



Chapter 10

AFTERWORD: BEYOND ZERO

“We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion. We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate of having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein we err, and greatly err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours they move finished and complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.”

Beston H (1928) *The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Company.

Shortly after STOP was formed in 1991, I went with Barbara Carr to an international conference about cat and dog overpopulation. Among the speakers was a feral cat advocate who told about early Trap/Neuter/Return programs in Great Britain and South Africa. Barbara’s reaction, like many of those who worked in animal shelters at the time, was that managed feral colonies

seemed like “subsidized abandonment.” Over time, though, Barbara’s shelter near Buffalo ended its long-standing policy of euthanizing all ferals that had been brought to them. Now they euthanize only those that are sick or injured, spaying and neutering all the others and placing them back in the community or, when possible, in adoptive homes.

Many other animal advocates have gone—and are going—through similar changes. When animal shelters were first established more than a century ago, preventing cruelty and abuse was their first priority. As Henry Bergh explained in 1866 when he founded the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), a humane ethic sprang not from any duty people owed to animals but to one they owed to themselves:

“It is a solemn recognition of the greatest attribute of the Almighty Ruler of the Universe, mercy, which if suspended in any case for a single instant, would overwhelm and destroy us.”

In recent years, increasing numbers of people have gained a broader perspective about what is humane, one that looks at things from an animal’s point of view. As Stephen Zwaitkowski of the ASPCA put it, early animal shelters focused their attention on the question of “how” animals were put to death in shelters, attempting to dispatch them with as little fright and pain as possible. Only in the past 40 years have more and more people become concerned about “how many” lives are lost.

Albert Schweitzer called this expanded ethic a reverence for life. Its impact, as he saw it, extends to almost everything we do:

“A man is really ethical only when he obeys the constraint laid upon him to aid all life which he is able to help, and when he goes out of his way to avoid injuring anything living. He does not ask how far this or that life deserves sympathy as valuable in itself, nor how far it is capable of feeling. To him life as such is sacred. He shatters no ice crystal that sparkles in the sun, tears no leaf from its tree, breaks off no flower, and is careful not to crush any insect as he walks. If he works by lamplight on a summer evening, he prefers to keep the window shut and to breathe stifling air, rather than see insect after insect fall on his table with singed and sinking wings.”

The Philosophy of Civilization (1949), Macmillan, New York, N.Y.

Diane Leigh and Marilee Geyer followed a reverence-for-life ethic in their book about the overwhelming death toll taken by shelter overpopulation, *One at a Time*, explaining that they decided to tell the story through individual animals that had entered a single animal shelter because

“The only way to understand the tragedy is to see, to know, that it happens to one animal at a time. One precious dog, one special cat, each with his own individual story, his own unique history, his own sacred spirit and his own uncertain fate. One by one, until there are millions.”

Supporters of feral cat trap-and-ethanize programs believe that putting these animals to death is, by the traditional definition, “humane” if their lives are taken as painlessly as possible. Reverence for life looks at it from a broader perspective. As Dr. Schweitzer put it:

“I must interpret my life about me as I interpret the life that is my own. My life is full of meaning to me. The life that is around me must be full of significance to itself. If I am to expect others to respect my life, I must respect the other life I see, however strange it may be to mine. And not only human life; but all kinds of life; life above mine, if there be such life; life below mine, as I know it to exist. Ethics in our Western world has hitherto been largely limited to the relations of man to man. But that is a limited ethics. We need a boundless ethics which will include the animals also.”

The Philosophy of Civilization (1949), Macmillan, New York, N.Y.

What does this mean for our work? If we are to show a true reverence for life, our work will not be complete when cats and dogs are no longer put down in any of our shelters just to make room for other homeless animals, no matter how welcome that day will be. That is not nearly ambitious enough. It would forget the millions of homeless cats and dogs that never enter a shelter.

It will not even be finished when every cat and dog has a home and companion, although that will be a profound achievement, too. Even animals with a place to live can be chained for endless periods or kept outside year-round with little or no shelter or tormented by parasites or preventable diseases. Our work will be done only when every companion animal has a companion as decent and loyal as they are.

Fortunately, the road that leads to each of these places—to ending the killing of healthy shelter cats and dogs, homelessness, and maltreatment—follows the same path. It may be some time before we get there. But as the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu noted, “the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.” We have already traveled much of the way there. As we travel further, it will be critical to keep the spiritual core of our mission in full view, to refresh us and keep us from making wrong turns. When we arrive, we will be worthy of the fidelity and devotion that cats and dogs have shown us for centuries, since they first joined us as our companions.