

# TNR's Role in Achieving No-Kill: Extending the Circle of Compassion

A speech by Ed Boks

I want to share my story with you. I want to tell you how I became acquainted with trap/neuter/return (TNR), the influence TNR had on me personally, and how TNR helped shape my conviction that no-kill is an achievable goal in any community.



My story begins on a Thursday afternoon in October 1998. I was sitting in my office in Phoenix, Arizona. I was a newly appointed director of Animal Care & Control (AC&C) for Maricopa County and I had been on the job less than a week. I was in my office thinking about where to start. Maricopa County is a large community, larger in fact than 17 states. It is home to 24 of the fastest growing cities and towns in the country, with a population of nearly 4 million people. In 1998, Maricopa County was impounding 62,000 dogs and cats a year and euthanizing nearly 75% of them, giving Maricopa County the reputation for being the worst animal welfare community in the country, with the highest euthanasia rates and the lowest adoption rates.

As I was considering how to reverse the negative image of that agency, my secretary brought in the daily mail. Off the top of the pile of mail, a newsletter from Alley Cat Allies fell onto my desk. I remember picking

the newsletter up, reading a few lines, and then laughing to myself.

I had heard of Alley Cat Allies and their approach to feral cats. The idea that you would catch nuisance cats and then return them to the very place you removed them from was so counter-intu-

itive, so beyond any logical problem-solving approach that I was acquainted with, that I nearly tossed that newsletter into the trash with a smug sense of superiority.

At that moment, I recalled something Albert Schweitzer had said:

**"It is the fate of every truth that it will be ridiculed when it is first proclaimed."**

Realizing that I was about to ridicule what I didn't understand, I stopped to think. I thought about how Maricopa County impounded over 20,000 cats a year. I thought about how 10,000 to 15,000 of these cats were feral. I thought about how we had been killing feral cats year in and year out for nearly 30 years. I thought about how we impounded feral cats, held them for three days as the law required, and then killed and disposed of them. I thought about the terror these cats must have experienced,

surrounded by barking dogs and a prodding public. I thought about the stress on my staff, who had to handle and care for these animals. I thought about how expensive this whole process was to the county. And then, coming full circle, I thought about how we impounded more cats each year than we did the year before. At that moment, I recognized the insanity of what we were doing.

Albert Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. For 30 years, Maricopa County killed tens of thousands of cats thinking each ensuing year we would see fewer cats. And despite the fact that we kept seeing more and more cats coming through our shelters each year, we just kept catching and killing cats year after year.

At that moment, I had an epiphany. I realized I had no answers to the problems associated with feral cats – certainly none that would help me achieve my goals of reducing euthanasia and lowering animal control costs.

So, as my smirk fell from my face, I opened that Alley Cat Allies newsletter and read it cover to cover. When I was done, I picked up the phone and called Becky Robinson of Alley Cat Allies, and asked her how quickly she could get to Maricopa County. Becky was there within a week, and Maricopa County has not been the same since.

In the months and years following Becky's visit, the issue of feral cats rose to the place where the county board of supervisors courageously enacted a thoughtful resolution declaring TNR the only acceptable methodology for dealing with feral cats, and the local support was such that the media and the community applauded their action.

How did we get so large a community to

switch from endorsing catch-and-kill to endorsing not only TNR but the whole no-kill initiative? Well, the board of supervisors was comfortable making an official proclamation endorsing TNR only after we at AC&C had implemented a successful TNR program called Operation FELIX (which stands for "Feral Education and Love Instead of X-termination"). Operation FELIX had achieved some pretty amazing results:

1. A dramatic reduction in the number of complaints elected officials and Animal Care & Control received concerning feral cats.
2. A dramatic reduction in the amount of funding spent on handling feral cats, freeing that funding for other progressive programs.
3. A dramatic improvement in the image of Animal Care & Control held by the community and local and national media.
4. A dramatic reduction in the number of feral cats coming into county shelters, which created more space for adoptable pets, which led to a substantial increase in pet adoptions, and a substantial reduction in euthanasia.

So, thinking back to that afternoon in 1998, I realize that was the day I first became convinced no-kill was achievable. With an effective, non-lethal strategy for resolving the vexing and complex issue of feral cats, the overall Strategic Plan for Animal Care & Control in Maricopa County fell into place. Over the next five years, Maricopa County became the largest pet adoption agency in the world. We achieved the lowest euthanasia rate in over 35 years, and we impounded and euthanized thousands fewer feral cats. These results were directly related to TNR being officially embraced as the preferred

method for humanely dealing with feral cats.

That is my experience with TNR, and I suspect each of you has a similar story explaining how and why you have come to be here today. But has anyone stopped to truly wonder at the significance of a Feral Cat Summit in New York City? Why now? Why here?

I think this first international Feral Cat Summit is significant, and I'd like to try to explain why I think so. But I should warn you that I am a retired pastor, so if what you are about to hear sounds a little bit like preaching, I ask that you would please just indulge me...

My early experience with TNR reminds me of another Albert Schweitzer quote:

**"It is not always granted to the sower to live to see the harvest. All work that is worth anything is done in FAITH."**

We are an extremely fortunate people. Unlike Albert Schweitzer, we are seeing the harvest. We are seeing the results of both his and our hard work, a work we all began in faith.

As I struggle to find the words to convey the significance of TNR within the larger context of the no-kill movement, I keep coming back to the questions, why now, why here? Is it a coincidence that TNR so recently came into national notice? How many read the *New York Times* article on TNR on Sunday, October 10, 2004? Is it a coincidence that TNR is getting so much recognition just now?

I think we can all probably agree that we live in troubled times, a time of war and ru-

mors of war. A time of fear so great that men's hearts fail them because of what they see happening around the globe.

We live in a time when just reading the daily newspaper or listening to the evening news can throw into question the value of human life. I remember growing up as a boy in Detroit and listening to the morning newscaster on my way to school. Each day he would begin the news by asking the question, "What's a life in Detroit worth today?" And then he would give an account of how someone's life had been snuffed out the night before for \$20, or a pair of sneakers, or a leather jacket, or just because someone didn't like the way another person looked at them.

I find it interesting that TNR is suddenly receiving so much national attention during a time of unprecedented violence and evil in the world. I'm reminded of a letter written by an itinerant preacher named Paul to a group of Romans 2,000 years ago. Remember, this group of Romans were themselves the victims of a "catch and kill" municipality. They were being caught and fed to some very large feral cats because they did not share the same religion that good Romans were expected to adhere to.

In his letter to them, Paul addressed the cruelty and evil they were being subjected to by explaining "that where sin, death and violence abound, grace and truth does much more abound." The darker the world seems to get, the brighter the light of truth. In a country where the literal wholesale slaughter of animals is common practice, TNR stands as a brilliant contrast and contradiction to the perceived downward spiral of humanity. In a world where people kill each other as they claim they are doing God's will, it is fascinating to hear stories of

Palestinians and Israelis putting down their arms to tend feral cat colonies together during cease-fires.

Today, we listen as our national leaders grapple with the issues of “good” and “evil.” They tell us that we are good, and we are at war with evil.

I think there may be a germ of truth to that. I think the war between good and evil is manifesting in our age like no other. What is interesting about good and evil is that there is really only one way for good and evil to truly be understood or defined, and it is not by what you believe or by what you think. Good and evil can only be demonstrated by what you do. Good and evil are defined and understood by actions. John Kerry, in the recent presidential debate, reminded us that “Faith without action is dead.”

Three years and one month ago, we all saw evil manifested in the desperate and hateful act of 19 religious men killing thousands of innocent men, women and children, just a few city blocks from here, and at the Pentagon, and in a small field in Pennsylvania.

Some question, as they should, how religion can cause men to do such evil while they think they are doing good.

Albert Schweitzer answered this question for us when he said:

**“Any religion that is not based on a respect for life is not a true religion.”**

So what, you might ask yourself, do all these religious musings have to do with our understanding the significance of an International Feral Cat Summit in New York City in October 2004, just three years and one month following 9/11?

To answer that question, I need to talk a little bit about the theory of evolution. In his theory of evolution, Charles Darwin explained that a species evolves by adapting to a changing environment. He explained that only those members of the species “fit” enough to adapt are fortunate enough to survive. Today we live in a changing environment defined within the context of this war between good and evil. If you can accept that premise, it begs the question: how will nature determine who is fit enough to adapt and survive? Or, more to the point, are we fit enough to adapt to our changing environment and survive?

I am confident that the answer to that question is a resounding YES. And the reason for my confidence may surprise you. I think the evidence that suggests we are adapting well to our changing environment is found in the fact that we are here at a Feral Cat Summit in New York City just three years and one month following 9/11.

I tend to agree with our national leaders when they tell us we are at war with evil. But I hasten to caution that we not make the mistake of thinking that this is only an external war, a war in faraway Iraq, Afghanistan, or the Sudan. Outward wars are merely a manifestation of an internal war – an internal struggle in and for our own hearts and minds. This internal war won’t be won through acts of violence on the battlefield or in the street, not by dropping bombs on each other or by throwing red paint on each other. This war is won by our becoming what we espouse, by living our beliefs.

Faith and reverence for life is the only antidote for the madness that seems to be engulfing the world today. Our reverence for life is a light to the world. The antidote is so simple that it is easily missed, and millions miss it every day.

Schweitzer warned:

**“Anyone who can regard the life of any creature as worthless is in danger of thinking human lives are worthless.”**

Are we, as a society, in danger of thinking the life of any creature worthless? I think that before TNR came along, we could argue, in our ignorance, that we had little choice, that catch-and-kill was a necessary evil in our attempt to control feral cat populations. But with clear evidence that TNR is more effective and efficient than any other methodology in reducing feral cat populations, could we not now argue, along with Albert Schweitzer, that to ignore TNR may actually take us one step closer to devaluing human life?

Before you dismiss this question out of hand, consider this. Recent research has demonstrated the fact that there is a link between a person who practices animal cruelty in their youth and that person growing up to practice spousal, child, or elder abuse, or some other form of domestic violence, as an adult. If that psychological link exists for a person, what makes us think it does not exist for a community? Can a community’s insistence on catch-and-kill, when effective, humane, non-lethal alternatives like TNR exist, be a link that reveals a community’s basic lack of respect for life? Even human life?

Certainly we have enough recorded history to understand what happens when a community begins to devalue human life. But where does that process begin? And once it has started, where does it end? A community may initially find itself assigning a lesser value to the lives of its enemies. Once comfortable doing that, it may then find it a little easier to devalue the lives of

those who don’t agree with its religious beliefs, and then its political views. And if Schweitzer is correct, this “unthinking” attitude can lead a community to devalue and abuse its aged, its young, its infirm and its most helpless. When a community begins to devalue life, where does it end? It ends only when a community can value all life. Only then do we break the vicious cycle of cruelty and abuse.

How many are familiar with the story of Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah? The story goes like this. The Lord was upset with the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah for living violent, self-absorbed lives. He felt there was no way to correct the situation except to destroy the two cities with fire and brimstone. But before doing so, God shared His plan with Abraham because He considered Abraham his friend. When Abraham heard God’s plan, he was deeply troubled because he had family and friends living in those cities. So Abraham argued with God. He said, “Lord, what if there are 50 righteous people living in Sodom and Gomorrah? Would you still destroy these cities?”

God saw the compassion of Abraham’s argument, so He repented and said, “For my friend, Abraham, I will not destroy these cities if there are 50 righteous people living there.” Then Abraham started thinking about that number and he got a little nervous. So he went back to God and said, “God, what if there are just 40 righteous people?” And again God repented and agreed with Abraham’s compassion and said He would not destroy Sodom and Gomorrah if there were 40 righteous people living there. This dialogue went back and forth until Abraham finally convinced God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah if there were just five righteous people living there.

Now, you may find fault with my comparing the lives of five righteous people to the tens or hundreds of thousands of feral cats living in your city or town. But if you do, it is because you don't understand the moral of the story. The moral of this story is not that the lives of feral cats are equal to the lives of men. The moral is that when we can value the lives of creatures as seemingly insignificant as feral cats, we will finally begin to understand the true capacity of our own souls to make compassionate choices.

If Abraham could prevail upon God to make compassionate choices, perhaps we can prevail upon our local leaders to do the same.

Mahatma Gandhi taught us that the only way to determine the true value of a community is to look at how that community treats their animals. Community value is not determined by our political rhetoric, or by our wonderful community and public programs, or by our art galleries, libraries and parks alone. Our true value, according to Gandhi, is actually found in the way we treat our animals. So if we as a city, town, county or nation can develop a life-affirming program for the lowliest of all creatures, our feral cats, what does that reveal about our intrinsic value?

According to Albert Schweitzer:

**"It is a man's sympathy with all creatures that truly makes him human."**

Schweitzer encouraged us to never let the voice of humanity within us go silent, because it is our sympathy for all creatures that defines us as truly human and good. There was another holy man (for some of us, more than just a holy man) who said, "For as much as you have done unto the least of these, you have done unto Me."

Again, it is not my intention to offend anyone's religious sensibilities, so if you are offended by what might sound like my equating feral cats to the lowliest of humans, you have missed my point. I am still not talking so much about the value of feral cats as I am trying to explain the human capacity to love – the capacity to love not only our family, our friends, our neighbors, or even our enemies, but to even love those damn cats living in your neighborhood.

When Schweitzer received the Nobel Peace Prize, he gave an acceptance speech entitled "The Problem of Peace in the World Today." In that speech he said:

**"The human spirit is not dead. It lives on and it has come to understand that the full breadth and depth of compassion can only be known when it embraces all living creatures and does not limit itself to mankind alone."**

I spoke earlier of Darwin's theory of evolution. It may surprise you that as a former pastor, I believe in evolution. But not in quite the same way that Darwin did. I think evolution is a spiritual force, and I believe compassion is a catalyst for evolutionary growth. In earlier ages, we are told, we had to rely on physical strength to survive; in more recent ages, we are taught we had to rely on our mental prowess to survive. Today I think we rise or fall as a species depending on our capacity to love all creatures, great and small. Our survival as a species depends on our ability to extend the circle of compassion to include all creatures. The world does not belong to those who embrace hate and terror; the world belongs to those who can love greatly.

Albert Schweitzer, along with many spiritual men throughout the ages, helped us un-

derstand the nature of compassion by showing us what it looks like in action. Compassion manifests itself as acts of kindness and mercy. Once you begin to think kindly and mercifully about life, you begin to truly appreciate the value of life, and when you truly understand the value of life, you evolve into what Albert Schweitzer calls a “thinking being.” And as a thinking being, you find yourself looking for ways to act compassionately toward all life.

Schweitzer said:

**“The man who has become a thinking being feels a compulsion to give every will-to-live the reverence for life that he gives his own.”**

In other words, you love your fellow creatures as you love yourself. You extend the Golden Rule to include other species.

According to Schweitzer, a person is not a “thinking being” if he cannot reverence the will-to-live in other creatures.

We live in a day and a world where 19 men can fly airplanes into buildings with the malicious intent of killing thousands of human beings. We also live in a day and in a world where 150 people will fly into New York City to discuss what they can do to better the lives of feral cats in their neighborhoods. These two acts in my view define good and evil.

While good is best revealed through action, that is not always the case with evil. Sometimes doing nothing can be an expression of evil. For instance, we can understand that millions of animals are dying in animal shelters every year and do nothing about it. According to Schweitzer, that is a cruel act.

He explained: “Very little of the great cruelty shown by men can really be attributed

to cruelty. Most of it comes from thoughtlessness or inherited habit. The roots of cruelty are not so much strong as they are widespread.”

Think about that. The roots of cruelty are not so much strong as they are widespread. That explains why a single act of kindness is so powerful. It is powerful because it is stronger than cruelty; cruelty is shallow and weak. If all men could live their lives in kindness and mercy toward all creatures, soon the light of compassion would overwhelm the darkness of unthinking and habitual cruelty.

Ask yourself this question: If it can be scientifically demonstrated that TNR is effective in reducing and ultimately eliminating feral cat populations, then what other explanation is there for a community’s continuation of catch-and-kill, except community-wide thoughtlessness and habitual cruelty?

Albert Schweitzer said a day would come when people will be amazed that the human race existed so long before it finally recognized that thoughtless injury to life was incompatible with truth, love, and compassion.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the significance of our being at this summit just three years and one month after 9/11. We are here to acknowledge that in a time of war and violence, the circle of compassion is not diminished but rather grows larger and larger each day. We are here to affirm that the small work we began in faith so many years ago is growing stronger and stronger every day.

We are here to assert and demonstrate by our actions that compassion, kindness and mercy are stronger than hate, cruelty, and violence.

According to Albert Schweitzer, “Affirmation of life is a spiritual act,” performed by thinking beings.

As thinking beings, we embrace and advance TNR as a compassionate means of eliminating the troubling condition of feral cats in our communities. Like Abraham, we are here to make the case that our communities can solve their feral cat problems without sacrificing their compassion or

their humanity. In the simple act of our being here, we affirm life and we extend the circle of compassion to include every community and neighborhood we represent, and ultimately, by faith, every community in the United States.

*This speech was given at the First International Feral Cat Summit, held in New York City on National Feral Cat Day, October 16, 2004.*