

Compassion for a Cat

And Other Thoughts

by Edith Miller

I had to make a decision a few years ago about our terminally ill cat, Zoë. I had to decide whether to let her die naturally while her kidneys malfunctioned and she slowly dehydrated to death, or to have the veterinarian's quick needle put her to sleep. Michael and I conferred with each other, consulted with the doctor, and made a long-distance call to our youngest son Joel. He had been the closest to the cat and might have been hurt or resentful upon hearing of her death after the act.

I could weep as much as the next sentimentalist. I could say as I cleaned Zoë's quarters after her passing: this was her bowl, this was her litter box, and here she is immortalized in our photo albums. But I also had to think pragmatically about terminating the part of her that was incurably sick, along with her loving feline nature, which put trust in her human parents and sought comfort in their laps.

Why can't we apply this same reasoning to human beings? It strikes me as equally valid to end the suffering of terminally ill patients who wish to end their lives. In this sense I could probably not be called a species-ist. The pet lover doesn't want the pet to suffer and is acculturated to euthanasia for pets and other domestic animals. It's another step in the process of ending a human being's suffering when the person has clearly, repeatedly begged to die quickly (as my grandmother begged my mother, who could not do it).

It is made infinitely more complex to mercy kill a human than a non-reasoning animal because of our institutions of religion and law, and years of conditioning over implications of killing and dying (although some institutions condone execution, genocide, and revenge). The psychological and cultural climate around euthanasia makes for a relative, variable truth.

I wonder if pure animal rights advocates prefer their pets to die a slow, painful death rather than death by euthanasia. Do they disagree with shooting a horse that has broken its leg to put him out of his misery?

If we can be species-ist when we kill or hurt animals for research, are we not when we mercy kill our pets? In both cases, we humans are the more powerful as well as the more reasoning of animals. We can do anything we put our minds to and we have the leashes, the cages, the weapons, and our laws. We also have the capacity for kindness. Animal rights practices have improved in recent years with a drastic reduction in unnecessary exploitation of animals for cosmetics research, computer graphics, animal models, and biology classes. There is a greater awareness and conscientiousness.

As for making a responsible decision over a dying loved one: what if the patient is being kept alive artificially and the doctor asks the patient's kinfolk to permit the transplantation of the patient's organ into another patient who will otherwise die? The relatives are hovering over their patient, thinking somehow that prolonging life is in his/her best interests as well as theirs. But consider this: the organ would live on in another. The donor would be doing a loving deed in giving this gift of life, and they could turn this transplantation into an experience of spiritual transcendence.

While these and other ethical questions turned over in my mind, Michael and I delayed our decision so as to enjoy Zoë while she appeared to be in a slight remission. But we were not deceived. We knew she was dying and due to suffer more and more. We realized we would be selfish to delay and prolong her state. Now I know we did the right thing in having her put down. It was awful for me as I actually felt her warm, soft, purring body go limp, and I blubbered. But Zoë was at peace.

Edith Miller, New Brunswick Monthly Meeting