The opening in the great Bernese mountain dog’s abdomen steamed quietly as the surgeon gasped and swore under her breath, finally meeting the cause of Sam’s plummeting weight over the past few weeks. My eyes widened in a mixture of horror and fascination as Dr. Patton proceeded to extract a grossly, lumpy, purplish organ larger than a T-bone steak from Sam’s body. She promptly cut out and dropped into my hands the cancerous spleen that had been slowly drawing life from a dog so loved by her family that her “father” had left work early just to check in on her before the surgery.

I spent the night with sweet, gentle Sam, monitoring her condition and intravenous fluids. The young but massive dog groaned and whined; I offered as much verbal and tactile comfort as I could, knowing full well that it was Dr. Patton who had provided the true and lasting relief through the splenectomy performed earlier that day.

Soon after I met the children who accompanied their mother and dog to the veterinary appointment that day, I had followed the progression of Sam’s case. I was the one who had held Sam steady during the ultrasound that revealed her bleeding spleen, when Dr. Patton announced that surgery as soon as possible would save this dog’s life, and now I had witnessed Sam’s surgery and recovery. All of this happening on my very first day working at the clinic, Sam’s case—baptism by fire to the world of small animal medicine—was a major eye-opener, not just with the shocking revelation of a misbehaving spleen, but in discovering and defining my underlying passion for veterinary medicine. The comfort Dr. Patton was able to offer to both Sam and to her human family had a great and lasting impact on me.

I had for several years envisioned myself solely as a wildlife research veterinarian who would change public policies in favor of conservation and biodiversity. Suddenly, I was flooded with confusion as I inexplicably felt a major draw towards small animal medicine—although I did not feel any less attracted to wildlife. The unexpected appeal I felt towards clinical practice nagged at me for weeks until I finally realized that it was not a certain type or group of animals that drove me towards veterinary medicine. In all capacities, it was my fascination and love for the human-animal bond. I recalled what I liked best from my experiences working at the zoo, in wildlife rehabilitation, and in pet clinics, and found a pattern. I realized I always found myself facilitating and participating in human-animal interactions, educating people about animals, or simply trying to understand how people saw the animals they were involved with. I found I always sought to be the bridge between humans and animals.

Much of what I have done in the last few years can serve as a testimonial to my passion for the bond between man and beast. In 20XX, I started a Marine Animal Conservation club to raise awareness about marine animals and human threats to their environment and population status. I organized beach cleanups and field trips to tidepools and science museums, and a “Save the Whales” march as part of the 2011 Independence Day parade in my hometown. During my time as a counselor at a summer farm camp, I showed children the joys and responsibilities of caring for farm animals. I learned a great deal about how other countries see their resident animals when I spent 12 days in the Galapagos Islands. I began painting wildlife on denim jackets and lab coats, intending to spark interest in wildlife in those near to the wearer. Walking shelter dogs at the SF SPCA, passerby would often comment on how cute the dog was—at these times I tried to engage them in conversation about adoptions, the mission of the shelter, and answer the questions they had.

As a zookeeper intern at the Oakland Zoo I always made it a point to interact with guests. I encouraged questions as I fed birds in the aviaries, and always tossed the mealworms in the air for the African blue-bellied rollers to catch mid-flight. This was not only enriching for the rollers, but was a very simple way to help people connect their common name to their flight pattern involving mid-air rotations. I loved talking to guests about the interesting biology of the pancake tortoises when I brought them out for sunshine and enrichment on the grass. When I was not so confident about answering questions about the zebras, I began observing them and reading up on their natural history. This eventually led to a personal project where I compiled my observations and background research into a zebra body language guidebook for fellow zoo staff and volunteers.

Through wildlife rehabilitation I was able to give injured and orphaned animals direct aid. Taking note of the reasons why the animals were released to the rehabilitation center, I discovered that they were injured or orphaned most often as a result of human activity. This was a major marker in the development of my interest in the human-animal interface and in wildlife veterinary medicine. However, my more recent experiences in the small animal clinic have revealed to me that ultimately what I strive for is to be the conduit for animals to be better understood by humans.

I cherish the bond between the 18-year old girl and the dog she grew up with since childhood; between a father pointing out a squirrel to his son in the park; between a grocery-store shopper and the chicken or fish they might buy for diner; between an impassioned college student and the critically endangered black rhinoceros. I have never ceased to appreciate the breadth and depth of the human-animal bond and I will always strive to better understand and reinforce it in the most positive way.

Sam’s moaning and groaning was obviously out of soreness and exhaustion from the surgery, but I long to be able to offer more than just verbal and tactile comfort to animals in need. I want to know intimately the physiological cogs and wheels that make their bodies tick so that I can pinpoint and alleviate any discomfort. At the same time, I want to be able to console people to whom the animal is dear. I want to be able to strengthen people’s connection to their pet and to the other animals in their lives. Through veterinary medicine I believe I will be able to help these connections flourish in the most positive way for both humans and animals.

Yay, great job Neda! I really get the sense that you are dedicated to animals and the people who may care or encounter them. You write well and have a good narrative here.

If there’s anything I would suggest, it would be to underline your clinical experiences and your knowledge of the impact veterinary medicine can specifically make in animal’s lives. I know it seems rather intuitive, but I think that would help make your statement come full circle. You want to help strengthen the human-animal bond; how exactly can vet med do that? I mean to emphasize this point because there are a lot of things non-veterinarians can do to make meaningful differences in animal’s and their handler’s lives. What about medicine can you find especially appealing that can help you reach your goals? You touch on it briefly when you say you want to understand the physiology of animals so you can find out exactly what’s wrong with them – that’s a good start!

Much of your experiences on the second page have to do with your interest in animals and getting other people excited about animals, too, or simply to care. This is great, but don’t lose sight on the fact that the main purpose of this essay is to describe your relationship with veterinary medicine as a profession, and not necessarily the connection between you and animals. It’s a subtle distinction but an important one.

Bonding with animals is one thing (and great!) but it doesn’t hurt to show an equally strong interest in medicine as a thing in itself and the greater scientific community. That doesn’t have to be the main focus of your essay, but it may help to balance things out and help diversify your interests. I was told again and again that the school tends to steer clear of “fanatic” animal lovers who lack a full understanding of what it means to be a vet – the reality is, you’re going to have to put down animals and be able to justify that to yourself for medical, financial, or scientific reasons. Compassion for animals is definitely something that is important but it cannot be debilitating to you as a professional. In the end, your reasons for wanting to go into vet med should be less “I love animals!” and more “I want to gain a professional set of skills that can enable me to perform meaningful work” – and then define “meaningful” however you want. Don’t get me wrong, you’re on the right track!! I’m really impressed and think you’ve got what it takes. Just fine-tune this a little more and you’ll be a shoe in. ☺

Also, it may be cool to work in more ways animals are connected to people. As you know, medicine can also help populations of animals in the wild (and thus sustain ecosystems), regulate diseases that may affect animals and people alike, help secure a safe and productive food supply, provide assistance to people with special needs (e.g., service dogs), or help out in the public sector (sniffer drug dogs or police dogs, etc.).