



Reiki in Animal Care Centers

BY MARSHA R. DROZDOFF, MSW

MY ONCOLOGY CAREER was deeply impacted and inspired by particular words from Dr. Bernie Siegel in *Love, Medicine and Healing*. To paraphrase, we all have something in our lives that needs healing; this may or may not lead to a cure, but is an intention. I was propelled to identify what I might help to heal in humans for over 40 years, and from 2001, Reiki became the primary modality to bring comfort and transformation to cancer patients, families, and professional caregivers.

When I retired from the medical center at the end of 2017, I meditated on what my passions were and what new opportunities there were to serve others best. That rich inner voice directed me to our wonderful Pima Animal Care Center (PACC) to primarily do Reiki on dogs. My first assignment was dog walking with the easier-to-manage, green-coded dogs. If a dog was responsive, I would offer some Reiki in the park by the lake. Even the most frightened or agitated dog would generally sit or lay down and return more refreshed and less stressed. To officially do Reiki as one's assignment, one needed to take a three-hour animal massage class. I thought I would never do massage; I was a Reiki Master, and Reiki was my healing tool. I soon learned that the combination is what is most needed in, at times, a very chaotic and noisy environment. I frequently move one hand doing massage while the other hand, my heart, and my eyes are doing Reiki.

So, how do I select eight or so dogs to receive treatments in the three hours at the Care Center each visit? I would frequently first send Reiki to connect with the dogs who needed the most healing. Other volunteers also recognized me as a Reiki practitioner, and they would refer dogs (sometimes cats) who could benefit from Reiki.

Perhaps these animals were overly shy, stressed, agitated, wouldn't eat, and unless we helped lessen these behaviors, their chances of being adopted diminished. I also would look at the animal information board in each pod or building and see if others identified behaviors needing intervention. Other times, a dog called to me with a bark or heartfelt eyes. I worked with dogs of all sizes, breeds, ages, and backgrounds.

Each week there were many lessons to learn. What do you do about a dog who is lovely and lays down on the walkway outside, refusing to get up? This situation was a lesson about implementing mindfulness and being fully present. I noticed that I was worried about what would happen in the future and how I would ever get this beautiful girl back into her kennel. I kept breathing mindfully, recognizing that this was her time, and it was her choice to stay there, receiving loads of Reiki healing. Finally, another volunteer came by with hot dogs and bribed her to move.

Another time, a dog had the most deceiving eyes of deep sadness. Well, this dog was very rambunctious and escaped from me. I was running all over the shelter grounds going in circles until I cornered the dog and corralled him back in. I also generally prefer only going into a kennel with one dog because it can be difficult being able to manage two or three dogs and exit the kennel after doing Reiki. One time I thought I had things under control, and after both dogs had appeared so mellow from Reiki, one pushed past me, and the other one followed. Fortunately, a staff person caught them both and almost had to wrestle them back in their kennel. After many apologies, I gave thanks for my many blessings that this person came in just at the right time. By the way, when a dog escapes like this, every other dog in that pod gets activated and barks rousing support for their canine comrade!

Sometimes a dog is so scared that it is shaking and refusing to eat or drink. I sit outside the kennel and send Reiki from my heart and offer assurances that I will not hurt him or her. I empathize with all prior pain and suffering and tell him or her that one deserves to be loved and safe. I ask permission to enter the kennel. Each animal is so different. Sometimes I just sit for a while until I try to offer a pet treat from my hand or from on the floor away from me. I try to desensitize the animal's fear while chanting the sounds of the Karuna Reiki® symbols, or a sweet song that I may make up depending upon the given name. Sometimes I get to touch the dog gently, and sometimes I get to do Reiki. Occasionally a dog responds so well that it climbs in my lap for Reiki loving and care. Sometimes the dog, however, is so shut down emotionally and physically that I choose not to create more stress and leave with a few gentle parting words. I then communicate back with other Reiki and massage volunteers who can follow up and support the necessary care and healing.

One day another volunteer asked me if I would work with a very stressed dog who had just returned from a foster home; these precious animals don't understand what they have done to be back in a frightening environment. I couldn't enter the kennel because the dog had an orange code, a category higher than my skill level. But, I could sit outside the kennel and use my Reiki skills to engage that dog. Just then, the light bulb went on, and I thought about one of my elderly Reiki students who years ago offered Reiki to her husband when he was in ICU for four months. At that time, I was so concerned about her health that I suggested that she send Reiki to him even though she was seated in the same room. I did a distant session with this dog while sitting on the ground outside the kennel. He responded as well as if I was sitting next to him in the kennel. He first sat down while looking at me and then laid down; he took that beautiful sigh of release and quieted from his head to his paws. He also had some neurological issues, and the twitching diminished significantly.

Some of the dogs in the animal care center come in injured after a car accident or being abandoned on the streets; some have other health issues and require surgeries and have to wear a plastic cone to avoid taking out stitches or making their condition worse. For these brave dogs, I

often do Reiki in the energy field over the injury; I also try to do hands-on Reiki wherever possible to offer love, support, and hope. It is a joy to see their smiles and behavioral responses of being willing to eat, drink, and socially interact more comfortably. Some dogs I do Reiki on weekly, and the improvement from one session to another is outstanding. Although I try to capture heartwarming expressions during the session, it is challenging to do Reiki with one hand on a precious dog who is on my lap while also balancing an iPhone.

To conclude, what are the lessons I have learned in the past year and a half? Animals need and respond exceptionally well to Reiki. In an animal shelter where we may not always know vital information about that animal's past, we can treat each unique life with the respect, compassion, and dignity that comes through Reiki. Just like our work with humans, these animals are often full of gratitude. We touch their lives. They touch our lives, and in return, we both heal.

*Addendum: I worked on a gorgeous 10-year-old Labrador Retriever almost a year ago. At her age, she is considered a "mature mutt" and had only been in PACC for a week. This initial period is frequently one of the most disorienting and stressful for animals either dropped off by former owners, concerned people, or Animal Control. She responded so well to Reiki I took her home for a sleepover ("Paw over"). By the next day, I was in tears and knew that I could not bring her back to PACC. She became a member of our household in July 2019, and not only loves Reiki but is my Reiki class assistant. 🌿

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