The Flickering Flame: An Essay on Companion Animal Euthanasia

Nancy L. Bischof, DVM
Okemos, Michigan

In the morning there is a cat with a man, or perhaps I should properly say a man with a cat. He is crying, or trying not to cry. I have long ago expanded my definition of this basic human activity for relieving grief.

The man thinks Whitey might still be alive. I listen closely, there is no heartbeat. I assure the man that Whitey has passed on. I know that Whitey is gone from this world physically, from my medical training. It may be some time before Whitey leaves this world spiritually. This I have learned with my soul.

Later in the morning Mr. and Mrs. Sparkles come in. Sparkles, a dog, has advanced hemangiosarcoma, cancer of the blood vessels. She can no longer stand, but she bit Mr. Sparkles when he picked her up to carry her here, he tells me. He is proud that she can still fight.

Mr. and Mrs. Sparkles cry. The veterinary technician places an intravenous catheter and Mr. Sparkles holds his friend's head as I inject the solution that will stop her heart. Halfway through the injection Sparkles relaxes and passes on. Mr. and Mrs. Sparkles tell me that I am merciful. I use most of my energy to keep from crying. I am trying to be professional, not to show any emotion. It is a mold I have difficulty squeezing into.

In the afternoon Sam comes in. Her temperature is below normal, she has been sick for a long time, although her family does not realize this. I can see she is dying and they are not ready. I tell them we will try to find out what is wrong, we will give her supportive care, make her comfortable. I bring Sam into the treatment area for x-rays, for fluids, for antibiotics, for hope.

LouLou comes in the family recycling bin. I have talked to her family on the phone and reviewed her medical records. She has advanced breast cancer, something that is almost 100% preventable in dogs with early spaying. LouLou is ready to leave. In her eyes the flame is flickering, she no longer has the energy to live. I hold her head and leg while the veterinary technician injects Fatal Plus 3. The brand name of a merciful death. When LouLou is gone I cover her with a clean towel in the recycling bin and return her to her family.

X-rays on Sam show two kidneys that have become calcified, hard as bone. They are no longer functioning. Tests on Sam's blood show that toxins the kidneys would normally get rid of have built up very high. I call Sam's family and explain this to them. They will come in to visit her, to say good-bye. Then we will end her suffering, help her to die.

I wonder how long I will be able to do this job, being merciful, delivering death. It is not the death that bothers me, as many who judge me claim. It is that this is all I

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have to offer. A room with four white walls, two doors, bright lights, a shiny tile floor. A stainless steel table, maybe covered with a blanket, a sterile environment, easily cleaned. Death with an injection, hopefully uncomplicated, hopefully quick. Some of my time, some of my medical opinion, "You've made the right decision, you're doing the best thing for your dog, for your cat, for yourself."

In the end I think I am also bothered by the fact that there is no place in the world for the expression of my emotions. There is no way for me to say good-bye, for me to mourn, no place for my tears. "You didn't know her, you were not her owner, master, family, friend." I am a stranger, but how can I be a stranger to any life? Life is life, a soul is a soul, and mine recognizes his or hers, even as I help that soul to pass on.

Society must recognize the realities of companion animal veterinary medicine. There is an emotional toll to extinguishing the flame of life. For too long everyone has denied the feelings associated with this, final, act of mercy. By virtue of my compassion, my love for animals, I am the breath that extinguishes the flickering flame.

Books Received

Michael W. Fox

THE BOUNDLESS CIRCLE

Caring for Creatures and Creation

Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1996

introduction, 283p, resource guide, notes
\$20.00 cloth

Kristin Aronson

**TO EAT FLESH THEY ARE WILLING
ARE THEIR SPIRITS WEAK?**

Vegetarians Who Return to Meat

New York: Pythagorean Publishers, 1996

preface, 295p, appendix, notes, select
bibliography, biographies, index of names
\$18.95 paper

Gary L. Francione

"Animal Rights and Animal Welfare"

Rutgers Law Review, 48(2), 397-469

Winter 1996

no price given

Gary L. Francione

RAIN WITHOUT THUNDER

The Ideology of the Animal Rights Movement

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996

230p, notes, index

\$59.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper