



HELP FOR THE HELPERS

By Brenda Shoss

I'm armed with videos, photos, reports. My job is to expose cruelty. I am the animals' witness — from the first thrust of a slaughterhouse knife...till dismembered limb by limb. I see the gas chamber that takes a dog's unwanted life. My eyes confirm bullhooks, flank straps and spurs that bully animals in circuses and rodeos.

Millions of souls inhabit my office. Sadie sits nearby with an electrical cord branded into her neck. A Lab-mix searches for the eyes and head a Michigan teen cut from his body. I hear their terror.

What I sometimes don't hear is my husband. The phone. Or an inner voice urging me to take a break. It's probably compassion fatigue. I once discarded the term as psychobabble. But compassion fatigue (CF) is real, with symptoms that exceed burnout. It is secondary post-traumatic stress for those associated with trauma victims: Emergency care/health professionals, law enforcers, disaster responders, animal shelter/rescue workers, activists and others.

For animal advocates, Compassion Fatigue may show up as:

- I cherish animals more than myself.
- I embrace a victim's pain as if it were my own.
- I am isolated. No one can understand what I have seen.
- My sleep and concentration are interrupted by flashbacks, thoughts, images of animals I've tried to help, or couldn't help.
- I sometimes feel hostile, defensive or impatient around others.
- While viewing or working with animals, I have wanted to lash out or hurt the abusers.
- I live with a sense of failure that I cannot rescue every one.

If a preoccupation with aiding others disrupts relationships, you may be a CF junkie. Over time, confidence, personal life and health can deteriorate. According to author Theresa Wagner, who created the website animalsinourhearts.com as a forum for healing, the compassion-fatigued sometimes focus on external pain to circumvent their own psychic wounds. "Giving love and support to animals is sacred...and fulfills a healthy need to help. Along with the rewards, there can be deep wrenching heartache," Wagner says.

For Susan Wilson, Humane Society of Southern Arizona executive director, a stream of suffering and human stupidity can take its toll. "Like the afternoon the 79th animal came through receiving with an ear completely removed to the base of the head by a knife or razor blade," Wilson recalls. "When we asked the owner why he hadn't sought veterinary help, he just shrugged. 'I can't afford it...It's just a dog.' But now the dog was flawed, so he didn't want it anymore."

Wilson shares a common rescuer's dream — to never again euthanize healthy animals. But that vision relies upon responsible guardianship, adoption instead of breeder or pet-shop buys, spay/neuter programs, and a paradigm shift that elevates animals from disposable things to unique individuals.

"In such ideal circumstances, inner peace in the midst of animal welfare work would be easy!" Wagner says. In reality, animal advocates emerge from battle with post-traumatic scars. Many who pursue institutional reforms for animals in food, entertainment, research, fashion...are perpetually angry or forlorn.

CF recovery begins with recognition and outreach. CF self-help groups? They could save the savers. But no broad network exists, so timeouts and support systems are vital — to breathe, vent pain, share coping tools...and even laugh.



Across The Pond: U.S. & U.K. Activists Share Stories Of Post-Traumatic HLS Shock

Brenda Shoss, U.S.

Certain images can send veteran activists over the edge. Nothing prepared me for the volcano in my soul when I viewed undercover investigator Michele Rokke's footage in Huntingdon Life Sciences, one of the world's largest contract research laboratories with facilities in England and East Millstone, New Jersey. Michele, who worked at HLS for 7 months, feigned indifference to learn the effortless sarcasm and sadism of fellow workers. At times, she slipped into rooms unobserved to kiss a doomed beagle goodbye or scratch the pink underside of a grateful pig. She gave each numbered specimen a name — Spud, Joey, Angel, James — and whenever she could, tiny pieces of human kindness.

Her journal, "Diary of Despair, Inside Huntingdon Life Sciences" and video clips left me speechless. I struggled to breathe as I watched HLS techs punch an uncooperative puppy, over and over again. During sleep they came to me one by one. The beagle with crude ropey stitches carved down the center of his shaved head. Oozing, bloody, vomiting puppies, pigs, and monkeys on cold, metallic floors. How would they face another day of poison poured down tubes lodged in their stomachs? How would they survive more smashed bones and severed limbs? Who would hold them when they trembled in uncontrollable seizures?

No one. I knew I could only pray for lonely death to release them. This left me with rage and inconsolable despair. So I wrote endlessly. I compiled *Inside/Out: Diary of Madness* to chronicle their wretched lives. I sent letters to HLS investors, suppliers, clients. I traveled to other cities to stand with activists and demand justice. Eventually, I became a spokesperson for Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC-USA), speaking at national demos. Staring HLS in the eye reaffirmed my commitment to animals, but left emotional scars.



Eileen Kinghorn, U.K.

Two years ago I was given a free ticket for a 'living without cruelty' exhibition here in London, by a dear friend I work with. [At that time] I was veggie and had my two beloved dogs but that was as far as it went. I meandered over to a stall where I was asked to sign a petition. As I signed, the young man explained about HLS, but I didn't walk away quickly enough...

I looked in utter horror at the small television sitting on the stall and my world, as I knew it, fell apart. I turned away and saw another woman looking at the TV in horror also. For what seemed like an age everything passed in slow motion. My legs gave out on me. I shook and pushed my way past the other stalls. Eager faces were smiling, I remember, and their lips moved — presumably asking me to sign yet another petition — but I didn't hear them.

I wanted to run out of there, away from the world, but all I could do was find a seat to sit down. I was in shock. Tears flowed from my eyes. My heart ached in pity for the poor creatures I'd just seen being punched in the face and shaken. But it was the noise, their screams, I couldn't bear. Even now, when I go to protests/demos and a protester plays that awful tape on the megaphone a part of me dies. Until only recently I still had to clasp my hands over my ears.



My life changed from that moment at the stall. I could not sleep for many nights. I still hear their cries and feel so much pain. But slowly the tears stopped and I became angry. I innocently sent letters off to the government and other parasites of the industry — no replies (or the usual reply of needing to test on animals blah, blah, blah.) I become more and more bitter, confused but more than anything ANGRY. Why is this allowed to go on? So many questions. Doesn't everyone feel the pain and sadness as I do? Why didn't I know everything in my store cupboard had been tested on animals? Why didn't I know the fancy perfume I used every morning for work was bloody tested down the stomach of an animal? Why wasn't I told? Why didn't I seek out the truth? Why did I turn away from those people I'd seen over the years doing stalls and thought they must be slightly off the rails? Why WHY?

I have gone through a whole kaleidoscope of emotions — pain and pleasure (e.g. when Stephens, Inc. pulled out.) I never, ever forget. I wake up with it. Still have bad dreams. I hold my dogs like I never did before. I love and appreciate them so much more. I instantly threw out my expensive perfume. I have turned vegan. A few months after the exhibition, while doing a stall, I met (and have subsequently moved in with) my activist partner John. We fight animal abuse together. My life has completely turned around.

Today it's Friday. People talk of the relaxing weekend ahead. I look forward to a stall and fighting for the animals tomorrow. I am driven. I lie awake nights composing letters to abusers. I feel guilty each day that I haven't done enough... Because of a heartbreaking video clip that shows puppies punched in the face, I have pledged my life to fighting animal issues. It will be BECAUSE of those infamous video moments that HLS will sink into the abyss where it belongs.

