

# FRANCIS<sup>↑</sup>CANOMICS<sub>↓</sub>

UPLIFTING STORIES FOR A DOWN ECONOMY



G E O R G E B R Y M E R

# Nine

## The Guardians of Animals

One day, Francis and a group of companions left Assisi and headed toward the Italian town of Bevagna, where they planned to spread God's word to anyone who would listen. As the group approached the city's outskirts, Francis spotted a potential audience gathered in a meadow. Asking his friends to wait for him by the road, Francis hurried into the field to address the crowd.

Some of the prospective converts were standing around. Others were sitting on tree limbs. Many were flying about. They were all, you see, *birds*.

"My sisters," Francis called out to them, "listen to the word of God."

As Francis's traveling companions watched in awe, the birds at once stopped what they were doing and congregated curiously at his feet. They gave the preacher their full attention, listening intently to him as he listed the many blessings for which they should praise the Lord: feathers to keep them

warm; wings with which to fly; and the ability to soar high above the earth where the air is clean and pure.

Before long, the birds appeared to be rejoicing. They stretched their necks, opened their beaks, and spread their wings. They began to sing as Francis walked among them, making the sign of the cross. Only then did any of the birds take flight.

“I am very neglectful in not having as yet preached to the birds,” Francis confessed as he rejoined his friends.<sup>1</sup>

*Franciscanomics* is about people who exhibit Francis-like compassion by helping others endure the Great Recession. Certainly, I would be “very neglectful,” as Francis put it, if I failed to include those who are rescuing animals from the recession’s wrath.

## Dominion

The legend of Francis preaching to a flock of birds highlights his special love of animals. That love was behind his decision to protect a wolf and the citizens of Gubbio from each other by bargaining with both. As you will recall from the first chapter, Francis convinced the beast to stop terrorizing the townspeople as long as they gave him food. And he convinced Gubbio to refrain from hunting down and killing the animal if he stopped attacking people.

That love was evident as well whenever friends presented Francis with gifts of live fish, doves, pheasants, or rabbits. Rather than slaughter the creatures for food, he released them back into their natural habitat, often with a friendly caution to be more careful lest they be captured again.<sup>2</sup>

All of these stories illustrate a unique love and compassion that would help earn Francis sainthood, as well as the title, “Patron Saint of Animals.” But some religious scholars point out that treating animals as humanity’s equals—whether by preaching to birds, negotiating with wolves, or releasing creatures back into the wild—put Francis at odds with an early-Christian tenet, the one that maintains that humans occupy *the* preeminent place in the natural hierarchy. After all, the Book of Genesis, among its “In the beginning” accounts of the world’s origin, describes how God granted humans *dominion* over animals:

Then God said: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground.”<sup>3</sup>

We typically associate the word *dominion* with concepts of power, control, or domination. But Francis, unlike the majority of his medieval contemporaries, believed that dominion over animals was not a matter of ruling over them, but a duty to safeguard them from harm. So, in the same way that Francis rebuffed the oppressive feudalistic social system of the day—and the wealthy aristocrats who got rich by extracting unpaid labor from the desperate poor—he also rejected the notion of a biological pecking order in which, by virtue of having been awarded the top spot on the ecological food chain, humans are free to exploit the rest of the animal kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

What is it about animals that moved Francis to stand up for them?

For one thing, he considered all creatures—humans and animals, alike—equally worthy of God’s love. What’s more, he believed that compassion is absolute: either you have it or you don’t.

In other words, people who can’t feel compassion for animals are, in turn, incapable of feeling it for their fellow humans. Having dedicated his life to teaching God’s compassion, Francis went out of his way to demonstrate it personally toward people and animals alike, even though his contemporaries scoffed.<sup>5</sup>

Francis’s stance toward animals would likely receive criticism, even now. As author Matthew Scully points out in his book, *Dominion*, the modern-day care of animals is complicated by economics, insofar as their place among our financial priorities is concerned. We still exhibit the centuries-old tendency to put human needs before those of animals—to exercise our God-given “dominion” over them, if you will.<sup>6</sup> It should come as no surprise, then, that when faced with economic adversity, some people are capable of ignoring their pets’ most basic needs.

We’ve seen the distressing impact the Great Recession has had on the lives of people across the country: One in ten U.S. workers can’t find a job. And with a third of jobless people out of work for over a year, there is little indication that the unemployment rate will return to its low pre-recession level, anytime soon. Millions of homeowners who can no longer afford their

mortgage payments are losing their houses to foreclosure and, in many cases, becoming part of the country's homeless population. The economy's hardships are forcing countless American families to choose between filling their pantries and filling their gas tanks. Between paying their rent and paying for their prescriptions. And, as I wrote in chapter 7, between keeping their kids at home and sending their kids to live with foster families.

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### People are not the only victims of the Great Recession.

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But people are not the Great Recession's only victims; there are an untold number of dogs, cats, and other household pets whose lives are being upended—or, in many cases, ended altogether—because their owners can no longer afford to care for them. Pet abandonment is rising drastically, as evidenced by the growing number of intakes at animal shelters around the country. Shelters located in regions experiencing high foreclosures are reporting corresponding increases in abandoned pets; so many, in fact, that experts are calling the relinquished animals “foreclosure pets.” And with fewer people able to afford the costs of adopting pets, overburdened shelters are euthanizing more animals.<sup>7</sup>

Some might argue that, in these tough economic times, people must come first. Scully, the author of *Dominion*, disagrees. Using much the same argument about compassion that Francis made, he asserts that how we treat animals—whatever the circumstances—speaks volumes about our humanity.

“Animals are more than ever a test of our character,” he writes, “of mankind’s capacity for empathy and for decent, honorable conduct and faithful stewardship.”<sup>8</sup>

## Foreclosure Pets

Contra Costa County is nestled in Northern California’s San Francisco Bay area, about an hour east of San Francisco (a city named for Saint Francis of Assisi, by the way<sup>9</sup>). With Mount Diablo as a backdrop, the county includes such upper-class cities as Brentwood, Oakley, Discovery Bay, Bethal Island, and Antioch. The region’s mild year-round temperatures, along with its access to the California Delta’s thousand miles of waterways, make the area a popular vacation spot for outdoor enthusiasts. Over time, developers have transitioned the county from a getaway destination into a year-round residential community, complete with waterfront homes and gated communities.

But even idyllic weather and pristine rivers could not protect Contra Costa County from the Great Recession’s mortgage crisis—or defend its residents against the ensuing onslaught of home foreclosures.

Foreclosed properties are nothing new to real estate agent Cecily Tippery, who’s been brokering repossessed homes in Northern California throughout most of her career. She’s witnessed the heartbreak people experience when they lose their homes, and she understands that displaced homeowners are often forced to leave personal belongings behind. But discarded furniture and family treasures are nothing compared to what

awaited her in one vacant foreclosed house, on a summer day in 2007.

Inside, Tippery found three starving and dehydrated dogs—a dachshund, a basset hound, and a Chihuahua. In the backyard, she discovered an anxious calico cat, as well as a dead turtle. The animals belonged to the house's previous owners, who abandoned the family pets when they lost their house—and left them to fend for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

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Tippery sprang into action. With two dogs of her own—and a husband whose allergies could not tolerate any additional fur around the house—she knew taking in the animals herself was out of the question. So she called a local animal rescue agency, one with a no-kill policy, and soon its veterinarians began nursing the pets back to health.

But Tippery didn't stop there. She next worked with the agency to find families who would adopt the animals. When the basset hound was diagnosed with a tumor, a condition that renders pets ineligible for adoption, Tippery convinced a co-worker to split the \$1,200 cost of the dog's surgery with her. Before long, she had found new homes for all four of the abandoned pets.

As the foreclosure crisis worsened, finding abandoned pets in vacated homes became a common occurrence for Tippery

and the real estate agents who work in her Brentwood office. So, too, did finding permanent homes for the animals she and her sales team rescued.

“It’s not as if I made it a rule,” kids Tippery, making it clear that her employees are not obligated to join her pet rescue mission. Then again, it’s probably hard *not* to get involved, considering animal adoption efforts are regular agenda items in their weekly sales meetings. “Luckily, most of us have that connection to animals,” she adds.<sup>11</sup>

When the local media began telling Tippery’s story, she leveraged the coverage to help increase awareness of how foreclosures are endangering pets—and to find homes for several other pets her team had saved. She began hearing from other realtors in the area who had been rescuing foreclosure pets, too. Now these business competitors are collaborating to get abandoned animals adopted.

“Most people would do the same,” Tippery says of her efforts to help foreclosure pets. But *would* they?

## The No-Kill Debate

Not all abandoned pets in our country are as lucky as those rescued by Cecily Tippery and her colleagues. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) estimates that between five million and seven million pets end up in animal shelters every year. Half of all shelter intakes result from owners voluntarily relinquishing their pets; the rest come from local animal control efforts. Nationwide, shelters euthanize two-thirds of the dogs and cats they receive, usually be-

cause limited resources prevent them from caring for unclaimed animals long enough to locate new homes for them.<sup>12</sup>

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While the numbers of euthanized pets are staggering, they have fallen drastically since the late 1980s, thanks largely to greater public awareness about pet overpopulation. Around that time, experts estimated that shelters were destroying as many as seventeen million animals annually, and a public intolerance toward allowing the deaths of so many pets began to emerge. As a result, spaying and neutering efforts increased around the country, greatly reducing the numbers of unwanted—and, thus, euthanized—dogs and cats. Then, in the 1990s, a new emphasis on adoption over euthanasia led to a movement toward “no-kill” animal shelters.<sup>13</sup>

San Francisco was the first U.S. city to fully embrace the no-kill model. Under the leadership of local ASPCA director Richard Avanzino, the city launched a number of initiatives designed to reduce pet overpopulation, including vigorous adoption efforts and concentrated spay and neuter programs. San Francisco’s model, in which euthanasia is a last resort saved for animals who are untreatable and suffering, or who are deemed vicious and dangerous, has become the national standard for no-kill resourcefulness.<sup>14</sup> The city’s namesake, Saint Francis, would be proud.

Saving dogs and cats from needless death hardly seems like a contentious position. But the no-kill concept does manage to stir up controversy, even among animal advocates. For starters, there are those who maintain that, compared with the barbaric clubbing, shooting, and drowning methods employed for centuries, euthanasia is a humane approach for dealing with pet overpopulation. Furthermore, some people argue, even for healthy animals, death is a more favorable fate than roaming the streets, or being caged and warehoused in a shelter. Considering those options, they add, euthanasia is the best way to prevent unwanted animals from suffering.

Even the name itself can spark debate. Some opponents consider the no-kill label purposely misleading. They argue that “no-kill” implies that all animals are accepted with the intention of keeping them alive. But many shelters only preserve their no-kill status by accepting highly adoptable animals. Along these lines, some contend that the name indirectly disparages other animal shelters; after all, the only alternative to being a no-kill shelter is to be a *kill* shelter. The name, then, is a roundabout way of asserting a higher moral ground than, say, an overcrowded municipal agency that can’t afford a no-kill option.<sup>15</sup>

For their part, no-kill proponents point out the obvious: the conventional catch-and-kill approach of the past has done nothing to lessen the pet overpopulation problem in our country. And until we as a nation embrace the proactive adoption and spaying and neutering concepts—ideas proven to work in San Francisco and other progressive cities—we’ll go on punish-

ing innocent animals, whose only offense was winding up in an overcrowded shelter.

Unfortunately, the Great Recession has dealt a setback to efforts aimed at reducing animal shelter populations. As more and more Americans struggle to make ends meet, many are unable to keep their pets. Whether they relinquish their dogs and cats to shelters, or simply abandon them, their pets will more than likely end up facing death.

## The Dog Guardians

Dog rescuer Michele Armstrong cringes whenever she hears the word *euthanasia* used relative to dealing with pet overpopulation.

“Shelters kill 14,000 animals every day in the United States,” says Armstrong. “Calling that euthanasia is a disservice to those animals. We’re not talking about mercy killing. We’re talking about killing thousands and thousands of adoptable pets, and in many cases, killing them in horrific ways.”<sup>16</sup>

Euphemisms such as euthanasia, contends Armstrong, make it too easy for Americans to accept the widespread killing that’s happening inside their community animal shelters.

“Someone must step forward and say, ‘This is not okay with me,’” says Armstrong.

And so *she* did. In early 2010, Armstrong started Lulu’s Rescue, a nonprofit organization that saves condemned dogs from kill shelters. Spearheading the initiative from her home in Point Pleasant, Pennsylvania, Armstrong coordinates a multi-state team of volunteers who liberate dogs from animal shel-

ters, relocate them to foster homes, and find families to adopt them permanently. It is, as newspaper writer Amanda Cregan put it, a kind of “underground railroad for dogs,” referring to the Civil War-era network of routes and safe houses used to secretly shepherd escaped American slaves to states where slavery was illegal—to “free” states.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the dogs that Lulu’s Rescue saves come from North and South Carolina and Georgia, states in which spaying and neutering has not caught on with pet owners, and where animal overpopulation is an unrelenting problem. Some of the dogs were abandoned; many were abused. But all of them wound up on death row, in shelters where unclaimed animals are destroyed after predetermined waiting periods.

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One hundred percent of the rescue work is done by volunteers, or as Armstrong refers to them, “Dog Guardians.” They visit shelters in southern cities looking for dogs whose time is running short. Rescued dogs are taken to nearby foster homes for periods averaging around three weeks. With Lulu’s Rescue covering the costs, foster families arrange to have the dogs spayed or neutered, vaccinated, and attended to by veterinarians for any injuries or medical problems.

“The foster families help us gauge a dog’s temperament—how the animal is dealing with its new life, and how it interacts

with families,” says Armstrong. “That’s information we can share with families who are thinking about adopting a dog.”

Next, the dogs are transported north to Pennsylvania, where new foster families await their arrival, and where the process of finding them permanent homes continues in earnest.

Armstrong, who formerly freelanced as an art director while living in New York, serves as each dog’s individual publicist. She uses professional photographers—all of whom volunteer their services—to capture the dogs’ personalities, and she writes engaging profiles that reflect the feedback gathered from foster families. The photographs and biographies are then posted on the Lulu’s Rescue website ([lulusrescue.com](http://lulusrescue.com)), as well as on [petfinder.com](http://petfinder.com), the searchable online database that matches prospective pet owners with animals who need homes.

“My marketing background helps me ‘move the merchandise,’ so to speak,” Armstrong says, referring to her rescued dogs. “It’s all about selling people on the idea of adopting a dog.”

The focus on publicity works. Thanks to Lulu’s Rescue, more than forty dogs get a second chance at life, every single month.

Like most nonprofit services, the Great Recession has increased the demand for pet rescuing. “We’re seeing a huge jump in the number of animals being relinquished by owners, simply because they can no longer afford to keep them,” reports Armstrong. “The shelters we rescue dogs from are bursting at the seams. And they’re receiving pets that have not had

many preventative health measures, such as vaccinations or heartworm treatments, because their owners were forced to cut back on household expenses.”<sup>18</sup>

Although they can't save every dog they encounter, Armstrong and her team are making a difference in the lives of hundreds of dogs each year.

## Meant for This

By Armstrong's calculations, she spent fourteen years as an “independent” dog rescuer before assembling the volunteer corps that became Lulu's Rescue. She was continuously encouraging her friends and family members to adopt the homeless dogs she found. After leaving New York for Point Pleasant, she tried her hand as a café owner. But looking back, it was if, deep down, she always knew that rescuing dogs was what she was meant to do.

“Dogs give us their unconditional love,” she says. “That's why we call them ‘man's best friend.’ But I often wondered, what are *we* doing for them in return?”<sup>19</sup>

Now, rescuing dogs is Armstrong's full-time vocation, one she spends eight to twelve hours working on every day. It's unlikely you'll find anyone more passionate about saving dogs—or, for that matter, anyone better educated about the country's pet overpopulation problem. Although she worked in marketing and advertising, Armstrong has never been a publicity seeker. Raising funds for Lulu's Rescue has required her to step out from behind the scenes and become the organization's

public face. Despite her aversion to the spotlight, it's a role that suits her assertive personality.

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People who meet Armstrong for the first time are often compelled to enlist in the service of saving dogs. Her passion for her cause is that contagious. Friends marvel at Armstrong's zeal for making things happen—and they warn that, unless you're joining forces with her, you're better off getting out of her way.

Armstrong thinks she inherited her spunky spirit from her paternal grandmother, Lulu. When she was wondering what to name her new organization, it occurred to Armstrong that many pet rescuing agencies have descriptive names that include such dire-sounding phrases as “in the nick of time” or “last chance.” Looking for something more heartening, she named her organization Lulu's Rescue, after the most positive and uplifting person she's ever known.

Eventually, Armstrong plans to begin offering free clinics to teach owners how to handle animal behavioral problems that, if left unaddressed, might cause them to abandon their pets. More importantly, perhaps, the clinics will also provide assistance to pet owners who can't afford to have their animals spayed or neutered.

“Getting people to adopt homeless pets is great,” says Armstrong. “But we can't solve the overpopulation problem by

adoption alone. Convincing people to spay or neuter their pets is the bigger issue.”

And in case you're wondering, Lulu's Rescue hopes to start saving cats as well as dogs.

“Gandhi said, ‘The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated,’” reflects Armstrong. “I think America *already is* a great nation. However, even though we're the most civilized nation in the world, we still have a lot of animal issues to resolve—from how we deal with overcrowded animal shelters to the ways we raise and slaughter our farm animals.”

In the meantime, Michele Armstrong has seen the uncivil ways that too many Americans treat unwanted pets, and she's come forward to proclaim, “This is *not* okay with me.”

## Pilot Program

The Great Recession has taken some of the fun out of being a recreational pilot. With high unemployment, stagnant wages, and inflated gas prices, it's hard to imagine flying hobbyists fueling up their airplanes for a casual weekend jaunt. These days, most pilots need a really good reason to head for the clouds.

As it turns out, pilots around the country are taking to the air to help rescue homeless dogs and cats from being euthanized. There are nearly 2,000 aviators registered with Pilots N Paws ([pilotsnpaws.org](http://pilotsnpaws.org)), an Internet message board that connects pilots with animal rescuers. Imagine Lulu's Rescue with airplanes, and you'll get the idea.

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The inspiration for Pilots N Paws originated in 2007, right around the time the Great Recession was officially “taking off.” Long-time animal rescuer Debi Boies was trying to save an abused Doberman in Florida, and she was struggling with the logistics involved in getting the dog to her home in Landrum, South Carolina. Her friend, Jon Wehrenberg, a retired business executive who also happens to be a pilot, offered his services.

In the process of helping Boies save the Doberman, Wehrenberg learned about the countless pet rescuers around the country, many who travel long distances to save animals from kill shelters and relocate them to no-kill communities.

“I’d had no idea of the number of animals being euthanized,” says Wehrenberg, “and the ordeal people and animals were going through in transports.”<sup>20</sup>

Wehrenberg suspected that if other pilots knew about the geographical challenges involved in pet rescuing, many would volunteer to fly rescue missions. So he and Boies established Pilots N Paws to help rescue agencies locate pilots and airplane owners who are willing to transport rescued animals to foster homes and adoptive families.

Aviators can scan the Pilots N Paws site to see if a dog or cat needs a lift to a city they’re already flying to; but more of-

ten than not, they find a request and plan a special trip to help. And the pilots pay for all the fuel and plane maintenance expenses.

Why are pilots getting involved in rescuing animals? Mike Boyd, a Pilots N Paws volunteer from Broomfield, Colorado, sums it up. “To take my hobby and apply it to help this situation, well, it’s just a great feeling.”

All over the United States, people like Cecily Tippery, Michele Armstrong, Debi Boies, and Jon Wehrenberg are doing whatever they can to save animals from certain death. If Francis were preaching to animals today, most surely he would list these people—and the thousands of animal guardians like them around the country—among the many blessings for which they should praise the Lord.

## **A Philosophy for the Ages**

Not long ago, Michele Armstrong and a friend got into in a philosophical discussion about pet overpopulation. Her friend, a subscriber to the humans-as-supreme-species viewpoint, couldn’t understand all the fuss about saving dogs and cats from extermination. Citing Genesis, he argued that God bestowed people with dominion over animals. And that, he maintained, somehow makes killing surplus pets acceptable.

Armstrong’s rebuttal bears an uncanny similarity to how Francis responded to that same reasoning when his early Christian colleagues expressed it. She patiently explained that dominion is not a license to kill, but the human responsibility to guard animals from harm. And, as she often does when she

finds herself in these kinds of debates, she shared her Francis-like perspective of compassion.

“There’s a direct correlation between the way we treat animals, and the way we treat other people,” Armstrong remembers telling her friend.<sup>21</sup>

That was true in ancient times, when the future Patron Saint of Animals preached the Gospel to all living creatures. It’s also true today, when Michele Armstrong preaches about the need to employ humane methods—such as adoption and spaying and neutering—to control the pet population.

One day, hopefully, humanity will listen as attentively to animal guardians like Michele Armstrong as the birds outside Bevagna once listened to Saint Francis. And then, all living creatures will be able to rejoice *together*.