

Identity Complex

Animal Sheltering: Much of your book, *Just a Dog*, deals with giving cruelty a context as part of building a personal identity. How much of that do you think is conscious?

Arnold Arluke: For the most part, it's not. A lot of what makes us who we are, we don't articulate because it's too in front of us and we don't have the language to do that. It may be the hardest question to ask people: Who are you or what are you? It stops them. There were some exceptions where people did specifically talk about identities, and that was shelter workers. Frankly, when I talked to many "no kill" workers, a lot of their rejection of much of euthanasia ... is also rooted in their desire to go back to what they think shelter workers should always have been. [It's that idea that] "some-where along the way we got side-tracked and we got stuck with this awful, dirty job of doing euthanasia, but can't we go back to our original roots?" And that to me is very specific identity talk: "Who are we?"

You write that shelter workers are plagued by a sense of "inauthenticity." Can you explain what you mean?

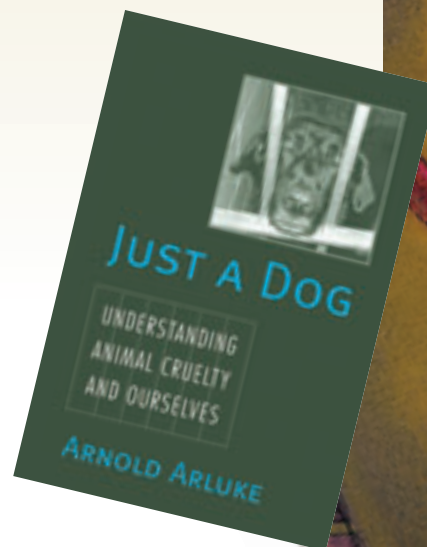
Inauthenticity is the sense that you're doing something, some act or some job or some behavior, that is repudiating who you think you are as a person. And I think that for years the shelter community has been plagued with what I call the killing/caring paradox. The first research I did on shelter workers was in the late '80s, and it was on the dilemma of euthanizing animals. And in those days ... you could really have scores of animals that would be euthanized, many of these not for humane reasons but for space. In those cases I

saw identity being trampled. And when I would interview people who quit and left, the number one reason was: "I didn't get into this business to do this." I do think that the sheltering community, since it embraced euthanasia in the 20th century, also embraced this dilemma that left a permanent problem for many workers. And I think "no kill" became this alternative pathway to work in the shelter world that could allow people to maintain that sense that you care about animals and love them.

From that chapter of your book, it seemed like both camps of the sheltering field have been able to function partly by blaming someone else for euthanasia. Some "no kills" blame open-admissions and open-admissions—more understandably—blame the public. Do you feel that blame plays a useful role in the field?

I think the approach I took to the shelter world would probably argue it's not. The debate about euthanasia and whether it's cruel or not is more divisive. I don't see it as a good thing; I just see it as a symptom of a division. And this may change. So much has happened within the past two or three decades with "no kill"—I'd be interested to see what the shelter world is like 20 years from now. It may be we're at a paradigm shift point where the way the shelter world in general approaches euthanasia in animals is changing, and that in 20 or 30 years there may be far less division. I've even seen changes in the past five years, where I think the friction and conflict that has been generated over euthanasia is not gone, but I don't think it's as sharp a problem as it was.

The September-October issue of *Animal Sheltering* featured a partial interview with sociologist Arnold Arluke, whose recent book *Just a Dog* examines how different groups contextualize animal cruelty. Much of his book explores the experiences of those working in the humane field—shelter staff, humane law enforcement officers, even shelter marketers, who garner public support through stories of cruelty cases. Associate Editor Carrie Allan continues the interview here with Arluke's observations on euthanasia-related dynamics in animal shelters.



You mention in the book, though, that reducing the use of the term “no kill” has bothered some people. Where did you see that?

There were some people I spoke to in the “no kill” world who were concerned about preserving the difference in identities—the open-admission world, as they saw it, was still far more powerful in terms of resources. And I think the concern was that they would lose their identity and therefore their mission and cause by getting it absorbed into this black hole of

humane centrism or whatever you want to call it. I saw a number of cases at professional meetings, for example, that were attended by shelter workers, where there was discussion about changing the name of the meetings, or even the use of the term itself when people would debate it. It was felt, “Well, what’s going to be next? We drop the term, what does that really mean?” Especially since many open-admission facilities are modeling themselves as somewhat “no kill,” even if they don’t use the term.

I remember talking to one woman at a “no kill” shelter who did not embrace the “no kill” philosophy, but she felt like for sanity, the shelter needed someone who she felt like was more of a voice of reason. And she had a lot of problems—they used to call her “killer” and stuff, and I thought it was pretty cruel. And yet she stayed. And I don’t think she was staying for the sake of causing problems—I spent a lot of time with her and I was genuinely impressed that she really felt that, for the sake of the dogs, you needed to have someone with a different perspective there. And I certainly saw the opposite more often in open-admission shelters, where there were often small groups of workers who felt like they had to defend animals they felt were at risk, and they would often go to the director or the shelter manager when it was time to euthanize and put pressure on the shelter manager and the shelter manager hated that.

Within each setting [there is] a lot of complexity with identities, too. That’s what makes it interesting to look at and causes a lot of the dynamic interplay in these settings. Every euthanasia isn’t so clear—and maybe that’s how it should be. Maybe instead of being seen as an organizational problem, we should advocate more for organizational complexity, where you have workers who have very different perspectives. I realize people will also think, “Good God, that would be a horrible place to work.” But again, all of these people are there for the animals’ sake, so one might argue that for the animals’ best outcome and best welfare, maybe we need a diversity of opinions and identities, maybe we don’t need one or the other. But I’m not in the position to head up any shelter—I’m just in a position to cause controversy. 🌀

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Right, and “no kill” sounds good in a way that “open-admission” certainly doesn’t.

And none of the other terms suggested for “open-admission” have the obvious attraction. It’s like the pro-life movement—certain terms seem to excite a lot of passion. Maybe it isn’t so simple as “You kill and I don’t kill,” but the labels and the identities force that difference. I met many people in “no kill” shelters who I think were really open-admissionists and I met people in open-admission shelters who I couldn’t tell what they were doing there. So it’s not so organized a work culture where everyone is in the setting they most want to be in. People drift into settings for different reasons. Some people felt like they were performing a function—