

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

February 2017

Dear Friend,

Over the years I have been inspired by the reality show, *The Biggest Loser*. But probably not for the reasons you think. Physical fitness has always been important to me, but as I get older I struggle to keep up with the activities I did a decade earlier. Things hurt, I'm tired, I have too much on my mind, and my weight seems to conspire against me. I often think about the contestants on that show and how hard it must be to start working out when they weigh 400 pounds. Yet they do it. Their knees and joints hurt, they can't breathe, their motivation is low and, worse yet, they have all that history of failure to overcome.

People talk less about psychological fitness than physical fitness. We may have that backwards if you think about where our motivation and determination come from. When we are feeling psychologically fit we can take on the world. There is a saying in rock climbing that "climbing is a battle of inches." Even a tiny foot hold on a small ledge can open up new opportunities. I love the term psychological fitness because it means no matter how you feel today you can take small steps to become and/or stay physiologically fit. A speaker I recently heard is convinced that the next big revolution in health care will be in this area, and training for psychological fitness will become as critical to our lives as running and going to the gym.

In my job, I often get asked questions about the animals. People are fascinated by the notion of whether our animals are happy. It's like animal "happiness" is the measuring stick of good animal welfare. But I am 100 percent confident based on my zoo and personal animal experiences that animals are not always happy in the wild; certainly not all day, every day. It stands to reason then that answering this question in a zoo setting can be challenging.

The question our team is working to answer is "what does it look like if an animal is happy or unhappy?" I think all of us can agree that animals do have emotions. I am not sure if animal emotions look and feel the same as our emotions, and I'm not sure it matters. We can see animal emotions in the way they act and how they behave.

When I asked Ilana (our lead elephant keeper) this question she said, "I think the elephants are happy. Every morning when we arrive they come over and act excited to see us." This made sense to me as I described how my dog waits at the door, jumps up on me and wags her tail excitedly as I come in each night. But Ilana cautioned me to not overly equate the two. Dog behavior is not the same as elephant behavior. And lion, hippo and meerkat behavior is not the same as dog or elephant behavior.

One thing all those animals do is play. They play with toys we give them and they play naturally without our intervention – like a kid who is content to play outside in the mud for hours on their own. We see these simple joys from our animals too. Recently on a 52-degree day in February, one of our elephants was in the pool, splashing the water with her feet and trumpeting. Not my idea of fun, but it seems to be hers. Not to be outdone, another elephant was on the sand hill, rolling in the sand, flopping her trunk all around and sliding down the hill on her knees.

Maybe with animals, being comfortable or content is also happiness. Perhaps humans would be happier if we learned to be more content. Happiness is so subjective. I recently overheard a boy remark that “the giraffes look bored.” But his mom said they just looked calm and content to her. Our keepers probably would have agreed with the mom. When we see prey animals lying down, we surmise they are calm and not worried that a lion might come over and eat them. Content? Happy? Who’s to say?

People also want to know if our animals get sad. We get this question most often when an exhibit mate dies. We assume the animal feels a sense of loss. That is why we have moved toward giving the animals an opportunity to say goodbye. We had a 34-year-old giraffe named Becky who had become friends with a young giraffe calf. On the day that Becky was dying that calf would not leave her side. All the other giraffes went outside that day but we could not get that calf to shift out. I am told giraffes have friend groups that are as important as family groups. They spend the majority of their time with those they like, not with those who they are related to – like the older female group of giraffes that we call the “golden girls.” They do everything together.

When our old lion mom Angie passed away, her full-grown daughter Zwena came in and made kitten-type sounds. It’s not hard to believe she was grieving. When Rafiki, our silverback gorilla, died we let all the girls in to say goodbye. What dawned on me most when I was watching them was that each one dealt with the grief differently. Some went in to see him and touch him, some hid in the back and never even went in the same room, and some settled for a “drive by” and quick peek.

Our new okapi did seem sad to us. Again, if we can let go of thinking we are doing something wrong we can begin to focus on the observation without feeling like we are bad people. One of our three vets, Dr. Eric, has three advanced board certifications: one in exotic animals, another in bird medicine, and one in reptile medicine. Do you know what he prescribed for our okapi? Five good scratching sessions a day! In three days he seemed better. He was eating more, was more interested in his surroundings, and he was more responsive to his keepers ... all things we would interpret as “happy.”

Finally, a lot of people want to know if our animals have friends. Again, we don’t know for certain but our animals seem to have at least two types of friends: human friends and animal friends. I recently was with the woman that purchased Lucky and Kimba for the Zoo many years ago. She told me the reason we have Lucky was that when Kimba first arrived (alone) the keepers put a goat in with her to keep her company. Her husband saw that and decided Kimba needed an elephant friend. That is how Lucky

came to us. They have been best friends ever since. Ilana tells me that when something happens in the barn that seems scary, the first thing they do is find each other and huddle. I told you about the giraffe "golden girls." We also have two giraffe calves that were born a day apart. They love spending time together and are inseparable.

I am not sure why we are afraid to think of animals having a broad range of emotions. It only makes us think all the more about the responsibility we have for their lives. And I don't mean responsibility for their happiness, but rather the responsibility for treating them like individuals. You may be familiar with this famous quote from Cardinal Roger Mahony: "Any society, any nation, is judged on the basis of how it treats its weakest members -- the last, the least, the littlest." At Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, we are dedicated to developing a better understanding of what that means as it relates to animals and what we can do to save wild species from disappearing forever.

I am thinking of you often and the work we are doing together to make the world better.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain