

Alpaca: Heal Me Now

by Katharine Thompson



“Would you check my blood pressure?”

It was not an unusual request. As a nurse, and eldest daughter in a close-knit family, I frequently monitored the whole family’s health: making an initial stab at pinning down a rash, before sending my sister-in-law off to her doctor; or adding an educated “two cents” about the wisdom of self-dosing with Echinacea for my brother’s impending cold.

But most frequently, I “did duty” for my aging dad; acting as interpreter and advocate during doctor visits, and providing home-based wellness measures. In his early 60’s, my father had been in top condition; but during one of his normally-peaceful bike rides he had encountered his mortality, in the form of a drunk driver. Known as a “regular” with local police, this woman had chosen a little-used country road to attempt to make her way

home – undetected – following a heavy drinking session. Unfortunately, my Dad was using the same country road.

My father survived the encounter, but not without totaling her car, and sustaining an impressive assortment of fractures to his skull, arm, leg, ribs, and spine. He was comatose for a time, and then the virtual prisoner of the ICU’s various survival machines. But his penchant for exercise paid off: eventually, he healed, and once again was able to walk, talk, and even return to his active life as a cranberry farmer. (Though at my mother’s request, he retired his 10-speed, in favor of long walks through the woods.)

His convalescence taught me something about managing emotional stress, and taught him something about dealing with physical ailments.

“The Doctor says I should get you to monitor my blood pressure about once a week.”

That was fine with me. As part of his healthy-living routine, my dad would often walk briskly through the woods adjoining our properties, and then spend a few minutes communing with the alpacas in the front pasture before returning home on the wood’s path along the creek. He would occasionally drop-in for a quick B/P check.

On one particular occasion, I greeted Dad, not neutrally, as a white-coated professional would, but with a daughter’s litany of minor problems relating to the farm, the family, and life. Consistent with his empathetic nature, he didn’t tell me to “can it,” but instead internalized all the stress I was unwittingly unloading on him. Not surprisingly, my father’s blood pressure reading told the tale: it was high. Too high.

Hhhmmmm. “Dad, why don’t we go visit the ‘pacas? You haven’t seen the new cria yet.” With this minor subterfuge, I stalled for time, before

Editor’s Note: Here is a remarkable article that tells two seemingly separate stories: first, that of a dedicated daughter caring for her aging father; then, that of a loving mother gripped with terror over a daughter missing in Manhattan

during the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack. In a poignant twist to these two stories, see how it was alpacas that brought comfort and rejuvenation during the sequence of events in both story-lines.

repeating the reading, and deciding how to handle this ominous wrinkle in his health profile.

After twenty minutes of strolling among “the peaceful ones,” admiring the newest addition, and basking in the calm one finds in a ‘paca pasture, I repeated the B/P. It was down more than 25 points. Before my eyes was tangible proof of research done on the therapeutic effect of animals on humans.

James Lynch, Ph.D., in writing for the Delta Society, discusses human nature, and the effect that animals have on it. Dr. Lynch reminds readers that humans (like alpacas) are subject to physiological changes from the stress of everyday life.

“In essence... in a social context where other people (or animals) are seen as a threat [the body] triggers the repetitive activation of what physiologists long ago labeled as the ‘fight/flight response.’ Faced with meeting the proverbial saber tooth tiger or the wooly mammoths of old in the primeval forest, both human beings as well as non-human mammals had to have a way to react quickly to preserve their lives. Unfortunately, though the saber tooth tigers have long since disappeared, the human body still responds to symbolic threats as if they were the real things. It is the repetitive mobilization of such excessive fight/flight, in situations that do not require such reactions, which eventually wears down the human body.”

Dr. Lynch refers to the book *A Cry Unheard*, which describes how interactions with animals can allow humans a non-threatening type of “dialogue” that actually reverses the fight or flight response:

“...[such] a dialogue that includes others [such as animals] would activate the opposite type of physiological response... a biological state of enhanced relaxation... one that produces health and longevity. It is one that draws people out of themselves...”

This finding is reinforced in Dr. Lynch’s research (described in his book, *The Lonely Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness*) with coronary patients, that clearly demonstrated that those patients in his study who had pets were more likely to survive following coronary surgery than those who did not own pets. “Four times more patients without pets had died within the first year, even though they comprised only 42 percent of the population!”

Some will remember Dr. Lynch, for his appearance on the show *60 Minutes*: it included scenes of Dr. Lynch’s daughter, as she interacted with her pet dog. Using electronic, continuous read-out blood pressure equipment, the girl’s blood pressure was shown to drop significantly, immediately upon fondling her pet dog.

My father, without realizing it, had been “dosing” himself – several times per week – with “the alpaca experience.” Never really an “animal person,” he nonetheless did appreciate the alpacas enough to spend a few minutes with them, in the midst of his walk. And obviously, the experience had a benefit to him, and to his heart. At 76 years, he remains healthy enough to walk a mile to visit the alpacas, ‘most every day.

I have never suffered from high blood pressure, but am a “refugee” from a high stress career. For me, many a long, anxiety-filled day had been “treated” by spending quality time – at day’s end – in the darkening barn, quietly interacting with the alpacas. In hindsight, one wonders why it took so long to come to the awareness that the corporate world was slowly killing me, and the animal world was my “cure”? Full-time farming quickly followed the insight.

Some days are particularly pure examples of how good the farm life really is. One particular day stands out, for it began with a bright blue sky over green pastures, with just a nip of

the Autumn soon to arrive. Weather like this does not come often to New Jersey, and those of us who slog through humid summers, doing outdoor chores, learn to appreciate such a respite.

After the morning routine of feeding the alpacas, scrubbing out water tubs, and barn tidying, I lingered on the stroll back to the house, just for the pleasure of being there. I visited briefly with each female near her due date, sympathizing with one, and then another, about summer pregnancies and long gestations. The new crias provided a ready diversion, as they play-fought for control of the dirt mounds, and leaped over and among the females, sprawled out to soak up the warm rays of the morning sun. All seemed well with the world.

Sometimes, something has to threaten your world, for you to realize how good things really are.

Something about the way my husband’s pickup raced down the farm drive, told me that time had come. I joined him as he flipped on the TV, in time to watch horrifying images coming live from New York City. At first, like so many people who live near the City, we assumed that the inevitable tragedy had occurred, and a plane had accidentally hit one of the Twin Towers. My first thoughts were of friends who worked in Manhattan: would this affect them?

“Where is Liz right now?”

Until my husband uttered these words, I had honestly not thought of our 20-year-old daughter. The internship position she had started in lower Manhattan had begun so recently that I did not yet think of our daughter as a “commuter”. And for an awful moment, I could not recall the address of her magazine’s office.

“I’m... I’m not sure. I know she’s pretty far south, but I can’t... remem...”

Just then we watched as a jet flew directly into the second tower; and with a sense of incredulity – shared



Patients in Dr. Lynch's study who had pets were more likely to survive following coronary surgery than those who did not own pets.

by so many others – we realized that this was no accident.

Struggling for control, I automatically reached for the comfort of the phone, intent on asking “411” for the address of *BUST* magazine. But of course all lines into New York were already down. Liz’ cellphone – at first – seemed to work... at least her voice mail answer-message came on, automatically. I left there what was later to seem like the shakiest of all worried-mother messages. It was not until the next day that I realized the New York cellular towers had been disabled,

perched as they had been, atop the World Trade Center.

As we watched the first Tower collapse, the realization dawned that it would be some time before we would be able to confirm Liz’s whereabouts. Something inside me moved to suppress a rising panic. She **had** to be alright, it just was going to be a little longer before we would know for sure, right? And with the thought came the memory of pride-mingled-with-discomfort at our firstborn taking a position in “the big city.” A fairly protected child of the rural Pine

Barrens, Liz had accepted a position that required her to learn the “war-fare” required by big-city commuting. We feared she might be mugged on the subway; a terrorist assault had not occurred to us.

Something made me glance at the clock, and I realized with a sick stomach, that I had a perfectly mundane appointment with my younger daughter. Realizing that she might hear of the tragedy in school, I chose to keep our appointment, and be with her if we learned the worst. Mundane mommy-chores were just what were required in such a situation.

But the High School, being so close to two military bases, was in full lockdown; so that I had to wait outside, while my younger daughter was escorted out by uniformed guards. It’s indicative of how deeply in shock I was that it was not until this moment that I realized fully: this was not just a personal tragedy, but a national one. A line of parents formed, to remove their kids from school, though I doubted that many had a family member missing in Manhattan.

“Mom!! Stop driving so close to that poor guy! You’re going to rear-end him.” Obviously doing mundane chores was not a good idea just now. But back at home time crawled by, with no relief from the TV images. The phone rang and rang, but it was not Liz: her friends, spread over a dozen states, all wanted to know if she was safe.

As with so many tense times of the past, I found my way back into the alpaca pasture, spending most of the day there with my “therapy friends.” Above us, the sky was just as blue as it had been that morning, but with such a different feeling. For once, no planes roared overhead, coming in low to land at McGuire Air Force Base. The unprecedented silence was eerie, but the respite allowed me to focus on the green earth, on the calming presence of my animal friends, and for a time, to push back the horror of *not knowing*.

By two that afternoon, Liz was finally able to access a computer from her refuge in Hoboken, New Jersey, just across the river from Manhattan, and send a brief message letting us know that she was safe. It was not until much later that I learned she had, by sweet serendipity, worked late on Monday evening, so had been told to come in late that Tuesday morning. Had she followed her normal Tuesday commuter routine, she would have boarded a train from Hoboken that travels directly under the World Trade Center. I am told that the clocks at that station are permanently stopped at 9:10 am.

Liz, unlike so many less fortunate people, made it home safely, late that Tuesday night. Later, she told of watching from her “safe” vantage point: of the Towers burning, the air twinkling with billions of shards of glass, of “snow drifts” of paper blown high into the air; and of knowing full well the number of deaths she was witnessing. It was not something for which we had prepared her, but then few of us were prepared for the unimaginable.

I felt an instant, palpable, relief on learning that she was alive. But, oddly, the sense of shock lingered on. As the hours, and then days, ticked by, I was able, thankfully, to account for all of my other “city friends.” Each of their tales added to the horror.

As the immediate panic subsided, but before the numbness wore off, we slowly began to go back to work, and turned attention to our Farm Day event, scheduled for that weekend. We assumed it should be cancelled, of course, but were surprised when first one, and then several, of our New York friends urged – no, *begged* – us to hold the event.

“Don’t you think that it’s a bit... disrespectful?”

“No, we all have to go back to work, sometime. If we don’t, it’s like admitting they have succeeded, that they have won. Please, if it weren’t for something like this – a day sitting on the grass, among the alpacas, I would have to stay in the city, looking at the ruins smoke. Please.”

“Of course, I hadn’t thought of it quite like that. Please plan to come down. We’d love to have you.”

Life slowly crept back to whatever state “normal” was now going to feel like. But added to my routine now is an extra measure of caring for **me** and my loved ones. I have asked my teen and my twenty, probably one time too many: “Are you OK?” Though it’s obvious that they are fine, if I would just stop interrupting them for a hug. When I catch myself wanting to hug the girls, once too often, I sit with the ‘pacas and pretend it never happened. It’s easy to do, out there.

And Liz has gone back to the City. Her choice, and not an easy one. “Mom, it wasn’t until I went there, and worked with those people, that I realized how special *this* all is.”

“What?”

“The farm, the alpacas. They ask me about it. They want to know if Joya has had her baby yet. They seem to need a connection to *normal*.”

I guess we all do.

Those wishing to do further reading on the relationship between animals and human physiology may visit the website of the Delta Society at www.deltasociety.org.



Katharine Thompson owns and manages Fenwick Manor Farm, in the Pinelands of southern New Jersey. In her past life, she has been a nurse, and an MBA, doing business development. Today, she enjoys writing about alpacas, and serves on AOBA's Board of Directors.

Photos © T. Stephan Thompson