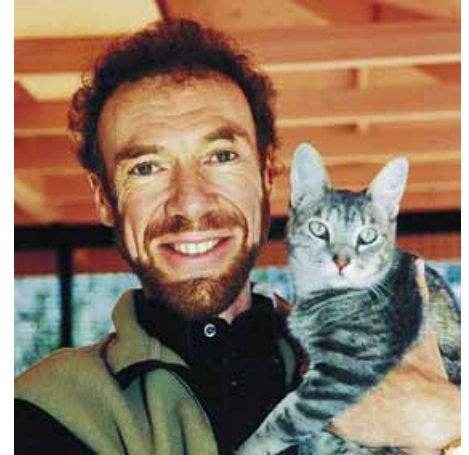


A Question of Ethics

► By Michael Mountain



“Once the determination is there, the ingenuity, the good ideas, and the cooperative spirit all start to emerge.”

Imagine you're the director of a busy city animal shelter. You always have more abandoned dogs and cats than you can take care of and today's dilemma is that six homeless pets have been brought in and you have room to keep only one of them.

Four of the six look quite adoptable, but you still don't have space for all of them. The fifth was brought in by the mayor's wife. She is active in raising funds for the shelter, so you don't want to upset her by destroying the dog she just rescued. And the sixth is an older cat that your staff all fell in love with and don't want to kill.

So, which of the six do you save, and which do you tell your staff they will have to put down?

This kind of scenario is repeated at humane societies across the country every day. It was presented to a workshop session about shelter ethics at the annual convention of a large national humane organization. A colleague who works for an animal group (not Best Friends) went to the workshop and called me on the phone when she got home.

"We all know that humane societies have to deal with reality," she said. "They have to make hard choices every day.

"But what really bothered me was that this was a session about *ethics*, and the one issue that no one raised at all was the ethics of killing all these homeless dogs and cats. It just never came up. Everybody assumed that killing five of those six dogs and cats was the only thing to do. The sole question was *Which five?*"

Here at Best Friends, we know the realities, too. We can't bring every homeless dog or cat to this sanctuary. But since the no-kill movement took off, a dozen or so years ago, the number of animals being killed in shelters every year has dropped

from 17 million to just under five million.

Here in our home state of Utah, the number of animals being destroyed has dropped dramatically in the first six months of a five-year No More Homeless Pets program that involves every humane society, every city and county animal shelter, and most of the private rescue groups.

So, the first ethical question for all of us is: How quickly can we abandon our old, tired thinking and come up with new ways of working together to bring an end to the continuing holocaust of family pets?

There are always options, if we look for them. For starters, in the case of those six dogs and cats, someone (maybe a volunteer with a can-do attitude) could look for new foster homes for the four adoptables.

Perhaps someone could suggest to the mayor's wife that she ask her husband to go on the evening TV news with the dog she rescued. Hundreds of people often call in when there's a "famous" animal up for adoption and the shelter could be standing by to offer the other adoptables to all of the callers. (If all goes well, the mayor could even start a weekly TV spot!)

And as for the sixth – the older kitty that the staff fell in love with – well, of course, she's the one you take into the shelter and tell everyone to make her feel like a princess. They'll be so delighted and they'll make such a big fuss over her that she'll probably become the shelter mascot and end up raising more funds than the mayor's wife!

It really *can* be done. And the only thing ever stopping it is the rigid belief that it *can't* be done. But once the determination to bring an end to the killing is there, the ingenuity, the good ideas, and the cooperative spirit all start to emerge.

Where there's a will, there's a way. 🐾