



Florida

### **Saving Our Best Friends**

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by Michael O. Schwager

A friend of mine, wanting to adopt a puppy for her children, asked me to join her on a trip to the Broward County animal shelter, Animal Care & Regulation, near Ft. Lauderdale Airport, in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida.

I am both glad and sad to report that I escorted my friend to this so-called sanctuary, known by most as "Animal Control." Glad because the visit meant that a little puppy would be saved, and adopted by a loving family. Sad because for any lover of animals to bear witness with open eyes to what transpires at this institution is a horrific experience. It is in reality anything but a sanctuary.

Upon entering the lobby, the first thing I noticed was a huge sign to my right, a disclaimer by the handlers at Animal Control, renouncing any responsibility or guilt for the fact that the fate of beautiful and innocent dogs, puppies, cats and kittens have been placed in the hands of these bureaucrats.

I soon learned the reason for this hand washing. These homeless pets are regularly and systematically euthanized. "Murdered" would be a better word for their fate.

At Animal Care & Regulation, one day a week is dedicated to the disposal of the latest crop of abandoned and stray pets. Many thousands are killed each year. The explanation of the handlers is simple: overpopulation. There is no room to accommodate the huge influx of animals, who were once-loved pets who gave unconditional love to their families, and many of whom are repaid by society with execution.

As I roamed about the premises, I came upon beautiful dogs of all shapes and sizes. German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, Boxers, Poodles, Irish Setters, Terriers, Cocker Spaniels, Shitsus, Pugs – and every conceivable mix of these and other breeds.

I walked down the hall of a huge room, with dogs corralled in pens to my left and right. Many looked at me longingly, and I saw in their eyes both a desolation and a yearning for love, and for help. In one of these pens, my eyes came upon an adorable little Benji look-a-like. Sadly, he just stood in one place, as if in shock. His spirit seemed to have been decimated. His head was dropped down and he stared blankly at the cement floor. I approached him, and said something kind to him.

But as I tried to lift his spirit, I felt my own spirit dampened, knowing that soon –very soon – he would be lying on the killing table, at the hands of the house veterinarian, who had taken up the role of official destroyer and executioner.

I talked to this man, a person who I imagined had begun his career dedicated to healing and to life, as all doctors hopefully start out. “Why are you doing this?” I asked him. “Because someone has to do it,” he said. “If we don’t do it, the streets will be flooded with unwanted hungry animals.” Which is worse? To let them suffer that way, or euthanize them and take them out of their misery?”

“There is a better way,” I retorted. “To stop the killing, and become more aggressive and resourceful in finding new homes for them. To get very creative with marketing communications programs that can dramatically bolster public awareness about their plight, and look for ways to dramatically boost traffic to this place so the number of adoptions can drastically increase. To develop more stories in newspapers, and arrange interviews on radio and television. To enjoin the cooperation of the media, so as to air public service announcements that run constantly, day and night. To design and implement better signage to this shelter, to make it easy for families to find it here. And finally, to develop communications programs to encourage Broward County residents to neuter their dogs and cats. There is nothing sadder than unwanted kittens and puppies brought into a world where they don’t have a chance.”

The veterinarian looked at me blankly, as if I was speaking another language. It was then I understood. This was just a job for him; a way to earn a living. The same was true for all the people who worked here: just a job, just bureaucrats following the rules. Animal Control was just a processing center helping the County dispose of homeless pets. Nothing more.

As I continued to walk through to the back end of the shelter, things got worse. Two long back rooms, parallel to each other and perpendicular to the hall of pens I had just walked through, were filled with cages. In the first such room, there were cages filled with puppies. Many of these pups were unable to move, crushed into spaces too small to manage any mobility. And then my eyes beheld two beautiful pups, lying cramped in cages, their eyes desolate. It was a haunting site, a terrifying site.

One of these puppies was a German Shepherd/Irish Setter mix. I named him Rusty. The other puppy was a mixed beagle. She looked forlorn and in great physical discomfort and emotional distress. I named her Patty. As I looked into their cages, I noticed the water had emptied from their bowls, and the food was minimal – some kind of tasteless cardboard-looking stuff. It was understandable. There was no investment in their lives. Why would there be an investment in their proper nourishment?

Nearby, my heart sank as I saw a young whippet mix struggling to stand in her cage. She was emaciated and shaking. She was too large for her small cage and could barely move. She was sick, and the floor of her cage was covered with vomit.

I asked the attendant about her, and she assured me with a smile that someone had claimed her for adoption and “would be stopping by to pick her up within a few days.” I told the attendant, “She could be dead within a few days. She needs medicine and hydration, and a more comfortable resting area.” My words fell on deaf ears. My heart ached with sadness and frustration.

Across from Rusty and Patty, I saw a tiny Chihuahua-Pug mix, still filled with life and jumping to get my attention. She was only six weeks old. When I approached her, she extended her tongue to lick my hand. It was love at first sight. I named her “Chickie” and knew I would adopt her immediately.

Then I walked into the parallel room behind. It was filled with cages housing kittens and a number of young adult cats. One of these adults, a beautiful part Siamese silver-coated mix, was crying and desperately reached his entire front leg and paw through the cage bars to touch me, to beg to be saved. It was clear he knew his probable fate.

Next to him a tiny white-furred kitten with a charcoal spot on her forehead, reached out similarly, pleading for rescue. My heart sank, for I wished to save both these felines; and in fact all the caged animals awaiting their probable tragic end.

I asked the attendant if there were any more animals housed elsewhere. She responded, “Yes, there is a cat room in the very back, a place we put most of them to sleep.”

She allowed me to enter this room. On the back wall, there were rows of small portable cages stacked one upon the other. I counted three levels of stacked cages. Inside each of them were older cats. I saw the wisdom and the resignation in their eyes. They knew they were about to be terminated.

Eerily, looking at these elder cats, I was reminded of Stephen Spielberg’s movie, A.I., about the plight of a sensitive humanoid robot boy who had been “junked” when the real comatose son he had replaced had come back to consciousness.

Rounded up by humans to be delivered to a killing circus, the boy and other doomed humanoids awaited their fate. Intelligent and aware but doomed, the resignation of the humanoid robots resembled to me the resignation of those lovable looking but consigned-to-the-trash heap cats.

It was all so sad and so wrong – to kill, to murder intelligent, feeling beings simply because they were not human. On the other side of the closed back room were cages filled with just-born litters suckling at their mothers’ sides. The attendant told me they would all be put to sleep, babies and Moms, by day’s end. “They become little angels sent back to God,” she said as if comforted by the thought.

How was it possible, I asked myself, that things could come to this? That life could be so disrespected and trashed as it is here? That the innocence and purity of these creatures could be so betrayed? That these, God’s creatures too, could be so defiled? Who were we to think we had the right to put to death these innocents? We did not create them. We have no right to destroy them!

That day, I adopted little Chickie, along with two kittens, and brought them home. But the return trip home was a very sad one for me. I was filled with mortification at what I had seen – the suffering and desecration of the lives of hundreds of beautiful, feeling creatures.

That night, I had a dream. In the dream, close-ups of the faces of Rusty and Patty appeared before me, especially their sad soulful eyes. And they began to talk to me. “Help me. Save me. Please.” I awoke in a sweat. I could not bear this image.

The next morning, I drove back to Animal Control, and adopted Rusty and Patty. My heart leaped with joy when the attendant removed them from their confining cages and put them in my arms. I held Rusty in my left arm, and Patty in my right arm. They were close to me and began licking my ears, as if to thank me.

The images of Animal Care & Regulation continued to haunt me, however. What could I do? I could either fight them, or help them. Fighting them was a big task, for it would require challenging the statutes that created this institution in the first place. It was also about creating an alternative, turning it from a killing place to a no-killing place.

I also new that a short distance from Animal Control was The Humane Society, which had a no-kill policy (actually animals that are sick or unadoptable are euthanized there, but most animals are given much more time for a chance at adoption).

I decided to have lunch with Chris Agostino, Director of The Humane Society of Ft. Lauderdale. I learned that Chris had made an effort to take over Animal Control, and to put it under the auspices of The Humane Society, a completely donor-funded organization. Unfortunately, the “powers that be” – and I presume that to have meant The Broward County Board of County Commissioners, which oversees Animal Care & Regulation – would not allow that to happen.

My next step was to request a meeting with Alan Davis, Director of Animal Care & Regulation. I explained to Mr. Davis that I was a media relations expert, and would volunteer my time and talent to creating a communications campaign that would heighten awareness of the existence of Animal Care & Regulation, would help increase traffic to the establishment in order to boost the number of weekly adoptions, and a campaign to raise awareness about the importance of spaying and neutering.

Mr. Davis put me in touch with his assistant in charge of public relations, Alan Siegel. I requested a meeting with both Alan Siegel and Alan Davis to lay out my thoughts about a creative and meaningful plan of action.

Alan Davis refused to attend that meeting, claiming a full schedule. I could only surmise that what I was proposing to him – a way to significantly reduce the number of euthanizations at Animal Care & Regulation – was a low priority for him.

I did meet with Alan Siegel, but shortly thereafter was advised he had moved on within the Broward County civil service to take an unrelated position. When I informed Alan Davis that I would be happy to work with Siegel’s replacement, he advised he’d get back to me. I have not heard back from him, though many months and killings have since transpired. I am not surprised.

Each year, 10-15 million pets are abandoned in the U.S. Of those, 6-8 million enter shelters, and an estimated 3-4 million are euthanized -- simply because they do not have a loving home.

Here in Broward County, "Animal Care & Regulation" is less about care and more of an "Auschwitz," destroying the most beautiful abandoned and stray dogs, puppies, cats and kittens. Most of those who are lucky enough to get adopted are invariably found to be sick in some way and require an outside veterinarian’s care.

Given the “care” they are under, how could it be otherwise? As the son of Holocaust survivors from Germany, I look at the mass murders at Animal Control – and all the Animal Controls across the country – and declare that a great moral sin and error is being perpetrated on the lives of these innocent creatures. Critics argue that we cannot compare these two holocausts, and that to compare the slaughter of innocent animals to innocent humans is offensive.

I do not wish in any way to trivialize the horrors of the Holocaust. That horrific event still lives with me and other children of survivors in a myriad of ways. That said, I do not think there is in any way, shape

or form sufficient sensitivity to, nor awareness of, the need for reverence for all life, especially the lives of the millions of innocent and beautiful of God's creatures we destroy every year.

The late great Dr. Albert Schweitzer said it this way: “Until he extends his circle of compassion to all living things, man will not himself find peace.”

I am a strong believer in neutering, for why would we want to put unwelcome lives into the world, only to be destroyed? But for those who are here, we have no right to hurt or kill them. These are creatures who come into the world to give us unconditional love. Life is sacrosanct: human life and the lives of these precious beings.

We must understand that the treatment of these creatures is a reflection of our inhumanity to our own fellows. The web of life is a whole web, and the connections and relationships between humanity and the other life forms on this planet is inextricably linked. As we do to them, so we do to each other. As we do to each other, so we do to them.

It is time for us to move our awareness into the regions of the heart, where this can at last be seen and felt.

And what of Animal Care & Regulation? Sustained by the tax dollars of the citizens of Broward County, it needs to be wrested from the hands of the unfeeling bureaucrats who now run it, into the hands of those whose moral and spiritual sensitivities take offense at the current policies of destruction.

A great philanthropic drive needs to occur to enable The Humane Society, an entirely donor-funded non-profit organization, or a group of true animal lovers and advocates, to take charge. Generous philanthropists such as Mrs. Wayne Huizenga have been great supporters of The Humane Society. Animal lovers who are among the wealthy and

politically influential need to enjoin their intentions and wills to create a new culture of life at “that other place” for the sake of our best and most loyal friends. They are innocent and defenseless. They cannot speak for themselves. It is up to caring humans to be their advocates and defenders.

The kill policy at this taxpayer-supported shelter runs rampant at hundreds of other shelters across the country. Whether you reside in Broward County, Florida, or elsewhere near other such inhumane institutions, it is only through your resolve to end the killing and abuse, motivated by your combined feelings of mercy and outrage, that change can truly take place.

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