

# REIKI CREATES A HEALING SPACE



*Author Lee Harrington used to avoid visiting her local animal shelter because she feared the experience would be depressing, and because her own dog kept her plenty busy. But when the loss of her beloved dog led her to the place she feared most, she discovered that not only was the animal shelter not depressing, it was absolutely uplifting. Find out why, and how, in this interview by the author of popular Bark columns “Rex and the City” and “The Chloe Chronicles.”*

**M**y local shelter, the Ulster County SPCA in Kingston, N.Y., is highly regarded and much loved by the community. The vibe at UCSPCA is a good one, and some of the credit for that can go to Liz Wassal, the shelter’s Animal Reiki practitioner and teacher. For those not familiar with it, Reiki

is a healing technique based on the principle that the practitioner can channel energy into the patient and activate the natural healing processes of the patient’s body, thus restoring physical and emotional well-being. (I should point out here that the word “reiki” is a Japanese term that means “universal life force energy.” When capitalized, Reiki refers to the energy healing system founded by Mikao Usui. So, I ask all the English majors and copy editors who are reading this to be prepared for deliberately inconsistent capitalization.)

A pleasant, knowledgeable woman with an MA in psychology and a BFA in classical animation, Wassal—a Reiki Master Teacher—began volunteering at UCSPCA in 2007. Initially, she offered Reiki to the shelter’s animals informally. Even though she was low-key about it, other shelter

workers quickly began to notice that an energetic shift had taken place. The animals were calmer and were healing more swiftly from injuries and surgeries. They seemed happier, too.

Eventually, Wassal was approached by board members and asked if she would teach them Reiki. Soon, staff members began requesting Reiki training as well. Currently, most of the department heads—the cat manager, the dog kennel manager, clinicians—are certified Reiki practitioners. Wassal, who is also an ordained priest, animal communicator and a chocolatier, now serves as the shelter’s official Animal Reiki teacher and offers ongoing courses in Animal Reiki to staff and volunteers. Her courses follow the principles established by Kathleen Prasad, founder of the Shelter Animal Reiki Association (SARA).

**Lee Harrington: How would you describe Reiki?**

**Liz Wassal:** Reiki is the energy of the universe. We all have it. Reiki is also called *ki*, *chi*, *prana*. These are all synonyms for the same subtle, transcendent spiritual energy.

**LH: How do you initiate an Animal Reiki session?**

**LW:** Well, the first thing the Reiki practitioner does before beginning a healing session is to secure consent. Obviously, a human patient would simply sign a consent form and/or give verbal permission, whereas communication with the animal recipient is non-verbal. I'll either intuit the answer—the consent—or the animal will give clear signs that he's willing to accept the reiki—sometimes simply by coming toward me or backing away. After securing the animal's permission, I create a healing space by asking the reiki to flow. Intention leads the energy on. Instantly, the reiki fills the room, a building, a neighborhood or

wherever it's directed. Reiki energy has its own intelligence and knows exactly where to go. The animals also know exactly what they need.

**LH: When I've received a Reiki healing, it looks as though the practitioner is just sitting there meditating.**

**LW:** In fact, that's pretty close to what it is. A Reiki session is non-invasive and passive. It's not hands-on.

**LH: Describe a typical Animal Reiki session.**

**LW:** There really isn't a "typical" Animal Reiki session, because we turn everything over to the animal. The animals are always in charge. They decide how long the session goes, or where they want to be or whether they want to receive the reiki energy at all.

**LH: What do you mean by "where they want to be"? Are they confined to a particular area during a Reiki session and asked to stay still?**

**LW:** Again, it's up to the animals. They get to choose where they want to be within the perimeters of the kennel or

treatment room. I often I sit with the dogs in their kennels or cages (with permission, of course). The dog is free to move around the room or, if he so chooses, can cuddle on my lap and place his head in my hands. Or he may position himself 10 feet away from me, or—if he's not comfortable with me being so close—he can be in another room.

**LH: The Reiki practitioner does not need to be able to reach the dog, or even see him, to offer the healing?**

**LW:** Nope. The reiki energy knows where to go and what to do. In my private practice, I often do healings from a distance. At the shelter, if I'm working with a particularly fearful or agitated dog, I'll stand on the other side of the kennel wall where he can't see me in order not to trigger anything by being visibly present.

**LH: What are some of the benefits of Reiki for animals?**

**LW:** The benefits of Reiki and other energy healing systems are numerous.

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Reiki can help relieve pain and reduce stress and stress symptoms such as sleeplessness, restlessness, pacing, barking, panting and so forth. Reiki is a supportive system. It's an energy that helps keep things balanced.

**LH: And having a balanced system means that the body is better able to heal itself.**

**LW:** Yes. We'll often do Reiki on the animals right before, during or after procedures to help facilitate the natural healing process. Or, if an animal is crashing from stress or needs to be calm before a procedure, we'll offer Reiki off the cuff.

**LH: Can you give an example of a Reiki healing session having an immediate impact on a dog?**

**LW:** I remember working with one of the Hurricane Sandy dogs who was brought to us from a shelter in, I think, Long Island. This young dog was so utterly terrified in the isolation area that he was urinating all over himself. He was too stressed to stay still—pacing, barking, shaking. But after 10 minutes of Reiki, he simply lay down. He accepted the energy despite his stress. A few minutes later, he fell asleep, even though other animals near him were barking.

**LH: That's impressive, especially given how challenging it can be to relax or sleep in such loud and high-stress environments.**

**LW:** Indeed. These dogs have to put up with a lot. But Reiki does help them sleep. I've seen them stop barking quite suddenly and slump into sleep, their noses pressed against the kennel doors.

**LH: Have you ever had a dog decline a Reiki session? If so, did you know why?**

**LW:** Yes. It's hard to say why. It may be that they are very agitated and reactive and simply cannot settle down if I'm visible to them. But I always respect the animal's wishes. If a dog is not interested in Reiki that day, no problem. I will not use treats to try to persuade an animal to accept [a healing session]. Nor will I use a dominant approach if the animal is unable or unwilling.

**LH: It sounds like a nice way to establish trust.**

**LW:** These shelter animals are in situations in which very little is under their control. So I don't push them. Often the animals will remember this—remember me as the person who listened to them. Thus, the animals will be more willing to accept my presence, and Reiki, the next time we meet.

**LH: You are also an animal communicator. Does that serve your Reiki practice, or vice versa?**

**LW:** Animal communication is not part of Reiki, but it is an overlapping discipline that is helpful. For example, as I said earlier, it's easy for me to intuit whether an animal is willing to accept Reiki or not.

**LH: Are you officially on board at UCSPCA as an animal communicator, or is that under the radar?**

**LW:** I'm not official, but people know I have this skill. So staff people often ask me behavioral questions, such as "What does this dog need?" Or, "Why's he so stressed?" Or, "What can we do for him?"

**LH: I could tell when I first stepped into UCSPCA that the animals knew they had a voice and were being listened to. I didn't have the words for it at the time—it was just something I sensed. A vibration of sanity and balance and hope.**

**LW:** The rescue community is in dire need of this type of attention. Animals come to shelters as mysteries. Unless we are able to open ourselves up to their needs, we won't be able to truly communicate with them. And if we can't communicate with them properly, we can't help them to our fullest extent.

**LH: When you communicate with dogs, is there a typical question you get? I know they're all individuals with individual needs, but—**

**LW:** The most common question I get from dogs is, *Why is no one listening to me?* Animals are frustrated because no one gets it, no one is speaking to them and no one is hearing them. Also, a lot of the shelter dogs ask, *What did I do wrong? Why am I here?*

**LH: Poor sweeties. But I'm thankful they have people like you to help them. Do you offer them advice, so to speak?**

**LW:** Well, I do whisper to the animals: *Remember who you are. Don't forget, you are more than this.* A lot of religions and spiritual traditions offer similar reminders, along the lines of "Remember the light you carry."

Animals, because they are more evolved than we are spiritually, don't usually need that reminder the same way humans do. But in such an extreme environment [at a shelter], what's the harm in reminding them of the part of them that travels forever and will always be at peace inside of them? *Remember who you are.*

**LH: Getting back to Animal Reiki—how hard is it to learn and to practice?**

**LW:** It's very easy, simple and straightforward. You can learn the basics of Reiki in a short time, and you can walk out of your Reiki 1 class empowered to offer Reiki to anyone in your circle of family, friends and most definitely your pets. My teacher, Kathleen Prasad, who founded SARA, is extraordinary. Her mission is to enable as many teachers as possible to set up Reiki programs at their own shelters, and it's catching on, one volunteer, one shelter at a time.

**LH: The more people who practice Reiki at shelters, the more uplifting those shelters will become, and more animals will be helped and adopted. UCSPCA is lucky to have you.**

**LW:** The staff at UCSPCA is extraordinary. That shelter attracts such devoted, conscientious and open-minded people. Thank goodness the animals are in such good hands. These people are the steadiest presences in the animals' lives while they're with us. We're all lucky. 🐾

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