

# FOREWORD

## THE BEGINNING

In the autumn of 2003 the worst fire ever to hit the state of California spread over 60 miles in the foothills and mountains east of San Diego. The fire caused massive destruction to homes, people, and habitat. The hills were blackened and covered with ash. The trees were transformed into skeleton-like forms. Everyone was sad, and slowly tried to clean up, rebuild, and tend the living things that were left in the forest and the mountains.

The fire threatened a little mining town in the mountains east of San Diego called Julian. The four-block historic mining town, which dates back to the 1800s, is where hundreds of firemen made a stand to save the town. They saved it, but at great expense to the rest of the area. Over 1200 homes were lost, untold numbers of wildlife destroyed, and well over half the forests were gone. In one particular mile-long section of street only five homes remained. As I looked at all the destruction it was hard to understand how those five homes escaped total destruction. But they did, and one of them was mine. It was to become a refuge for many people and animals over the next 15 months.

A year later, in another part of Julian, a litter of four kittens were born. Who the parents were and what those kittens first seven weeks were like we will never know. This story starts when they made their way to the lane that had been so badly burned and to the house that had been saved from the fire. It now became home to a litter of cats in addition to several people who had lost so much in the fire of 2003.

We not only had the incredible good fortune of having our home saved, but we also had a wonderful man and his family that lived there and took care of the four acres and the house. I suppose, being 61 and 72 years of age, we fall into the category of

older people. We can no longer do the physical activities to care for the property we have.

The caretaker of our home has two daughters. The older one wanted a kitty and we said, of course, she could. Although this is our second home, allowing cats on the property was as stretch. We are big time DOG people. Together we have 131 years collective experience with DOGS. A cat had not yet crossed our path in the many years we had lived. Since it was to be the little girl's pet, and there was plenty of room, we saw no problem with having a kitty on the property. The next thing we knew there were four kittens scampering around the grounds. They lived outdoors and had no names; the little girl called them kitty, kitty, kitty, and kitty. If the truth were known, we are people who treat animals with even more respect than humans. Animals are family members with all the house rights and privileges of family. Seeing these little kittens outside fending for themselves made me worry that they would freeze, get killed, or meet some other tragic fate. Older people worry more than little girls.

So, that is where the story of *Henry's World* began, in a town that had suffered immeasurable loss, and with moms who were dealing with a loss of their own. At first, his presence was a welcome distraction from our personal anguish. Then, as his adventures unfolded day by day, I began sharing them with a circle of close friends. It wasn't long before Henry's stories developed a devoted following. It was clear there was something bigger than Henry and his world that kept us hooked.

Henry's stories are a tale much like *The Velveteen Rabbit*. They are stories about essence as opposed to form. They are about unlikely bedfellows, about prejudice being softened by chance

exposure. They are about spirit and spunk, about being yourself in a world that invites you to be everybody but yourself. Little Henry reaches deeply into all sorts of hearts. He is about how we survive our wounds. He reminds us that it is not the events of our lives, but our responses to them, that dictates what happens to us. Henry's life is about reframing tragedy into possibility, about random acts of kindness, and about getting more back than you put out. It is about trust when there seems to be no good reason to do so. Just as *The Velveteen Rabbit* taught us that being real was about being loved, love and caring is what makes us all real. In the end, we are not our positions or our possessions. In the end there is just love.

Henry is more than a story about a cat. It is a story about all of us, about trust, about community, about courage and resiliency. It is a story about prejudice and overcoming it, coming to love what we thought we hated, enemies becoming friends, challenges becoming learning experiences, and foremost, that life is a series of adventures.

I grew up in a world where animals were what I knew and trusted. I always talked for my dogs and through my dogs. My most beloved books were books about animals. Author E.B.

White's *Wind and the Willows* was one of my favorites. I understood intimately the archetypes each of those animals represented. In the foreword it was written that this was the kind of book you give to your fiancé, and if they don't like it you cancel the engagement. The book seemed to say more about who the reader was than anything else.

Animals were my first and deepest connection. I have always had them in my life. I have been a psychotherapist for over thirty years now. My work is my privilege and passion and the most interesting thing I can imagine doing. But outside of that world, I always return to the world of animals, particularly dogs. I don't know if I will ever let a cat into my heart as deeply as a dog. But if there is ever a spirit animal who could challenge that barrier, it is Henry.

Henry's being, in a virtual way, was born of the Internet, and will continue in that realm. I didn't write this book. In the strangest of ways, he did. He only had one front paw so he asked for my assistance with the typing part. It appears that I can now add Cat Scribe to my résumé. Welcome to Henry's World!

– *Cathy Conheim*