

## "When your Llama Dies-Coping with the Death of Your Llama Friend

Death is often referred to as the last taboo in Western Society. Few aspects of animal ownership are less understood and discussed than the death of an animal friend. Americans own more than 1.2 trillion pet creatures, spend more than 4 billion to feed them and spend another 4 billion to outfit them with leashes, cages, halters, etc. The relationship of pets to people and their effect on our lives has been studied very little. The effect of their passing has been studied even less. Perhaps it would be best not to compare the human relationship with animals to that of our relationships with people. One is neither better than, nor less than the other, simply different. For many people the relationship is one of immense importance. We humans grieve when we lose something of great value. Grief over animal death has been with the human race for a long time. The Egyptians shaved their eyebrows following the death of a cat, and Caligula, emperor of Rome (37-41 AD) built a temple to his horse.

Owning a camelid is different from owning any other animal. Living with and getting to know a llama or an alpaca is not quite like anything else. In many ways camelids are neither fish nor fowl when it comes to being a companion animal. Llamas and alpacas generally do not live in the house but they can and do live in closer proximity to us than other barnyard pets. They can come in the house and they can ride in our vehicles with us. They live much longer than more traditional animal companions. A pack llama may share with us some of the finest moments we spend in life. Llamas and alpacas normally don't solicit human attention, but when they finally do accept and trust us the relationship seems that much more precious.

One has only to attend a meeting of llama and alpaca enthusiasts, talk to a few new owners and see their scrap books complete with baby pictures to appreciate the emotional investment people have in their animals. For many, llamas and alpacas are a substitute for children or an answer to the empty nest syndrome of later years. To be sure many people have experienced the loss of a llama however with the llama phenomenon barely 10 years old, few llama owners have experienced the loss of a llama that has shared their lives for many years. Sally Taylor and her husband Paul have been raising llamas for over 15 years. In that 15 years they have had to cope with loss of some of their llamas in particular a grand old gentleman named Teddy. Sally told me, "We had Teddy for eight years. Jane Wheeler aged him using what teeth he had left and estimated his age at 25-30 and that was in 1982. Teddy's teeth were so loose that you could see them move in a stiff wind. Eventually we pulled all of his teeth some of the teeth were so loose Paul could pull them with his fingers. Teddy got a special gruel everyday and when he ate it, it sounded like two pieces of rubber being rubbed together. It was very hard for me to let him go. I couldn't put him to sleep even though maybe we should have. He had several strokes that partially paralyzed him for a period of time and we got him going again with some TLC. We don't run a male in with our females normally but in the end we kept Teddy in the pasture with the females. He couldn't breed anymore but it seemed to make him feel really important. He died in his sleep up high on the hill with 20 females all around him."

Many people who own llamas also breed them. Raising llamas and experiencing the birth of young inspires a special relationship. More than a few llama enthusiasts come to this endeavor with little experience in breeding animals of any kind. The reality

of raising animals means that you will lose them. Many llama enthusiasts learn this lesson the hard way with their first sick baby. It is devastating to lose a long time companion; it can just as devastating to nurse a sick baby only to lose it days or weeks later. Sally Taylor told me, "I take it harder and the feelings last longer when I loose a baby. The babies have so much potential and so much ahead of them. What hurts as much as anything is that the mother grieves too. When we have to take the baby away to take care of it and it dies the mothers seem to blame us. Some mothers really take it hard and there is no way I can explain it to them. We had one female who lost her baby to a breech presentation. I felt the cord break when I was trying to get the baby out and it just drowned before I could deliver it. This llama was always very good and quiet when she had her babies. The next year after loosing that baby she attacked us when she had her baby. We had to sell her. With her new owners she is very mellow. She saw us carry that baby away and she just wouldn't let us back around her babies."

The more joy llamas bring us when they are alive the more sorrow we are bound to feel at their passing. Understanding grief doesn't make it go away but it may help an individual cope with the process. Part of the grieving process is talking about the loss. There is a new willingness to discuss death and grief, in part due to the work of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, noted for her work on death and dying. The subject is still far from completely out of the closet. Many people find it difficult to talk about the profound feeling involved with pet loss. One reason may be that the individual may feel silly for taking the loss of an animal so hard. Many times when a bereaved pet owner confides in someone they may get a less than sympathetic response, something like, "When are you going to pull yourself together and get over that silly animal." Another reason for difficulty in expressing emotion regarding the death of a pet may be the general discomfort that most of us feel about death in general. Given the fearful emotional climate around death it is easy to understand why a bereaved pet owner may feel reluctant to share feelings of loss over just an animal. In the case of llama owners it may be doubly difficult, first to discuss the matter and second to find an appropriate person to discuss the loss with. Most people don't know what it is like to own a llama much less loose one. It may be comforting to turn to members of the llama community when faced with the loss of your llama friend.

According to the book the "Loving Bond" Edited by Phil Arkow a typical grief reaction may include both physical and emotional disruptions. The individual may feel exhausted may experience drastic alterations in eating and sleeping patterns. They may feel very nervous or irritable, may experience breathing difficulties or may sigh a great deal. Nightmares and hallucinations involving the lost animal are not uncommon. Many newly bereaved pet owners report seeing or hearing their lost pet. Emotionally the individual may cry a lot, they may be unable to concentrate and may lose interest in people or the things that they are normally involved in.

Most persons knowledgeable in the field of thanatology (the study of death) agree that there are certain common characteristics of grieving individuals. Commonly the literature will site the stages of grief as numbness and denial, painful feelings and acceptance. Not all owners will experience all stages in the same order but most people experience some aspect of the grieving process. The first stage of grief, numbness and denial is characterized by feelings of unreality and shock. These

feelings are psychological defenses that protect us from the full impact of the loss. Numb and denying owners may seem dazed and may ask questions or make comments that indicate that they are unaware that the animal has died.

The second stage of grief normally involves anger of some sort. Quite often the owner may direct his anger toward the veterinarian but just as often the anger is directed toward the animal, however unreasonable that may be. Guilt is usually present and the owner may feel reasonably or unreasonably that there was something they should have done differently. Bobra Goldsmith has been raising llamas for about as long as anybody. When I asked Bobra about this aspect of living with llamas she told me, "The hardest loss for me was female named Flower. We found her in the field and she couldn't get up. She was otherwise ok, eating and so on. We ended up taking Flower to the vet school. After finding nothing we decided to let time be a part of the treatment process and decided to bring her home. In the meantime the students at the vet school put her in a sling to get her to stand. When I got to the vet school to pick her up she was in such terrible pain that we had to put her down and in fact she died before we could give her the injection. When she was necropsied we found that she had a dislocated sacrum. Putting her in that sling had to be terribly painful and was just the opposite of what should have been done. I went over the whole thing a thousand times in my mind. Looking back on it I could see that we missed some things that Flower was trying to tell us. I grieved over that llama for a long time. I took it harder because it was so unnecessary. I would find myself crying about it months later."

The final stage of grief is that of acceptance or recovery. Given enough time the owner will reach a stage where there is no more anger, guilt, or intense pain about the animal's death. The individual can think about the animal without experiencing 'grief pangs'. It is possible to reminisce, and not feel much pain. The intensity of the emotions involved in companion animal loss will certainly vary depending on the individual's life situation, the circumstances surrounding the death and the emotional make-up of the individual. Generally the grief experience for animals is intense but brief. The stages of grief over a pet are run through rapidly like a film speeded up. Disturbances in eating and sleeping generally last only a few days at most. Many animal owners reach the stage of acceptance in a few weeks. One of the reasons that the mourning period is shortened is that the death of a pet does not normally otherwise disorganize the life of the individual and there is rarely a change in the individual's social life. When the animal is central to the lives of the owners it can cause the grief experience to be much more intense and to last much longer. Marilyn and Dan Milton lost their herd sire Bogart in November of 1989 and when I spoke with her early in 1990 she was still having difficulty accepting the loss. According to Marilyn, "Bogart was so special. We had him for five years. He was our first llama. He was a traveling herd sire and we put over 50,000 miles on my van together. He was such a gentleman and such a good breeder. He would make himself right at home at each ranch. He would never fight with the males at a ranch he was visiting, he didn't care if there was a stud across the fence he would do his breeding and never pay any attention. We bought the van to transport him and he would hop right in and make himself comfortable. He knew why he was at a rest stop and never went to the bathroom in the van. He would get very annoyed when we would haul him with another animal that would dirty 'his' van. He wasn't only personally special he was the backbone of our ranch.

Dan and I both had a very special relationship with him and when he died Dan took a week off of work to be home. When he died I wasn't only numb and depressed I was disoriented. My whole life revolved around Bogart in one way or another, taking him to scheduled breedings and promoting him. I didn't know what to do with myself. We buried him here on the property, put a fence up and planted a tree on the grave site and I do visit his grave. I don't think I can ever move from here now. The first month was really bad it is getting better, but I still cry. I have gotten over the loss of people easier than losing Bogart. We had friends over the other night and read a poem about Bogart that my son wrote for us and we all cried."

There are ways to lessen the burden of grief both for yourself or for others. First of all give yourself permission to feel grief. It is also helpful to reminisce. Looking at photos and remembering good times and bad times shared with your llama will help. It is important to have sense of closure. Some sort of memorial or memorial service is comforting. A memorial service offers the opportunity to share your feelings with others. A eulogy in the form of a poem, letter or quotation may help. This "is time to reach out to friends and family and the llama community. These individuals can be of great help in coping with grief and assisting the bereaved owner emerge from the experience strengthened and still able to continue sharing their love with a llama companion. When Teddy died Sally and Paul got a bottle of champagne and toasted a long and happy life and a peaceful passing. Teddy was also featured in one of the Taylors ads in memoriam.

For those individuals that have a particularly hard time coping, a companion animal grief counselor may be of some help. Jean Footit is a social worker at the Hospice Franklin County Medical Center where she specializes in bereavement counseling for people. On the side she acts as a grief counselor for people having difficulty dealing with death of an animal. I asked Jean to tell me when a grief counselor may be in order, who to look for and where to find one, "A grief counselor may be in order if the individual is having difficulty eating or sleeping and is not able to go to work. Many times the death of an animal brings up unresolved issues from the past. For example the death of a dog that belonged to a divorced mate may rekindle the issues involved in the divorce. The other circumstances of the person's life are important as well. Is the animal an elderly person's significant other? In these cases the reaction can be quite severe. For these reasons it is important to find someone who is a trained and licensed therapist. To find someone you could start by asking your veterinarian or you could call a human resource hotline. You might look through animal magazines, or ask a breeder."

One of the most difficult decisions an animal owner is called upon to make is that of euthanasia. It is sometimes very difficult to determine when euthanasia is appropriate. One way to make the decision easier is to address the situation before it occurs. A suggestion I picked up at a workshop on pet bereavement is to enter into an informal quality of life contract with your companion animal. Decide on those things that truly bring your animal pleasure and make his or her life worth living. Write those things down when your animal is healthy and save the list. The list may contain items like eating normal food, or grazing, it may be making it up to the highest point in the pasture or keeping up with the herd. When you find yourself wondering if it is time to think about euthanasia this list may make it easier to come to a decision. It may also be helpful to

have your veterinarian explain specifically what is involved in the procedure and what to expect when the injection is administered. Jean Footit told me, "We make the choice in the case of euthanasia and feelings of guilt and grief are very normal. We as human beings can predict the future, animals cannot. We can make a decision based on information that the animal doesn't have. We may know that the animal will get worse and suffer. In the case of euthanasia we are their guardians, actually we are their guardians all along. The animals are our teachers when it comes to grief, especially for children. We learn from their passing how to grieve and that grief is a process that ends. In this sense their passing is a real gift to us. We may not see it that way at the time, but it is. Veterinarians obviously play an important part in this decision. Don't hesitate to talk to your vet and if your veterinarian is reluctant to discuss these issues go to someone else. More attention is being paid to the issue of euthanasia and grief in veterinary schools and veterinarians are taught to respond appropriately."

A survey by the pet industry found that 23% of former pet owners said that grief over a pet was the reason that they no longer had one. Marilyn Milton told me, "We lost a number of animals in a few months and Bogart was the final blow. I told Dan I would rather sell them than watch them die. But you just have to focus on the good times and how much joy they bring. I can't tell you how supportive my friends were. I called some friends and they came right away, some of them from quite a distance. I didn't have to watch or deal with the necropsy. Two friends came over and dug the grave for him. We got so many cards, letters and flowers from people, some of them we didn't even know all that well but they had used Bogart for breeding."

People who wish to enjoy the wonders of living with llamas will have to face the death of these animals that we love so much. The llama community is a wonderfully supportive group of folks. We can help each other with this final aspect of sharing our lives with these magical animals. Cheryl you can either use this poem as the final part of the article or use it as a sidebar.

Dan and Marilyn Milton's son Greg Milton wrote a poem for his parents following the death of their herd sire Bogart. Marilyn told me, "We got the llamas after Greg left home. He was home periodically and helped out but I always thought he really didn't understand our feelings about the llamas. He wrote this poem on Christmas eve, when we were all feeling the loss of Bogart. Greg is an art major at school, plays the guitar and writes song lyrics and poetry. He tried to read it to us as a gift on Christmas morning and couldn't get through it. Sometimes our children fool us, Greg identified with us and our love of the llamas more than we thought.

Yesterday a friend walked by my side,  
    Filling me with love and a sense of pride.  
We went everywhere together, he and I,  
    always turning a head,  
    Always catching an eye.  
The prize of prizes and a sight to see,  
    he was special to everyone,  
    But ever more special to me.  
Now he's gone and the sun is set,  
    but yesterdays are days I will not soon forget

The holidays are upon us and loved ones are here,  
    And although he is not, his spirit is near.  
a time of happiness, a year coming to a close,  
What the future hold me-no one knows.  
So I stand to face the new year  
    Surrounded by love the friends I hold dear.  
I may still cry, but I'll never regret,  
    Because yesterdays are days I will not soon forget.  
    Greg Milton