WHEN YOU LOVE SOMEONE
By Julia Hammid, B.A. (January 15, 2004)

When you love someone, you want to do everything you can to make them happy. You want to pamper them and shower them with care and kindness… The same goes for our pets. We provide food they like and that's good for them, a warm place to sleep, special toys, and lots of cuddling and playing with. Those who work with animals professionally, are often motivated by a special sensitivity to animals' needs. As I visit various shelters in the course of working with Support Services for Animal Care Professionals (SSACP), one of the things that always impresses and moves me is how shelter staff and volunteers make such an effort to make the animals under their care just a bit more comfortable. Some collect old towels and put one in each dog's cage so it doesn't have to sleep on a cold concrete floor. Others collect little toys and make sure there's at least one for each cat. Or there's a box for the cat to hide in, letting them feel safer in a strange environment. Many shelter staff take a little extra time during feeding to talk a bit to each animal. In one shelter where dogs are housed in one large room with cages facing each other, staff has put up screens down the middle of the room, blocking the dogs' view of each other and thus cutting down a little bit on the stress and stimulation of being among so many other animals.

Sometimes, when we've become especially attached to an animal, either our own pet or one under our care at the shelter, we may even let them get away with bending some of the regular rules, like letting them climb up on the table or chew on that taboo slipper for a bit. We may sneak them some special food, a piece of chicken or hamburger. When an animal is young and hasn't been trained yet, it's especially tempting to let them get away with things. We may laugh at a kitten's antics as it climbs up the drapes or a puppy as it leaps up to greet us with a warm tongue. We may feed them some table scraps once in a while. But genuine caring for an animal includes setting clear and appropriate limits. Who hasn't winced when seeing a stranger walking a dog that's so fat it can barely run or cringed when visiting a home where the cat is yelled at repeatedly or even swatted for scratching the sofa? Proper training and discipline, and being able to say, "no," is also an expression of love. As much as love is expressed through pampering and special attention, an equally essential aspect of genuine love and caring is guiding an animal towards becoming a good companion, housemate and family member. It takes care and attention, and a mature recognition of our responsibility towards the animals, to do the hard work of training. It takes real dedication and deep understanding to consistently reward desired behavior and limit that which is undesired.

An untrained dog is an unhappy dog and, more often than not, an unadoptable one. An unsocialized cat, one who is confused about what to expect from humans, is probably destined to live out its life in a shelter or to ultimately be euthanised. The need for proper training becomes even more important as dogs are having to live in increasingly human-centered environments. Our cities and towns, apartments and neighborhoods are becoming unnaturally crowded with pets. We have imposed these stresses on our animals and they need our help in dealing with the restrictions this places on their natural

impulses. Cats, as well, are being kept indoors in smaller spaces, often having to share territory with other animals and they need to be given clear signals and limits. Knowing when to set a limit on how many animals one can realistically accommodate within one's living space and lifestyle is another aspect of truly caring. No one wants to satisfy their own need for a companion at the expense of that being's sanity and well-being.

Setting limits is also an essential component of a healthy human relationship and a healthy sense of self. Learning to ask for what we need and to say, "no," to what is not good for us is crucial. Being able to do so in a loving way is a skill that can be learned. And one with many rewards. One of the greatest gifts we can give each other is to offer our loving attention, to just be there with another. Just listening and being willing to respect someone as they express and experience grief, joy, pain or confusion is a powerful manifestation of caring. In order to offer our full attention, we need to also be able to sometimes say "I really can't right now," or "I need to stop right now," when we're not able. We show respect for ourselves and the other person by being realistic as to what we can offer. Then we can feel comfortable truly giving of ourselves when we do.

One of the things we teach during the Compassion Fatigue and Burnout Workshops is the "Five-Minute Share." This is a simple way to make space in our busy lives to release some stress which then allows us to more fully enjoy our work and our relationships, with people and animals. As we go through our day, constantly busy dealing with multiple crises, large and small, making decisions, reacting with emotion to joys and losses, there is a buildup. Often we're so focused on the tasks at hand, we don't even realize how stressed and overwhelmed we are until the end of the day when we either collapse, drained and numb or explode at some small thing for no obvious reason. Both of these extremes leave us feeling even worse, wondering what's wrong with us? The "Five-Minute Share" is a simple and amazingly effective way to short-circuit this cycle and get back in touch with ourselves before we either shut down or explode.

Here's how it works: Find someone you trust and agree to set aside 10 or 15 minutes together in a quiet place. It can be an out of the way corner of the shelter, at home or an outdoor spot, or even in a car parked outside the drive-through after a quick lunch. Each person takes a turn to be with whatever is going on with them for about five minutes, to tell a story, to cry, to share a recent success, to vent some anger or talk through a decision. While one person takes their turn, the other simply listens, not advising, not asking questions, not comforting. Simply being listened to can feel deeply affirming and healing. Having a clear time limit creates safety for both people. The person doing the sharing knows that their story is being truly honored and that they don't have to worry about being swept away into more emotion or deeper issues than they can handle. The person listening can give full attention without having to worry about stopping the person doing the sharing from going too far or too long.

There are many other arenas of life where setting limits is crucial in maintaining balance and well-being. They include such things as having specific hours when a shelter is open to the public, deciding how many animals, or what kind of animal, one can realistically

care for well, drawing boundaries between work and personal life, knowing when to take a vacation or even seeking professional help when appropriate. It is wonderful to wish we could do and be everything to everyone, to save every animal and be able to be there for every person we love at any given time. But no one can fulfill this impossible expectation. Knowing what our own limits are and taking steps to honor them enables us to be truly effective in the work we do and more openly loving in all our relationships.

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