

## THE KILLING OF ANIMALS IN SHELTERS AND POUNDS IS AN ANIMAL RIGHTS ISSUE

Presentation by Dr. Deborah Tanzer

“Hope for New York Shelter Animals: Meeting the Challenge

Featuring Nathan Winograd and sponsored by Friends of Animals, in collaboration with S.O.S: Save Our Shelter Animals

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The killing of animals in shelters and pounds is an animal rights issue that has not been properly recognized and dealt with as such, by either the animal rights community or the rescue and shelter community. I am deeply involved in and work in both of these worlds. Part of what I do is to receive and send out desperate last-minute appeals to save the life of animals on death row, all over the country, and all too often, here in NYC, where the animals at Animal Care and Control will be destroyed, usually the next day, and often within a few hours. I look at the photos of these dogs and cats, I see their pleading eyes, and my heart breaks, regularly, every night, and I cry myself to sleep all too often. Occasionally one will look unaware, not knowing the grim fate just ahead, but most look bewildered or frightened. Some have given up hope, and look dejected. All of them are confused and frightened, and grieving. They have been torn away from familiar surroundings and people, they have been abandoned, they are suddenly trapped in a cage under terrifying conditions. And now, most likely, they will die. The numbers of cats and dogs in these appeals are staggering. In one night it may be 17 who will be killed the next morning, or 32, or 41. This is what is called animal care and control in the greatest city in the world.

So yes, my heart breaks, but I also become very angry. And the reason I am angry is that when I look at these faces, and right now, I believe we are doing something very very wrong, that we have absolutely no right to kill these animals. No right whatsoever. Sadly, we have the power to, and as in many situations where humans deal with animals, we exercise and impose our power immorally. But though we may rationalize and attempt to justify our actions all over the place, we do not have the right to kill them, and I challenge anyone to show me how we do. This is where the issue of animal rights comes in.

The fundamental, bedrock premise of the animal rights philosophy is that every animal has the right to his or her own life. They are individuals, with histories, biographies, each is whom is what has been called the “subject of a life.” Thus it holds that we have no right to violate their lives, this basic right of theirs.

Springing from the same natural rights philosophy which gave rise to the concept of human rights, it holds that as for humans, for animals too, these rights are inherent, inalienable, non-contractual, non-negotiable. It is not that it is a shame if we have to kill animals, it is that we cannot kill them. May not kill them. Period. End of story.

And thus, when we kill them in pounds and “shelters” we violate this fundamental, bedrock right to their lives, their birthright, which they possess as much as we do. I repeat again, we humans have absolutely no right to violate animals’ rights by taking their lives. In the words of Michael Mountain, former President of Best Friends Animal Society, “Who gets to decide whether an animal should live or die? What gives any organization, large or small, the right to kill a homeless dog or cat just because they have him or her on their premises? ”

How does this relate to the horrendous killing that is going on at AC&C in New York City and at other pounds and “shelters” across the country? First, let me say that I use the word “shelter” very reluctantly, when at all, for a true shelter is a haven, a refuge, a place of safety, not a place to be killed. Well the reigning philosophy, the current paradigm, is that we “must” kill these animals, we “have to,” because there is not enough space to house them, and so killing them is what might be called a “necessary evil.” “What else can we do?”, the established powers ask? “What can we do if we don’t kill them? We have no choice.”

This, I believe, is not only a direct violation of their right to their lives, but it also gets things completely backward, and guarantees that killing as a “final solution” will go on forever. For it is not until we rule out killing as an option at the very beginning that answers and procedures can be worked out. We do not kill human children in orphanages, or homeless people in shelters, or the elderly in nursing homes, or prisoners in prisons, because they are crowded, and we would not kill them, because we believe it is wrong. Because it is morally unacceptable to us. We have drawn our moral line in the sand. And we must do the same for

animals, if we truly respect their rights to their lives, and do not really, or secretly, believe that we are better than they are. We must commit at the outset, to the idea that we cannot, may not kill them, that it is not an option at all. Then we will work out answers and solutions, for we are very creative. To quote Michael Mountain again,

“It’s not that no-kill is a better way; it’s that stopping the killing is the only way. As long as the humane establishment accepts killing as a solution, there will never be a solution. And the sooner they take killing off the table, once and for all, the sooner the shelters will adopt the real solutions.”

But we do not have to wait very long, or look very far, for Nathan Winograd’s “No Kill” philosophy and programs provide just such an answer. Truly consonant with the idea of animal rights, it holds that No Kill is the only morally correct position, and it is also eminently practical and doable. It is not pie-in-the-sky. It has been instituted in many communities, including Austin Texas and Reno Nevada. And so, here in New York City, it is not good enough to hear that the kill numbers are going down. For while it is of course better if some lesser number of animals are being killed, 14,000, or 12,000, or 10,000 killed a year is horrifying, and obscene. There should be no thousands killed, no hundreds, no tens, not one. Not if we believe every animal has an inviolable right to her or his life, and that we have no right at all to rob them of that life. Each time we do this, we are committing an immoral action.

I believe that the animal rights community--Friends of Animals is a notable exception--has not given proper recognition to this issue, often denigrating shelter issues as “welfare” concerns, or viewing concerns about cats and dogs as less worthy of attention than the problems of animals in the wild, or animals in laboratories, or farmed animals, or numerous others—all of whom are treated with unspeakable cruelty and abuse of power by us. But they are all, fundamentally, the same issue, the rights of animals to their lives. And so the millions of animals killed in pounds and shelters must be taken much more seriously by the animal rights community.

Similarly, the rescue and shelter communities have neglected the issue as an animal rights issue. Working heroically to save the countless animals they have, and feeling justifiably proud when we can save some, we are still by and large caught up in the old 19th Century paradigm that there is nothing else we can do. But there is, if we recognize that it is not enough to love the animals we all care so much about. Or to feel grief when we picture them dying, dragged against their will, injected with a lethal dose of “Fatal Plus”, and leaving the shelter in black plastic body bags. We must also accept, as the starting point, that they, just as much as we, have an inherent right to their lives. That the unspeakable killing of animals in our “shelters” is a violation of this fundamental right to their lives, and that because we humans have absolutely no right to violate animals’ rights by taking their lives--only an immoral power--for this very reason the whole system must change and No Kill must become a reality

I am a psychologist, and I know how hard change can be--for individuals, for groups, for societies. Our own investments in a status quo, in keeping things the way they are and have always been, in saying “What else can we do?, we have no choice?” are massive. Resistance to change is a deep part of the human psyche. But paradigms do change, throughout history, and Winograd’s “No Kill” paradigm is such a change. If we are to stop the killing, if we are not to have to see those pleading faces anymore, or grieve for the lives un-lived they have been robbed of, “No Kill” must be taken seriously and embraced, here in New York City--By rescue workers, volunteers, veterinarians, shelter staffs, the Board of Directors of AC&C, the Executive Director, by the city agencies that govern it, and by the mayor. Otherwise we will continue to bring shame to our city, rather than pride. Gandhi said “The moral progress of a nation can be judged by the ways its animals are treated.” Winograd’s programs go a long way in this direction., and the “No Kill” idea can and should become the bridge that unites the animal rights and the rescue communities to stop the killing. Now.

#### Program Notes:

Dr. Deborah Tanzer is a psychologist and psychoanalyst in New York City. She has written and lectured widely on social theory, psychoanalysis, gender issues, and animal rights. She is currently writing a book on the connections between violence, gender issues, and human treatment of animals. She is the co-founder of S.O.S: Save Our Shelter Animals.

#### From Mission Statement of Save Our Shelter Animals (S.O.S.):

We believe that the mass, systematic killing of our beloved companion animals is abhorrent, immoral and unacceptable. We believe that all animals have the inherent right to live, and to be treated with respect and dignity; that no animal should be treated as a disposable object or killed for any reason other than for dire and untreatable medical condition.