

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

December 13, 2013

Dear Friend,

Life is an adventure. Sometimes in today's controlled environments we forget that. More than likely, you are reading this in a room where you can dial the heat to within one degree of your satisfaction. Life is full of mundane moments, and if the truth were to be told, we sort of like it that way. Dangerous moments, moments full of risk, are often the things we work to avoid. Normal patterns are what make us the most comfortable. That is what I want to discuss here; RISK followed by MAGIC. As we wade through a thousand mundane hours, we secretly long for those few magic moments that lift our spirits to new heights.

Managing risk is a part of everyday zoo life. Fighting for animals by fighting extinction involves both life and death. In my line of work, I see days of normal, days of tragedy, and decisive moments where we take risk in order to achieve something worthwhile. All of those days work together to form the kind of magic that makes all the other days worthwhile. The magic appears as if from nowhere. And yet, I know, as you know, rarely do things just happen. Somebody did something, made some decision, or took a calculated risk to make them happen.

Recently, I had a dream that has stuck with me. In my dream, the world's best classical orchestra had one open seat. There were two candidates vying for the position; one was a beautiful, classically trained, brown haired woman. She was impeccable, both in training and appearance, and the perfect professional. The other candidate was vastly different, both in appearance and behavior. He was an older man resembling Albert Einstein. Even his references seemed to speak to his spontaneous nature. After their interview and audition, I witnessed a conversation between the conductor and the impressive dark-haired woman; he was describing why she did not get hired. I still remember the scene like it was yesterday. He said, "In classical music, there are a million notes. There are hours and hours of classically good moments, but there is a time or two in every performance when magic happens and the crowd and the orchestra is transcended to another level and the world stops to witness something great." He told the woman, "When you play, it is good. But when you play it safe, the chance to create magic rarely happens. In your case, good is the enemy of great."

In order to achieve greatness, to achieve magic, we must be willing to take calculated risks. We can think and strategize and weigh our options, but risk is inherent in the work that we do. As you know, we recently lost a female lion at the Zoo. It was a tragic day for us. Any time we lose an animal from our collection, it feels as though we've lost a member of our family. We know you feel it, too.

Of course, everyone wants to know the real story about what happened with Jamilla and Abuto. The fact is, we don't know much more than what you read in the papers. We have theories about what could have happened and why Abuto finally decided enough was enough, but, like you, we will never really know. We just know that any time you introduce wild animals, there is risk involved. And unfortunately, this time it ended with the tragic death of one of our lionesses.

Many of you read these letters to get the behind-the-scenes scoop at the Zoo. Today, the only real story I can tell you in all truthfulness begins where this letter began. In life there will be a thousand mundane moments. As we wade through hours and hours, days and days, months and months of normal business, a day will arrive when something magical happens. Things like the birth of lion cubs, the releasing of black-footed ferrets into the wild, the ability of a gorilla to be the first in the troop to mother-rear a baby or the breeding of an endangered species of frog that nobody has ever bred before. To arrive at this kind of moment of magic will require patience and persistence. And, more than anything, it will require risk. This is true in art, in love, in child rearing, in all of life really. The trick is to put people in your life with whom you can enjoy the wait or with whom you can increase the odds that the magic will happen.

You are a special group of people. Your support and kind words have meant so much to my staff as they deal with the tragic moments surrounding the death of our lioness Jamilla. I know it feels odd to say, but there will be more tough moments. To achieve the kind of magic necessary to save endangered species, there has to be. When you are working with wild animals with the goal of breeding insurance populations for collapsing wild populations, there will be loss and it will feel tragic. But when we see the resulting magic in action - the bald eagle making it off the endangered species list, the California condor flying wild in California, bison ranging wild in parts of the west, and wolves straggling into parts of Colorado - somehow that risk feels worth it.

Through the normal days and the tragic days, what I can promise you is smart, thoughtful and brave decision making that will lead to these moments of success. This is what I owe you and what I owe the animals in our care. It is their job to give you a window into the wild world of nature and sometimes they do just that.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain
President and CEO

P.S. At the end of the last Behind the Scenes letter, I promised you a follow-up on our Emergency Response System. Obviously, this is not that letter. But I felt compelled by this topic so I hope you'll forgive me. My next letter will cover emergency response.