Speaker 1:](#) Would that be different for say, a working dog?

[James Serpell:](#) It is up to a point, yes. Working dogs clearly, if you have a dog you want to use for whatever it is, herding sheep or hunting, they have to have the right characteristics for those activities. But still, nine times out of 10, you also want an animal that is cooperative, that responds to your gestures and your signals, and likes being with you. So that's always in the background although you can select for these other traits as well, like herding sheep or barking at the postman or whatever.

[Speaker 1:](#) I was going through TSA the other day for a flight and I went through a line that had one of the dogs sniffing through the bags. They had these signs up saying, "Don't pet the dog," which is irresistible for some people, they do it anyway, but I had to wonder how much behavior training had to go into that.

[James Serpell:](#) A lot. I mean, there's obviously some dogs are predisposed to be better at that type of activity than others. They have to have a good nose, they have to have a willingness to work and to respond to sort of rewards. Often these scenting dogs, these odor sniffing dogs are rewarded with toys more than they're rewarded with food because food's often thought to be a bit of a distraction to them. But if they're highly motivated, for example, to get a particular toy that they like playing with then you can use that as a tool to reward them when they do the right thing. In other words, when they find the object that is being sought. But the process of training them to actually find that apple that you left in your suitcase by mistake is a very long, drawn out process, or that, finding an explosive or finding anything like that, that takes a lot of effort.

[Speaker 1:](#) Have we gotten better at training dogs?

[James Serpell:](#) Yes, I think we have. People are much more focused now on, what they call reward-based training. In the olden days, training was much more authoritarian, tends to involve a lot of punishment when the dog didn't do what you wanted it to do. Those days, I'm happy to say, are more or less behind us and we're moving much towards the idea that instead of punishing the animal for its errors, you reward it when it does that right thing. That turns out to be, not only a more effective training method, but it also improves the relationship with the trainer because the dog's not expecting some kind of unexpected punishment for something it didn't know it did, which is often the case with people. I mean, to this day, you'll see people in the park or whatever punishing their dog for doing something that it has no idea what it's done.

[James Serpell:](#) So then the dog gets us confused and is also learning that the owner is a sort of strange and unpredictable creature that will occasionally lash out.

[Speaker 1:](#) Is it hard to make that kind of a mainstream message that that doesn't necessarily work?

[James Serpell:](#) I think we're getting there slowly, but people have short tempers. They react to their dogs or they just don't bother to learn about more appropriate training methods. They just think, "Oh, well, this is how my family used to treat dogs when I was a kid, so I'm gonna do the same." I find it quite depressing at times to see how much punishment is sort of given to these animals that, nine times out of 10, have no idea why they're being punished 'cause they're just being dogs.

[Speaker 1:](#) I mean, I imagine that has to be frustrating just thinking about how often ... It's sort of a boys will be boys, dogs will be dogs sort of situation for a lot of people, I imagine.

[James Serpell:](#) Mm-hmm (affirmative). It's partly that and just partly, dogs are so amenable, so compliant, so willing to do what we want. So we have sort of a great deal of power over them and I think people are inclined to abuse that power such is the matter, especially with these little dogs.

[James Serpell:](#) I saw somebody the other day, their little dog ... I forget what it was. A Pomeranian or something was very excited to see another dog and was sort of lunging forward trying to see the other dog. The owner was just, literally hung it by the leash, so it was suspended above the ground just to stop it lunging. I was looking at this and thinking, "Really? Would you do that to your child?" Maybe they would, I don't know, but it seemed very inappropriate at the time.

[Speaker 1:](#) Wow. Yeah. I recently learned that dogs get depressed too and are treated with antidepressants. I have a friend who just his dog on Prozac which is fascinating to me. But my understanding of it is, it's more to treat anxiety, is that right?

[James Serpell:](#) Yes, I think that's the case. Depression's one of those tricky ones. Finding a good animal model for depression is actually quite difficult, but certainly dogs get anxious and many dogs show a lot of anxiety-related problems. Yes, these serotonin reuptake inhibitors and things like that, these drugs that have been developed to treat depression, anxiety in humans have indeed been found to be quite useful for dogs.

[Speaker 1:](#) We're using exactly the same drug, right, so it's like Busiprone that a human might take, same thing that ...

[James Serpell:](#) Yep.

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah. Most drugs that work on humans are pretty good with dogs, but there are small ones where the dog has a different metabolism or whatever and it doesn't do well on that particular drug that's fine with humans. Cats are much more difficult apparently.

[Speaker 1:](#) Cats are on antidepressants too?

[James Serpell:](#) I don't know if many cats are on antidepressants, but there probably are some. There probably sort of are anxiolytic agents that you can give to cats safely.

[Speaker 1:](#) Do you study cat behavior very much?

[James Serpell:](#) A little bit, not so much as dogs, but I'm trying to catch up. I feel cats have been left behind.

[Speaker 1:](#) Are they more difficult to understand?

[James Serpell:](#) They are rather weird, yes. Cats are strange.

[Speaker 1:](#) "Rather weird", that is a way to put it.

[James Serpell:](#) They're not as easily pigeonholed as dogs. So I've been studying sort of behavior and personality in dogs for a long, long time and it's very to kind of classify dogs into different types, sort of personality types. With cats, it's much more difficult. Cats are very idiosyncratic animals, and in some ways, very hard to predict.

[Speaker 1:](#) Is your study of cats pretty recent?

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah, in the last few years, I've suddenly kind of got more focused on cats. Actually, in terms of numbers, they are the most popular companion animal now in the USA. So they outnumber dogs, although fewer households have cats. So, that means that the houses that have cats tend to have more cats, but they are a very popular pet. I feel that all this research that's been going into sort of dog behavior and dog cognition recently has really left the cat behind.

[Speaker 1:](#) Do you think a cat is more resilient with behavior than dogs?

[James Serpell:](#) Resilient?

[Speaker 1:](#) Yeah.

[James Serpell:](#) In what sense?

[Speaker 1:](#) In a sense that if you were to try and punish a cat, I think, maybe they would not put up with it at all-

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah, I think-

[Speaker 1:](#) ... and not even bother wondering why.

[James Serpell:](#) That's partly because cats are less socially-oriented than dogs. That doesn't mean that cats don't miss their owners and that sort of thing. They do like to have company, but they lack the same kind of social skills that dogs have. So dogs learn about social situations very rapidly and adapt very rapidly for the most part, whereas cats often find that very difficult. So if an owner punishes a cat, often the look the cat will give is like puzzlement almost. It's like, "What?" They can't understand what's going on at all.

[James Serpell:](#) Whereas, dogs, I think, get it at some level because dog society is somewhat hierarchical anyway and so they kind of get the message that some individuals are kind of above them in the hierarchy. But cats, I don't think get that at all. Every cat is its own master, so to speak, and it just cannot fathom it when suddenly the owner, who it depends on, suddenly becomes aggressive.

[Speaker 1:](#) Is there any major takeaway that you've had since you started studying cats?

[James Serpell:](#) Well, confusion, I think more than anything else. They're very interesting but difficult animals to fathom.

[Speaker 1:](#) So when you're studying and doing your research, what does often look like?

[James Serpell:](#) I have to admit, most of the research I do is done through owner reports, through questionnaires, surveys, that type of thing, just because it's a way of getting information about very large numbers of individuals. The advantage of that is that you can make sort of generalizations about breed differences and things like that. You can also get a sense of how prevalent behavior problems are, for example, in whole population because up until quite recently, we really didn't have any idea. Because the only kind of handle we could get on the prevalence of particular behavior problems, whether it's aggression or anxiety or something like that, was based on the people who actually are driven to the extent of taking the animal to an expert and saying, "My dog's become too aggressive." But you don't know how many other dogs out there are also showing aggression at some level. So that was one of my primary interests in these kind of survey-type methods was to try and get a sense of big data figures for prevalence of these types of problems.

[Speaker 1:](#) Right, and you along with Carlo Siracusa have a platform, right? That's where the telemedicine effort to collect these surveys of-

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah, and before we applied it to telemedicine, we developed survey methods which we were just putting out there online and inviting dog owners and inviting cat owners to complete it for their dogs. So we now have a database of, I don't know, somewhere in excess of 50,000 behavioral evaluations of dogs of

all different types and varieties, and some background information about those dogs, so we can draw some conclusions about the sorts of demographic factors or developmental factors that contribute to behavior problems.

[James Serpell:](#)

But what Carlo and I are doing now is applying that sort of approach to somebody who has a dog that has a problem can go online, do an evaluation, get a report back that suggests that animal does have a problem. In other words, it's not within the normal range for most dogs, and then contact their veterinarian and arrange a consulting relationship with our behavior service here at Penn Vet.

[James Serpell:](#)

It's complicated by the fact that veterinary laws in the United States prevent us, for example, accepting a client over the internet from another part of the country. We can't do that. We're not allowed to directly engage in a sort of doctor/client to patient relationship that way. They have to come into our office and we have to be able to do an examination and all that. But what we can do is we can consult with vets around the country. So as long as the client has their own vet and can have a relationship with that vet then we can have this sort of three-way to keep it going.

[Speaker 1:](#)

That's clever.

[James Serpell:](#)

Yeah.

[Speaker 1:](#)

And that's been successful so far?

[James Serpell:](#)

Well, we're just about to officially launch it, so I can't say whether it's gonna be successful or not. We are sort of, on the brink.

[Speaker 1:](#)

But the idea is that there's a few behaviorists, right?

[James Serpell:](#)

That's right, and most vets don't get any training in behavior.

[Speaker 1:](#)

Why do you think that is?

[James Serpell:](#)

Well, you have to learn so much to be a veterinarian and I think just behavior's fallen off the radar for the most part. It's too specialized and typically you can't make a lot of money as a veterinary behaviorist because each consultation takes too long. It's not a quick and easy thing to do a consult, and so, I think most veterinarians, they don't know enough about it to feel comfortable in that area and also they don't want to spend the time learning about it because they don't think there's enough there for them to generate the extra income for themselves. So I think there is a niche for something like this where vets can have access to the kind of expertise they need in order to their own clients.



[Speaker 1:](#) What do you make of TV shows and reality TV show that try and glamorize is a bit?

[James Serpell:](#) Well, I think some are good and some are not so good. I mean, the ones that are focused on dog trainers have done more harm than good by espousing a particular style of controlling dog behavior and I think that sort of set things back quite badly. I know if you talk to other people in our behavior clinic, a lot of people they see are people who've tried some method that they've seen on TV and it's made the problem worse so they've had to-

[Speaker 1:](#) Wow, so it's really that pervasive?

[James Serpell:](#) Yep, yeah.

[Speaker 1:](#) Is there a good program that you can think of?

[James Serpell:](#) I don't watch this stuff, but I've heard of it. I know there are sort of people out there watching sort of shows about vets in practice.

[Speaker 1:](#) Is there a general resource that you think is good for behavior if people want to learn more?

[James Serpell:](#) Well, there are many and that's the problem. The problem is actually finding the good ones and being able to filter out the stuff that's not so good. Unfortunately, everybody who's ever trained a dog feels like they're an expert and that's a problem because many of them are promoting a style of interacting with the animal that's actually bad for its welfare and is likely to make the problem that they had even worse.

[Speaker 1:](#) What about today's vet students inspires you most?

[James Serpell:](#) What inspires me the most is, A, how clever they are and how hard they work. I mean, really to become a vet now, you have to work your ass off. It's incredibly hard work. There's so much to learn. It's almost an impossible amount and I really take my hat off to them. They work so hard, really impressive.

[Speaker 1:](#) Well, do you have pets?

[James Serpell:](#) I do.

[Speaker 1:](#) I know you had a parrot.

[James Serpell:](#) Not any more. My parrot was stolen.

[Speaker 1:](#) How long did the parrot live to be?

[James Serpell:](#) I will never know 'cause he was stolen.

[Speaker 1:](#) Oh no.

[James Serpell:](#) It was a big tragedy.

[Speaker 1:](#) That's so heartbreaking.

[James Serpell:](#) It was. It was very distressing.

[Speaker 1:](#) I guess you didn't get another one?

[James Serpell:](#) No, after that, I didn't. He wasn't an ideal pet, he was very destructive. I lived in a small kind of shared house where I had a room when I was a graduate student, and he basically destroyed this room this single-handed. I mean, I kept him in cage when I was out at work during the day, but when I came home in the evening, I would let him out so he had sort of liberty of the room. He would spend his time, basically, dismantling and destroying everything in the room.

[Speaker 1:](#) Did people often come over and wonder why you had a parrot?

[James Serpell:](#) Yes, and he became very aggressive towards other people as well. He was very jealous, so he regarded me as his kind of partner and didn't take kindly to me having any kind of social life other than him.

[Speaker 1:](#) Wow.

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah, and so he violently attack my sort of, my girlfriends, anybody who came into the room essentially. But I had learned to deal with it, but then I went to-

[Speaker 1:](#) For relationship status, it's complicated, right?

[James Serpell:](#) Very, very. I've heard this from other parrot owners that they can become very, very possessive and difficult.

[James Serpell:](#) Yes, I had to go away, I had to do some traveling and I had some contacts at local zoo and I said, "Would it be okay if he went into the collection at the zoo temporarily while I was away?" And they said, "Yeah, yeah, that's fine." So I thought he'd have a nice time because there were several other parrots of the same type there and he seemed to be okay, but then I came back at the end of my trip and he'd gone.

[James Serpell:](#) I said, "Where's he gone?"

[James Serpell:](#) They said, "Oh, he got stolen."

[James Serpell:](#) I said, "Who ... Does anyone know?"

[James Serpell:](#) "No."

[James Serpell:](#) They had no idea. I think it was one of the keepers, probably stole him, but no one could shed any light on it. They just said he's gone, so it was very heartbreaking.

[Speaker 1:](#) So you don't have any pets or you do?

[James Serpell:](#) Oh no, we do. Yes, we have a dog.

[Speaker 1:](#) Of course.

[James Serpell:](#) An old dog, 13 years old. Two young cats, who are the bane in my life because they are into everything and very destructive and leaping all over the furniture.

[Speaker 1:](#) I've never heard such a thing of a cat.

[James Serpell:](#) They're just out of control, these two. And then a great many aquarium fish. My wife's very keen on-

[Speaker 1:](#) That's a lot of upkeep-

[James Serpell:](#) ... tropical fish.

[Speaker 1:](#) ... for an aquarium.

[James Serpell:](#) Yes.

[Speaker 1:](#) Yeah.

[James Serpell:](#) She's got about a dozen aquariums with different types of fish in them.

[Speaker 1:](#) Beautiful, though.

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah, they're nice, but yeah, it's a lot of upkeep, a lot of water changes, constant water changes.

[Speaker 1:](#) Yeah. How do you like to keep your house? You like to keep your house nice and tidy or ...

[James Serpell:](#) Well, yes, I'd like it to be tidy, but unfortunately, it never is. No, it's a mess.

[Speaker 1:](#) So what is a fond memory you have of working with an animal patient?

[James Serpell:](#) I don't actually deal with patients, so. Although I-

[Speaker 1:](#) Or like a consult or ...

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah, I did do some behavioral consultation when I was a post-doc in Cambridge, back in the U.K. I enjoyed it because I used to get such weird cases. There was one woman who brought her dog to see me and she said, "I need you to do something about my dog."

[James Serpell:](#) And I said, "Well, what's the problem?"

[James Serpell:](#) She said, "Well, he likes watching television."

[James Serpell:](#) So I said, "Well, what's wrong with that?"

[James Serpell:](#) She said, "Well, he doesn't like the show we like and if he gets bored with what we're watching he just starts barking until we switch it to something he does like. So he's controlling our lives."

[James Serpell:](#) In the end, I advised them to set him up with another TV in another room, which he could change the channel with a foot pedal. I don't know whether she ever took me up on the suggestion, but it seemed like a great idea.

[Speaker 1:](#) Oh, wow. You'll never know.

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah. I said, "What kind of shows does he like?"

[James Serpell:](#) She said, "Oh, he likes those American cop dramas with lots of action in them."

[James Serpell:](#) Apparently, that was her view, and that was it. And also anything with wildlife, like nature shows.

[Speaker 1:](#) Well, just keep Animal Planet on all the time.

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah.

[Speaker 1:](#) Or Discovery or something. What do you miss about the U.K.?

[James Serpell:](#) At the moment, not much.

[Speaker 1:](#) Touché.

[James Serpell:](#) What do I miss about the U.K.? More than anything else, I miss the freedom to just walk about in the countryside. It's very liberal in that sense, that even though it's private property, the whole country crisscrossed by, what they call footpaths. And so, as soon as you get out of the town, there are these footpaths

that just go off across the countryside, through fields, woods, pass people's houses, all over the place. There's nothing anybody can do about it. Nobody can come out and tell you, you're on private property, they have to accept it. It just creates this sort of feeling of freedom that's very, very nice, which regrettably, you don't have here. If you go marching off across someone's private property here, there's a real risk associated with it.

[Speaker 1:](#) Where do you like to go for a walk here if you need some peace?

[James Serpell:](#) Well, where do I go? You have to go out to one of these parks, somewhere like Ridley Creek or somewhere like that, which involves sort of getting and doing a 40 minute car drive and dealing with traffic and all the rest. It's not so easy here.

[Speaker 1:](#) Do you have a happy place like that?

[James Serpell:](#) I mean, there are places we go, yeah. We go out to Ridley Creek a lot, we go up into various parts of Pennsylvania. Jim Thorpe, that area around there is nice. We kind of go off, but it's all a major undertaking. You gotta plan it. It's not something you can just do spontaneously like you can in England.

[Speaker 1:](#) Right. Do you like to cook?

[James Serpell:](#) I do. That's my main hobby.

[Speaker 1:](#) Ah, so what are you cooking up lately?

[James Serpell:](#) I kind of chop and change. I'm very fond of Italian food, so I do a lot of Italian food. I'm getting quite into Asian foods, Szechuan, Chinese food. I found a nice book, but it's quite handy for that. I try all kind of things. I'm experimenting with various vegetarian meals and that sort of thing, I try and kind of ring the changes.

[Speaker 1:](#) Is there something in particular you like about cooking? Is it the process or is it the result?

[James Serpell:](#) It's both, both, unless the results are a disaster. But yeah, I enjoy the process, the sort of creative process is enjoyable. And yes, it has that added advantage that you can eat your creation and hopefully it's delicious and that sort of produces sort of a warm glow, so to speak.

[Speaker 1:](#) Sure. What Italian restaurant do you like?

[James Serpell:](#) Well, that's an interesting one. I hardly ever go to Italian restaurants 'cause I ... This is gonna sound really arrogant, but I actually prefer my own Italian food to most of the food I get in Italian restaurants. That's to say there are some really pizza places, Vetri Pizza and places like that, which I love those 'cause I know

making pizza is really tough actually 'cause just getting the dough right and all that is really very difficult. It's easier to just go to somewhere that really knows what it's doing. I like those, but for most Italian food, I kind of prefer my own.

[Speaker 1:](#)

That's fair. What do you think is an overrated virtue?

[James Serpell:](#)

An overrated virtue ... Idealism, maybe, just 'cause it gets us all into so much trouble. Whether it's political or religious, ideology is just a disaster, I think, for the world. At the same time, we seem to uphold people with strong ideals as being good and I'm not sure really they are.

[Speaker 1:](#)

What is your favorite season?

[James Serpell:](#)

Hm, definitely not winter. I guess spring and fall, but for completely different reasons. I like the sort of changeableness. But one's very much associated with sort of growth and the other's with decay and that sort of thing, but they both have a sort of strange beauty to them but for different reasons.

[Speaker 1:](#)

Where would you live if you couldn't live here or if didn't?

[James Serpell:](#)

That's a good question. I think maybe I'd sort of divide my time between Scotland and Costa Rica. Scotland, because it's kind, and I feel it's in my blood. I like, something about the landscape resonates with me even though the weather's awful, and the midges are awful and all the rest of it, but my family, well, bits of my family, certainly came originally from Scotland.

[James Serpell:](#)

Costa Rica, just because it's like this perfect little country with a good political system, no military, good health system, good education, and incredible wildlife, just incredible wildlife. They seem to kind of got it all sort out. I hope and pray they can keep it that way because it really is a remarkable place.

[Speaker 1:](#)

What animal have you not seen in your life that you would really like to see up close?

[James Serpell:](#)

Oh, hundreds, hundreds and hundreds. I'd love to see a snow leopard in its native habitat. Wow, so many ... Some of the Siberian tigers, something like that. It'd be interesting to see a panda where it lives as opposed to in a zoo, which is where we're all familiar with seeing these animals. They are native to parts of China and it'd be really interesting to see one where it belongs.

[Speaker 1:](#)

Do you do safaris or retreats?

[James Serpell:](#)

I haven't for a long time. I used to when I was younger. It's just getting so expensive now, but whenever we get the chance, my wife and I, we'll go off and do a vacation somewhere. Costa Rica or somewhere else or Mexico or

somewhere where there's either interesting archeology or interesting natural history that's kind of our two main focuses, I'd say.

[Speaker 1:](#) What is the most impressive animal that you've seen?

[James Serpell:](#) Wow, most impressive ... When I was in Indonesia, I encountered a 28-foot python in the forest. It had just eaten-

[Speaker 1:](#) A far cry from a dog or a cat.

[James Serpell:](#) Right. It had just eaten a pig, and unfortunately, it had been killed by the villagers, but it was all laid out there and I sort of paced out it's length. That's about as big as they get. It was a reticulated python and that was impressive.

[Speaker 1:](#) I imagine it would be. Lastly, what gives you hope? Interpret that however you'd like.

[James Serpell:](#) Yeah, what gives me hope ... I mean, people give me hope, actually, strangely enough. I mean, people are the problem, but they're also the solution. There are some people out there, especially young people I feel who have really ... They had enough with the way things are and are determined to make change but in a positive way, and I hope we give them the space to achieve what they can achieve because really, we need to change rapidly, otherwise we're really just gonna go down the tubes. But I'm hopeful that that generation will be able to move things forward and kick out the old guard.

[Speaker 1:](#) This podcast is a production of the Office of University Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. We hope you'll join us again soon for another session of Office Hours.