

What's in a name? Playing the Orwellian card

Ever since Nathan Winograd's "Redemption: The Myth of Pet Overpopulation and the No Kill Revolution in America" hit bookstores, I've been seeing complaints that, because even "No Kill" shelters and animal control agencies practice euthanasia to some extent, they cannot truthfully call themselves part of a "no kill" movement.

"No Kill," goes the argument, is an Orwellian use of language. "Killing is killing," they say. "No Kill needs to call itself something else."

But I don't think it does, and I don't think it's the No Kill movement that's using Orwellian language. I think it's the opponents of No Kill in the traditional shelter movement, the ones who are being criticized so fiercely by Winograd, who are doing that.

And they've been doing it for a long, long time. So long that skewed definitions of all the words related to ending an animal's life — kill, euthanize, put down, put to sleep, humanely destroy — have become such a

pervasive and even unconscious part of their world view that they literally no longer know the meaning of the words they use, and how those words sound to people from outside the humane movement.

I'm not really sure when this language shift started, but I can mark one moment when its philosophy was enshrined: In 1978, when the late Phyllis Wright's article "Why We Must Euthanize" was published in the newsletter of the Humane Society of the United States.

The introduction to the article reads like this:

Anyone who works in or cares about animal protection must eventually face the fact that



millions of dogs and cats must be euthanized each year because there are no homes for them. No one, least of all The HSUS, is happy about this. Nevertheless, we realize it is a necessary kindness to euthanize unwanted animals.

Once upon a time, I might have read that, nodded my head, and continued reading. In my defense, when it was written I was 19 years old. You may have not even been born

HSUS' Wright Killed 70,000 dogs and cats: "I don't worry about one of those animals..."

yet. It's understandable that the nuances of the choice of words, and the concepts behind it, might have wooshed right by our heads.

But reading it today, what leaps out at me in red letters ten feet high is that since it is neither necessary nor a kindness to kill unwanted animals, it most certainly is not, and cannot be, "euthanasia." It's population control killing. And that is exactly what the No Kill movement is seeking to end.

You might argue that euthanasia is a sub-set of killing. You wouldn't be wrong; it is. I'd argue, though, that it's an act of mercy that any animal lover, whether a shelter worker or animal control officer or not, would want to have done for his own animals, or any animal in his care. That it is veterinary care, and has nothing to do with controlling animal population at all.



I've made that argument before, though, and been told I'm the one who is twisting the meaning of words. "Killing," I'm reminded, "is killing."

But it's not just me who sees it that way. That editor back in 1978 saw it, too, because his or her next words are these:

But some people have great difficulty accepting this. They see the kindness in euthanizing an animal that is in great pain, or terminally ill. But why must young, healthy dogs and cats be put to sleep simply because no one will take them home?

Why, indeed?

Since behind every use of Orwellian language is an agenda of manipulation, the editorial response to this rhetorical question also got the "red letters ten feet high" reaction from me:

Why can't they be kept at the shelter indefinitely, to live out their lives in warmth and comfort with plenty of food and good veterinary care?

And here's where I go... huh? Did the "warehousing" accusation so often thrown at No Kill sheltering models really originate that long ago? Too bad I was a teenager wasting her time going to journalism school in 1978 instead of paying attention to this particular controversy. Because I'm sitting here today wondering, "Who the hell said those were the choices?"

Apparently, Phyllis Wright did. In her words:

We all know people who never want an animal euthanized, who insist it's best to keep the animal alive and breathing regardless of how badly the animal lives, how inadequate its care, or how impressive its loneliness. That is the worst thing we can do.

Our objective is to prevent and release animals from suffering. We know that death, humanely administered, is not an evil, but a blessing to animals that are of no comfort to themselves or to the world because they are unwanted and suffering in isolation. And we are positive that it is no comfort to dogs or cats to be kept alive indefinitely in shelter cages, even if they are well fed.

Letting an animal live is the "worst thing we can do"? How about conceding defeat without a fight? How about calling yourself an advocate for the voiceless and then pretending (or convincing yourself) that there are only two choices: Death, "humanely administered," or being "kept alive indefinitely in shelter cages"? Where did "Being creative and proactive and finding homes for the animals in our care" go?

The answer to that is contained in Wright's next comments, where she expressed the belief that most of the animals in shelters are better off dead:

I know it is difficult to put animals to sleep. I've put 70,000 dogs and cats to sleep; and I'm aware of the trauma. But I tell you one thing: I don't worry about one of those animals that was put to sleep. And I worry a great deal about dogs and cats that have to spend their lives shut in small cages or runs, or left chained to the back porch day-in and day-out, without affection or companionship. Being dead is not a cruelty to animals. Being half alive is.

We have the responsibility to release these animals from suffering. We have the responsibility to make sure this release is as painless and comfortable as possible, even when it means studying the morbid topic of euthanasia methods. We also have the responsibility to work towards a time when all pets will have responsible, caring owners and euthanasia is no longer needed.

Do you know what a straw man argument is? It's when your own argument is so flawed you have to make up a fake opposing viewpoint and argue against that.

This might be a valid argument if there were — or had ever been — vast numbers of warehouses filled with animals in cages littering our nation.

But that's not the problem. The problem is that too many animals are dying in shelters.

And if shelters and animal control agencies still, like Phyllis Wright in her day, don't worry about the animals that are killed in their care, but about the ones who live, if the people we have hired to shelter these animals believe that most of them are better off dead than in the hands of people who — horror of horrors — work all day, or have small children, or don't have a fenced yard, or who own a pickup truck, or any one of the absurd rules used to protect animals from imperfect homes, sending them instead to perfect death — well, who's Orwellian, now?

Wright concluded by saying:

Education is one of the most effective tools we have to prevent cruelty to animals. I don't think there is a better tool to accomplish this. In the past ten years, there has been a growing awareness of the problem of unwanted animals. I think The HSUS can take a lot of credit for bringing this out to the public. We have never hidden the facts. We have never swept the fact under the carpet that animals have to be killed.

In fact, some of the criticism in the outside world is that "I don't want to know that." Well, if you don't know it, you can't do anything about it. And if you are not aware the problem exists, you can't solve it.

I'm all for education. I've devoted much of my career to it. But that's not education,





that's Orwellian language. Killing animals because you can't figure out what else to do with them is not euthanasia, and calling it that shifts the burden of success, the burden of care, from the animal control and shelter system off to an archetypal "irresponsible pet owner." We're not killing the dogs and cats who seek shelter from us; we're "educating the public" and "releasing animals from suffering."

And the goal of that process?

The first thing you must do in your community is make your community aware of this problem, because when we have only responsible pet owners, who are educated about what it is to own a pet, our shelters and pounds will no longer be needed to receive, hold, and euthanize unwanted and homeless animals. That, my friends, is an end goal for each one of us.

But isn't that what shelters are for? To care for the animals who need, well... shelter? To provide safe harbor for the dogs, cats, and other pets whose owners cannot or will not do it? This single paragraph sets up the false paradigm that, because there will always be animals in need of shelter services (just as there will always be families in need of family services), shelters will "have to" euthanize at least some of those animals, both to save them from suffering and to teach/punish their irresponsible owners.

Back in the 90s, I interviewed the then-

head of the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo, Calif. We were discussing a trap-kill proposal for feral cats at the airport in Half Moon Bay, and she looked me in the eye and told me that the lucky cats would "die beneath the wheels of a car."

No wonder her predecessor, Kim Sturla, thought it was a good idea to kill kittens on the evening news as a way to punish all the bad pet owners in the region (or in her words, "take a 2-by-4 and hit them over the head"). Those dead kittens were the lucky ones. That makes it so much easier.

It's not that I'm trying to hold Phyllis Wright or the shelters of 1978 responsible for not using programs that didn't exist anywhere back then. But the philosophy of this article still permeates the shelter world. It underlies every word choice, every program, every press release. It is the reason why we can still, today, have "experts" from the humane movement like Penny Cistaro, director of the Whatcom Humane Society in Bellingham, WA, and a member of the audience, having conversations like this one, from last year's HSUS animal shelter conference:

Penny Cistaro: *What we have done on ours is "humanely destroy" rather than the word "kill." We're not, we're not killing them.*

Audience member: *A lot of people thought a*





lot about the way the wording is going out. The reason why I think they picked that is because they want the public to be aware that, it kind of puts it in a way that people can easily equate, I guess.

Penny Cistaro: Well, but, I can tell you, I would disagree with that. But that's me being opinionated, in that "kill" is such a negative connotation. It's... we're not KILLING them. We are taking their life, we are ending their life, we are giving them a good death, we're humanely destr — whatever. But we're NOT KILLING. And that is why I cannot stand the term "no kill shelters."

So on the one side, we have people insisting that they must kill, although in fact they're not killing at all, they are euthanizing or giving them a good death or humanely destr... oh wait, skip that one. That's got such a negative connotation.

And on the other side, we have people saying that they want "no kill," which doesn't mean "no euthanasia" but "no population control killing."

At which point I have to ask one question. Doesn't the fact that I have to define euthanasia to exclude the killing of healthy or treatable animals just because shelters don't have room for them and don't know how else to make room — that I have to do that before we can even have this discussion — show how completely the mindset of "Why We Must Euthanize" has come to dominate the language and philosophy of the shelter movement in this country?

Because killing an animal for shelter space or to teach pet owners a lesson is not, has never been, and can never be "euthanasia." And insisting that a shelter or an animal control agency or a rescue group cannot use the term "no kill" if they practice euthanasia — actual, dictionary-definition euthanasia — to spare an untreatable animal from suffering is itself the most Orwellian use of language of all.



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