

# Tripod Turns Tragedy to Triumph

Exclusive TLC Interview by David S. Cohen

Henry's World (A Three-Legged Cat's View of Human Absurdity) is a most unusual book about the transformation wrought by a most unusual cat, first on the women who rescued him after an accident left his left front paw useless, and then, in ever-widening circles, on a whole Internet-created community of animal lovers drawn to his story and the wonderful e-mails sent in his name. Self-described 'cat scribe' Cathy Conheim, a San Diego psychotherapist, gave Henry a voice that embodies our vulnerabilities and has inspired so many readers to answer in kind that a book was needed to encompass them.

I spoke with Conheim on a Santa-Ana-laced October day as Henry, now a tripod cat after a life-saving amputation, sniffed curiously about. He'd been brought to the Julian property where Conheim and her partner Donna Brooks spend their weekends by the daughter of a family they'd given refuge after the devastating Cedar Fire, but it was on the weekend after the 2004 election that he really became a part of their lives. Driving there, Cathy had said to Donna, "I feel like a truck ran me over and left me for roadkill. I've been wounded and I'm not sure I have the resiliency to get up and fight again." They pulled into their driveway to discover that little Henry had literally been run over, his left paw dangling as he took refuge in a little igloo they'd bought for him. Dog people at heart but unable to see an animal suffer, they took him to their country vet, where, despite the cost of the operation and their resistance to taking in a cat, Henry's purrs and mesmerizing, trusting eyes led them to decide to take him in.

**Did stewarding Henry through his recovery have an effect on your having felt so devastated by the results of the election?**

Yes—here was this little wounded animal who seemed completely trusting. He'd been picked up by two people he didn't know, put into a car similar to something that must have hit him, around a big black poodle ten times his size—and Henry seemed to be fearless. He walked up to Dolly, who usually chased cats, and rubbed against her leg, and she just sort of stood there.

When her chemotherapy failed, she wrote Henry that she wanted to meet him. She got on a plane in Seattle, balding and weakened by chemotherapy, and spent four days with Henry, who'd come to mean beating the odds and the unexpected happening and 'Don't give up!' **You're interested in getting the book to amputees who have been in Iraq....**

This book has a lot to teach. It is a model for telling one's story and getting to know another even through cyberspace. The young people going to Iraq had a different story in mind than being wounded. Now they need to redirect their energies. I would love for Henry to be the springboard for those teachings. A Marine Colonel who heard about his story sent \$1000 to buy the first 50 books for the wounded Marines. Now I'm trying to get this gift into their hands. It may not be easy but Henry teaches us to just keep trying.

How Henry's stories got started is that when we brought him home, I was still sort of "I-don't-know-what-to-do-with-a-cat."

I started to write his stories as a reaching-out to our friends to make contact and to try to distract myself and pay attention to something at hand: Here's something that's wounded, this we could do something about. People started to respond. I sent it to twenty, and then they sent it to twenty, and soon the stories became the absorbing thing and for a month or two, I got the distance I needed from the election to regain my own resiliency, that life was about NOW, and no matter what happens, you've got to keep reaching out.

**What else did you learn from adopting Henry's voice in the e-mails?**

I grew up in a world of animals and animal stories in a family that talked mostly through animals and not to each other. I've discovered other people, when they talk to or for an animal, do so from a heart place that's way more vulnerable. They use a different voice and they tell stories that they otherwise wouldn't. They can tell a whole story without being interrupted, without being told 'there's a different opinion about that,' or 'let me tell you how that's not true.' It became clear as many many people wrote back, that Henry touched something that allowed them to talk about their troubles and their losses and their resiliency and their joys in ways that were very different from if they had just written to me as Cathy.

**Can you tell a story of a person (or an animal) who responded to Henry?**

Probably the most touching story was from a kitty named Emmy Lou. Emmy Lou's (human) Dad was overseas in the military, and her (human) Mom got a very serious diagnosis of lung cancer, and she didn't want to tell her husband because he couldn't do anything about it. This, by the way, was a person we didn't know, who lived by someone who received Henry's e-mails, so by now it's a third or fourth generation of recipients. She chose not to tell her husband, or anybody else, until after Christmas—but she told Henry about her fears and her concerns. Emmy Lou has written over 130 times and Henry has become a touchstone for this woman with the disease, who second-hand hears what she should do from Doctor Mom (Donna is a retired physician) and Mom Cathy. Not once has she ever written in her own name, only e-mails from Emmy Lou.

**What are some of the other deeper lessons that you think Henry and his book have to teach?**

Henry's story is a lot about courage and resiliency. When all your instincts say that you want to pull in, to curl up and be by yourself because you've been wounded, the opposite is what allows you to heal. Had Henry stayed in his little igloo, then Henry would have died. So that which felt safe essentially would have been a killer to him. Think of Christopher Reeve—his life as Superman meant nothing, it was a class-B movie, but as a man who changed the face of stem-cell research, who reframed and recharged his life, he moved far more powerfully through the world as a public figure than he ever did as a silly guy running around in a cape. Part of what he and Henry teach us is that we are not indeed defined by our misfortunes, but by our response to those misfortunes. The deeper message is realizing how much our attitude is really what healing is about, that the body may lose various portions but if we embrace that as a teacher to us, we'll have a different journey.

**How are the profits from Henry's book going to be used?**

There are many many people who have to put an animal to sleep because they couldn't do a surgery like we did for Henry. The only reason Henry's alive is we had the money to pay for his surgery. So we're going to use all his profits to give to grassroots organizations that help animals, and people who can't pay their vet bills; we can't take grants, but we'll never run out of organizations to help. In fact, Henry asked for an advance on his profits to help all his friends drowning in New Orleans, so we sent money to Louisiana, but we'll mostly stay local or give to FOCAS and PAWS and Project Wildlife. Up in Julian the merchants are giving profits to the feed store and the vet to help families still struggling from the fire to pay their animals' bills.

**And the book itself will be available at cost for any organization that wants to use it as a fundraiser?**

Right. It's meant for animals to benefit from the cost and people to benefit from the story. The beauty of the colonel giving me the thousand dollars is that all the profits go to the animals and the books go to the people.

**If I'd like to buy Henry's book right now, what should I do?**

You should go to his Web site: [Henrysworld.org](http://Henrysworld.org). Even if you don't buy a book, you can read a few chapters, become one of his pawpals, look at his slide show—just have a nice time hanging out in Henry's World. But if do you go to his store, on Pay-pal, you can write a comment to Henry to tell him that you read the article and you want to make a difference. Say that you read it in *The Light Connection*—that name is what it's all about. 🐾

