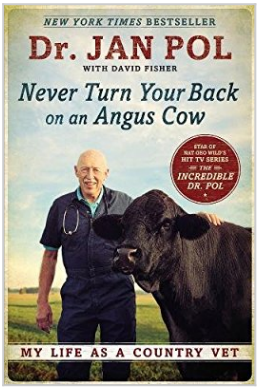

Never Turn Your Back on an Angus Cow: My Life as a Country Vet

By Dr. Jan Pol, David Fisher

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The star of *The Incredible Dr. Pol* shares his amusing, and often poignant, tales from his four decades as a vet in rural Michigan.

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From the time he was twelve years old and helped deliver a litter of piglets on his family's farm to the incredible moments captured on his hit TV show, Dr. Pol has amassed a wealth of stories of what it's like caring for this menagerie of animals. He shares his own story of growing up surrounded by animals, training to be a vet in the Netherlands, and moving to Michigan to open his first practice in a pre fab house. He has established himself as an empathetic yet no-nonsense vet who isn't afraid to make the difficult decisions in order to do what's best for his patients—and their hard-working owners. A sick pet can bring heartache, but a sick cow or horse could threaten the very livelihood of a farmer whose modest profits are dependent on healthy livestock.

Reminiscent of the classic books of James Herriot, *Never Turn Your Back on an Angus Cow* is a charming, fascinating, and funny memoir that will delight animal lovers everywhere.

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- Sales Rank: #19468 in Books
- Published on: 2015-08-04
- Released on: 2015-08-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.94" h x .77" w x 5.31" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 288 pages

Editorial Review

Review
“America’s favorite veterinarian.”
—*Scratch* magazine

“Nat Geo WILD’s #1 series *The Incredible Dr. Pol* continues to charm audiences and animal lovers everywhere.”
—TV by the Numbers

“There are TV shows that are so simple, so straightforward and so purely American that you can't help but want to stick an apple pie in the oven when they're on. Case in point is the family-friendly, well-made and fun *The Incredible Dr. Pol*” — **TV First Look**

“America’s favorite veterinarian.” — **Scratch magazine**

"Dr. Pol has dedicated his life to ensuring that the declining population of family farmers stay in business and that their livestock remain healthy and happy." — **PawNation.com**

"Dr. Pol's vet's-eye view of the world will plunge you up to the armpit in his passion and compassion for all the animals that walk the earth."

— Jim Gorant, author of the New York Times bestseller The Lost Dogs

"The story of Dr. Pol and his old-school veterinary practice is as fascinating on the page as it is on TV. *Never Turn Your Back on an Angus Cow* is an eye-opening glimpse at the many unexpected adventures faced by animals and their people."

— Ken Foster, author of I'm a Good Dog and The Dogs Who Found Me

"The Incredible Dr. Pol is awesome."

— Kristen Bell

"Dr. Pol really is incredible! His hard work, dedication, and passion for his career comes through the TV, leaving viewers wanting more of the friendly veterinarian."

— Yahoo! TV

"Dr. Pol is a no-nonsense, get-'er done kind of vet. Even I learn things when I watch his show!"
— Dr. Michelle Oakley, veterinarian and host of Dr. Oakley, Yukon Vet on Nat Geo WILD

About the Author
A native of The Netherlands, **Dr. Jan Pol** has been a practicing vet for more than 35 years. He lives in Weidman, Michigan with his wife, two horses, two dogs, five cats, five peacocks, two doves, about 25 chickens, and who knows how many fish.

David Fisher is the author or co-author of 18 *New York Times* bestsellers, among them collaborations with New York Giants coach Tom Coughlin, entertainers George Burns, Leslie Nielsen, and William Shatner; and Nobel Prize–winning biochemist Kary Mullis. He lives in New York.

Open Your Mouth and Say Moo

WHY I BECAME A VET

When I was in veterinary school in the Netherlands in the 1960s, a farmer brought a cow to our clinic. “My cow is not eating,” he told us, “and she is not making manure.” We were all very confident students. We could diagnose everything and fix anything. So we examined this cow and discovered she had a fever, her stomach was not working, and she clearly was in some pain. All of those symptoms pointed toward hardware, meaning that the cow had swallowed a piece of metal, and then when her stomach contracted, that metal went through the wall of the stomach, causing the pain. This is very common; cows are indiscriminate eaters. A cow will eat anything you put in front of her, and too often there are little pieces of metal lying around the farmyard.

We had a brand-new X-ray machine at the college. Our professors were proud of this because it allowed us to see what was going on inside the animal. This X-ray capability was going to change veterinary medicine; it was going to make us all smarter and better animal doctors. After we diagnosed this cow with hardware, we sent her to the new X-ray department. The X-ray came back negative. “No metal in this cow,” we were told. “Look again,” our professors told us. “She does not have hardware.”

So then we examined this cow again. Same thing: elevated temperature, stomach’s not working, pain. Diagnosis: hardware. We sent her back to the X-ray department and got the same result: “There is no metal in this cow.” So the professors put her in the stable to see what would happen. And what happened was that she died. So then they sent this cow to pathology: There was the stomach, the heart, the lungs, on a table. And they said to us, “Take a look at this.” And that cow had hardware.

Except that it wasn’t metal, which was why that expensive X-ray machine didn’t pick it up. It was a broom bristle six inches long. That cow had swallowed it and it had punctured the stomach wall and was going into the heart, and it had killed the cow. If we had listened to what that cow was telling us—Hey, I got some hardware inside my stomach—we would have done surgery, opened up the stomach, taken out the broom bristle, closed up the stomach, and given her some antibiotics, and she would have been fine.

So I learned how to be a hands-on veterinarian, an old-style vet. I use all the wonderful machines we have and I pay attention to what the animal’s owner tells me, but mostly I look at the animal; I put my hands on the animal and I listen to what that animal is telling me. I have been practicing animal medicine for nearly a half century; I’ve treated just about every type of creature you can imagine, from a white mouse to a twenty-six-hundred-pound horse, and I’ve discovered that the longer I have been in practice, the smarter the animals have gotten!

I have spent my whole life being with animals, as a vet and as an owner. Until they start inventing new animals, I think I can say there isn’t a type of animal I haven’t looked in the eyes and wondered how it was feeling. My wife, Diane, and I once estimated that I’ve handled more than a half-million patients, without one of them ever complaining about me! In 2009 my son, Charles, who had moved to Hollywood to be in the entertainment industry, thought that people might be interested in a television reality show about a farm vet. I asked him who he thought would be interested in watching an old man who speaks with a funny accent putting his hand up the back end of a cow.

“You’d be surprised,” he said.

“Yes, I would,” I agreed.

“Everybody likes animals,” he explained. “Every day in the practice is very different,” he said. “You’re dealing with life and death all the time and doing it with patients who can’t tell you where it hurts. And unlike most city vets, you also have to consider the economic impact on the farmer’s business. Besides,” he added, “you’re a character.”

I didn’t know if your son calling you a character was a compliment. But when he also pointed out that we would be telling the story of American farmers in the Midwest, that got me intrigued. I come from a farming family, I know how difficult that life can be, and I know that is a story very much worth telling. So I agreed to let his camera crew follow our staff for a few days, still wondering if anyone was going to watch.

It turned out Diane and I raised a smart son.

When I opened my practice outside the small town of Weidman, Michigan—which is about twelve miles from the larger and better known Mount Pleasant—in 1981, it was about 80 percent large animals, farm animals, and about 20 percent pets. It was mostly family dairy farms when we started, with several pig farmers. We took care of all their animals. But those family farms are mostly gone now; instead, we have the big concerns that supply to the chain stores, and they have their own vets. The workhorses are mostly gone too, and there are no more pig farmers. I remember that not too long after Diane and I moved to Mount Pleasant, I got a call from a farmer named Don Hatfield. Don and his brother had just taken over their uncle’s dairy farm in Mecosta County, and they needed help with a calving. “We’re having trouble getting the calf out of the cow,” he said in his wonderfully deep voice I got to know so well. When we started talking, Don admitted he didn’t know much about dairying because his uncle, who had recently died, had taken care of the cows. So I spent quite a bit of time with at the farm, helping them out, teaching them how to care for their livestock. Don’s family had been on the land a long time; that barn was just about one hundred years old. He was a wonderful man whose real passion was the history of this part of central Michigan. He interviewed all the old-timers and then compiled thick books telling the story of this area. Don did okay on the farm for a long time; then he more or less retired and sold the cows. When Don quit the barn I went over there and picked up some things I found lying around that I still have, like porcelain mineral cups for the cows. “Take whatever you want,” Don told me. I still hear that beautiful grumble of his voice in my head.

The next thing I knew, the farm was sold to a potato farmer, who dug a big hole and pushed the beautiful old stone house and the barn into it and covered them up. I drove by the place once and stopped to take a good look, and I couldn’t even tell where the house and barn had been. All that was left standing was the electrical pole with a transformer. I just sat there for a little while staring sadly at that field and remembering the people who had once been there. A hundred years of farming history pushed into a hole.

Now my practice is about 60 percent small animals. There are basically three classes of animals: farm animals, work animals, and pets. There is obviously a big difference between them; the relationship between the farmer and his animals is based on economics. These animals are the farmer’s livelihood. The relationship between pet owners and their animals is based on love. That difference doesn’t matter at all to me; I treat all animals with the same concern.

I love animals; believe me, I don’t remember a day of my life that I haven’t loved animals. My whole family has always been comfortable with all kinds of animals. My mother used to tell us a story about her grandfather, who was said to be able to hypnotize animals. In his town in the Netherlands there was a butcher who had a big, mean German shepherd–Saint Bernard cross. My great-grandfather and the butcher met on

the road, and the butcher warned him, “Watch out. He’s a mean dog.”

“No, he’s not,” my great-grandfather said.

“Oh yeah? Well, this dog will take you.”

“Then go ahead and turn him loose,” my great-grandfather challenged him. The butcher released the dog from his leash. My great-grandfather and that dog looked at each other. Neither one of them moved. Then the dog sat down. My great-grandfather took a step forward; the dog moved backward. And that dog was never very much of a guard dog after that.

Many people who have watched our show on the Nat Geo Wild channel know that I grew up on my father’s forty-acre dairy farm in the Nazi-occupied Netherlands during World War II. We lived way out in the country, in an area that was called Wateren, and we had no electricity or running water. Wateren wasn’t even a town; it was just a road with some houses on it. It was so far from everybody else that the daily newspaper came to our house a day late; it had to be delivered by the mail carrier. My dad hated that because he wanted to be on top of the news, but there was nothing we could do about it. We didn’t even have a radio until 1950.

We lived in a big house, big enough for our whole family and all our livestock to be under one roof—all the livestock except the pigs. Many farmhouses in that region were built that way. There was a hallway that led directly from our living area into the cow stable, so if you had to check on a cow at night you didn’t have to get dressed; you just put on your slippers and walked into the barn. We didn’t have indoor plumbing, so we used to take our baths in one of the big wooden tubs in the stable behind the cows because that was always the warmest place in the house. The cows kept it warm!

Behind the cow barn was the big area where we stored the hay and wheat as well as the farm machinery in the winter, and a stable for our three horses. All of this was under one big roof. Outside was the little shed for the pigs. We couldn’t keep them inside because they smelled too bad. When you grow up living with animals, you learn how to respect them.

During the war people would ride their bicycles out to our farm to get away from the city or simply to get something to eat or milk to drink. The winter of 1944 was known as the Hunger Winter because the Germans cut off most of the food supplies to punish people for supporting the Resistance. My parents never turned away one person.

I was the youngest of six children, and we all were expected to do chores every day. We had all the farm animals—we had about twenty cows, which we milked by hand; we had horses and chickens, turkeys, geese—but my protector was a Saint Bernard that would not let anybody he didn’t know come too close to me. We always had big dogs, still do. I learned from my father that if a farmer doesn’t have respect for an animal, that animal will not work for him. He used to tell us, “If you don’t treat an animal right, that animal won’t treat you right either.”

My love of the animals almost got my family in terrible trouble one day. During the war we were not allowed to own anything; everything belonged to the occupier. All the production was for the benefit of the occupier. These weren’t TV Nazis; they were the real thing. These people were very dangerous. They would come and inspect your farm, and if you got caught hiding anything, the best thing that would happen is they would take you to prison for a few years. Well, before I could talk, I called all cows “boo.” Don’t know where that came from, but to me all cows were “boo.” Even with all the danger, my father would sometimes hide a calf or some of the food we grew so we would have at least a little milk and food for ourselves. One day the inspector came to see all our cows. I was just a toddler holding on to my mother’s hand. As we walked around, I pointed to each of the cows and said, “Boo.” But then I pointed to a closed door, the door

that led to the place we were hiding that calf, and said, “Boo.” My older sister tells me that everybody got very scared for a few seconds; nobody took a breath. “Boo,” I said again, still pointing at the door. If that inspector opened the door, it was going to be a very bad time for us, but the inspector ignored me and kept walking. From then on I wasn’t allowed anywhere near that German inspector when he came to our farm.

In those times it wasn’t just livestock that we hid. For a time we sheltered a young Jewish boy who was somewhere between my age and my next oldest brother, who was seven years older than me. There was also a Jewish family hiding in a little shed, which wasn’t much more than a deer-blind, in our woods. All the local people brought them food and the Nazis never found out about them.

My sister Henny tells me that my first pet was a crippled chicken. It was a chicken that had been stepped on and probably had a broken leg, so it limped or hopped. In Dutch, that’s a kreupel kipi, crippled chicken, but the best I could pronounce it was urpa bipi. My sister says that my chicken stood by the door waiting for me to come outside. And I sat there with my chicken for hours, just petting it. So even then, I guess, I wanted to look after the hurt ones.

In the Netherlands at that time farmers didn’t rely too much on the veterinarian. There were not many vets in the Netherlands then because, in fact, there wasn’t that much they could do that farmers couldn’t do by themselves. Farmers had to be self-reliant; if they weren’t, they wouldn’t be farming very long. If you had a cow, then you got a calf. If you had a horse, you got a foal. If you have a sheep, it gives lambs. If there was a problem, you’d better be able to fix it yourself. Only when you couldn’t fix it, or your neighbor couldn’t fix it, would you call the vet.

The nearest vet to us was Dr. Van der Eyck, who lived more than eight kilometers away. We didn’t have a telephone, so if there was a problem, one of us had to get on our bike and ride as fast as we could to his house; when we got there we rang the doorbell and hoped he was home. There were times he was at the farm before we even got back.

The most famous vet in the Netherlands was a fictional character named Dr. Jan Vlimmen. There were several novels written about him, and there was even a movie made. But one story sums up very well the way the Dutch people thought about vets. Late one night Dr. Vlimmen’s bell rang. When he answered, a man was standing there. “How much would it cost to make a farm call at this hour?” he asked.

After finding out how far away this farm was, Dr. Vlimmen told him, “That will be ten guilders.”

“Good,” the man said. “I will ride along with you to show you the way.”

So off they went. When they reached the farm, Dr. Vlimmen looked around but did not see any animals in distress. “So where is this sick cow?” he asked.

“Oh,” the man admitted, “I don’t really have a sick cow. It’s just that you were cheaper than a taxi!”

I decided I wanted to be a vet when I was twelve years old. I can still remember the day. It wasn’t because I thought I could make a successful career out of being a vet; believe me, I never even thought about the business part of it. In fact, on our very first day in school they warned us that there were very few opportunities for vets in the Netherlands and that most of us would never practice. I didn’t worry about that; I became a vet because it was the only thing I ever wanted to do.

My life changed forever the day Dr. Van der Eyck drove into our yard. “Come with me,” he said. I was tall and very thin, but that morning the most important thing was that I had very long arms.

As long as I can remember, I have been helping animals giving birth. There are some animals that take care of their young as soon as they are born, but not pigs. Sometimes animals are born with the afterbirth over their faces, and if it's not cleared away pretty quick, they die. A cow will lick its offspring to help it breathe, but a sow doesn't do that. The little piglets come out, and they'd better find their own way to mama's belly and start nursing, because the mom is not going to do anything to help. A lot of the piglets don't survive; that's one reason pigs have so many of them in each litter. When I was as young as six years old, my job on our farm was to sit behind the pig waiting for her babies to come out, and when they were born I cleaned them up until they were breathing on their own. I was handling newborn piglets all the time. Yes, it was slippery and there was some blood in there, but it was not dirty. It was the miracle of life in my hands; it was a very natural process. This was my job; I never even thought about it.

Dr. Van der Eyck was a typical large-animal vet; he was a big, strong man, with thick, muscled arms. We had to go to my brother's farm, he said. My brother had married and had his own farm about a half mile away. He'd bought some gilts, young female pigs that have not had their first litter, and one of them was about to give birth. The problem was that this gilt was having great difficulty because her pelvis was too small. That isn't uncommon in animals, and usually the farmer or vet will reach inside the animal and help. Dr. Van der Eyck's hands and arms were way too big to go through the pig's pelvis and grab a little one, though. So he soaped up my arm and told me exactly what I had to do.

I lay down in the straw behind the gilt and slid my hand inside its pelvis all the way up to my armpit. I reached deep inside the sow and began pulling out her piglets. In pigs it doesn't make any difference if the piglets come out headfirst or butt first. Some of them I couldn't pull all the way through, but I got them to a place where Dr. Van der Eyck could reach them. One by one they came out. And I had helped them. Oh, that feeling was fantastic. It was so much fun, and from that time I knew that I wanted to work with animals for the rest of my life.

Vets are specialists, and we specialize in every aspect of animal health and well-being. People have a special doctor they see for every part of their body; we have eye, ear, and nose specialists; heart specialists; orthopedic doctors; hand and foot doctors; and even dentists. The vet is all of those things for an animal. In fact, almost the only thing we don't do for animals is psychoanalyze them.

So we had to learn how to treat the whole animal. Utrecht University's School of Veterinary Medicine is the only vet school in the Netherlands. It's a six- or seven-year course that emphasizes what are known as large animals, basically farm animals. Pigs and goats, for example, are considered large animals. The emphasis in all of our courses was on keeping livestock healthy and productive so farmers could make money. The school was very difficult. In the Netherlands, if you graduated high school you were entitled to go to college. We paid only room and board; there was no tuition. But because of that system they made the school very, very hard to weed out people.

On my first day there were three hundred new vet students sitting more than one to a seat in a classroom built for one hundred people. By the second year more than half of them were gone. Of the dozen friends I started with, only two of us made it into a regular animal practice. The others went into teaching or into research, became slaughterhouse directors, or worked in other places, but only the two of us became practicing vets.

People had come to the school for different reasons. Some of them were there because their fathers had been vets, so they became vets. There were students there who didn't even like animals very much, and we even had a few students who were allergic to them. You could see by the way they handled animals that they were indifferent; to them it was a job. Not for me. For me, it was a calling.

The veterinary school was spread out over several long blocks in the city, with stables on both sides of the

road where they kept the animals we worked on. We had departments of Surgery and Internal Diseases, we had Obstetrics and Technology and Anatomy and even a museum, where they displayed all the abnormal animals. The small-animal clinic was outside this area. We had only five minutes between classes, and the school was so big it was impossible to walk from one place to another, so as soon as a class ended we all hopped on our bikes and raced to the next classroom. The classrooms were mostly amphitheaters with our seats arranged in a semicircle looking down at the podium.

Our first two years were exactly the same as premed and predental; we wore jackets and ties to class every day, and we learned all the parts of the body. Many body parts are universal; they may not look exactly the same in two different animals, or even between people and animals, but they perform similar functions. We started by learning the bones. They had piles of bones in the lab and we just grabbed bones and with the help of a professor and our books we learned the names of every hole and point and surface of every bone—in Latin. It was all memorization, and oh, it was boring. We had to learn every single bone. Those first two years we never even touched a live animal.

We also dissected animals, large animals and small animals, front quarters and rear quarters; they even had a freeze-dried cow cut in half lengthwise and crosswise so we could see how everything was working. Today an artist does that same thing and puts it in plastic and then sells it to a museum for millions of dollars. We didn't know we were looking at art. But what I learned from that is that bodies are put together so fantastically, it is beautiful to learn how it all works.

The second year was the hardest for me because we studied organic chemistry. I managed to stumble through it, but after that we got separated from the medical and the dental students and started studying veterinary medicine, which is when it became fun for me.

At one time, I remember, we needed a microscope for microbiology and I couldn't borrow one. I wrote to my father and told him it cost 600 guilders, which was about $175. You bet that was expensive for a Dutch dairy farmer. So my father sold a cow to pay for my microscope. I used that microscope for years, and I still have it. I wouldn't sell that, ever.

Our third year, most of our classes focused on animal care. We still had to learn about plants and spore technology; we had to be able to recognize what we were looking at under that 600-guilder microscopes and know what it meant and what to do about it. But mostly it was theory and textbooks.

It was in our fourth year that we began actually working with live animals. At Utrecht our teachers taught respect for animals; animals were creatures of God and it was our job to take care of them. But they were clear that these were animals, not human beings, and we shouldn't mistake them or treat them as equal to humans. It was never, Oh, poor baby this. No, a cow had a calf, not a baby. Dogs had puppies, not babies. A horse had a foal, not a baby. But, oh my gosh, if you ever mistreated an animal, you would be branded with that forever. The animals were not there to be hit or abused; they weren't there for us to take out our anger. As I learned in my career, sometimes for your own safety it becomes necessary to show an animal who's the boss; but that was rare and never, ever abusive. We learned to take care of them to the best of our ability, while never forgetting that they were animals.

And we learned that we weren't there to save every animal. On the farm every animal is worth money and the farmer has to make a living off that animal. And to do that the farmer has to take care of it. If you don't take care of the cow, it won't produce milk; if you don't take care of the horse, it won't pull for you or ride for you. We were taught all the time that on the farm the animals have to fill certain needs, so the farmer who doesn't take care of them will be out of business.

We didn't spend too much time in that school studying small animals—dogs and cats and even smaller. But

in my practice I've learned there is a financial balance that needs to be considered where pets are concerned too. I am sorry to admit that there are a few small-animal vets who will shame people into spending money for tests and treatments they don't want or can't afford, when the outcome—sometimes it's a sad outcome—can't be changed.

Having grown up on a farm, I was more comfortable being around live animals than many of my fellow students. I knew that when I was examining an animal, for example, the most important thing for me to do was to let that animal know where I was at all times. Animals will defend themselves when they are threatened, and they are threatened by anything unusual or unexpected. For that reason I learned that as I moved around an animal I should keep talking in a calm voice or touching the animal as much as possible to make sure that it knows that I'm not a danger. My brother told me a story about an animal trainer who worked in a circus. This man always kept a colorful bandanna tied around his waist underneath his shirt. When a new horse came to the circus, he would walk by its pen and throw the bandanna in there with the horse. The horse would find it, smell it, and probably play with it a little bit. A short time later the trainer would walk up and he would have the same smell as the bandanna. The horse would say, Hey, I know this guy. I don't associate anything bad or dangerous with him. C'mon in, everything is fine.

And just as important, I learned that the one thing a vet should never do, under any circumstances, is turn his or her back on an animal. I remember one time we had an animal trainer come in to do a demonstration of this for us. In those days they were still catching wild animals to sell to zoos. He had three tigers in a six-by-six, ten-foot-long traveling cage. He walked in front of that cage and those tigers backed up; they were practically on top of one another to get away from him. He was about fifteen feet away from them. "Now," he told us, "watch this."

He turned his back on them. He hadn't even finished completing his turn when all three of them hit the front of that cage so hard the cage moved. If that door had popped open, I don't know where I would have run. But it was a message not one of us ever forgot: You turn your back on these animals and they will get you. Every matador knows that—and so does every farmer or rancher. Most of the large animals I have dealt with are bigger and stronger than any person—but they don't know it. These aren't pets; a cow is not a sweet, docile animal. It is an animal that can kill a person without even intending to, without even knowing it. When I'm examining an animal, I'm always in a place where I can very quickly jump over a gate or a fence or get behind some other kind of barrier. And there have been times in my career when an animal has helped me get over a fence.

But for many people their careers as vets begin the day they stick their hands inside an animal's butt for the first time. The concept of it probably makes people much more uncomfortable than actually doing it. Mostly it's very warm inside a cow; the temperature is about 102 degrees. On a very cold day in a drafty barn, it will keep you warm. It's not uncomfortable at all. And the cow doesn't seem to mind.

One time the Nat Geo Wild TV crew was filming me doing pregnancy tests, and when I finished I asked if any of them wanted to try it. A few hands went up, but they went up pretty slowly. And everybody looked around to see who else had his or her hand up. I told them, for many people, putting your hand up a cow's butt is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And when they went back to their homes and people asked them what they were doing, they would be able to tell them very nicely, well, there was this cow . . .

In class when they taught us how to do a rectal exam, some of my classmates were pretty nervous. I'd done it for the first time when I was twelve, but many of my fellow students had never done it. In the Netherlands, vets didn't use plastic gloves; they would take off their shirts and go in bare-handed. When you were done your arm was green; believe me, we came home dirty. Thank goodness by the time we graduated they let us use gloves.

Our instructor would give the cow a tranquilizer and stand on the animal's right side. "Okay," he told us, "get your shirt off and reach in there." Some students were pretty tentative, but that cow didn't feel a thing. She was just standing there chewing her cud. Once your hand was inside, the instructor would guide it to all the different organs, through a hole in the cow's side. The instructor wanted us to know what everything felt like in a healthy animal so we would recognize problems: "This is what the uterus feels like. Now follow it to the end; here's an ovary."

If you were right-handed, you were taught to use your left hand, so your more coordinated hand was free to give a shot to the animal if necessary or make a note or do whatever else had to be done. I always close my eyes when I do a pregnancy test so I can see with my fingers. My fingers tell me exactly what is going on in there. Many years later I tore some muscles in my left arm when a cow pulled away from me, so for three or four weeks I couldn't work with my left hand. One day I was doing a pregnancy check with my right hand and the farmer started laughing. "What's so funny?" I asked him. And he told me my left hand was moving whichever way I wanted my right hand to move, as if it was telling my right hand what to do. After many years of doing the same thing thousands of times with one hand, my brain was trying to adjust to doing it with my other hand.

Most times cows give birth without too much difficulty. Farmers usually take care of normal deliveries because it would be much too expensive if they had to call a vet for every birth in the herd. So vets get called only when there is a problem, which means that most of the time we deal with difficult births. We studied all types of problems in school: Often the calf or the foal was positioned wrong and couldn't fit through the pelvis, or it had died already and was rotting inside. We had to learn how to manipulate it so it could be delivered or, when it was necessary, cut the dead foal or calf up into pieces so we could get it out.

The farmers who lived near the vet school knew that if a cow was delivering and had any problems, they could call the school and a vet would come right out with two or three students. For the school it was a teaching opportunity; for the farmer it was a way of getting good professional treatment at a very low cost, as well as getting some good entertainment. The farmers knew that we students didn't know what we were doing, and they would stand on the side, watching, with big smiles on their faces. The more we struggled, the more they enjoyed it. I remember one of the first times I went out on one of these lessons, the cow was trying to deliver but the calf wasn't moving. Our professor reached in there first. Okay, he knew what was going on. He told one of my classmates, "Get in there. What do you feel?"

It was a uterine twist, a condition in which the whole uterus is twisted around like a plastic bag. We had all read about it, we had watched the lecture, but this was the first time any of us had to actually tried to fix it. We approached the problem with all the confidence of students: The best way to deal with that is to lay the cow on its side, hold on to the uterus, and roll the cow over. You're actually untwisting the problem. Sometimes, though, it's possible to shift the calf inside the cow.

"Okay," our teacher said to the first student, "get it out." That student began shifting his body, moving around, but nothing was happening. The sweat started coming down his face. A minute went by, two minutes. "Okay, get out of there. Next."

The next student stepped up. "You feel the twist?" Yes. "Get it out." Two minutes, he started sweating. "Okay, get out. Next." When my turn came, I felt pretty confident I could do this. I remembered my lessons: If the twist is to the left, then you have to flip the uterus to the right in order to get the twist out. I took my shirt off and reached in; the twist was to the left, I decided. I thought this through and started applying gentle pressure. But that thing didn't move. I had to push a little harder. That thing still didn't move. Now I was getting more determined and a little anxious. I pushed harder. I was determined to be the student who solved the problem. Now I was really starting to sweat. "Okay," the teacher said, "two minutes. Get out."

The farmers were shaking their heads. This was a great show for them.

The teacher reached inside the cow again, but this time he did a little of this, a little of that, and within a few seconds took his hands out and stepped back. “Okay. Now feel. Is it straight?” We all reached in. The uterus was straight. We had no idea how he had done that until he explained, “If it doesn’t go one way, try the other way.” We had all thought the twist was to the left, so we were trying to twist to the right. If we had twisted to the left, it would have easily been straightened. It was a good lesson for all of us, and a good laugh for the farmers.

Eventually we all learned how to work inside an animal. Before those days, cowhides had been pretty valuable, especially calves’ skin, so we were even taught how to cut the hide off a dead calf while it was still inside, before we had to cut the calf into pieces to remove it from the cow. Now we use an instrument that is known as the Utrecht fetotome, which is basically two handles held together by a piece of thin wire, which is used to cut apart a dead animal trapped inside the uterus. We never do a C-section for a dead calf, because it would kill the cow; instead we work inside the cow and cut the calf apart to save the cow.

One night, I remember, a cow came in with a calf that was way too big to fit through the pelvis. The vet in charge right then had just graduated ahead of us, so we all knew him very well. I was with three other students. Somebody had been working on this animal trying to get the calf out, but the cow was all swollen inside. We started cutting and got part of the calf out; then we got a hook on the calf’s pelvis and pulled, but the cow’s swelling was so bad, we couldn’t pull the calf out.

If we couldn’t get the remains of that calf out, that cow was going to die.

The new veterinarian was just as scared as we were. We tried everything we had learned without being able to get it out. I was the tallest, so I said, “Let me try one more time.” I lay out flat on the ground behind the cow. Two people were standing by my feet so I could push hard against them. I stretched as far as I possibly could inside that cow—I was inside up to my shoulder—and I just grabbed the calf and pulled it into a better position. Two of us cut the pelvis in half, and we got it out. That was the first cow I saved. We treated the cow for infection, and the cow got up and a few days later went back to the farm. I can remember that feeling of satisfaction so well. That was the first time I felt like I was a real vet.

Our final year in school we did rounds, learning how to diagnose problems—and learning that sometimes those problems were with the owner as well as the animal. You could call it barnside manner. I remember when I was working in the small animal clinic a lady came in with her boxer. Usually I don’t remember what the client looked like; instead I remember the animal. But this was a very big lady and she was bringing in a very big dog. They were a perfect pair. This dog was so fat that it had no defined neck. She couldn’t even keep a collar on it. The lady complained that her dog must be sick because it wasn’t eating. When an animal stops eating, it often is a sign of a significant problem. Our professor carefully examined the dog and found nothing wrong. It didn’t have a high temperature, he found no unusual bumps, its color was good; everything seemed normal. None of us had anything to suggest: Why would an apparently healthy dog suddenly stop eating? It was a mystery for all the students. And then the professor made his diagnosis: The dog wasn’t eating because it wasn’t hungry. She had fed it so much that the dog finally said, Look, lady, I can’t eat anymore. I’m not sick; I’m full!

That was probably the one diagnosis we hadn’t considered. The dog was being killed by love. The answer was standing on two feet only a few feet away from us. What we had to do was learn how to look for the most obvious cause. The woman had forgotten the most important lesson: This was a dog; this was not a person. In this case the cure was a simple one: Stop overfeeding your dog.

In our last year we had to spend six weeks working in a slaughterhouse to learn how to properly inspect

meat. All the veterinarians in the Netherlands had to be qualified meat inspectors because we had a lot of slaughterhouses and not enough vets to certify that the meat was safe. Being in a slaughterhouse is not something anybody looks forward to, but it was an important part of our education. We each had a big butcher knife that we used to inspect lymph nodes. As hard as it is for some people to accept, large animals are commodities; many of them are raised to be slaughtered, and the job of the vet is to make sure that meat is safe for human consumption. It isn't a task anybody can enjoy, but it is a necessary part of the job of a large-animal vet. In my practice farmers sometimes butchered their own animals, and if they had any doubts they called me to come and make sure the meat was safe to eat. I'd walk up to the carcass and stick my nose in it. Most people would say, "Ugh, that stinks." But fresh meat has a certain smell. Many people may not like that smell, but I learned in the slaughterhouse what normal meat smells like. If it smelled good, it probably was good to eat. Then I'd look at the lymph nodes and make my determination. My motto was, If I don't want to eat it, I'm going to tell you it's no good to eat.

The slaughterhouse was in Utrecht. Each day they slaughtered a different animal: one day cows, the next day horses, the next day pigs. Different people worked on different animals; people who worked on pigs would not work on cows or horses. The people who were doing the slaughtering got paid by the piece, so they worked as quickly as they could. But the organs had to stay with each carcass until the meat inspector had completed the inspection. The workers wanted to get as much work done as possible, while we students wanted to be slow and careful to be sure we were doing a good job. Sometimes we got a little behind. And when that happened those guys had a trick they used.

They were slaughtering pigs one day and I was doing my job carefully, as I had been taught, checking every lymph node. No one was going to get sick eating bad meat that I had approved. I was standing between two carcasses hanging from a rail, when vroom! Some of the slaughterhouse workers shoved the line forward, and before I could move I got caught between the carcasses, pushed inside a pig. I had to worm my way out. And from then on I knew to stand by the side of the carcasses—not between them—when I did my inspection. That's how you learn.

Many people wonder how it is possible to accept the slaughter of animals. People who work with animals—farmers, for example—understand that God made them on earth for us to use. Not abuse; use. In this case it meant finding a way to kill them quick and with no pain. The people who did this were skilled workers. It was just a different skill than you see from a carpenter or plumber. It's a gruesome job, but they did it in such a way to ensure that at least the animals didn't suffer. In a strange way I admired them, because I couldn't do their job. I think every vet will agree that the most difficult part of our job is putting down an animal, especially an animal that has been cared for and loved for many years. No matter how often I've done it, I still don't like it. And many times, tears come to my eyes too. I don't let people see me, but I do tear up. I also know when I do it that it is the best thing for the animal. I made a promise to myself while I was working in that slaughterhouse that I would never allow an animal to suffer. So when I do have to put down an animal, a dog or a cat or a horse, that animal is first getting an anesthetic. My animals get an anesthetic first. And only when they are quiet and at peace do I give them the final injection. There are others who do it differently. I don't care; this is my way.

I was very glad when I finished that phase of my training. You bet. I had gone to vet school because I wanted to learn how to help animals.

I was not the best student. I have always had a hard time learning from books. I learn best from watching. Show me how something is done and I'll remember it. Show me a surgery one time and I can do it the next time. What made it even more difficult for me was the fact that I'm color-blind. That made pathology especially hard. I couldn't make the diagnoses that were based on the color of the tissue. We sat in a dark classroom and the instructor projected color slides on a screen as he explained, "This is pneumonia. You can

tell by the color."

Not me; I couldn't tell by the color. For our final exam they showed the slides and we had to identify the disease. I did just well enough to pass. But the next year they put organs on a table—all kinds of organs from all kinds of animals. We had to identify the animal, the organ, and the problem with it. That was easy for me. At the end the professor stopped me and asked, "You know everything that's here. Last year you had so much trouble. Why?"

"I'm color-blind," I told him, "and the teaching is backward. Last year it was, 'Here's a color picture of a diseased organ; tell me what you see.' It was backward for me. But this year it's exactly the opposite: 'Here is the diseased organ; what is the organ and what is the disease?' That I have no problem with."

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