

The Life in My Hands

By Susan Russell

I wrote a truly highbrow poem once. It was called, “Because You Gave a Shit.” And it began something like this: “Because you gave a shit, a life was saved today. It’s never been a pretty business, this death due to delay.” And it ended something like this: “Because you jumped into the fray. And because you gave a shit. A little life was saved today. And I am grateful for it.” I won’t bore you with the other masterful stanzas in between, but I will say that in true Emily Dickinson style, it went on for a fair number of them. The poem was an homage to that heartiest of soft-hearted soldier who gets knee deep down in the muddy, tear-filled animal welfare trenches to ensure that what once mattered to no one, mattered more than anything to them.

The *Life in My Hands* details the continuing journey both inward and outward toward a profound realization of what matters. It’s one of those personal essays that hopefully won’t prove too tasking after much fine dinner and drink. I promise I will not regale you with stories about my kids. I haven’t any of those. I also promise that I will not tell you all about my cats. I have too many of those. And in return for your attention, I promise to titillate your ears with some delicious bits of

hypocrisy and Chicago history, as well as the most intimate details of my worsening addiction for which there is, sadly, no help to be had.

For those of you who don't know me, no doubt most of you here in the room, I number among that lot who fall squarely into the category of the animal lover. The category is one that usually invokes a snicker or two, and a knowing roll of the eyes, and calls to mind visions of housecoat clad women of every age, with cats in every nook and cranny of their hair and home.

But the category of animal lover is a broad and variegated one, and perhaps some clarification is needed here. How does one define a category of identity with any precision? It's like calling oneself a feminist or an environmentalist. What does that mean? I'm sorry I even brought it up. That being said, I'll put a few parameters around the label so the concept doesn't float perniciously around this essay like plastic in the sea. There are, of course, the far animal rights extremist types; those who believe our species has violated a social contract with the nonhuman "others" and who tend to end up on the FBI's watch list by blowing up buildings to rescue long-suffering chimpanzees or beagles forced to sniff all manner of noxious things. La Résistance so to speak. Although I sympathize, I do not number among them. I would too

quickly give myself away on Facebook. I also don't number among those who cannot envision the death of any living soul till it has literally withered and dropped off the vine; whose mind is eased so long as an animal is alive, irrespective of whether it has a life. I'm also not just the practical mathematician type who can rationalize a whole lot of death of perfectly healthy shelter animals to diminish the problem of too many homeless creatures, and the perceived problem of not enough homes. Maybe I'm not doing a good job here of describing what kind of animal lover I am within the fraught category of animal lover. But it is, indeed, quite complicated and quite fraught.

So rather than attempt to define what type of animal lover I am, I will describe how the tormented sensibility all came about to become whatever twisted shape it now takes up in my brain. I blame for the most part my dearly and long departed grandfather David Beatty Russell, the former printer of Bay Roberts, Newfoundland, the most easterly Canadian province; a place where my roots have held fast to some notoriously hard and rocky soil against some pretty nasty weather. (Newfoundlanders sometimes stoically muse: I remember what day summer was last year.) Whether blame has been properly bestowed is debatable. I have always come away with a sense of things,

and never really all the facts and figures neatly lined up in my retrospective, rose-colored brain. But I sense this is when my fledgling conscience initially became pricked, and when the microscopic droplets of awakening first began to pool.

As the town's printer in the mid-20th century up until 1990, "Gramp" as he was known to me, had a printing shop on the first floor of his home that faced out onto the Bay. Long before the Internet, split-second decision making, and globally provocative presidential tweeting, Gramp's major marketing efforts for his services consisted of a simple wooden painted sign at the street side of the shop: "D.B. Russell Printing." The small crowded confines contained all of the lumbering machinery of a respectable printer in the early 20th century, including the monstrous Linotype that would mold the lines of lead-based letter guts for the bodies of messages contained within the *Bay Roberts Guardian* newspaper, the funeral and community events posters, and everything else he used to communicate the national and local goings-on to the town. The press's paper scraps he kept stacked upon his back shop shelves for other uses. The multi-colored booklets were a delight to the little blond-haired girl he called the "Squeaker," who would scribble furiously page after page, wearing her crayons down to the

nubs, and who would very early confirm that she would never be an artist. Upon these scraps, Gramp would set the type for pieces of poetry, including Max Ehrmann's *Desiderata* and Charles Hanson Town's *Around the Corner*. These subtle reminders to his fellow man were intended to be tucked into a book or a brain; they have remained tucked in both of mine for decades. But one in particular got committed to memory: It was *The Kindness Prayer*, widely attributed to a Quaker. I'm sure many of you have heard at least one of its many variations: "I shall pass through this world but once. If therefore, there be any kindness I can show. Or any good thing I can do. Let me do it now; Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again." No pressure. It was not just his bookmarks and those words, however, that wielded the conscience-pricking needle in the young girl's brain.

When the Squeaker was young, the family enjoyed dinner with Gramp most Sundays, and she would impatiently sit in the back seat of the family car for the hour-long drive from St. John's to the town of Bay Roberts. And sometimes before dinner and sometimes after, Gramp would take her hand and walk her out to observe what was left of the headless flowers in his little planter that decorated the front of the printing shop. He'd attribute the floral massacre to the cows, goats, and

horses that roamed the prosperous little town. Back in the 1970s and long before, the animals grazed freely around Bay Roberts and the surrounding areas. There were no stockyards or Jungles. Unlike his neighbor Mrs. Tutt, Gramp did not run out in his bra when he saw the goats coming up the road with their bursting udders, corral them in the yard, and milk them for all they were worth. I never heard Gramp complain about the roaming ruminants, or call for their containment. At the time, the animals seamlessly and neatly folded among life's other everyday wonders.

But his leadership by example was far less subtle at times: Gramp loved to fill bellies with the comfort of food. He never remarried after ovarian cancer spirited away my grandmother, widowing him in his late forties. After the loss of his Dorothy, he prepared his own meals. And when the crowd arrived on Sunday, they would be hit with the heady smell of roasted turkey mingled with the Newfoundland summer savory dressing balls, drenched in turkey fat, and Jigg's dinner vegetables -- turnip, carrots, cabbage, potatoes -- all boiled with salt beef. It's truly a wonder cardiac arrests never spirited us all away as we converged at the dinner table like a flock of half-crazed gulls. Many a time, I would witness Gramp quietly rise, go into the kitchen and fix a plate of dinner

for the mentally ill Mr. Critch, who had seated himself on the stairs of the back porch, and who had signaled his arrival just moments before with a passionately delivered curse-filled tirade to no one and everyone as he walked up the town's main street. As my father conveyed during Gramp's eulogy in 1990, my grandfather

[H]ad a special feeling for people, animals or anything else that struggled to survive. He fed birds in winter, even crows, which he said - although despised had their place. He took in a ragged stray cat and nursed it back to health. He took food and blankets to an old horse in the dead of winter.

I suppose we all have our mythologies, our threads of endless and eternal truths and lies that we utter to ourselves to keep grounded while clambering around Samsara's hamster wheel. Gramp figures largely among the timeless heroes I keep on hand to shield me in my weaker moments; and emerges to remind that all living creatures in their own right, beyond their utility, are deserving of a kind attention; that we must try, at the very least, to do no harm.

Like many an animal lover of whatever stripe, I grew up with animals. I should say, an animal. A dog named Laddie; Lad for short. My father, a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman, boasted of Lad that he was no less than a "purebred killer dog, born and bred in the mines of England to kill stoke rats and timber wolves." This might have been

somewhat of an exaggeration. In the early 1970's, to my mother's horror and the infinite delight of the little blond girl, dad brought the legendary puppy home in an Alpine beer box to our bungalow in Truro, Nova Scotia. He was my first dog love.

Laddie was what was commonly known as a "bad dog." Let me put it another way, Lad would not have been awarded a role -- not a leading, supporting or even an extra role -- in *A Dog's Purpose*. He would have been kicked off the set. He appeared to have an affection for us all, but he listened to no one but the Mountie. When my father was transferred to St. John's, Newfoundland in 1977 ("back home" as we called it, as both mom and dad were born there, and their parents before them), Lad too made the trip. To all outward appearances, he looked like an innocuous little beagle: tri-color black, white and brown, shorthaired, truly as cute as could be. Unfortunately, the scrappy Manchester terrier also lurked deep in his gene pool, deceptively nowhere to be found in his phenotype, and would surface daily. His misbehavior could largely be attributed to us, his irresponsible doting owners. Back in the day, neutering was not de rigueur. And Lad did bite just everyone who didn't appeal to him. The mailman complained. Even threatened to stop delivering mail at one point. Parents of children who had been bitten

complained. Owners of cats that Lad had chased into houses, complained. Needless to say, these were less litigious times. He lasted 16 years, ripping down countless sets of curtain sheers while barking at everything that came to the door. We attributed his longevity to the fact that neither god nor the devil could handle him. But as all legends must, he did finally expire, and the loss was truly unimaginably painful for the emotionally fragile teenager. After Lad, though, there would come many more little legends: a foot-long rat named Tolstoy, a rabbit named Easter, and countless cats, including Mr. Bird, the only one of my pride to attend college.

In her early twenties, this animal lover evolved into an animal shelter and rescue volunteer. Since 1989, my hands have seldom been without a leash, and my evenings and weekends seldom without a shelter dog to walk, no matter what the season. All of this is to say that after years of interacting with nonhuman beings, being pulled all over hell's half acre by them; walking alongside them; running behind them; feeding them; talking to them; laughing with them; receiving comfort from them; being bitten, scratched and at times badly injured by them; and holding their paws as they journeyed onward and upward, I now know too much. I can no longer obliviously lay my head on that soft

pillow of widespread belief: That we humans sit midway in the great hierarchical chain of being, with only god, angels, demons, stars and the moon above us; and that our placement somehow justifies our dismal treatment of nonhuman beings further down that chain. To slightly rejig and borrow a phrase: This much I know is NOT true. In fact I have it on good word that cats are actually privy to the top spot of that great motley chain, or so I've been admonished by my pride of five. But in all seriousness, when you spend so much time with the animals, they can no longer be perceived as lesser beings, but rather different beings toward which we have a great responsibility. This realization in and of itself has caused me no end of torment -- almost as much torment as my commitment in 2017 to go vegan one month on and one month off. I managed to get through January, and take it from me, there is no such thing as vegan cheese or eggs. Don't let those flawless skinned vegans tell you otherwise. I know I'll be traipsing around the eighth circle of hell in February as I return to rennet-free cheese and eggs from nicely treated chickens. But the realization cannot be unlearned. You can't un-see or un-think it. You can only henceforth see through the fur-covered glass darkly.

I promised you intrigue, and I know thus far, I have miserably failed to deliver. But this is a fine place to begin the discussion of how my current addiction took hold of me, like the proverbial dog with a bone. If an initial injury kicks off the irresistible craving for the opiate, the faces of thousands of animals over the years could be analogized to the initial kick in the gut that just kept on kicking. Truly, I eschewed the anodyne of passing time in my younger years. In fact, I used to run from the very concept of mutability. Squeeze my eyes shut from the unthinkable thought that what was here today, will have changed by tomorrow. Flee from the realization that everything would not, could not, stay the same. I never thought I'd hunger for impermanence: Like the heroin addict eyeing her little bag of white dust. I certainly never envisioned that I'd attempt to serve it up in every form: Through the biggest vein, up through my nose, against a numbing tongue, or just plain ol' down the hatch. But, gradually the addiction took hold, and more than any year before, in 2016, mutability became the life preserver that I threw reluctantly to all of my white and grey matter; matter that had become unmoored against the swells of cognitive dissonance that continue to pound daily against my cerebral shoreline. Let me explain.

For those of you unfamiliar with the concept of an open-admission municipal animal shelter and control facility, a little bit of shelter 'splaining might be in order. In contrast to shelters that select the animals they will take in (i.e., selective-admission shelters), most open-admission facilities must accept by law any animal that comes through their doors, and in whatever condition they come. And with regard to the Chicago's open-admission city shelter, I do mean any animal: from garden-variety and purebred felines and canines; to fish and fowl; to members of the class *reptilia* and the order *rodentia*; all sorts of wildlife, including skunks, deer, raccoons, and even bats.

And when I say that such facilities must accept animals in whatever condition they arrive, I do mean whatever condition. For example, strays indiscernible as *canis familiaris*, caked in urine, blood and feces and an army of maggots as abundant as rice strewn after the wedding. Animals riddled with bullets, or replete with broken bones. The starved. From the perfectly vibrant and healthy, to the aged, to the severely neglected, to the horribly abused, to the deformed, to the anxious, to the vicious, to all of the shades of what constitutes behaviorally challenged; and, of course, most generally, the living and the dead -- the doors of the open-admission shelter remain open to it all.

These shelters are the places where the tame and the wild things go, and they are stark reminders that any creature can become lost, sorely abused, neglected, caught, or abandoned.

When shelter ‘splaining, any discussion of open-admission shelters also requires a sobering discussion of euthanasia. Shelters euthanize animals for many reasons, primarily injury and sickness or very bad behavior, and sometimes for the more mundane reason of what is called capacity for care, which is usually an issue of space and resources. This latter basis is understandably the most controversial.

The word euthanasia comes from the Greek words eu (meaning well or good) and thanatos (meaning death), in sum a good death or death done well. It is the practice of intentionally ending a life in order to relieve pain and suffering. In many animal shelters today, the common, modern, and humane method is an administration of a lethal dose of the anesthetic sodium pentobarbital either intravenously, or via an intra peritoneal (the stomach cavity) pathway, or intra cardiac (heart chamber) pathway, but only after the administration of sleep inducing pre-medications, such as a combo of Ketamine and Xylazine, which renders the animal unconscious. Once administered, sodium pentobarbital makes its way to the heart, where it then swiftly heads up

through the arteries to the cerebral cortex, then to the cerebellum, and then on to the medulla oblongata where it depresses all life functions and vital signs. If deaths can be considered good, this is indeed, as I have witnessed, one of the more peaceful, painless and swiftest ways to die.

Generally speaking, in Chicago's sheltering landscape of days gone by, there were not always good deaths to be had, and there were far too many deaths to contemplate with any sense of sanity. For an accurate picture whence we've come, I went to speak with someone who lived it. A native of the Belmont Cragin neighborhood, Diane Spyрка's service to the animals of Chicago spans decades. If you lift away Diane's shoulder-length brown hair, and look closely, you can see the nubs just above her shoulder blades where her wings have been shorn away, no doubt so she could more easily drop to earth. I'm certain they will completely grow back when her time on the planet has come. She is a fixture of the Animal Welfare League, an organization founded in 1935, also known as the AWL. She is also veritable library of Chicago animal welfare history. In 1975, after finishing up at Oakton Community College and earning her certified medical laboratory technician certificate, Diane followed the money, and left her \$1.35 per hour kennel attendant job at the Bone

Animal Hospital, to join the AWL as a clinic assistant, earning \$1.50 per hour.

For roughly four decades she has made the trip to 6224 S. Wabash to a building that, like Lady Gaga, has had more than a few costume changes. The storefront currently sports bulletproof glass, security cameras, and a steel composite outer skeleton -- it is one of the only south side humane societies providing the economically depressed area with essential animal services and a pet food pantry. The facility serves hundreds of people and roughly 4,000 animals per year, mainly cats and dogs, and even the occasional squirrel and cantankerous hibernating chipmunk named Chippy. (Diane also has her wildlife rehabilitation license.) It is currently a receiving facility for strays and unwanted pets, complementing the AWL's open-admission facility in Chicago Ridge, which intakes roughly four times as many animals annually. During the 1970s, the neighborhood surrounding the Wabash facility was taking a violent turn; many people no longer wanted to visit because of safety concerns. Diane did not abandon her post.

Diane is also what is commonly known as a "very rare bird." I believe she might even be red listed. Her life's work, and what she has withstood as witness, is not for mere mortals, or any mere animal lover.

When Diane first started at the AWL, the volume of animals was exponentially greater than the volume she sees today. Back then, the organization was annually inundated with more than 50,000 animals, and the other big two shelters and control facilities, Chicago Animal Care and Control and the Anti-Cruelty Society, were pulling in similarly huge numbers. At the AWL, there were three shifts of people and two shifts of drivers that contained and retrieved packs of stray dogs running rampant around Chicago. To put it in more practical and blunt terms: At the AWL, it used to be that dead animal pickup was every day; now it is only once a week. She recalls a time in the late 1970's when Chicago Animal Care and Control's gas chamber was out of service, and CACC had to sign over to AWL more than a hundred animals a day for euthanasia. Diane's facility had two workers whose only job was to euthanize animals all day long.

Euthanasia was also not the same back then. AWL used electrocution in those days. It was the method of choice in Great Britain, and AWL had imported their two electrical boxes from the great isle. These boxes were engineered to thread 220 volts of electricity to a chain that had been affixed to an animal's neck. With a flip of a switch, the animal dropped immediately. Although horrific to ponder, it

apparently was a death assured quickly. The other methods used at that time by the other two facilities were no less repugnant to modern-day sensibilities. The City shelter used a gas chamber. The Anti-Cruelty Society used decompression. All were approved methods back in the day. None is now in use.

Longevity of commitment is not something that characterizes those who do what Diane does every day. Few could identify with what Diane has seen, or understand how much she has accomplished, or how much Chicago, as a city, has accomplished. A deeply practical individual, she knows she can't save them all. There's not enough financial support; there are not enough homes; they are not all salvageable. Few people are equipped with whatever kind of under armor Diane wears to stave off the effects of witnessing the hardest stuff day in day out, the suffering of which most of us spare ourselves the sight, to paraphrase Albert Schweitzer. Yet somehow she has still managed to keep her heart open, her smile wide, and her laugh resounding. As she conveyed to me, a tear welling in her eye, "This is not a job. It's a way of life."

So if Diane says Chicago has made huge strides in animal welfare, I'm ready to believe her. Like those incredibly long and thin ladies

sucking back cigarettes “tailored for the feminine hand,” would utter, Chicago has indeed “come a long way, baby.”

A shout out must be given to Illinois generally for its tougher stance on animal welfare. Illinois’ animal protection laws are some of the strongest in the nation. For the ninth year in a row, the Animal Defense League Fund ranked Illinois number one for the comprehensiveness of these laws. I won’t bore you with a long list of the laws that are in place, but Illinois does deserve a pat on the back for its efforts. The laws are also designed of course to protect people and other animals from dangerous animals. Chicago’s Municipal Code 7-12, for example, provides *inter alia*, guidance for controlling and determining “dangerous animals.”

Huge strides, however, don’t always straddle the chasm between what you know to be true, and what your duty to public safety and reality might entail. As I mentioned, from a mild addiction to mutability for most of my volunteer days in animal shelters, I became heavily addicted to the concept in 2016; in May of that year, I accepted the appointment of Executive Director of Chicago Animal Care and Control, the City’s largest municipally run open-admission animal shelter. I left my career as a litigator to oversee an operation that provides both

animal shelter and control services to the City of Chicago. Day after day, animals stream in. And day after day, concerned groups of people, employees, volunteers, rescue organizations, members of the public, work like dogs -- because we all know cats don't work -- to get them out alive. I am ultimately responsible for these animals: When they live, and when they die. I've seen them enter the shelter, sometimes on the end of a long excuse, abandoned to their fate after many years of family service. I've also seen some come in with a police officer, or an animal control officer, their physical and mental condition mere shadows of what they could have been in loving hands. I've lain down on the floor with a couple, and held them as they've been peacefully put to rest. I characterize this job as the most difficult I've ever had, and probably will ever have. It's been a very interesting nine months for sure. I could write essays upon essays about the animals that have passed through CACC since I arrived, but I conclude this essay with the stories of only two. I do this because it seems fit to end an essay titled, *The Life in My Hands*, with two lives that are deserving of their own written remembrance. Concluding with this particular story also will put in sharp relief the root cause of my addiction.

I must preface their stories with an explanation of the definition of a “dangerous animal.” A dangerous animal and a dangerous dog in particular may be many things under Chicago’s Municipal Code. For example, an animal may be labeled dangerous if it visits an unprovoked attack on a person or another animal. It could be a dog that is used as a guard dog or for fighting. A dog that has approached someone in an apparent attitude of attack on more than one occasion can also be labeled dangerous. After an investigation has been performed, CACC’s Executive Director has the responsibility of deeming a dog dangerous -- or not. If a dog is deemed dangerous, and not ordered euthanized, the dog may still return to its owner with conditions of upkeep: these include spaying or neutering the animal, purchasing a certain amount of liability insurance, safely containing the animal, muzzling the animal when walking in public, training, and obtaining an annual dangerous dog license at \$100 a pop. An animal might also be banished from the City. The owners sometimes comply and come and pick up their pets; and sometimes they don’t. If abandoned by their owners, the animals become City property, and they are usually euthanized. Placing animals that have no issues, and that do not pose any threat to the public is difficult enough. Placing animals with a bite record is incredibly difficult.

Not long after I had arrived at the City shelter in my new role, I began investigating some uncharted territory, venturing back to the dangerous dog pavilion where the violators of the Code resided and where they sometimes would sit for months, and sometimes years. Since dangerous doesn't always literally mean dangerous, I went to see if there were some of these animals that I could take out for a walk in the large fenced yard out back of the City shelter. There were always a couple of them.

T1, the younger, and T2, the older (not their real names) were a couple of Belgian Malinois that had been deemed dangerous by my predecessor. And for good reason: Their owner used them as guard dogs to patrol empty properties, and on two separate occasions they had freed themselves from whatever perimeter they had been charged with guarding, given chase to a passerby, and attacked. When I became director, these guys had already spent months in kennels in a back pavilion, but were not yet property. They bounced off their smallish concrete confines, spreading feces everywhere, and barked to anyone who walked past. They eagerly gobbled down the Milkbone biscuits tossed through the bars. I reviewed their file carefully. The photos of the injuries they'd inflicted while absent without leave were not critical, but they were also not pretty, and no doubt mentally and physically

painful to the victim. The description of the attacks, however, contrasted sharply with the restless young T1, who yipped enthusiastically in his kennel, displaying a head tilt and *joie de vivre* that could tease a smile from even the hardest face. T2, a dog of four or five years was more intense. He sported a snowy, wizened muzzle and a sartorial style reminiscent of the bass player for John Prine. Their owner could have taken the dogs home so long as he complied with the conditions in the Ordinance, but rather than comply, he abandoned them to their fate at the shelter.

I'll never forget the first time I removed each separately from their kennels and brought them into the fresh air for a leg stretch. It was the first time in months that the animals had been outside. T1 was first. When I released him off leash into the fenced-in yard, the freedom was palpable, both in the way his fetid wheat-colored coat feathered about him as he raced around the yard, and in the way he would eagerly chase a tennis ball, and show absolutely no desire to retrieve it, as though all objects animate and inanimate deserved a break that day. Old man T2 was a different creature all together when he exited his kennel for the first time. He meant business, and his aptitude for chasing and retrieving any object thrown was unparalleled. He chased a ball with the

concentration and precision of a brain surgeon. When you are employed in a place of throwaways, you can't but help wonder what their lives might have been like, had their talents been positively directed from the beginning. Had T2 gotten on the right track at the start of his life, he no doubt would have made a great police K-9, finding people, finding drugs, finding anything: There was no ball that T2 could not fetch or find, and retrieve on his old pins.

After that first night, I took them out to the backyard a number of times. Separately, they appeared to be good dogs. I considered trying to transfer them out of the shelter to responsible hands. I contacted a couple of law enforcement folks to regale them with T2's amazing abilities with a ball, but pretty much learned that old dogs were not what they were looking for. I also contacted a couple of rescues that I thought with full disclosure might consider taking them. All the while, though, liability considerations, like sadistic and sour sugarplums, danced and danced around in my head. I kept asking myself, what if they got out again? What if they harmed yet another person or an animal? What if, what if, and what if? After many weeks of tossing balls and tossing in my sleep, and pushing the old arguing married couple of angel and devil off of my shoulder, I decided early in the summer that neither

dog should leave the shelter. Against every moral fiber I had, I authorized the euthanasia of these vibrant beings. I know many of you are sitting here thinking: Well of course. Others are sitting here aghast: How could I?

I wanted their last day to be the greatest day, especially of all the days they might remember confined in the noisy, stressful shelter. I'm sure their earlier days of patrolling building parameters had long been forgotten. That morning on my way to work, I drove through a Burger King drive-through, and ordered eight plain Whoppers to go. I decided that their final hours would be filled with burgers and balls. That night, after the workday curtain had drawn, I picked up the slip lead, shoved poop bags in my pocket, microwaved the burgers, and made my way to their kennels. Distant rumblings outside and a gathering convention of ominous clouds signaled a brewing summer storm. I released T1 out in the yard first. He wasn't in a ball-playing mood, and initially just walked around sniffing, and then nuzzled his long nose into my side for attention. As the sky continued to darken, he finally ran around the yard, as I watched the distant flashes of electricity dance atop the black marching mass of clouds. I softly begged for some more time from whatever powers were gathering till I could get T2 out. After a half hour

had passed, I returned T1, and immediately lassoed up T2--there was no time to waste--and I released him into the yard. Lightening lit up the sky in the distance, and the drumbeat of thunder pounded closer and closer. The ominous steady prelude of the rain had begun, like Australia's All Blacks' Haka, and I could hear the warriors chant, "Let me go back to my first gasp of breath. Let my life force return to the earth." I furiously threw tennis ball after tennis ball, and T2 raced up and down the yard. But it was the bolt from the sky immediately overhead our metal enclosure that shook me out of the trance of bend, pick up, and throw ball. "Well old boy," I whispered to the heaving, impatient old shepherd pawing the dirt in front of me, "If we stay out here much longer, neither one of us will have to be euthanized." I threw the slip lead over his head as the drops began to echo off the shelter roof top, and we raced back into the building just as the heavens opened, and pelted us with arrows of heavy rain. Back in the Pavilion, after T2 was safely stowed, breathless and panting on the cool concrete floor, I unwrapped the burgers that had once again grown cold. It was of no moment for T1, who gobbled them down in two bites a piece, and pawed his kennel bars for more. I left T2's portion in his bowl as he was

far less interested in eating burgers than he was in gulping air and water.

Burgers, balls, and butt scratches were the only thing I wanted them to remember before they took flight into the world of the invisible at 7:00 p.m. that evening. I deeply regret not having held either one of them as they were euthanized. Rather, I drove home that evening barely able to see the road through the twin torrents of tears and rain.

There is no 12-step program to assuage the compulsive need I have for another moment, or the realization that one has passed, or that one will pass -- and the requisite steadiness to allow them to pass without collapsing on the floor. I have discovered that what profoundly matters is the recognition that living is an intensely momentary thing. Not recognizing its ephemeral nature is a great cause of failing the moment, and failing the being who happens to be sharing it with you, if but briefly. And conversely, perhaps paradoxically, the addiction to mutability is also the root of considerable relief and healing. Had there been nothing to allay the decisional despair associated with these two, and many others that have followed, I think a sinkhole lined with grief and guilt would have swallowed me whole. Buddhist nun Pema Chodron wisely observed,

That nothing is static or fixed, that all is fleeting and impermanent, is the first mark of existence. It is the ordinary state of affairs. Everything is in process. Everything—every tree, every blade of grass, all the animals, insects, human beings, buildings, the animate and the inanimate—is always changing, moment to moment.

The river that need not be stepped in twice is the only river that washes away enough of the emotional grit and grime to allow you to get up and try again the next day. The lives in my hands have transformed me into an impermanence junkie. And every day, I tighten that rubber band with my clenched teeth, flick the air bubbles from the needle, and shoot it up uncut into my biggest vein.