Just a Dog
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The cat-in-the-dryer case did not have the right ingredients to be picked up by the media. To get really extensive coverage and a strong response from the public you need a victim and a happy ending, and an animal that is saved in some way. Even though the kitten case was really disturbing—someone butchered it alive and threw it in a dryer where a little boy found it—it was not a real good media case. It’s disturbing, but unless you can show an actual animal that people can identify with and have this animal helped in some way, it’s almost too gory.

—Media affairs staff

Usually after tragedy destroys a community there is an outpouring of grief and support from survivors to reestablish social bonds. However, sometimes there are tragedies that have no community to restore a sense of order and meaning after loss of life or property, and the survivors pay for this void (Brison 2001). If there is no community to begin with, tragedy occurs in a social vacuum, as happens when death strikes isolated people. There is no one to reaffirm and support core community beliefs and standards of morality, no one to tell the survivors that their former identities are still honored and respected, no one to mull over the meaning of the death or recall memories of the deceased, and no memorialization—the person or event is forgotten. There is no healing.

This scenario often applies to the humane community when animals are egregiously abused—severely neglected and abandoned, enduring prolonged suffering and an agonizing death, or burned, beaten, crushed, drowned, poisoned, shot, or otherwise intentionally tortured. Few people would deny that these are extreme cases of “cruelty” that go well beyond routine violations of the “food, water, shelter” requirement of the cruelty code or what agents might describe as a bullshit complaint.

Although there is significant harm to animals in these cases, most of the time only a small number of people beyond the complainants and abusers themselves know that something untoward happened.
Sometimes severely abused animals have no owners who can try to mend this travesty, and if there are owners, they often do not have community support for the loss they feel; they are alone with their thoughts and emotions. Humane agents might talk about these cases among themselves, but usually other people do not want to hear about such “gory” things. And this silence applies to the veterinarians, hospital technicians, and shelter workers who examine and treat abused animals. They experience a sense of loss when animals have to be euthanized or are brought in dead and have to be disposed of, but this loss is individual, informal, and often private.

Although these cases are not easily forgotten, most people who work for humane organizations or who support their mission never learn about them. There is no mechanism for them to hear about these victims, let alone memorialize and mourn their loss. Thus, there is no public or official recognition that these cases of cruelty, as a group, are the saddest of all animal cases that come into humane societies and their hospitals. There is no grief or mourning that is openly ritualized and that would permit the honoring of these animals. In short, animal abuse is a tragedy in search of community.

Occasionally, there are “big” cruelty cases whose unique features address these problems. Word about them travels throughout humane societies because they involve every department of these organizations. In addition to law enforcement agents who seize animals or bring in dead ones suspected of abuse, veterinary pathologists examine dead animals for clinical signs of abuse, internists or surgeons treat their sicknesses or injuries, veterinary technicians help them through recovery, and shelter workers nurture them and try to find them new homes.

The public hears about big cases through humane society marketers—the media affairs and development departments. The former covers these cases as part of public education, while the latter uses these them to make their financial appeals more effective. Images of abused animals appear on the outside of direct mailings and their abuse is described inside with grisly details of cruelty that elicit the reader’s anger, horror, sadness, uneasiness, and frustration. However, most of the thousands of cruelty complaints made each year to large, urban humane societies are never considered for such use; only a few are the egregious sort, and most of these are not suitable for mass mailing and public education.
When the right kind of case does come up, it is regarded as an enormous opportunity; failing to capitalize on it is considered a mistake.

Despite their small number, big cases are just what are needed by both the concerned public and staff within humane organizations. Cruelty, especially the blatant, sadistic sort, is a deep shock to these people. In its aftermath, they are horrified by the harm done, perplexed about its cause, and angry with abusers. They feel shaken morally and emotionally, just as are people when unexpected violence strikes others, particularly so when the victims are innocent and defenseless. Big cases are particularly valuable because through them the institution, its staff, and its supportive public come to terms with cruelty. It is acknowledged, grieved, and memorialized, and in the process, the humane community’s solidarity is enhanced. Finding and shaping these cases, however, is no easy matter.

THE “BEAUTIFUL” CASE

Not all incidents of egregious cruelty can qualify and be transformed into beautiful cases that achieve high visibility in the general community. A case must possess a number of characteristics to make it what some staff call “beautiful.” To capture the hearts and minds of the public, media experts scour new cases in search of the right mix of ingredients, just as do journalists. Walter Goodman of the *New York Times* calls it “prettifying reality,” a point elaborated by Bernard Goldberg (2002, 71) to describe the press’s distortion of homeless people in the news. To arouse sympathy for the homeless and build support for programs, documentaries focus on otherwise hard-working couples or attractive teenagers rather than “off-putting specimens.” Making cruelty appealing to the public is an equally challenging task.

Acceptable Suffering

Properly depicted cruelty is the most important part of a beautiful case. A media affairs staff member explains the value of such cases: “If there is something graphic about an animal’s abuse, we want to show it because you want people to care about that animal, you want them to be moved.” Staff believe that when people are so “moved” they will more likely provide information, donate, or adopt. Only certain images of abuse or neglect are thought to so effectively mobilize emotions.
To start with, cruelty needs to be visible and disturbing to viewers. In one case, a dog was neglected for many months and developed several veterinary problems. The most graphic abuse—the dog’s heavy coat of extremely matted hair—would easily photograph to dramatically highlight the “before” and “after” scenario used in presenting these cases to the public. But this was not a beautiful case. Some veterinary problems the dog suffered, including “terrible skin problems and other issues involving its well-being,” would not be apparent in photographs and would remain hidden from the public. Moreover, badly matted hair and serious skin problems were not “sexy” forms of cruelty that could pull the heartstrings of viewers, but they were, nevertheless, real and vexing problems for the animal.

Cruelty, however, according to development and media affairs staff, should not be too disturbing. They feel that the challenge to marketing egregious abuse is that it must be perceived as sufficiently “bad” to elicit sympathy and perhaps even identification by the public but not be so upsetting that people turn away from the solicitation because they are appalled or grief stricken. If people are “horrified” by pictures of cruelty, they might not read the material or donate, staff members claim, so “in the pictures we were very careful not to show how bad it really is. You want to show cruelty, but it is too much when people start not wanting to open their mail.”

The institutional practice of “going light” with cruelty is based more on informal custom and political posturing than on sound market research. Within humane organizations and among its supporters, cruelty is an unseemly or uncomfortable topic for some people to face, despite the fact that combating and preventing it was the impetus for the organizations’ creation and is the heart of its current mission. Many employees want someone else to deal with cruelty because it is so horrible; they know abuse happens but do not want it “in our faces.” The organization also is “conservative” compared with other animal groups in that they do not want to be “sensationalistic” or “political” when dealing with issues like cruelty. Their public base of support is different from the supporters of animal rights organizations that are more willing to describe in text and picture the stark reality of extreme cases of cruelty. As one person in development noted, its audience is uncomfortable with graphic and ugly portrayals of cruelty: “Over the years, we have gotten letters. The public has made the line clear to us—our
public—the one we target, which may be different than PETA’s [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] or HSUS’s [Humane Society of the United States].”

To avoid offending people, the media affairs staff rejects the use of photographs showing extreme abuse. One staff member explained how they screen animals for use in photographs: “We go see what they look like because we don’t want an animal that is just so awful that people are going to be horrified and angry at you for pushing this awful thing in their face.” For example, according to a humane agent, in one particularly violent and hideous case, media affairs failed to pursue press attention because the cruelty was too “icky”: “These two kids who took a cat and threw it off the roof of an apartment building, hung it up on a wrought iron gate fence, crucified it by tying its arms to the fence. They took the intestines out and stretched it out in a crucifixion type manner with the intestines, and then took one of the eyes and stuck it in the mouth—just as sick as you can imagine. We locked them up, gave them counseling. That happened some months ago, but that got no coverage. It never made the papers only because our media relations director felt it was too icky for the papers. It’s got to be cute cruelty.”

Photographs from other, perhaps equally disturbing cases, might be used, but only after careful selection of easier-to-see pictures, or perhaps even uplifting ones of abused animals in recovery. Staff members might, for example, reject the most shocking pictures in favor of showing “after” ones. In a case involving tar-covered puppies found in a sewer, “before shots” could not be used because, according to one staff member, “they would have been too hideous, too horrible to a lot of people. We have to be so careful.” Instead, photographs were used of the dogs after they were washed. Sometimes “before pictures” are taken that avoid showing potentially disturbing details. In this regard, the head of development spoke about Fluffy, a terribly abused dog, who was used in one humane society’s mass mailings: “We will take ‘before pictures’—in the case of Fluffy who had had one of her hind legs severed by her owner—the story was that her owner had chained her by her leg to a post for so long that the leg had severed right around where your thighbone would be. And it was really horrific when she came in. She was emaciated, covered in hundreds of ticks, and she had short hair so you could see all the ticks, huge engorged ticks all over her, and you could see a bit of bone this big—an inch or two—sticking out of the
stump on her leg. It was just horrible in every way imaginable. You could see her suffering, it was beautiful. The only thing we had to do when we took our ‘before pictures,’ and even our after pictures, you had to be careful not to show too much of the stumpy, bloody, horrible leg because you didn’t want to horrify people.” The Fluffy case, while beautiful, was difficult to manage because of the concern that her cruelty—if fully shown—would be too much for the concerned public to handle.

Not offending people also means carefully wording descriptions of cruelty. Media experts choose the correct language to move readers while not shocking them. Creating an acceptable narrative of abuse means sidestepping the use of certain terms. In one case involving “degloving,” press releases avoided this term and instead spoke of skin being removed from the animal without describing in detail what this meant. A staff member explained: “That was one of the tough things about the Mandy story. She was degloved. And when I first heard that I wasn’t sure what it meant. It means that all the skin was removed on her arm. It’s pretty horrible. It was difficult to figure out how to write degloving and explain what that meant without making it sound so hideous. Sometimes it is ugly.” This staff member added that animal rights organizations might not have downplayed degloving if they had used it in their promotions.

Descriptions are also carefully worded to avoid offending the media and organizations important to humane societies. A media affairs staff member spoke about the need to be “conservative” rather than “sensational” when writing about cruelty: “We have a fine line that we have to walk on. You have to grab the media’s attention but you don’t want to appear too fanatical as far as the language that you are using. You are a little bit more conservative with the language. I mean put powerful language but not over the top. We always try to keep that respect that the media and other agencies have for us, so we need to be truthful and present the severity of it yet without sensational language. I think when you get a letter from PETA or ALF [Animal Liberation Front] the language and pictures hit you over the head, I mean there is no mincing of words. We have to be respectful of the person who is reading it and mindful of the image we are presenting.” To avoid politicizing the issue, then, language is softened in press releases and solicitations. Instead of using words like torture or maim that are used in the
direct mailings of more politically inclined animal organizations, humane societies use wording that is more dispassionate.

Appealing Animals
In addition to the right amount of graphic cruelty, beautiful cases have appealing victims that can easily evoke sympathy. Certain kinds of animals are automatically excluded, although they can represent some of the most brutal cases. As one media affairs director said: “I would never take pictures of dead animals and put those in press releases. That would cross the line.” Abused farm animals, too, rarely appear in cruelty promotions, since most of the target audience would find it harder to identify with them than with domestic or wild animals that are harmed.

Companion animals, when in just the right condition and pose, are thought to be the most effective type of animal to elicit support from the public. By far, dogs are most commonly featured, and small dogs are considered the best for promotion. Tiny, a deliberately burned dog, was described by a staff member as a potentially beautiful case for this reason: “It was a big case because the violence was so graphic, but I also think there’s a species issue too. I think people react differently to a small dog [or] puppy. [They get a] peak reaction. Tiny was a small dog with very graphic pictures that showed burns. It was a defenseless little dog intentionally hurt, and the way Tiny looked—you couldn’t look at him without wanting to cry.”

An abused animal’s age can affect its appeal. Although any small dog or puppy is thought to be a perfect victim for presentation to the public, a dog that is too young is problematic. As one society staff member pointed out: “From the start, Buster was very young. Not quite a puppy, but very young. Not so puppy-like to be disturbing to see how crippled and injured he was. Seeing a very young puppy that crippled would have been very disturbing.” A development staff member illustrated this problem with the example of Susie, a dog whose leg was chopped off and was used in one society’s direct mailings: “You walk up to this dog and her tail starts wagging like mad and she’s good natured and has this beautiful face. She was a dog who, right from the start, had a natural visual connection to you. Just telling the story itself was emotional. If Susie had been a six-week-old puppy missing a leg, I don’t think we would have used her because that would have been way too horrific for people to handle.”
An animal’s expressions can also affect its appeal. As one staff member remarked: “You have to think about every little thing—Does the dog have its tag on? How does it look? Does it look happy? Does it look angry? If it’s a pit bull you want to be sure it’s got a sweet, sensitive face. You don’t want it to have an aggressive face.” Indeed, showing behavior like aggressiveness is carefully avoided when animal victims are photographed or taped for television. In one case, for example, the abused dog, off camera, was worrisome because “it had warning signs.” As a staff member explained: “He had to be anesthetized to have anything done to him because he was ready to bite off the staff’s fingers. He was a biter. We wouldn’t let anybody get close enough to see if he really would bite. He was fine with his owner and people he knows, but with strangers could be aggressive.” The public also does not want to see expressions on animals that could be construed as suffering. As a media affairs expert observed, “They don’t really want to see a dog show pain.” However, abused animals can “look bad” if they still show some sort of appealing expression. For example, in one case of a badly beaten dog, the media affairs director noted that she referred to it as “Little Frankenstein because it had black stitches across its face.” She explained: “On the TV coverage, almost all the commentators warned people that this might be graphic. But despite the wounds, he still looked like a happy-to-be-alive dog.”

Even appealing names are thought to help market beautiful cases. It is thought that the names of abused animals should be fitting—inoffensive and uplifting. In one case, staff members changed an animal’s name from Lusty to Hope so that the development literature would be more appealing. They explained their action: “Actually we changed her name. The officer at the time, or someone in the shelter or hospital, had named her when she came in and it wasn’t sellable. It was a horrible name. It was just awful. I don’t know what they were thinking, but they weren’t marketing people. So Susie and I sat for a while trying to think of a good name—something that was uplifting and sweet and feminine—and just reflected what we thought her personality was. That’s how Hope came to be. It’s a female name but it has a different meaning. At the time we were desperately looking for the right story for a mailed solicitation, and pop, she appeared just in time for us to do this mailing and just in time to put one photo of her in that brochure.”

At some societies, names become identified with particularly successful marketing campaigns and are retained long after the animal dies. The
Marketers

Dusty Fund, for instance, features a “new” Dusty about once a year, even though the breed and abuse are different from the original dog used in this campaign to raise money to fight cruelty.

The search for appealing abused animals means that the best cases will eventually be trumped by even more appealing cases, making them all, in the end, replaceable. Addressing this matter, one staff member said of a particularly effective case: “Sunshine is timeless but I have no doubt that in six months I will have another horrifying Sunshine story, just as bad, and just as good at the same time, and I may never have to use Sunshine again. But I have her. That’s the sad truth of this awful business—there’s going to be another Sunshine in six months. I am sure of it, as sure as I am sitting here.”

Since beautiful cases can become “boring” to the public, marketing campaign star-victims are rotated. One development staff member likened this rotation to the change of characters in a popular television show: “I am hitting up most of the animal lovers and I don’t want them to get bored. So you rotate—whether it be in advertisements, mailings, stories in newsletters. If you use the same animal month after month eventually it gets boring. It’s like the TV show Law and Order. It’s been on TV for ten years and people still love it. Part of the success of Law and Order in my opinion—a marketing perspective—is that the characters change. They’ve been through three or four detectives. There are two sets of detectives, which are the law—they are the cops. And the order is like these DAs. In the ten years they have changed the DAs and cops numerous times. And in other shows, you change the main character and the show goes to pot. But they made it part of their thing so the show is always fresh. Sometimes they focus more on the cops and sometimes more on the DAs. That keeps it fresh too. And I think that’s what’s going to hopefully keep the Buster Fund fresh. You change the stories, you change the faces, you rotate things.” Species victims also are rotated to keep things “fresh.” One staff member described this rotation: “We do dozens of mailings throughout the year, so we’ll rotate them throughout, rotating dogs and cats. So if you are a cat person—you’ve got a cat story and maybe the next quarter of the year we’ll use a dog story to mix it up.”

Distraught Owners

Owners can be shown as victims too—revealing further damage from cruelty. Although both development and media affairs concentrate on
the animal’s side of the story, owners—if they are known and not themselves the abusers—can have a small but important part in beautiful cases. Indeed, by the time newspapers and television programs craft their own abuse stories, owners are given center stage to provide some human interest to cruelty stories. Owners express a range of strong emotions, running from being distraught to being furious, thereby demonstrating that they too are victims. These displays of emotion match the reactions of people who are featured in news stories about children who are harmed, abducted, or killed. As one media affairs expert noted, “We definitely want people to act like they care and are concerned about this.”

Owners who speak for their animals can generate public outrage. As one staff member explained: “When they were interviewing Kim, Little’s owner, they kept asking her, ‘How do you think Little feels?’ and, ‘What would you say to Little if Little could understand?’ They were trying to get an emotional story. They definitely want to ask those questions that will turn the story on its emotional edge.” When owners are asked such questions, viewers are indirectly asked to imagine the answer—by putting themselves in the place of the animal—and to accept that getting an answer to such a question is reasonable and possible. Having an owner speak thus serves a transferential function if the statements prompt or facilitate identification by outsiders with the owner’s position. A media affairs staff member underscored this point when she described the public’s reaction to an owner who expressed great lament over his abused dog. This reaction aroused sympathy in viewers, who saw a kindred spirit—a fellow animal lover in distress—felt his suffering, and offered support. “This case, since I’ve been here, generated the most phone calls from the public. I lost count how many calls were from people who have small dogs too who identified with this dog’s owner, saying ‘I have a little dog. I can’t imagine someone doing that to my dog.’”

Owners, if they are in the picture, need to be appealing, just as do animal victims. For cases to be beautiful, owners must be upset over the mistreatment of their animals and be responsible caretakers. Public affairs personnel closely monitor “celebrity owners” to ensure that they project the right image. In one case, the dog Blacky had been brutally abused, but media affairs was not confident that his owner would appear to be a good caretaker. The staff considered downplaying or
excluding Blacky’s owner in newspaper and television reports because she was somewhat “shady” and did not fit the standard profile of a good owner; they feared that on air she might talk about wanting to breed her abused dog, use inappropriate language, not show sufficient feelings for her animal, or accuse someone of animal abuse. Unfortunately, on the first newscast, which the society did not orchestrate, the abuser and her family came across as hardly ideal owner-victims. A staff member compared Blacky’s owner to “Mickey’s,” the latter being perfect owners: “Blacky’s owner was challenging to manage because she was on the edge. The perfect owner would be someone like Mickey’s owner. They were a couple in their mid-fifties, they had grandchildren and children, who absolutely loved their dog and were articulate and responsible and dependable in terms of what they said publicly about the case. Blacky’s owner actually turned out to be publicly quite good. The media asked her the same question ten different ways to try to get her to publicly cry on camera—‘If you could talk to Blacky . . . ? If Blacky were a child, what would you tell him?’ They were really pushing the envelope to try to get her to show emotion. I was concerned because in person she was the kind of person who had trouble completing a sentence without swearing. She also wasn’t a stable woman, but she truly loved her dog and on camera, she was fine. And she was very grateful. I mean, off camera, her sister told me, ‘If you don’t get him [the abuser], we’re going to get him.’ I told her to please not say that on TV. She did have other members of her family in the background shouting inappropriate things. On the first piece of news coverage you will see that they actually pointed a finger at someone they truly believed did it who turned out not to have done it. But they were positive he did it and channel nine was questioning him on camera, basically asking him why would they say you did this if you didn’t do it?”

**Shadowy Abusers**

Beautiful cases also feature abusers. Indeed, without a “perp” or “respondent,” there is a lingering sense that justice has not been rendered as the criminal roams free. The ideal abuser, if included, has no motive to harm animals other than sadistic pleasure—evil intent is clear. More important, the abuser is arrested, charged with cruelty, convicted, and sentenced.
When direct mailings or press releases include abusers, they are portrayed as dangerous and guilty of aggression toward animals. A media affairs staff member recounts one such case: “I wrote a piece about a woman in the Southend housing project who had an argument with her neighbor. She attacked her neighbor and her dog. Her neighbor went back into her apartment, but the dog was outside. She used a box cutter to slice up the dog—mainly superficial wounds—but ones that looked pretty bad. We went and arrested her for animal cruelty because she attacked the animal.”

More commonly, the abuser’s presence in a case and the court outcome are only implied. For example, one humane society’s newsletter often reports cruelty cases that are still under investigation, so there are no criminal justice outcomes to disappoint readers. However, the city where the abuse takes place might be listed and articles routinely note the current maximum penalty for cruelty, indicating to readers that the humane law enforcement department has some idea about who harmed the animal and that the abuse will be pursued and taken to court.

Although beautiful cases might include arrest and successful prosecution, they rarely do because so few egregious cases have an abuser who is arrested, let alone found guilty and punished. In one case of an animal that was doused with gasoline and set on fire, no abuser was found, making it difficult to elevate this incident to a perfect one, although in every other regard it “qualified.” The victim was a small, cute dog that did not die. Her abuse was graphic and violent but suitable for photographing in ways that de-horrified the cruelty. And she had a loving owner who spoke openly about the tragedy and the distress she felt. As one administrator said of this case, it was over without an abuser: “It depends on what happens now. The chances of us identifying who did this are pretty small. The story is kind of over unless they find the abuser.”

Most abusers fail to go to jail or receive much punishment, and certainly it is impossible to ensure that the abuse will not be repeated. As one staff member complained: “The public wants closure on these high-profile cases. They want to know that the person who did it to them is going to go to jail or be punished some way and that that person is never going to do that again. We all want the person who did this to be brought to justice, but it is a difficult thing.” Another society representative added: “I wish the stories had an ending of, ‘Here’s the conviction
and this man is going to jail for doing this.’ And maybe that would get the message across that this is unacceptable and will be punished. I don’t see the punishment component out there.” And yet another staff member said: “I would love a case with a conviction to announce, but that has never happened since I’ve been here— like ‘torturer gets five years’ would be great. It just hasn’t happened. That would be great, but I’m not optimistic. It is sad.”

Like cruelty that is too gory to report in detail, the judicial experience with abusers, if reported completely, might appall the public. Media experts dodge the fact that abusers get away with these heinous crimes by focusing on other aspects about them. For example, one development officer explained that she focuses on the counseling abusers receive because they all go unpunished—an outcome that she would like to report: “In the end, I would only choose to talk about the process of improving them [abusers] and how the society might participate in that, for example, with counseling. The abuser is not the story. The story is the animal. You use the abuser only when you need to support the animal’s story but not to focus in any way on the abuser. If the sentence wasn’t satisfactory to me, then I can’t believe it would be satisfactory to our donors. We have unfortunately not reported any sentences in our mailings. I can always pray, but right now we haven’t had a good sentence to publish.” One case was considered beautiful because the abuser was convicted, but the society’s handling of the case ignored time served to prevent the reader’s “horror.” As a staff member pointed out, “Every angle you look at it, it is beautiful—the guy eventually did get convicted, although we didn’t state the sentence because most people would be horrified at how little it is—it was like time served.”

Perfect stories also ignore abusers when their behavior is considered too bizarre: “crazy” or unseemly actions are thought to detract from the animal focus. One officer described a grotesque case of cruelty that was not used for promotion because of the abuser’s loathsome character. Officers investigating the case found several pit bull puppies that had been used as bait: one had half of its face missing, another had gangrene from a chain collar grown into its neck, and a third had hundreds of bites and an eye entirely closed: “The individual who owned these dogs had quite a reputation in the neighborhood. They were all scared of him. I could see why people were scared of him— two hundred and sixty
pounds and about five feet nine inches, with a Nazi tattoo on his back. Crazy as a loon to boot. I knew it would be one of those things where we would be rolling on the ground with him. We got cuffs on him. He of course was charged with animal cruelty and he had quite an extensive arrest record. It was almost like these were junkyard dogs and this individual didn’t care. In fact we found one skull in the back. He bragged that he killed a number of dogs and buried them in the back of that yard. This individual is about as sick as you can get. But this case has not gotten any publicity. These kinds of cases in general don’t get into the papers.”

Because there are so few examples of prosecuted and punished abusers whose behavior is not too disturbing, most press releases and direct mailings about cruelty ignore the judicial component. Public relations experts delicately sidestep the entire issue of justice in extreme cruelty incidents because they believe that reporting courtroom reality detracts from what are otherwise beautiful cases. Indeed, not being able to include some happy judicial ending in the reporting of these cases is a sore point for all staff members, who are disappointed and frustrated because abusers are not apprehended or punished for their crimes. As one public relations director said: “Since I’ve been here, the one really frustrating thing for me in dealing with the public and the media on these cases, and I am sure a hundred times more frustrating for law enforcement, is that we generally don’t get the people who did it. It’s very, very difficult to make an arrest and even if you do make an arrest, they tend to get off. It is very frustrating because you talk to people who are really moved to want to donate to the reward fund, to want to help with this, and really respect what our officers do, but you very rarely are ever able to bring someone to justice for these cases.”

Happy Endings
To move the public, media experts believe that beautiful cases should have “happy endings” where animals do not die but have healthy and robust futures. In the words of one senior administrator at the society: “It hurts if the animal dies. Then the case is over. It doesn’t have a continuing life because the dog didn’t survive. There’s nothing like having a happy ending, from a marketing perspective. A happy ending is just a wonderful thing. Who wants a dog dying? That’s a bad story.” Although happy endings are very important and are featured in direct
mailings, in reality, unhappy endings are far more common. Many animals found by agents are either dead or are in such poor veterinary health they must be euthanized, as happened in the case of a dog suffering from a severe skin disease that left it with no fur and eyes practically closed from swelling. “You look at it— like I don’t want to touch that animal. That animal should be put down now. There is no hope for it,” one public relations staff member said.

Nevertheless, choosing or creating the right “after-photographs” can produce happy endings. An animal that appears responsive to humans, perhaps even playful, is a crucial ingredient, as a development staff member pointed out in one beautiful case: “We have a great after-picture of Tina [an abuse victim] that we use in solicitation where she is happy and her tail is wagging and she is licking the face of the officer that rescued her. She was a really sweet dog, a really wonderful dog. She was in my opinion the epitome of what a really fabulous story is. Tina in every way is perfect. You see her happy. You see her healthy. You see that she is capable of leading a good life.” Some after photographs are staged in exterior settings that transcend the adversity of cruelty and further imply a happy ending because of their sheer beauty and tranquility. In one beautiful case, the featured victim was posed for pictures in an outdoor setting hundreds of miles from the city where its abuse occurred. A member of the development staff talked about how these photographs featured a brilliant blue sky above a healthy-looking former victim standing alertly on a sand dune: “This photo was chosen because the animal is out, and it is beautiful, and it’s happy and free— you know, it is glorious. That is what people want to hang. They don’t want to hang a picture of a dog emaciated and covered with ticks and with a paw missing. The first couple of times we worked with the photographer, we sat with him you know, “this is what we are looking for,” and now John really knows, and I might say over the phone, ‘I want black and white, or color, or be sure to get one where she is doing this or that.’ These little details are important.”

Happy endings also mean that animals end up in good homes or are returned to their owners, if the owner is not the abuser. Many animals in big cases have no owners because they have been abandoned or their owners are irresponsible or even criminal. In these cases, adopters serve as proxy guardians and contribute to the case’s perfection. In one such case, over thirty puppies in “horrible condition” were
rescued by officers from a deplorable “puppy mill.” After being nursed back to health by the society’s hospital workers, these animals were farmed out to shelters and all found adoptive homes. The society’s newsletter covered these “happy” adoptions: “After they [the abused animals] recovered, they went to the shelter where they were overwhelmed with people who wanted to adopt them. One of the dogs was adopted out to a nice family with two little boys that were featured in a video we did. And it even had the little boy writing a letter to the shelter saying, ‘Please let me adopt this dog and I’ll take him to the vet, I’ll take good care of him.’ That’s really the ideal story.”

Constructing happy endings, however, means ignoring cases where adopted animals have demanding behavioral or medical problems or leaving out these details in direct mailings or press releases. Indeed, some animals in beautiful cases would not be put up for adoption were they “normal” shelter charges because of the problems they present to adopters. Yet the notoriety they receive often generates many offers for adoption. For example, one case involved a dog whose unpublicized behavior was at times difficult and challenging for his new owner to manage, even though she was a very experienced shelter manager. According to a senior administrator familiar with the situation: “We want the beautiful cases to be neat and clean and the happy endings to be wonderful, but sometimes all is not what it seems. Sometimes people are cruel to animals because they are angry because the dog bit them or snarled at them. And so they did an incredibly cruel act, and it became highly public and we fixed the animal up, but the reality is that this is not a very nice dog. We end up with an animal that has a slew of problems associated with it, not just as the result of the cruelty, but because it is a behavior-problem dog. So what do you do now with this dog that is not beautiful cruelty? It can be a big case, but all of a sudden you are dealing with an animal that is hard to deal with. Gigi is an example. She has a slew of behavior-related problems associated with her. She hates men. And she is also into everything. I mean, Gigi’s second trip to the hospital was when she chewed up Betty’s [the adopter’s] purse and ate a bottle of Ibuprofen, plastic and all. This is a dog with a lot of problems who was very lucky to have been a dog that Betty fell in love with.” When Gigi appeared in the society’s public relations material, no mention was made of the many difficulties she posed to her new owner. She was just one more beautiful case.
THE PERFECT MESS

The disorder of the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention was a “perfect mess,” according to the social critic Abbie Hoffman (1968). Despite the chaos and violence at the convention, all parties involved in the scene—from the mayor to the police to the Yippies—had a chance to show the world that what they were doing was right. Everybody tried to manipulate the media to advance their version of reality and the ugliness surrounding the convention provided this chance. “Everyone gets what he wants,” Hoffman writes (p. 122). To some groups, it “proved” conspiracy; to other groups it “proved” the need for law and order. “There was enough of a perfect mess for everyone to get a share of the garbage” (p.123). What Hoffman saw so clearly was the desire and ability of various groups to make sense of the same tragedy in different ways to advance their own agenda or meet their own needs. Even in the worst situations, there lies opportunity.

Extreme cases of animal cruelty also are perfect messes, and though they are of a very different sort from what Hoffman observed at the 1968 Democratic Convention, they are both chaotic and violent and, as Hoffman perceived disruption at political conventions, they pose serious trouble to humane societies. Although these organizations purport to fight cruelty, why should their followers continue to believe in the organizations and their mission if there are no victories over animal abuse? For the same reason, why should their staff members not suffer a serious blow to morale? There are no easy answers to explain away these troubles and, without proper addressing, they can challenge an institution’s core beliefs, lessen the zeal of its followers or proponents, and tarnish the robustness of its vision. Left unaddressed, extreme cruelty cases can only remind humane societies, their staff, and their public, that some people blatantly disregard dearly held values about the proper treatment of animals. Left unexamined, these cases can blunt confidence in the institution. Left unanalyzed, these cases can extinguish hope for a better world for animals.

Like Hoffman’s observation that political disruptions created opportunities for various groups, the tragedy of cruelty has the same potential. In fact, beautiful cruelty cases are seen as “opportunities” by humane societies—far greater ones than stories about other activities or services, such as their hospitals and shelters. Speaking about the significance of these cases, a staff member said: “They are the most compelling news
stories we have for the media and the public. We want them to do something.” It is the work of development and media affairs to create narratives about these cases, so they can do something. Their stories explain the society’s work with cruelty—why it is so horrible, how humane agents carry out thorough investigations of it, what kind of criminal penalty is appropriate for abusers, how skillful veterinarians work with animal victims, and how sensitive shelter staff care for them.

Officially, humane societies want these stories to raise money and public awareness. To say, however, that these cases are good because they result in donations or provide public service messages does not give full credit to their value, although fund raising and general education are vital concerns for humane organizations. Actually, beautiful cruelty cases “do” quite a bit more. In the face of untoward events, unmanageable problems, unremitting uncertainties, and inexplicable actions—and cruelty is all of these—humane societies must rely on the narrative power of their stories about cruelty to make understandable, orderly, and meaningful something that is not. In reality, the events surrounding abuse are disjointed and fragmented, full of ambiguities and muddled with contradictions. At a different level than fund raising and education, creating and telling stories about cruelty is a process by which humane societies make sense out of what it considers to be a tragedy. This organizational sense-making (Choo 1998) produces moral tales that distinguish right from wrong and draw boundaries between good and evil. Such tales enable the organization to sustain its battle against cruelty because they remind the public at large and the staff members of humane societies what is important, who they are, and why they should believe.

Reaffirming Values

Extreme cases of cruelty are major blows to humane societies and their followers. These tragedies cry out for recognition, they provoke mulling, and they demand meaning. In other words, they prompt memorialization of animal victims—just as do human tragedies for survivors who mourn the dead and injured. Memorials have many important functions, perhaps none so important as the extraction of “lessons” from concrete events that find something of value in what are otherwise meaningless, untoward situations. Communicating lessons about cruelty gives humane societies a significant opportunity to promote their view of cruelty and increase awareness of their mission.
There is however, a different opinion in the United States that it is frivolous to be too concerned about animals. At times the media seems to encourage this sentiment. The *Boston Globe*, for example, ran a front-page article and photograph called “Paws and Smile” that talks about “ruff days for canine commuters” (Arnold 2000). The human interest article, whose photograph showed well-behaved dogs strapped to the seats of a school bus, described the dogs’ drive to “doggie day care” as the “lap of luxury.” The $325 monthly fee, however, did not include lunch; dogs had to bring their own because “some are picky eaters.” “You’ve got to love dogs to do this,” the manager of the program said. Soon after this article appeared, several hostile letters to the editor ridiculed it as further evidence of the silliness with which humans approach animals and the waste of resources spent on them. By establishing that humane treatment of animals is normative and that cruelty is norm violating, beautiful cases contest such perceptions.

As a vehicle for mass moral education, beautiful cases convey the notion that the mistreatment of animals is reprehensible—whether this is a novel view for some people or redundant to others. The first and simplest way media experts use beautiful cases to communicate the seriousness of cruelty, as one expert pointed out, is to make clear that “cruelty is wrong. That cruelty is bad. That it is not acceptable. And that something needs to change. I have been here so long, I sometimes take it for granted that people know that, but not everyone knows that. We still need to get out the general message that cruelty is wrong and it shouldn’t be tolerated.” And staff members believe that this basic message is effective; one media affairs director praised the ability of beautiful cases to change people’s thinking and action toward animals: “We use examples of people doing the wrong thing so that people out there will understand, ‘Oh, this is wrong, this is bad, this is not something that should be done,’ whether they are going to do it themselves and it will stop them from a potential action or it simply makes them humane ambassadors so that when they see it, they know it’s wrong.”

The second way media experts use beautiful cases to underscore the seriousness of cruelty is to emphasize that such cases are commonplace, even though they are rare. The direct mailings or press releases of humane societies often try to put individual cases into a bigger context by noting the large number of investigations each year and the fact that this number is probably much larger because many witnesses do not
report these crimes. As one brochure notes, “I am gravely concerned about how rampant animal cruelty is right now. Last year, the Society’s Law Enforcement received more than 4,300 complaints of animal abuse or neglect . . . At the risk of alarming you, however, I must state that the problem is even more serious than these figures indicate . . . there is a lot more violence being inflicted on animals . . . than we know about.” In truth, the total number of yearly abuse complaints to the society has remained fairly constant over the past decade, and the vast majority of these do not involve incidents of active cruelty. Nevertheless, by featuring extreme cruelty, rather than everyday neglect, promotional pieces like this one give readers an exaggerated picture of the frequency of cruelty.

Third, to portray cruelty as a serious crime, beautiful cases have just the right kind of animal victim at their symbolic core and dramatic center. In a process Majone (1988) refers to as norm-using, they rely on broadly accepted social standards to give these images added legitimacy and currency. Thus, the narratives underlying beautiful cases seem reasonable if not conventional because they tap into existing attitudes that people readily appreciate and endorse. For example, the child protection movement gained power when its ideas were connected to broadly respected norms about defending children from harm (Sinclair 1995). Beautiful cases also put forth a victim that is childlike in its innocence and helplessness. Animal victims, then, attach to dominant cultural norms specifying appropriate response to human victims. By implicitly suggesting that animals are like children, beautiful cases suggest a breach of fundamental social values similar to that suggested in media reports of murdered children (Grabosky and Wilson 1989), in turn providing an opportunity for the concerned public to share its outrage over these incidents and reaffirm “fundamental” values they hold regarding the proper treatment of animals. Moral education most effectively happens when tragedy is appropriately staged.

Fourth, media experts communicate the seriousness of cruelty by making frequent references to the “scientifically” established connection between cruelty and other violent crimes. The mailings of humane societies speak of the “link” between animal abuse and violence toward humans, as though it were a proven fact. As one letter proclaims, “We now have scientific proof . . . that people who abuse animals are far more likely to commit acts of violence toward people . . . 70% of animal
abusers also had criminal records for other serious crimes. This is alarming!” Interestingly, the study from which these statistics were extracted reported that animal abuse rarely leads to later violent behavior against humans (Arluke et al. 1999). However, by invoking the “link,” humane societies can upgrade or broaden their case for the gravity of cruelty.

Fifth, media experts emphasize the “law and order” theme in beautiful cases to underscore the seriousness of cruelty. They rely on a “vocabulary of justice” (Kidder 1983) that makes sense to the public and reflects social norms about what is thought to be just. By emphasizing the value of law and order in general, these cases resonate with well-established, legitimate social goals and send the message that the expectations of humane societies for law enforcement policy are reasonable, that cruelty is a crime, and that humane law enforcement agents are to be supported in their pursuit of abusers. Even though most abusers are not caught, and those who are rarely get convicted and punished, beautiful cases project a strong image of agents as fighters of abuse and guardians of humane treatment of animals. To showcase agents to the public, one society names celebrity “uniformed officers” in mailings and press releases or on television news. “The uniform is a presence,” one media relations staff member explained: “We want people to know that we are investigating cruelty cases and that they can come to us if they have a concern about another animal. A lot of people don’t realize that we do law enforcement. Out of a city of nearly ten million people, we only have ten agents doing law enforcement. A lot of cruelty goes undetected.”

To complete this vocabulary, the society, in its promotion of beautiful cases, asks sympathetic individuals to report information, often with a reward, that might lead to the arrest and conviction of abusers. By offering “a reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of suspects,” the narrative creates a criminal drama where the public is made to think about their role in apprehending abusers and bringing them to justice. Even if this is more of a symbolic gesture than one that can produce real results, the concerned public can feel as though they are contributing to a larger effort to apprehend abusers. Although these requests for information rarely lead to arrests or convictions, they also tell the public that action is being taken to catch abusers and presumably to punish them, serving as another reminder that abuse is a form of criminal behavior—on a par with serious crimes committed against
humans—because the request and reward for information leading to arrest and conviction is the same language used to summon information about suspects in other crimes. There is, then, a high symbolic value in making this request.

In the end, beautiful cases are moral tales. They have bad people who take advantage of and violate the love and trust given so easily by innocent animals, dedicated and caring agents who work to apprehend abusers and bring them to justice for their crimes, tragic victims who end up happy and healthy while abusers pay the price, and a humane society whose battle against cruelty is slowly but surely being won. These tales challenge the public to think about what constitutes the proper treatment of animals and their abusers. To the extent that they do this, beautiful cases are an opportunity for humane societies to establish social norms that support the prevention of animal cruelty and the punishment of abusers. Of course, trying to change legal and social responses to animals is a slow process because social attitudes must change, but beautiful cases are a platform to pursue this end.

That these tales say nothing new to those who support or work for humane societies is exactly the point. Rather, this “education” is a restatement of core norms and beliefs that are at the moral center of the concerned animal community. They need the right issues to rally around—those that endorse and articulate their central values, long-term dreams, and heartfelt sentiments. Egregious cruelty is exactly the right kind of issue. It can be a trigger for the amorphous animal community to step out of its isolation and express these beliefs, hopes, and concerns. Beautiful stories are a vehicle to elicit these feelings—to “move” people—and those who write them consciously create emotionally charged narratives, even if their tone is reportorial and unsensational. As one media expert admitted, “Your emotional side will come through when you are telling a story, and sometimes that will help to have a bigger impact because people can see that it is a moving case.”

Validating Identities
Hearing or reading about extreme cases of cruelty can deeply disturb people who have strong sympathy for and identification with animals, even though the victims are not their own. These cases pull at the heart-strings of the public as well as the staff of humane societies because they are unusual enough to provide comparisons, yet universal enough to
evoke identification. “Narratives unfold with flesh and blood,” encouraging empathy and humanizing content (Ellis and Bochner 1992, 98). It is easy to imagine how people who care a great deal about animals will be moved by these stories, but those who lack special feelings for animals also can be moved if these stories touch on themes—such as the loss of a child—that most people readily appreciate.

Things about these cases shake up people’s core beliefs and values. For one, they can feel unsure about their own identities as animal guardians and what they assume are fundamental ingredients in human relationships with domestic animals. Extreme cruelty is a stark reminder that not everyone shares their view that these animals should be loved and protected. For another, these cases may make them feel less assured that the world is a safe and just place for animals. They reveal that some animals were not protected from harm, that similar threats to other animals might occur, and that abusers are often not caught and, if caught, rarely punished.

Clearly, the friends, donors, and supporters of humane societies need to have their identities validated and supported after they hear about extreme cases of cruelty, but this is difficult to accomplish because most are isolated in the general community. Many are regarded as “animal people,” an inexact but nevertheless commonly used folk term that labels those who are strongly concerned about the welfare of animals without necessarily being heavily involved in the animal right movement. Unlike activists, members of the concerned animal public belong to an amorphous group; they do not have frequent meetings to attend, rallies to cheer at, products to boycott, or petitions to sign. They have few if any animal-related events that make them feel part of a larger, defined group. To be effective, however, humane societies need a “cult” of dedicated followers because their work needs to occur in an atmosphere of compassion, encouragement, and support. An audience, especially of the laity, that shares the sorrow over cruelty and anger toward abusers validates the sentiment of humane societies and helps myth making take on an air of authenticity and relevance.

Beautiful cases can bolster and validate these battered identities by creating a sense that “we” are in a battle together to fight cruelty. They do this by opening a channel for expressing sentiment about cruelty, since the public can be particularly interested in and concerned about the victimization of animals, especially when it is extreme. Because
they see humane societies as having compatible values, some people telephone or write to these organizations and “vent” their concerns about cruelty, express their affection and pride for their own animals, and communicate their views about human-animal relationships in general. A media expert explained that her job is to listen to these people and reassure them that abused animals are being helped: “I got dozens of calls from people after the fact wanting to know how Sparky was doing. You know, ‘Is he okay, I haven’t heard anything? Did you catch the guy?’ A lot of it is that they just want to vent. Some of this venting is anger—we get calls generally from young men who want to go out there and get the guy themselves and also want to donate money to help. But mostly, it’s just emotion, that people are really moved by these cases and want to talk about them. They just want a sympathetic ear to tell how they feel about this and to hear someone say to them, ‘We feel the same way and that it was so kind of you to send a contribution. Thank you.’” Once opened, this channel allows supporters to express their empathy for abused animals and their owners. It was common, for example, to see letters addressed to the abused animal and “signed” by the letter-writer’s pet. At a deeper level, these responses make it possible for people to feel connected to the victim’s owner as well as to the larger animal community, as one staff member speculated: “These cases do things for us—for animal lovers—they reinforce the way we feel about our animals. It says, ‘I am not the only one who loves my dog as much as she loves her dog.’ People really do identify with the cases. I can’t tell you how many people call me and start telling me that they are moved by Sparky’s case [a dog beating] but then they get into their own dogs—all about their dogs and how important their dogs are to them and how they couldn’t imagine anyone doing anything like this to their little puppies or whatever. You really get a lot of that.”

More tangible support also is offered. An outpouring of donations come in after these reports hit the news. For example, the press picked up one of these cases: a cat that had been badly abused needed a thousand dollars’ worth of medical treatment and a home. After this article appeared, donations poured into the society that paid for veterinary care, and several offers were made to provide homes for the cat. In another more dramatic case, television exposure resulted in donations to help pay for a burned dog’s expensive reconstructive skin grafts.
And in yet another case, a direct mailing that described a horrific case of cruelty was mailed to twenty thousand people and brought in over sixty-five thousand dollars—an average of about eighty dollars per gift—“and that’s about as good as you could possibly get,” one staff member explained. People also donated money when the society offered a reward for information leading to an arrest and conviction, often wanting to increase the reward through their pledges. Nor is it unusual for donations to continue to come in for months after a perfect cruelty case appears in the news. Those who donate get a thank-you letter signed by the society’s president, which serves as a way to “reach out” and create new relationships as well as reaffirm old ones.

The meaning of these monetary gifts goes beyond the dollar amount. Raising money for animal victims is similar to raising funds in human tragedies, where unusual efforts or sacrifices are made to give donations. In one beautiful case, for example, a personal trainer was giving free sessions to his customers if they donated. So much money came in that the dog’s bills were paid and surplus money, with donors’ consent, went to help other animals through the society’s general reward fund and its pet assistance program. Those who respond often offer more than just money; their special sentiment shows they regard cruelty as a true tragedy. They want to console the owners for their grief, validate their anger, and share their frustration. In rare, but telling moments, they just want to be in the company of these owners and their animals, as if paying their respects at a funeral of a loved one. A society employee recalls an unusual expression of support: “People do really extraordinary things. A woman in New Hampshire who makes custom dog beds insisted on being put in touch with one dog’s owner and actually drove down from New Hampshire to bring a custom-made dog bed to this dog and its owner as a gift. She brought her whole family with her and was thrilled to meet the owner and the dog. She really wanted to see the dog and to meet Shelly [the owner]. She wanted to help this dog, she was so moved by the story. She liked Shelly and was very happy with the visit.” Others responded to this particular case by mailing toys for the dog. The victim’s owner said that her “phone was ringing off the hook with people calling to offer help and wanting to know how her dog was doing.” At such times, people feel they are comforting both animal and human victims of abuse, experiencing a sense of community as they do so.
Beautiful cases also bolster identities by creating enemies—those who are deplored because they mistreat animals. Enemies are useful for communities for building identities and creating boundaries, telling people who or what they are not like. Enemies form an inverse reference group that allows people to say, “I am this type of person because I do not belong to that group.” The essence of a community’s identity can be found by discovering its deep or core imagery— things it holds most sacred, things it most fears, things it sees as most evil and unforgivable. Beautiful cases bring home this imagery and identification of both the enemy and “me.”

Having an enemy elicits and focuses outrage. Although some Americans are not outraged by animal cruelty, they do respond to media reports of child abuse, which often elicit strong arguments for harsh criminal justice responses. These articles have banner headlines like “Hang the Bastard” and sometimes discuss “wild protests” erupting outside court houses by concerned members of the public calling for the death penalty (Wilczynski and Sinclair 1999). Beautiful cases elicit the same passionate response but more privately in letters and telephone calls to humane societies. Some people become incensed when they read or see a report about animal cruelty that notes the weak maximum penalty for this crime and vent their anger by contacting these societies to proclaim, for example, “The penalty is much too weak, it should be increased.” Even if sentences are imposed, abusers rarely get sufficient punishment in the concerned public’s eyes. In this regard, readers are upset by the fact that the newsletter does not name abusers, noting only the town or city where the abuse occurs. Although the editor cannot report names, readers are nevertheless disturbed that abusers remain anonymous, neither formally sanctioned by the courts nor informally sanctioned by the animal community. Those offering help are sometimes given guidance about what they can do, such as contacting their legislative representatives to support a bill that increases penalties for cruelty.

In short, beautiful cases are moral emergencies for animal people that inspire them to articulate deeply felt but rarely sanctioned sentiments about animals. As people respond to these cases by calling, writing, or donating money or gifts to humane societies, they also articulate their place in a larger animal community, showing how they think and feel about animals. Beautiful cases, then, ignite identity-generating
emotions by providing an opportunity for people to offer their help and support to animals, their owners, and humane societies more generally.

**Strengthening Morale**

Most extreme cruelty cases are not beautiful—animals are crucified or have their eyes gouged out; many are dead, and those that are alive are not particularly cute; many abusers are not found and of those who are, most go unpunished. These cases rattle the sensibilities of everyone who works for humane societies, including the most experienced. Although they are in the animal welfare “business,” staff members never get used to these disturbing cases. They are horrified when they encounter them and have strong feelings of anger and sometimes rage toward abusers, just as do animal people in the community. Sadistic cruelty is usually seen only in photographs. When extreme cases are directly confronted, even seasoned employees find their faith shaken in humanity. As one twenty-year shelter veteran admitted: “It is upsetting to see what mankind is capable of—embedded chains in necks, a puppy with amputated legs that somebody has chopped off with a cleaver, another dog with wire wrapped around its leg for a long period of time that grew into its skin, so it chewed off its own leg. Things like that are so horrific. Horrific things that make you not want to be a person. How can you do this? I would tell law enforcement, don’t ever give me a gun if you take me out on the road because I would shoot everybody. I know that’s the extreme, but to me, to inflict such horrible harm on a defenseless creature who has no defense is the lowest. To do this, how sick do you have to be?” These cases can make the most seasoned worker doubt their mission’s effectiveness.

Beautiful cases help shore up these doubts. For one, they remind staff members that their core mission is to prevent and fight animal abuse. Although humane societies were created in the nineteenth century to deal with exactly this problem—the mistreatment of animals—few employees handle cruelty regularly and most never do. Managing, investigating, prosecuting, and promoting beautiful cruelty cases symbolically link humane societies to their historic mission. Indeed, as people describe their involvement with beautiful cases, they refer to the cruelty-fighting efforts of Henry Bergh, the founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and George Angell, the founder of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to
Animals. For example, one development director drew on this history in her efforts to publicize a case of a dog brutally chained by its leg: “That’s my job—telling people that these horrible things happen and that by supporting us they can work slowly toward making those things not happen. Henry Bergh went to this socialite type dinner back in the 1800s and there was this fantastic centerpiece. It was gorgeous, alive with color. And on closer inspection, he realized it was live butterflies pinned to this ball as the centerpiece. And the flutter of their wings was all this live color. Now you and I today would be horrified. It may only be an insect, but that’s disgusting, that’s horrible. But it was acceptable to everyone except for Henry who said, ‘Wait a second, hold on here. Is that right?’ I don’t know if he made a scene at the dinner, but I know he did later write the woman and say that was horrible, how could you do that? I don’t think that, overnight, that changed. But I know today, one hundred years later, we wouldn’t think of doing it. Maybe overnight, people aren’t going to chain their dogs until their legs are severed, but hopefully a hundred years from now they will have better sense than to do that.” Especially when employees see beautiful cases in the news, they “feel good” about working for humane societies—particularly those outside of law enforcement—because everyone can feel as though they are “on the front lines stopping animal cruelty.” As one worker said: “In public affairs you can go days just doing the office work you do, and you may not make a dent, and then a law enforcement case will break, and it really just brings everything home. It reminds you, oh my god this is the work we are doing. This is what is really making a difference.”

Most important, beautiful cases provide hope to staff members who do not feel that cruelty is being prevented or dealt with effectively. Although this pessimism resonates throughout humane societies, workers feel constrained not to go public with their sentiment, at least in an official capacity, for fear that such bleakness would hurt the organization’s image and effort in this area. One media affairs staff member, for example, recounted her despair after one egregious case: “This was the most disturbing cruelty case that I have ever seen. I still have difficulty thinking about. I just can remember the look of this dog. It was a dog that we believe was being raised for bait in dogfights. It was called Wishbone. This dog had been abandoned in a lot. It was clearly neglected. It was severely malnourished. It had been in many fights. There
were scars all over its body. Wishbone had a lot of scars, but he didn’t have any gaping wounds. It is just the demeanor of this animal—these sad eyes. You just felt like all the joy had gone out of this dog’s life. It was just the saddest thing, the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen. That was not an easy case in the sense that it was a disgusting, tragic case. And this dog was euthanized. That was the most humane thing. I get very sad, disgusted, and angry because sometimes you get like, Is what we are doing even working? Are we making a difference? You are just faced with something so disturbing and you can’t believe that things have gotten better in the last ten years or however long you’ve been in the business.” A beautiful case remedies this pessimism, if only briefly, because it furnishes hope that even in the most tragic episodes of cruelty, sometimes things turn out well. Happy endings can happen after animals are seriously harmed—they recover, they find good homes with loving owners, and they live out contented lives. Beautiful cases, then, help to restore faith in the institution for those whose belief and spirit are flagging.

Providing Heroes

Hope for a happy ending is essential for the morale of workers, but sometimes it feels like an illusion because happy endings are rare. Most abused or neglected animals seized by humane agents have no doting owner, are in poor veterinary health, and cry out for nurturing because of the miserable treatment they received. These animals provide opportunities for “rescuing” in a setting devoted to helping animals in need. By coming to their aid, humane agents are saying that people will help animals but with personal sacrifice and commitment. When staff members make this sacrifice, they keep hope alive by providing flesh-and-blood heroes who embody the finest qualities valued by a group. These heroes can restore confidence in institutions by showing that good things can happen after untoward events.

One way to become a hero is to show special interest in seized animals. For example, most humane agents end their involvement with these animals after giving them to veterinary technicians or shelter workers. They return to the field to conduct new investigations. However, some agents continue to be involved with the animals, taking an active interest in their welfare and outcome. A few visit and “keep track” of what’s happening with the ones they bring into the hospital
or shelter. For their unusual effort and compassion, employees praise these agents: “They don’t just drop them off, like it’s over. Todd worked on the Annie case and he was up here [fund raising] once a week just talking about her, talking to Tina [the shelter manager], talking to Mary [a hospital employee], about the progress of the case. Any information he could give us—he wanted to help in any way he could. Todd cares a lot.” These agents develop reputations within humane societies for following cruelty cases, when animals survive, all the way to adoption, even to the point of checking out the suitability of adopters—tasks far exceeding their job requirements. One such agent reflected on a “high visibility” case from two decades earlier: “I remember everything about Natasha. Maybe I remember Natasha so well because it felt so violent and so unfair to this little puppy. I developed a personal relationship to this dog. I was the person who basically interceded and took control of this dog. And the protection of this animal undergoing this terrible painful thing was my responsibility. I visited her a lot in the shelter. And then I ended up knowing the person who adopted her. And I saw that dog for the rest of its life.”

Others become heroes by spreading the word about seized animals, so people throughout humane societies learn about their history and abuse, veterinary welfare and progress, and fitness for adoption. More important for the fate of victims, these champions make the animals (and themselves) in-house celebrities. One senior administrator gave the example of an employee in the accounting department who is known to make it a personal mission to get involved with egregious cruelty cases: “Maybe people in accounting won’t get involved in an HLE [humane law enforcement] case hands on, but they all know about them. If a big case comes through they hear about them. Very few people don’t know about them. They know about them because a lot of people go down and visit the shelter. They visit the dogs. They talk to other people. Like Lauren Smith in accounting knows a lot about the HLE cases—she really loves the animals and loves her dog. There are a couple of others in there, but if somebody in there is going to talk about an animal case, it’s probably going to be Lauren.” The more who know about these cases, the more likely these animals will receive constant attention and care, support for legal prosecution, and offers of adoption by society workers.

Others become heroes by interceding on behalf of seized animals that have long shelter stays because they are being held as “evidence” for
pending court cases. Many empathize with them because they have been subjected to abuse or neglect and are still in the “current and continuing plight of being in a cage.” In response, these employees rally around the animals and become their “ambassadors,” agitating to get something done for them. They may, for example, express dissatisfaction with the animal’s plight to humane law enforcement. One department head described this problem, as it led to the fostering of a seized dog: “Buster was there [in the shelter] for more than a year. People were very upset that he was here that long. They identified with his continuous confinement. I mean they were walking him all the time. But they were really upset with us but they don’t understand our situation. There is a tendency in some people to believe that we are not doing as much as we could or should. It is not realistic. There is a need to blame someone and who better or who else to blame than the people who brought the animal in and stuck the animal in a cage. I never had calls in which people were nasty, but they appealed to us to do something about it. What can be done about it? It was frustrating and demoralizing to me and the staff because they were painted with the same brush. This accusatory brush—basically, that we were ineffective.”

Finally, some become heroes by adopting seized animals, creating real-life happy endings. These adopters become well known throughout humane societies, as happened in one organization. Jane, in shelter operations, adopted Susie—a shepherd severely beaten with a club. Barbara, in public affairs, adopted Sheldon—a badly burned cat. Tim, in law enforcement, adopted Spot—a Beagle deliberately run over by a car. Helen has photographs of her adopted law enforcement dog prominently displayed in her office along with copies of newspaper articles about the case. And there are many other animal victims adopted by staff members who gain institutional notoriety for their acts. As one media expert said: “Some cases stand out more than others, especially if you have someone who champions that case—where someone will really fall in love with the case and they will do whatever it takes to help that animal to the very end get adopted, fostered. Chi was adopted by his champion, which was Susie Snow. Tina Louise was adopted by Mary.” These special partnerships become moral badges of caring for the staff members of humane societies. They are the final act of compassion that can be offered to victims—taking them home, despite veterinary or behavioral problems. Everyone knows
about these special adoptions and applauds those who step up to end the suffering of victims by providing them with loving homes. They are local heroes who make beautiful cases believable enough to give life to the myth of happy endings. Amid cruelty’s perfect mess lies sociological opportunity.

THE IMPERFECT VOICE

Beautiful cases do not portray the gritty reality of animal cruelty. That is not their goal. Like other traumatic events that the media memorializes (Peri 1999), they need to distort reality. Memorialization requires that events be simplified, people’s achievements be highlighted, and their foibles be forgotten. If cases were presented more accurately, with all of their contradictions and complexities, it would be difficult to create myths, followers, and heroes—the stuff that makes a memorial.

Some humane society members who have face-to-face contact with cruelty—agents, shelter workers, hospital staff—believe, however, that people inside and outside the organization should see the dark, unsavory side of human-animal interaction so they can understand what it feels like to investigate, treat, and nurture severely abused or neglected animals. More important, cruelty workers think that if others see what they see, there would be greater support for combating this problem. In other words, they want a voice that accurately and fully represents their efforts to better fight cruelty.

These workers are not sanguine about this possibility. They feel that many of their fellow staff members, let alone the public, do not want to know much about cruelty and certainly not in the way that those on the “front lines” do. For example, people manning the telephones, overseeing the budget, or hiring or firing workers will become sickened and saddened if they see severely abused animals, but their reaction is to turn away and let others “take care of it.” One public relations director described how two of his workers reacted to a big case in the hospital: “People don’t want to face cruelty and they want someone else to take care of it. You show people neglected animals and there are some that are shocked. We had one case where a guy neglected his dog and decided to kill it. It was a Rottweiler. He wanted to get rid of it. And he shot it in the head three times. Either he was a bad shot or Rottweilers have really good skulls because this animal was shot in the head
and three days later he still wasn’t dead. It came into the hospital and *Newsday* was covering the story and my two press people who had not been exposed to a lot of cruelty and animals in hideous condition had to see this. And they were like, ‘oh my god, get us out of here,’ they were just ready to cry and throw up.” Such reactions make cruelty workers think that others want them to take care of abuse so they never have to directly face and be shocked by animal suffering. In fact, the director of a humane law enforcement department was rebuffed when he wanted to make a slide presentation to the board of directors to show them, in uncensored and brutal detail, what humane agents see when they investigate the worst cases. A senior administrator asked the director not to show slides of grotesque abuse—“Don’t get too ugly because it’s dinner time.” Although the director initially resisted cleaning up his slide presentation because he felt that agents’ work was “messy” and wanted board members to have empathy for their work, he finally agreed to tailor his presentation so that the dinner could remain a “cordial” affair.

Memorializing a few beautiful cases reinforces rather than remedies cruelty workers’ concern that their voice is unheard. The fact that “real” animal abuse and neglect, and the problems dealing with them, are not fully and accurately communicated to other people makes them uneasy with the “reality” presented by beautiful cases. Most of what they experience, according to one law enforcement director, are “negative, disturbing cases, not the happy ending cases. The animal didn’t survive. People in this business avoid sharing those cases. They’re downers. They are too disturbing. They are too upsetting. But in the process of withholding them you get a very distorted picture of reality. It’s not reality.” Beautiful cases prevent people from grasping and appreciating the severity and ugliness of extreme incidents of abuse.

The focus on beautiful cases also ignores other things considered important for the public to know, according to cruelty workers. For one, they resent that the vast majority of harmed animals—the more everyday cases—are passed over for beautiful cases. These animals, it is thought, also deserve to have their story told to the public, even though the abuse in these cases is less dramatic. Also, there is some resentment that because only the rare case is picked for publicity, the vast majority of cruelty work—routine law enforcement investigations, veterinary intervention, and shelter care—get no acknowledgment or praise. In other words, beautiful cases fail to capture the plight of most
harmed animals and the efforts of most cruelty workers; the institution is guilty of neglect. One worker summarized this sentiment: “Sometimes when you are involved in these things day in and day out, it’s like—so I investigate 500 cases a year and because one of them involved a cute little puppy you’re interested in that one? What about the other 499 that are just grunt day by day, talking with people, working my way through problems, trying to resolve something which is really a fight between neighbors in which the cow is being shot at, but the guts of my work is this. I think sometimes individual officers will react by saying, I’ve never heard from you media people—the only time you want to talk to me is about big cases. Why aren’t you interested in the rest of my life?” Their everyday work is thought to be too “mundane” and not “sexy” enough for the media. As one agent explained: “There is a large amount of work that we do all week long that doesn’t get pitched to the media simply because it’s fairly standard. We probably get seventy-five to a hundred neglected dog and cat cases a week and we follow up on a lot of them—either there is no violation or there is some violation and a summons is written and two or three days later they go back and check to make sure something is done. It’s all mundane work. It’s not sexy.”

Patently, beautiful cases will not satisfy humane workers’ desire for a more effective voice. As proxies, these reports cannot equal the reality of face-to-face encounters with extreme or everyday cruelty, whether people hear about them from humane society employees, read about them in newspapers or direct mailings, or watch them on television. However, that beautiful cases are done at the expense of reality is exactly why they serve so many useful functions for the society. Their value lies in venting and validating the emotions of staff members and the concerned public.

In the end, our institutions of mass communication are ultimately responsible for conveying the sober details of social problems like animal abuse to the laity. Imperfect, or ugly, cases do sometimes get covered by the news media. Indeed, for much of the general public—many of whom never read humane society promotional material—this is how they learn about egregious cruelty. Such coverage might address the lament of cruelty workers—that despite its mission, the society tiptoes around the issue of cruelty, such that its civility all but ignores abuse and neglect or sugar coats them in a way that leaves fellow society
employees and the concerned public unenlightened about the nature and significance of this problem. Yet what people learn from ugly cases is as much a reflection of their own anxieties and concerns as it is a “factual” report of harm to animals. The result is that the overall picture of cruelty in the mass media is more confused and conflicted than clear and consistent.