

HOW RORY THE RACCOON GOT “SAVED”

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Updated 6-4-26 — *see the end of this essay for my statement on “Zoos & Captive Animals”*



Decades ago, I was a licensed volunteer wildlife rescue-rehabilitator for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife. Decades before that, I was an exotic animal caregiver, comfort trainer, and researcher at the Audubon (conservation) Zoo in New Orleans. Eventually I left the zoo and became an emergency-surgical para-veterinarian at a large vet

hospital in the area. As time progressed, my heart became increasingly burdened to help people, so I returned to graduate school and became a counselor (individual, couple, family) — serving in that role for 40 years.

When I look back, those years as a wildlife rescuer were filled with heart warming stories of amazing animals whose intelligence and depth of emotion still astound me to this day. This one is the story of my friend — Rory, the Raccoon who was changed by love.

Rory's Rescue

One day, I received a heartbreaking call. An adult male raccoon had been seen in a rural field, after being shot through the back and left to die. Apparently for days he had lain there helpless, dragging himself through the dirt, starving, dehydrated, and possibly paralyzed in his back legs.

When I finally reached him, his eyes radiated terror and rage toward me. He had no idea I was trying to help. Using a humane capture pole and my Kevlar gloves, I managed to get him into a large cardboard box in the passenger seat of my car.

During the rescue and every mile of the drive home, he growled without pause — a fierce, guttural warning that sounded remarkably like a miniature lion. He clawed frantically at the box and even chewed a hole through the side in repeated attempts to reach me. While steering with my left hand, I used my right, encased in a Kevlar glove, to gently push his head back into the box each time he lunged upward. Whoever invented Kevlar gloves deserves my sincere thanks.

Unfortunately, the gloves were so thick that manipulating anything with them felt like trying to work with mechanical claws. Had his rear legs not been impaired, I'm quite certain he would have sprung out of the box and attacked my face before we ever reached home.

Finally back at my biology (rescue-rehabilitation) classroom, which had over the years become a kind of makeshift rescue hospital, I laid Rory gently into a large rubber cattle tub lined with soft blankets. Even then, exhausted and broken, he still fought me with everything he had. His body could no longer lift itself properly due to his legs, but his spirit was still wild and defiant.

As I planned his initial treatment, I hoped and prayed his paralysis would only be temporary. Sometimes spinal trauma improves once swelling decreases. If it did, then my veterinarian friend and I could stabilize him and perhaps one day his spine would heal so he could be returned to the woods where he belonged.

Physical Service Communicates Love That Can Be Trusted

Rory was desperately thirsty and starving. So, I immediately mixed kitten milk formula and began dripping it slowly from a bottle with a silicone nipple, holding it far above his mouth — staying out of reach of his teeth and claws. As he licked the falling formula drops, he furiously snarled and stared at me with eyes of fear and hate. Yet as he drank the cool liquid nourishment, little by little his heart and emotions began to soften.

The bottle's gradual dripping was too slow for me and him both. I knew he needed more fluids than I could safely give him. Since I had already been vaccinated against rabies, I decided to take a risk. I removed the Kevlar gloves.

Slowly, cautiously, I lowered the bottle closer to his mouth. Rory continued growling, his eyes locked on mine with suspicion and fury. Then suddenly he clamped his teeth onto the silicone nipple with all the force he could muster. Life saving liquid finally rushed into his mouth!

He froze in surprise. For a moment, he seemed almost confused that something so wonderful had come from the hand he feared and hated.

He then began sucking hungrily, almost frantically, trying to drink as much as he could. And then something happened I will never forget. Rory reached up with his tiny raccoon paws (*hands, really, almost like those of a monkey*) and wrapped

them around both the bottle, and around my bare fingers. His hands embraced mine and a new experience began for us both.



At first he occasionally growled between gulps, choking slightly in his desperation to drink. But then, as he seemed to realize he was safe with me, his growling stopped. His body relaxed. His eyes softened. And what had begun as fearful rage slowly transformed into trust. There, in only a few minutes, a wounded creature who had fought me with all his strength rested

peacefully — gently holding my hand — because the way of love had reached him where force never could.

That moment always reminds me of three Greek New Testament words, “agape”, “sozo”, and “metamorphóō”. *Agape* is the Greek word used for the pain-risking, self-sacrificing love exhibited by Jesus of Nazareth as he modeled the loving character of God the Creator. *Sozo* is often translated as “saved” and literally means “healed”. The word *metamorphóō* (the root of the English word metamorphosis) is used in the NT for spiritual transformation and inner renewal. It means a deep change: becoming something *qualitatively* new. In his own small way, Rory was “saved”. No, not yet physically, but definitely relationally, which is the core of what spiritual means. The terrified, violent animal before me had become trusting and voluntarily tame through one simple risky act of compassion. The term compassion by the way literally means “to suffer with”, and conveys the willingness to reach down and risk harm in order to share in the suffering of another to help, to rescue, and to save (heal as far as possible).

By the next day Rory began gently eating canned cat food directly from my fingers. He even enjoyed having his head rubbed and would fall asleep quietly as I sat beside him. The same little raccoon who once tried desperately to attack me now trusted me completely.

Sometimes We Forget There Are Different Kinds of Rescue

Over the next several days, as my veterinarian friend and I monitored Rory closely, the truth became impossible to deny. His spinal injury was permanent. He was losing bodily function and would only continue to deteriorate. There

would be no *physical* recovery, no return to the woods, no second chance at the *earthly* life he once had.

Part of animal rescue sometimes means giving a creature peace when physical healing is no longer possible. I understood that intellectually. Many times in my animal work merciful love required me to euthanize suffering animals and set them free from pain. By the way, the word euthanasia comes from Greek and means “good death”.

But it’s harder when you know them personally.

Harder when they have trusted you.

So much harder, when you’ve looked into their eyes and known their soul.

As my vet friend prepared the euthanasia syringe, I sat beside Rory stroking his head gently. His calm trust in our love was so different from the terrified angry animal I had first met.

As we prepared the process, my veterinarian friend looked over at my face and saw the tears I could no longer hide. She quietly asked me,

“Sid... do you need to wait in the other room this time?”

Her simple kindness meant more to me than she probably realized. Her willingness to compassionately, courageously do what was best in that moment — for me and for Rory — was an act of agape love, her gift to us. I certainly cannot know for certainty, but I hope and believe that God, the Source of love, will reunite the three of us in the eternal realm, together forever!

* **STATEMENT ON ZOOS & CAPTIVE ANIMALS** — Have you had **negative** feelings about zoos and captive animals? I empathize with you! If you research carefully, you will find that **good**, bad, and very ugly exists across the wide range of facilities and activities. When its bad and ugly, it’s sadly easy to see — while the good and **wonderful** is often more subtle and behind the scenes. The best of facilities are motivated and designed around **compassion, conservation, and education**. Their animals are loved and protected by their caregiver keepers, and enjoy far better lives than those in the “wild” who must struggle and suffer violent competitive survival of the fittest, coolest, and cruelest, against predators, disease, drought, floods, fires, etc. Without captive animals, many species would otherwise go extinct. And the educational impact of new generations seeing, hearing, and caring about their local captive animal “friends” motivates actions to preserve and protect the world’s natural habitats and inhabitants. For more, see: ***American Zoo: A Sociological Safari***, by sociologist David Grazian; and ***Zoo Story: Life in the Garden of Captives***, by Thomas French.