

“Dance with a Giraffe”

by Christine Jurzykowski

I grew up near Sao Paulo living in a house where the garden ended in the jungle. One of my first pets was a baby anteater whose mother had probably been shot. My father and I placed her in a small corral used for other animals. For days I sat on a hay bale observing closely her every move. Gradually she became used to me watching her. The daily routine was the same: I would sit in complete silence saying in my head, “You are my friend; you are safe here; you will be taken care of.” After a while I knew it would be all right to touch her. She was standing close to the fence. I reached out my hand and ran it along the middle of her back. She didn’t move. It was magical and natural at the same time.

Within a short time, the political situation in Brazil changed. My mother, who was of Jewish descent, had escaped Poland with my father, a Roman Catholic Polish nationalist, in 1939. Now, because of the junta, she was beginning to feel endangered in Brazil. We moved to Paris and later New York, while my father stayed in Brazil until his death when I was fourteen. I was twenty-eight years old and visiting a friend who lived in the town of Carmel in upstate New York, walking a property adjoining a larger forest sanctuary of hundreds of acres, when I suddenly remembered the interwoven relationships with the natural world that I had known as a child. All of a sudden I realized what I had been missing.

Leaving New York and my profession in film, I spent the next two years living on the sea. Being linked with nature in this way brought back more memories, igniting my passion for the conservation of wildlife. Long and adventurous, this journey brought me to Texas where my husband, Jim, and I assumed responsibility for a small ranch

with five hundred animals in what had been dinosaur country. Fossil Rim is now home to 1,100 animals from the wilds of Africa, Asia, and South America as well as the Southwest of the United States. Grevy zebra, white and black rhino, addax antelope, cheetah, reticulated giraffe, and Attwater’s prairie birds, among others, find a sanctuary here in this small “island” of protected habitat.

When I am in direct, intimate relationship with an animal, I am more able to ask questions from within the cycle of nature. Animals take me into the nature of nature. The universal dance of form and relationship—creation and destruction, of which we are all part. Being with Old Nick brought this feeling to me, especially when I was summoned to participate in his dance with death.

Old Nick was a six-year-old giraffe who came to Fossil Rim by way of Topeka, Kansas, in 1982. From birth, he never enjoyed good health. Nothing was specifically wrong, yet nothing was ever quite right. He suffered from swollen joints and was thinner and less active than the rest of the herd.

This giraffe, measuring eighteen to twenty feet tall, was fully grown at the age of three. Chestnut brown with white patches, he was part of a subspecies known as the reticulated giraffe. Giraffes sleep very little, usually twenty minutes at a time, and spend the majority of their day upright. When they do sleep, they kneel, tuck their knees under themselves, and flip their necks backward to rest on their tailbone. When giraffes “go down” horizontally, chances are they will never get up again. This is what happened to Old Nick one winter afternoon when Kelley, an animal caretaker, was cleaning his hooves.

I heard the call for assistance over the radio. When I arrived, members of the animal care staff had moved Old Nick from the barn into the large room of the giraffe house. In this area, Old Nick was visible to the other giraffes yet physically separated by pipe bars. “Quick, prop up his head.” The hustle began. “If blood pumps up any faster it will cause an aneurysm.” We quickly set bales of hay behind Old Nick to keep the upper part of his body erect.

By late evening, the temperature had dropped significantly and it was cold in the giraffe house. The floors are concrete, the walls cinder block, and the ceilings are about twenty feet high all around. We gathered old blankets and anything else we could use to keep Old Nick’s body from getting chilled.

Old Nick knew he was dying. So did we. So did the giraffes watching us from across the barn. Our primary concern was to make him as comfortable as possible and prevent further complications.

Being animal caregivers, it is our job to question how we interact and interrelate with the animals. There is an art to knowing how to help, where to intervene, and when to honor another being’s rite of passage. We are members of the web of relationships that includes all living things. How we honour these relationships with nature is ultimately how we honour them within ourselves.

There was a moment of silence as we huddled around Old Nick. One question was in our collective mind: “How can we best honour this animal while loving and supporting him?” No one had an answer.

We took turns holding Old Nick’s head on our knees. When it came my turn, I sat on the bale propping up Old Nick’s neck, got comfortable, and placed this majestic creature’s head in my lap. What a precarious yet precious feeling. My face was so close to his face, which was normally twenty feet in the air. I could caress his nose and brush his delicate

eye-lashes. And the weight—his head alone felt like fifty pounds of rock lying across my knees.

I felt sadness in my throat and dread in the pit of my stomach. My rational mind said the end would be soon, but I wanted to avoid this distraction, to be present. As I leaned closer to his face, I asked for courage. Part of me knew that everyone in this room had been chosen to be Old Nick’s partner in his dying. I prayed that I would be guided through this, that this would serve me as a teaching for the months ahead.

After twelve hours, it occurred to me to match the rhythm of Old Nick’s breathing. It took only a few minutes to let this animal set the pace and I dropped into a trance. My mind went elsewhere as kinesthetic awareness took over. For a moment I slipped away and forgot we were here to die. This breathing had a gentle calming effect. I entered into a different relationship with Old Nick. I was keenly aware of this rise and fall of the energy levels of his body. It was as if we were matched to a piece of music written in four four time.

Periodically, Old Nick’s willingness to fight affected the tempo of our breathing. I felt the energy rise, giving me hope. Then, just as quickly, his energy level dropped and I dropped with it into overwhelming despair. I wanted to turn my head and avert my eyes in hopes Old Nick wouldn’t sense the sadness in my heart. He knew I knew he would die soon—I knew he knew too. This is what we shared. The knowing. We are all a part of this. This is nature.

Meanwhile, the herd had gathered on the other side of the barn. The giraffes began what looked like gestures of acknowledgement of Old Nick; arching their long necks and throwing their heads back, then dropping their heads forward. Arching back, then lunging forward. This gesture continued as they paced methodically in a circle. Then in unison, they stopped.

As we entered the early morning hours, the bull's gestures became more dramatic and pronounced. As if they were learning choreographed dance movements, the females matched the gestures of the bull exactly. The dance became more animated and the herd moved toward frenzy. We weren't sure we could contain them, so we moved the bull to a room where Old Nick was out of his view, hoping this would restore quiet.

Alone, the bull continued his movements. The females, who could not see the bull, began moving with him. In unison and in silence they continued to bow and arch their necks, pacing themselves to the stamina of the dying giraffe. Their dance, my breathing.

We kept this vigil for twenty-four hours. Except for food and coffee breaks, I stayed with Old Nick the entire time. We kept having to move him, a difficult maneuver with a three-thousand-pound animal. The booming sound of the giraffes' hooves pacing on the cement floor reverberated around and around the large room.

So much happened during these twenty-four hours for us as caretakers, for Old Nick, for the herd. I had time to think, to hope, to despair, and to ask questions of myself, of the animals, of Fossil Rim. "Am I willing to imagine the possibility of true partnership in nature? Am I willing to engage in the mystery of a language beyond words? Will I trust what I hear? What am I being called on to remember?"

At last Old Nick left this world. Within minutes of his passing, deans of various schools of one of the major universities came to Fossil Rim for their official visit. I met the group at the giraffe barn as graciously as I could, tears in my eyes, devoid of sleep, dirty, and smelling of giraffe. They came over to where Old Nick lay, gave their advice and comments, and were off for a tour. This quick shift in focus shocked me out of my state of

mind and left me to make my peace with it later when I could.

Holding this giraffe in my arms, experiencing in his body the push and pull of death, I thought of the ancestors he and each one of these giraffes carry inside them, the memory of their origins in the wild, dry, hot climate halfway around the world from Fossil Rim. Not even a dramatically different controlled environment could change their inner understandings. Part of being alive is knowing everything belongs to something else. Nothing exists in isolation.

If we are willing to be still and become aware of what we are truly made of—energy and matter—we may experience the connection to the living system called nature. In the awakening of our own cellular memories, we may remember the way we evolved in harmony with each other within the cycles of life, the nature of nature.

And those words from my childhood return so vividly: "You are my friend, you are safe here, you will be taken care of."



Jurzykowski, Christine. "Dance with a Giraffe." In *Intimate Nature*, edited by Linda Hogan, Deena Metzger and Brenda Peterson, 375-378. New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1998.

Reproduced by permission of Christine Jurzykowski.