



THE DAY COMPASSION FACED A 500-POUND LION

My True Story of Overcoming Fear Through Love

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Standing Face to Face with a Lion

When caring for elephants and large carnivores 45 years ago at the Audubon Zoological Gardens in New Orleans, people often asked whether I was ever afraid of my animal friends. My honest answer is yes. But the moments that concerned me most were not caused by the animals themselves.

The greatest danger I ever faced at the zoo did begin not with an angry lion, but with an angry man. Looking back after all these years, I still find myself wondering why I am alive to tell the story.

When I joined the Audubon Zoo, the institution was in the midst of an exciting transformation. Under new leadership, outdated concrete exhibits and prison-like cages were gradually giving way to spacious natural habitats. Conservation, behavioral enrichment, and compassionate animal care were becoming guiding principles throughout the zoo. Like many zoological institutions of that era, however, buildings could be renovated faster than habits. Individual keepers embraced this new philosophy at very different speeds.

The animal caught in the middle that day was Bratar, a magnificent, powerful 500-pound Asian lion. He was not refusing to enter his capture-transport cage because he was vicious. He was refusing because he was terrified.

Friends, Not Just Animals

Ever since rescuing injured and orphaned wildlife as a boy, I had never thought of animals as "specimens" or merely members of a species. Each one had a name, an individual personality, unique fears, preferences, and ways of communicating. I considered them friends. Not human persons, of course—but persons nonetheless, each deserving respect, patience, and compassionate care.

Bratar and his sister, Rani, were endangered Asian lions born in captivity before arriving at Audubon. They carried emotional wounds that could not be seen. Long before they came into our care, they had experienced rough handling that left them deeply distrustful of people. They were not simply wild; sadly they had learned to fear humans. As with all of the animals I served, my goal was to show them I was different—that I was their friend.

One of the greatest joys of working at Audubon was watching the old less than compassionate ways slowly change.



Our lions now lived in expansive outdoor habitats of native grasses, trees, shrubs, climbing vines, rock ledges, and flowing streams that emptied into cool wide pools. Long water moats separated the animals from visitors who viewed them from elevated walkways. Typical to lions, Bratar and Rani *cautiously* drank from their pools and moat, while my tiger friends, Akela and Rakshi, delighted in swimming. Their tiger stories will have to wait for another chapter.

Each large carnivore also had an individual indoor den where it slept, ate, and could be safely separated when necessary. Although simple, the dens were clean and well maintained. More importantly, every animal knew its own name and responded to familiar verbal cues from the keepers who cared for them.

A Simple Transfer ... Until It Wasn't

On the morning of this story, we needed to relocate Bratar to a better building within the zoo. The procedure itself was routine. But the challenge was persuading a five-hundred-pound lion to voluntarily enter a rolling transport cage scarcely larger than his own body.

My immediate boss, the head carnivore keeper—whom I'll call “Tim” to protect his identity—tried every method he knew. When none of them worked, frustration seemed to slowly replace his judgment. As each attempt failed, Tim became louder, angrier, and more desperate.

Soon, his frustrated efforts became *punishment*. The pressure hose came first. Bratar endured it. Then came a long steel pipe. Instead of encouraging Bratar into the cage, Tim struck him and jabbed at him through the bars with the pipe, trying to force him to move. Bratar tried to fight back, defiantly growling, slapping the pipe with his claws, and roaring so loud it shook the concrete walls. But every failure to make Bratar move only increased Tim's anger. Blow after blow drove Bratar crouching farther into the rear corner of his den.

By the time it was over, the once magnificent lion was soaked, bleeding in several places, trembling, and yet now truly dangerous—because his fear had been turned into *rage*.

The Man With a Plywood Plan

Witnessing this unfold, I knew we needed someone who understood animals differently. I hurried to find our senior elephant keepers, whom I'll call Hank. Hank had spent years working with elephants weighing several tons, as well as the big cats. His greatest gift was *not* controlling powerful animals—it was *understanding* them.

When Hank saw Bratar's condition, he confronted Tim immediately. Their argument nearly became physical before Tim finally left the building. Hank then began quietly thinking about the lion instead of the problem. Hank's solution was remarkably simple. It was also one of the most dangerous plans I have ever participated in.

An empty den sat immediately beside Bratar's. The two rooms connected through a sliding doorway just large enough for a lion to pass between them.

Hank had us fasten two heavy handles onto the back of a large sheet of plywood, creating a temporary movable thin wooden wall. The board was intentionally cut just slightly smaller than the room itself. It nearly touched the floor. Nearly touched the ceiling. Nearly touched both walls.

The idea was simple. Two *junior* keepers would stand behind that plywood inside the empty den, gripping the handles and keeping the board upright. *Senior* keepers, safely outside in the hallway, would encourage Bratar to enter the den in front of us.

If everything worked exactly as planned, the junior keepers would slowly walk the plywood board forward, gradually and gently reducing the space available to Bratar until he chose to enter the waiting rolling transport cage. That would be the moment a senior keeper in the hallway outside the den would shut the transport cage's trap door.

Everyone understood what could happen if Bratar charged the board. The plywood wasn't anchored to the floor. It wasn't attached to the walls. Nothing would hold it upright except the strength and balance of the two young keepers behind it.

Nobody argued over who would stand behind the plywood. We all understand that the senior keepers were needed to be out in the hallway to operate the capture-transport cage's mechanisms. So, the simplest yet most dangerous part belonged to us — the junior keepers. I and a junior partner volunteered to be the ones inside the den to hold and walk the plywood forward.

Fear ... and Something Stronger

As the plan was ready to be tried, I stood in the hallway waiting to enter the empty den and get behind the plywood — *fear* rising inside me. But then I looked once more at Bratar in the adjacent den. He was soaked. Bleeding. Still trembling and growling in the back corner of his den.

At that moment, something unexpected happened. My fear did not disappear. It was simply overshadowed. My deeper, stronger emotion became *compassion*. I no longer saw a dangerous lion. I saw a frightened animal *friend* who had already endured unacceptable suffering. I wanted to help him.

So, I stepped into the empty den with my junior partner behind the plywood and held it up. The cold metal handles dug into my palms. They weren't designed for comfort. Their only purpose was to help two frightened keepers keep hold of the board in case 500-pounds of frightened and angry muscle suddenly slammed against it.

[Months earlier Bratar had demonstrated his power when he had twice charged what we had assumed was a sufficiently sturdy metal keepers' door that gave us access into to his den to clean it. Because of him blasting his body against that "strong" metal door, it had to be replaced. He'd made it bend so far out of its steel frame that it had nearly burst apart.]

Ready or Not ...

I planted my boots firmly against the concrete floor — deliberately tightening every muscle across my back and shoulders. If Bratar charged, our limited strength—not the plywood's—would be the only thing determining whether that safety barrier remained standing.

We knew that as the plan unfolded, if we and the board were knocked backwards, Bratar would instantly be on top of us. The other young keeper and I looked into each other's eyes. Neither of us spoke. There was no need for words.

What happened next still makes chills run through my body. Yet I knew then and I know now — after everything Bratar had endured that afternoon, he deserved someone willing to take a risk to rescue him.

Here He Comes

Once the equipment and all of us involved were set in position, a senior keeper slid back the door dividing the two dens and let Bratar into where my partner and I were hiding behind the plywood, holding it up, with our backs against the rear concrete wall.

Bratar roared, paced, and circled the den inches in front of our plywood barrier. We couldn't see him, yet we smelled his wet bloody fur, and the sound of his deep roaring made the board vibrate in our hands. Backed against — *and supported by* — the rear concrete wall, we knew that would be our last “semi-safe” moment.

The senior keepers who stood safely in the hallway next to the open capture-transport cage gave us the signal. So we gripped the metal handles even tighter, lifted the board up a few inches, and began walking slowly towards Bratar. As the space between our plywood and the open transport cage door got smaller and smaller, Bratar's pacing got faster — his growling and roaring got louder.

Suddenly, he panicked and his pacing transformed into powerful leaps up, down, around — all over the concrete walls — the metal transport cage —and worst of all — the board we held up — as we now stood dangerously in the *middle* of the den. Surging adrenaline increased our strength and determination.

Two Steps Forward ... One Step Back

We continued slowly walking forward, shrinking the space. Every time Bratar's 500-pounds hit the plywood it would knock us at least one step back. My hands were becoming numb from my gripping the handles. The closer to the opening of the transport cage we got, the more Bratar's own adrenaline filled body blasted harder against the board — nearly knocking us all the way over onto our backs many times. At this point my brain wasn't even able to think. It was as if my body and my partner's had become parts of a machine locked in a “*move-forward-at-all-cost*” mode.

It was truly do or die. Finally, at the last moment — maybe only because Bratar was becoming exhausted like we were — he entered the capture-transport cage. *Immediately*, a senior keeper quickly slid its strong steel door behind Bratar, while another senior keeper closed and secured its lock.

Still standing behind the plywood, my junior partner and I were blind to all of that was happening on the other side. Yes we heard Bratar's heavy body enter the transport cage and we heard the loud metal sounds of the steel trap door being closed and locked. We even heard the senior keepers telling us that all was now safe and that we could finally let go of the plywood board — but we wouldn't — we *couldn't*.

Our hands, arms, and bodies were still frozen as if parts of that make-shift wooden wall. I don't know how many minutes it took for our minds, our bodies, to relax and let go. It seemed like forever. Only when we could see the transport cage rolling down the hall with Bratar safely locked inside it, did we finally let go.

Compassion Is Not Crazy

Looking back now at the age of 70, as a retired psychological counselor, I realize that universities taught my *brain* to think, but life taught my *heart* the most important truths. My greatest teachers were not only professors and textbooks, but especially elephants, lions, clouded leopards, rescued raccoons, otters, dogs, cats, frightened children, struggling couples, grieving families — countless wounded fellow creatures—human and animal alike.

Everyone wonders about the biggest questions and mysteries of life — Where did the Cosmos come from? What is the meaning and purpose of life? Who am I and why am I here? Where is everything heading?

There are literally hundreds, maybe thousands of different, conflicting, and often contradictory theoretical answers attempted by countless scholars in science, philosophy, and theology. I've always loved and spent decades researching and reading, yet none of these academic theories has fully satisfied my head or my heart.

Experiencing humble compassion in action — flowing through others like Hank, and *unexpectedly* sometimes even through me, has revealed the *singular*, most profoundly simple answer to all of these questions. For me, humble self-sacrificial love is the key, the lens, to understanding ultimate reality. It's the source, the way, and the goal.

Someone once said, courage is not the absence of fear. It's the willingness to push through fear and do what's right for the benefit of others in need.

Yes, I've too often fallen short and failed to live this kind of mature, courageous love. But I've grown in it little by little over the decades — hopefully I'm still learning and growing.

[By the way, Tim was soon fired by new leadership at the zoo for multiple reasons.]