I AM AN ELEPHANT. I was not born for your amusement any more than you were born for mine. If you see me in the zoo, and especially in the circus, which arrived here yesterday, I am not there willingly. I was kidnapped and carried far, far away from my home and my family. I might have been an adult, but was more likely a baby when captured. Some "brave" hunter might have killed my mother - who could be dangerous - and sold me to a zoo or circus as an orphan. Elephants have large families, as you may know, each headed by a female. When a female is born into the family herd, she never leaves. Closely and happily, we travel together, eat together, play together, rest together. For elephants, every herd is a "village" in which the baby is cared for by its mother, and her sisters, and her mother. Being connected to family is as much a part of our being as our floppy ears. It harms us to be separated from our family. Can you understand that? Do you think I cannot feel loneliness and despair? As you may know, we elephants grieve for our dead.

We mourn for our family. Being disconnected from our family is like death for us. That is what we suffer when we are captured, and kidnapped, and sold. I am an elephant. I know you love seeing me, in the circus or in the zoo. I know some of you feel that, "It isn't a circus without elephants," or, "It isn't a zoo without elephants." You are thinking about yourself - what you want, what you like. Please think about me. I am an elephant. Do you think I was born to be chained to a stake, when my spirit cries to cross vast savannas? Do you think I was made to be pushed into cramped circus railway cars, to be hauled around the country like furniture? I perform for eight minutes for your pleasure, then spend endless hours in misery.

Some zoos try hard to accommodate my physical and psychological needs, but few succeed. My first need is spiritual and that was crushed when they stole me from my family in Africa. In Africa, my numbers are dwindling as poachers slaughter my kind for a few pounds of ivory. Imagine killing a majestic, five-ton animal for scraps of ivory. Does that offend your sense of decency? And yet you don't think twice about the slow death of imprisoning me in a barren cage. You believe letting your children get close to a captive elephant will make them appreciate me. Must that come at my expense? Can't they learn from videos, DVDs and Web casts, without my suffering? Can't you teach them about the dignity of living animals by leaving us alone? When you and your children see me do a circus "trick," you are delighted. You don't ask yourself, "How did they make that elephant stand on his head?" I never stand on my head in the wild. Was it positive reinforcement, as Ringling says? Was it through abuse, as undercover videos have shown? I am an elephant.

My second need is for physical stimulation, by walking. My long legs are built to move. I walk a dozen or more miles a day, when I am free to. No circus, and few zoos, give me what I need. And still I hear you want to see me in a zoo, you want to see me perform circus "tricks." You want to see me because you love me, you say. If you love me, don't do this to me.