

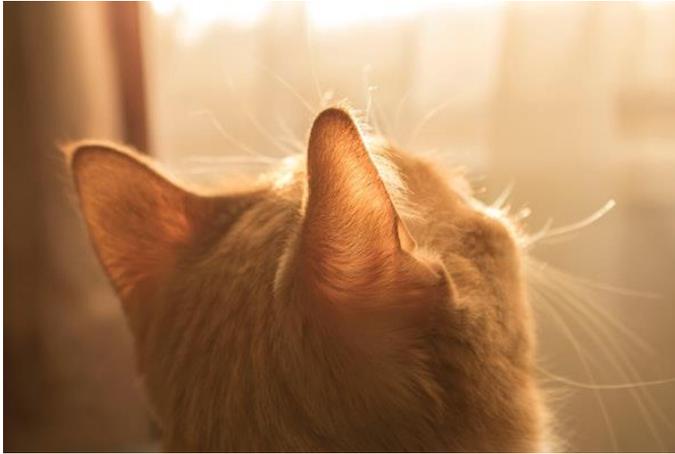
Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: Animal Sheltering in the United States

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Part 5: What's Past is Prologue: To best serve animals, humane societies must recapture their roots

[Nathan J. Winograd](#) 11 min ago



Carl Sagan once said, “The visions we offer... shape the future. It matters what those visions are. Often they become self-fulfilling prophecies. Dreams are maps.”

There was a time when No Kill was just a hope. We dreamed it anyway. And because we did, it no longer is. We now have [a solution to shelter killing](#) and it is not difficult, expensive, or beyond practical means to achieve. Unlike the “adopt some and kill the rest” form of animal sheltering that dominated in our country for over a century, needlessly claiming the lives of millions of animals every year, there are now No Kill communities placing over 99% of all animals entrusted to their care.

As we continue our work to make pound killing a thing of the past in every American community and then build upon that success to protect every animal, no matter the species, no matter the threat of harm, what will our map for the future look like? What roads will we take to do so?

There are those groups — like [Best Friends](#) and [Austin Pets Alive](#) — that instead of promoting the proven cure to shelter killing, are now advising shelters to close their doors, to stop taking in homeless and lost dogs and cats, to stop adoptions, to settle for 90% and even then come by it dishonestly, to be open by appointment only, [allowing neglect and abuse to remain hidden](#). In short, they are telling shelters to take in more money and do less with it and in the process, derail the movement and thwart further progress, leaving animals to suffer whatever fate befalls them.

And then there's the more optimistic vision, the more humane vision, the one that aligns mission and deeds, that allows for humans and non-humans to peacefully coexist, indeed to universally thrive. To build, in the end, a truly humane society. It is a vision in which our humane societies and SPCAs are not inessential, but indispensable.

To achieve this vision, we need only do what we have always done, what our success thus far has been dependent upon — to neither accept nor emulate the voices of defeatism, of corruption, of those who believe in their own celebrity and put themselves and the fundraising prerogatives of their organizations above the needs and lives of animals.

The founder of our movement did it when [his fledgling ASPCA stood up against those who would harm animals](#), including industries owned by peers and colleagues. We did it when [the fledgling No Kill movement stood up to a calcified status quo reliant on killing](#). And we can do it again by rejecting the self-serving, cynical pronouncements by those we once counted among us who have since lost their way. And do it again we must.

For if history teaches us anything about progress, it is this: that the future belongs to the dreamers. To those who defy convention. To those with the audacity to try something different. To those with the moral courage to proclaim that a naked emperor has no clothes. And to those who believe that tomorrow can always — *and must always* — be better than today.

150 years ago an animal lover named [Henry Bergh](#) stopped a man on the side of a road from beating his horse, and in that act of compassion, found his life's true calling. At a time when public displays of cruelty to animals were so commonplace as to be unremarkable, he refused to believe in the inevitability of such harm. And he dared to expect, and demand, better.

A century and a half later, we are all the inheritors of his legacy — the kinder, gentler world he bequeathed us, and an unfinished road whose first stones he laid that lead us to an even brighter future.

Bergh's life's work is now our work, and thanks to those in his lifetime who likewise admired and sought to emulate his example, thousands of humane societies and SPCAs, too long needlessly shrouded in darkness, already exist that could and should help us realize his broad, encompassing vision.

It is the battle for the souls of these organizations that has defined our efforts for the last three decades, but having reclaimed them — having finally eliminated the harm to animals they have themselves engaged in — a mission lost can once again be found.

Freed of the stultifying myths and excuses necessary to quell the disconnect between noble word and their own harmful deeds, our humane societies and SPCAs become liberated from a prison of their own devising; having laid down the heavy burden of killing, their hands become free to once again pick up and reignite Bergh's now smoldering torch; a torch that once lit and exposed dark corners where abuse and neglect of animals thrives in obscurity or convention in every American community.

Today, the primary challenge our movement faces to realize Bergh's dream and to reach the end of the path he placed us upon is to ignore those who have devised new shackles for our imagination; shackles designed to drag us backward or keep us rooted in a place that does not threaten their hegemony. But just as before, these shackles, too, are a mere illusion; an illusion that gives way the moment we choose to place one foot in front of the other in spite of them, and continue on this journey, of which we have already come so far.