Moved by the Spirit of Compassion

The great fault of all ethics hitherto, Albert Schweitzer wrote in *Out of My Life and Thought,* has been that they believed themselves to have to deal only with the relations of man to man. In reality, however, the question is what is his attitude toward the world and all life that comes within his reach. A man is ethical only when life, as such, is sacred to him, that of plants and animals as that of his fellow men, and when he devotes himself helpfully to all life that is in need of help. Only the universal ethic of the feeling of responsibility in an ever-widening sphere for all that lives—only that ethic can be founded in thought. The ethic of the relation of man to man is not something apart by itself: it is only a particular relation which results from the universal one.1

More than eighty years later, Schweitzer's comment is, unfortunately, still applicable to most government, social, religious, educational, and philanthropic institutions as well as to many environmental organizations that purport to include animals within their purview. In the twenty-first century, the majority of these entities remain largely anthropocentric—unconcerned and unengaged with the many avoidable miseries that humankind inflicts upon animals and untroubled by the possibility that their indifference diminishes the good work they do accomplish.

This ethical deficit is what makes the contributions of The Humane Society of the United States and like organizations historically significant. The HSUS's history is, in large part, the history of efforts to encourage humankind to set its ethical sights higher, to demand more of itself, and to recognize the treatment of nonhuman life—at all times and in all places—as a crucial litmus test of our moral and spiritual evolution.

To its credit, The HSUS has sought to apply standards of ethical treatment to the condition of animals in an impressive diversity of situations—not just to the popular and charismatic dolphin but also to the wholly unprotected laboratory mouse, not just to the majestic bald eagle but also to the much disdained prairie dog, not just to the ecologically endangered primate but also to the harshly confined laying hen. This consistency in the face of cruelty—real or threatened—has been a hallmark of The HSUS's five decades of work.

It would have comforted Fred Myers—who confided to Mel Morse that he felt “pretty well worn down” by his own humane labors—that millions of Americans have embraced the same path of service in the ensuing years. The HSUS, the organization Myers founded, has not had to go it alone. Other groups have been formed, other strategies adopted, and other programs pursued. While animals have continued to suffer at human hands, it is also true that organized concern for animals has found ever broader and stronger expression.

Nor has animal protection work represented a distraction from more urgent and pressing concerns or, as harsher critics might charge, a form of misanthropy. It is in fact, a vineyard ripe with benefits to humankind. The call for peaceful coexistence with nonhuman animals and
due concern for their interests assumes and seeks to create a world organized around principles of decency, justice, and sustainability that ensure the survival of both humans and nonhuman animals. The humane vision is all-embracing and deeply compatible with and, indeed, essential to, the finest aspirations of humankind for a better world. As The HSUS's founders hoped, an increasing number of people have come to appreciate that concern for nonhuman animals does not demean humankind but rather ennobles it, and that a serious regard for the interests of nonhuman animals is a matter of profound self-interest for human beings.

The exact number of animals whose lot has been directly or indirectly improved through the work of The HSUS over fifty years can never be known. While it is hard to quantify precisely the spread of the humane ethic, a few observations about The HSUS's role in promoting animal protection can be made. In a half-century of work, The HSUS has been the source of education, insight, and training for millions of people. At the same time, it has forged a reputation for reliable and responsible advocacy work. It has been one of the principal facilitators of information exchange in the humane field, providing some of the best literature available. It has fielded a cadre of professional and scientific experts without parallel in the world. While the fortunes of a handful of other organizations have waxed and waned, The HSUS has seen steady growth and the maturation of a durable and successful institutionalized framework for responding to the many challenges that threaten animals' well-being.

The campaign to fulfill Schweitzer's vision is, of course, unfinished, and it has not been a simple story of linear progress. Half a century into the modern struggle to promote and protect animals' well-being, and despite the achievements of The HSUS and other groups, some of the gains achieved in recent decades are in jeopardy. New threats, born of new technologies and objectives, have emerged. Cruelty and indifference toward animals still thrive in many quarters. Both wild and domestic animals in a broad range of situations within and outside the United States remain threatened.

Even so, there are reasons for hope, courage, and perseverance. Schweitzer's notion of reverence for life calls for dynamic and substantial action, both individual and collective. If there is any value in looking at organized animal protection's past, it is to reinforce the importance of principled and resolute activity. The fate of nonhuman life continues to depend on the goodwill and concerted effort of individuals moved by the spirit of compassion, to tireless, unselfish, and often unheralded labor. The reality is that few if any of the positive developments recorded in these pages would have occurred without the participation of determined advocates. The same will be true for those advances to come.