

THE LESSONS AND LEGACY OF HURRICANE KATRINA:

Would You Risk Your Life for Your Pet?

By

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Would you risk your life for your pet? Hurricane Katrina taught those who love animals as well as the general public that yes, indeed, people have loved and will continue to love their pets enough to sacrifice their own lives for them. For many, this fact is surprising, even shocking. After all we're socialized to regard animal life as less important than our own. Many people still view animals (even beloved pets) as chattel, our property, as frivolous or unnecessary additions to our families and certainly unworthy of serious consideration as a being for whom we would readily sacrifice our lives. For the most part, we have been taught that we have "dominion" over the animals and creatures of the world, and we have interpreted the word "dominion" as superiority rather than its true meaning which is "guardianship" or "stewardship" – the responsibility to respect and care for our animal brethren.

There are many others, however, who understand that in today's chaotic, tumultuous, unpredictable and violent world – a world in which we are often physically as well as psychologically detached and disconnected from our fellow human beings, that our animal companions are more important to us than ever before! No matter how difficult, complex, frustrating or challenging our lives may be, our animal companions offer unconditional love, support, healing, acceptance and affection. They are our best friends and confidants as well as family members. They seem to understand our feelings and our needs and are able to accommodate them. We can sigh with relief, let down our guard and be truly ourselves. No façade, no pretense, no agenda is required at home base – where we find a place of relative peace, sanity, comfort and safety. Physiologically, emotionally and spiritually we receive upliftment, comfort and healing from our pets.

Clearly the public and those who were recruited as well as those who volunteered to rescue the victims of Katrina underestimated or simply did not understand the extraordinary bond and powerful attachment many humans have with their animal companions. We were moved to tears at the predicament of so many of our fellow citizens who lost virtually all of their material possessions along with the lives they had known prior to Katrina. We were devastated to see families torn asunder. Yet one of the saddest stories we followed was the little 7-year old boy who vomited and sobbed uncontrollably when separated from his beloved dog, "Snowball" who was not allowed on the bus with him as he evacuated the city.

People are becoming increasingly aware of the significant roles animal companions play in our hearts and our lives – how deep a bond is forged between so many humans and

their pets. Of course, we must have respect and compassion for one another, but also, as Mohandas Ghandi so poignantly observed: “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way it treats its animals.” If we are to survive as a culture and a society, we must practice the teachings of all the world’s great religions: to live with love and respect for all living beings.