

**Sunday Column – Easier to walk away
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When you work in an animal shelter it is inevitable that you will eventually have more animals living in your home than you may have ever imagined. The need for loving homes, especially for hard to place pets, is relentless.

At PAWS Humane, we occasionally take in an animal with a serious health concern which tends to cause the average adopter to shy away. Taking in an animal like this can require a much greater commitment of both time and money. In some cases we take in an animal and later discover he has a terminal illness. If their quality of life is still good we will place a pet like this with a hospice foster care giver.

Bjorn is one such case. This spunky little kitten was born eleven months ago and came into PAWS one month later. He was found by a gentleman who lived in an apartment complex which did not allow pets. At four weeks old he was full of personality and as cute as he could be. We fell in love with him immediately.

Initially, we did not detect a problem. We placed him in foster care with a clinic staff member. This kind of foster care may last a few weeks to a few months. We were simply making time for a very young animal to receive the appropriate vaccines and to gain enough weight to undergo spay/neuter surgery. This also provides them an opportunity to learn how to live with other animals and people which helps them to become better adoption candidates.

Bjorn was brought into the clinic by his foster dad at the appropriate time and during the pre-surgery examination we discovered he had a heart murmur. With his blue lips and heavy breathing we knew it was serious.

Our shelter is fortunate to be located within commuting distance of three well-regarded schools of veterinary medicine. In this case, Tuskegee came to the rescue and provided a reduced-fee echocardiogram for our little guy. It was bad news. We learned that Bjorn had a hole in his heart, and was destined for congestive heart failure. His prognosis was grim and he was not expected to live more than a couple of months at best.

That was six months ago. He is almost a full size cat now and he's hanging in there. He is a little prince who lives in the PAWS administrative office. He has a favorite spot with each of his five foster moms, moving from one to the other throughout the course of each day.

Although he is comfortable and contented today, we know this will not last and we all realize we will lose him one day. Earlier this week a few of us were talking about how we live with the sadness that is so recurrent in the work we do. We wondered aloud if a day will come when any one of us will not be able to do it for one more day and find it necessary to walk away from all this.

It would have been easier not to bring Bjorn into our offices but we decided to fall on the sword for this little guy. Compassion is a wonderful thing. I believe our purpose in life is to be helpful where and when we can. It is our natural and innate sense of compassion that drives us to do this but there is a dark side to this coin. To get too caught up in our own grief over the loss of the animals we care for renders us much less useful. We have to focus on the good we are able to do and let these creatures go when the time comes.

The only way I know how to manage this is through deep faith in something larger than me. I have to believe that it somehow all makes sense even if it isn't always clear to me now. God knows what He is doing and my job is simply to do what is in front of me to do.

Bobbi Yeo lives in Opelika, AL. She is the CEO of PAWS Humane in Columbus, GA, an animal shelter and veterinary clinic offering low-cost spay/neuter and other services to the public. Email her at byeo@pawshumane.org with your comments and story ideas.