

The Four Phases

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Those of us who work on behalf of, and who dedicate our lives to, animals go through four phases in our career evolution. As we are unique, so are our individual stories, but we all go through a similar process, and, if we survive that process, go on to understand that we have achieved what we wanted in the first place.

PHASE ONE

Red hot and raring to go, we are out to change the world. We are high on life. We know we can make a difference, that our efforts on behalf of animals will ease their plight. We work what seems like 25-hour days yet are energized. Our enthusiasm overflows, our capacity for challenges is limitless. We eat, sleep and live in the cause for animals. Our friends don't understand our obsession and turn away or just fade away, and we let them for we meet new ones. Some of us though don't make new friends, we're too busy working for animals. Some of us become loners with only our canine or feline companions to keep us from total isolation but we're content because we have a cause. In our zeal, we tend to affix simple solutions to complex problems - every animal should be sterilized or no animal should be euthanized. We're often late because we try to rescue animals from highways and streets. We think we understand the problem and we know we can fix it if only people would get out of our way.

PHASE TWO

Our phase one enthusiasm has turned sour, the bubble bursts and we crash and burn. We see the same people coming into the shelter with yet another litter - they haven't heard our message. We continue to euthanize, there seems no end to it. Even our friends - those we still have left - don't understand us. We can't seem to reach anyone. Animals are still abused and neglected, their plight seems unchanged despite all our efforts. We've lost the boundless energy that characterizes Phase One. We no longer wish to talk about work, don't even want to admit where we work. We're tired all the time. We go home from work, lock the doors, turn out the lights, turn off the answering machine and close the window blinds. We're too exhausted to cook so we scarf fast food, pizza, potato chips or chocolate. Some of us buy useless objects we can't afford. Some of us turn to alcohol for it takes away our feelings of hopelessness. We ignore our families and even our pets get less attention than we know is right. We seem powerless to affect any of the changes that drove us to such ecstasies of dedication in Phase One. We have become horrified by the work we have to do. Even our dreams are filled with the horror. Every animal we take in, every animal we euthanize is yet another nail in our coffin of defeat. Somehow we're to blame for all our failure and it's destroying us. Raise the shields Scotty, the Klingons are on our tail! Our shield gets thicker and thicker. It blocks the pain and the sadness and makes our life somehow tolerable. We continue on because every now and then we get a spark of Phase One energy.

PHASE THREE

Our phase two depression has turned outward and we're mad as --heck--. Hopelessness turns to rage. We begin to hate people, any people and all people unless, like our co-

workers, they dedicate their lives to animals the way we do. We even hate our co-workers if they dare question us - especially about euthanasia. It occurs to us, let's euthanize the owners, not the pets. Let's take everyone who abuses an animal or even surrenders an animal and euthanize them instead. Our rage expands to our out-of-work life. That guy in front of us on the highway, the one who's in our way, euthanize him too. We rage at politicians, television, newspapers, our family. Everyone is a target for our anger, scorn and derision. We have lost our perspective and effectiveness. We're unable to connect with life. Even the animals we come in contact with seem somehow distant and unreal. Anger is the only bridge to our humanness. It's the only thing that penetrates our shield.

PHASE FOUR

Gradually, and over time, the depression of Phase Two and the anger of Phase Three become replaced with a new determination and understanding of what our mission really is. It is big picture time. We realize that we have been effective - locally and in some cases regionally and even nationally. So we haven't solved the problem - who could - but we have made a difference with dozens, even hundreds and sometimes thousands of animals. We have changed the way others around us view animals. We begin to see our proper place in our own community and we begin to see that we are most effective when we balance our work and out-of-work lives. We realize that work is not our whole world and that if we pay attention to our personal lives, we can be more effective at work. We understand that some days we work 14 hours and some days we knock it off after only 8. We take vacations and we enjoy our weekends. We come back refreshed and ready to take on daily challenges. We see that all people are not bad. We understand that ignorance is natural and in most cases curable. Yes, there are truly awful people who abuse and neglect animals but they are a minority. We don't hate them. When we find them we do all we can to stop them from hurting animals. We recognize that the solutions are just as complex as the problems and bring a multitude of tools to the problem at hand and use them any way we can and we begin to see results - one small step at a time. We reconnect with the animals. Our shields come down. We understand that sadness and pain are a part of our job. We stop stuffing our feelings with drugs, food or isolation. We begin to understand that our feelings of anger, depression and sadness are best dealt with if we recognize them and allow them to wash over and past us. We recognize our incredible potential to help animals. We are changing the world. I've noticed that some people get frozen in Phase One (the zealots), or Two (the zombies), or Three (the misanthropes). Some shift back and forth between Two and Three and even between Four and Three or Four and Two. Many leave animal work during Phase Two or Three, never to return. Some seem to move rapidly to Phase Four, while for others it takes years and years. Some never get a sense of peace to go along with our purpose, they work their entire lives on the frantic pink cloud of phase one or depressed or angry. I know I've been in all four phases in 25 years in animal protection. Can the journey from Phase One to Four be speeded up? Can we avoid the pain, discomfort and agony that goes with the journey? I wish I knew.