

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

September 27, 2014

Dear Friend,

Euthanasia. It's a difficult topic for many people.

I have been witness to the end of life for many of the Zoo's animals the past 11 years. Giraffe, bongo, mountain lion, skunk, and others. For some of them, I have been by their sides at the beginning and again at the end. And the one thing I've learned from observing so many end-of-life scenarios is that when I die I want my death to be like an old female rocky mountain goat named Shavano – on my feet for the last few minutes before I went to sleep for the last time.

I wonder, if you knew this would be the last time you ever went to sleep would you do anything different? I think, but I am not sure, that this is the difference between animals and people. I don't think they think that way. I don't think they worry about the mountains they haven't climbed, the other goats they have teased, the mom or dad they did not see enough, or the kids they wish they had kissed goodnight just one more time.

As I joined the group of people helping prepare Shavano for her last sleep, she had already been darted with the drug that will make her relax and lie down. But she stood, as hoof stock do, on her feet, sleepy-eyed, calm. Even though her head hung low and you could see she was ready to lie down, she did not. A thousand years of learning have taught hooved animals never to lie down when they are unsure.

As Shavano stood and fell into a deep slumber, I could not help but reflect. I thought about how I might do things differently if I knew my time was at end. Yes, I know this is risky thinking. We can't do everything and be everything to everyone; there is only so much time and energy in a day. I do think though, that perhaps I could do better. Not about working harder and longer. But about expressing to the people in my life that they are important to me. I hope they already know. I hope I have left no doubt.

I thought about our keepers and how they have dedicated their lives to our animals. Every day, rain or shine, hot or cold, this committed team is always here looking after the animals that you and I marvel at. And I thought about our vets and how they must feel when the time comes to put an animal down. Do they second guess themselves and wonder if they did everything possible? I know it distresses them when they don't get everything perfect. The drug mixture needs to be just right, given at the right time, delivered with the right needle in the right place. I have seen them dispense medical care and act as counselors all at one time. I hope I have made

it clear to this team that I value their professionalism, their sacrifice, and all the work that has brought them to this very moment.

Like all the animals who are nearing their end of life at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Shavano had been on our quality of life “watch.” This process is both scientific and emotional, and seeks to answer questions like: Is the animal eating? What is their weight? Is that normal? Do they still interact with the world and their environment? Do they move normally? Every box gets checked and every heart gets searched as we seek an answer to the question, “Is it time?”

The last few minutes are always very similar. Employees who have dedicated their lives to saving and caring for animals and engaging our guests gather together. We cry and tell stories, hug and laugh. It is nearly always the same. Crying, stories, hugging, and laughter. They flow out naturally.

If you were to observe us in these final moments, you’d see a small group of people lovingly laying hands on what many of us consider a friend or family member. It’s much like a final prayer for a safe journey and green pastures. This may not occur to you, but we really don’t get to touch our animals all that much and so we do. It may be the first time some of us have touched a particular animal’s skin, scratched their ears, rubbed their muzzle and seen the bottoms of their feet. Our hands curiously explore them as we wait for the final breath.

There is an employee at the Zoo named Bruce who is good with auto repair and machinery. A grounds person named Chris picks up trash all over the Zoo. Another individual named Brenda, along with Tony, set up almost every event. Susan, our membership data entry professional, works part-time despite the fact that our membership program continues to grow. Why am I mentioning these people? It dawned on me as I shared Shavano’s last moments that most guests do not know her name. Just like the staff here, there are countless animals that make this Zoo special, but are not well-known “stars” like Kimba and Lucky, Elson and Angie, or Emit and Digger. Yet, each is interesting and vitally important. I would challenge you to notice them. Ask a keeper about an animal’s story. Each animal has one. Shavano’s favorite foods were sweet feed, carrots, and apples. She was a tough old goat that never took any crap from the younger goats. She loved to take her meds each day from the keepers. We called her grandma.

In the very last moments, Shavano shifted her weight as she lay, stretching out her leg, much like I do on an international flight while trying to sleep. I saw her settle in and I knew she was now, at last, comfortable.

Warmly,

Bob