

THE WILD CREATURE

I have been a veterinarian for 30 years. Sometimes I have treated cattle, horses, goats, but mostly I treat dogs and cats.



Last week a young coyote with a badly injured foot was brought to me.

Treating, doctoring, healing this little wild creature is profoundly different.

It's not the medicine that is different – wounds are wounds, canids are canids. That's all familiar. What is different is the quiet look in her eyes, the body language

that tells me that although she is compliant, she is not a willing participant in this adventure. She does not surrender herself into my care.



This has inspired deep philosophical thinking on my part: she is different because she is wild, but what, exactly, does “wild” mean? The answer is not so hard. It means having control of one's own life: who to be with, where to travel, when to sleep, where to go. We humans call it “freedom”.

This young coyote, maybe 10 weeks old, already lays claim to her own life.

As I change her bandages every day, I tell her silently: Dear little Song Dog, when you can handle it I will set you free. I promise.

And though there are many who would hurt her, there are many who would help, who DID help: the granddaughter of the person who shot her, who called the son of the adjacent landowner, who made a big effort to find me. There are lots of us who care, we just need to raise our voices together and demand that our wild creatures can live out their lives without harassment.





UPDATE ON THE HURT COYOTE

For those following the young coyote's story, she is doing well. Though her foot was shot, leaving open flesh and broken bones and much damage, it was NOT trapped, so the blood supply was not cut off.

The pain and the damage from trapping come from crushing and fracture, but also from blood supply disruption. A trap does not merely "grip" a foot, Hypoxia, as it is called, is profoundly painful and the results are not evident for days. Sadly a trapped and released animal has a lot of recovering to do and may lose a foot.

Meanwhile, our "merely shot" coyote is healing incredibly fast. We have weaned



her onto a diet of "wholesome, appropriate, fresh roadkill" So far she likes squirrel the best. She eats enormous amounts.

She still retains the wild, haunted look. The other day I brought her cage outside for fresh air, but she tried to bite the bars and dig out.

She longs to be free.

Every day I promise her she will be free as soon as her foot heals. She doesn't believe me.



FOOD FOR COYOTES

As a veterinarian I have noticed that most people overfeed their dogs and cats. It's not that anyone is intending to be cruel (and it IS a cruelty), it's that our idea of how much is appropriate is different than reality.

I started giving Song Dog (8lb, maybe 10 weeks old) a chicken drumstick morning and night, an occasional egg, and some vegetables. I decided to switch to roadkill to give her the challenge of "opening" a carcass and some choices in what she would eat.

The first was a squirrel, busted up by a car, which she ate all but tiny pieces of big bone.

The next was an intact squirrel (hit by car in the head), which she also scarfed down.

Curious how much she would eat at a setting, I gave her half a good sized opossum. She didn't like the tail, but ate the rest.

After a week she had lost weight, so I now feed her about five times what I would feed a dog her size (even German Shepherd puppies would not get this much!)

Wow.

I know that 75% of wolf puppies starve in the wild. I suspect this is true of coyotes also. We don't need to kill them to "control their numbers". Their lives are hard enough.



THE SORROW OF BEING A WILD COYOTE'S VETERINARIAN

Without me, I think her foot would have festered and she would have died. With my care she has a chance. Halfway into this endeavor she is healing nicely – I expect to release her in 2 weeks – with four feet!

The saving of a foot, maybe a life – it should be enough.

But though I am honored to have been gifted this task, it is not joyful. For this coyote is miserable. I am her jailer, her tormentor, the dungeon master. And though I bring her food and the medicine and care I have given has



made it possible for her foot to heal, she does not know my ultimate plans.

After all, people trap coyotes, release them into the back of trucks and feed them, only to sell them for “penning” - being chased to exhaustion by dogs outside the pen, then dogs turned loose on them inside the pen to tear them apart. Perfectly legal in 20 states.

Does her kind have an innate fear of my kind, for all the horrid things we do to coyotes? I have many friends that recoil instinctively when they see a snake or spider. Song dog has the same look when she sees me.

sigh

The cats and dogs I treat mostly understand my intent. They may be frightened or snappy, but if I ask to take blood or check a sore spot, and listen to their response, reformulating my approach if need be, there is a very subtle acquiescence. Mostly, I have their permission.

I do not have Song Dog’s permission, and it makes me sad.

Only once have I seen a look that was not cowering in fear. It was when I took her outside in the cage. She was intensely interested in the world, but started to frantically dig to get out and chew the bars of her cage.

I can only tell her, “when your foot is healed, I will set you free, back with your family even”. But she does not believe me.

TAGGING AND COLLARING PREDATORS

Tagging and collaring animals of all kinds is an essential part of research. Without knowing where they go it is pretty impossible to learn anything else about them. We understand and applaud the use of collaring for responsible research.

But there is another sinister use for collaring: it is to tag an animal now so that it and its family can be killed at leisure later. No research is happening. It’s just a way of finding animals.

Taken to its extreme, Canada and Idaho use “Judas” wolves – the wolf is collared early in the season, the pack and young are established, and later, the signal from the collared wolf is used to hunt the whole pack, often by helicopter. The Judas

wolf is left unharmed, to form another pack and lure them to their deaths another year.

For a sentient species that forms strong social bonds, imagine how this FEELS. Even in the holocaust we didn't slaughter whole families but one, allow them to form new bonds, then slaughter the whole family again.

WHO DOES THIS WORK OF WILDLIFE REHABILITATION?

In short....YOU do! Each state has requirements for interested lay people to become wildlife rehabilitators. Here is a link so you can check YOUR state:

<http://bit.ly/29j80Ya>

It is important to remember that the goal is NOT to have a pet – in fact pet wild animals are often forbidden. The goal is to return a hurt, young or injured animal to the wild.

Persons interested in wildlife rehabilitation should follow the guidelines of their particular state, but also they should partner with an experienced wildlife rehabilitator. They should also establish a relationship with a veterinarian interested in wildlife.

It should also be remembered that there is no money in this: wild creatures don't pay bills. Veterinarians cannot work for free. Food, medicine and a place to heal all cost money, and there is always a great deal of time involved.

Nevertheless, in this world where people take so much away from wild creatures, it is wonderful to give something back.

WHY YOU DON'T WANT TO ADOPT THE WILD COYOTE PUP

As our world becomes more crowded with people and depleted of its wildlife, most of us are not fortunate to have a connection with wild creatures. We see a cute animal (like our coyote puppy) and long to adopt her, own her, keep her safe.

SHE, however, has no such wish, thank you very much. Already, just a few months old, she is her own "person". She wants no part of you. Or me. Or any human.

For 10,000 years (give or take) we humans have participated in a process, called domestication, in which we took wild canids, who agreed to put themselves in our care, and selected colors, shapes, and drives to suit our needs. The most important thing we selected for is invisible to many people: it is a retention of juvenile characteristics. When a dog grows up, he or she does not lay claim to his or her own life and leave you. Given food, water, shelter, and social companions, most dogs are perfectly willing to spend their lives in our homes.

We are taught to be responsible for our pets. We need to feed them, house them, give them meaningful activity, provide veterinary care, keep them from dying in hot cars, and so forth.

We don't have that responsibility for wild animals. They will take care of themselves. For a wild creature, a lifetime with you would be kin to YOU being told you had to be caged in your parents' house for your natural life.

If you love wildlife, by all means volunteer at a rehabilitation facility. Perhaps you can thrill to the close up sight, or even the touch of a real wild creature, but don't fall into the trap of thinking you can do a favor by keeping such a treasure.

This coyote longs to be free. Her longing is palpable. I feel it in every interaction. She doesn't care that her bones are not healed, and her wound still open. THAT is the thrill of dealing with her up close. She is her own self. She will be free.

PONDERING SONG DOG'S RELEASE

How do you KNOW she can hunt? How do you know her family is still there? How do you know she won't get shot again as soon as you release her? How do you know there's enough food?

And so on.

We don't, of course, know any of that.

"Maybe she would be safer in a sanctuary"

Sanctuary: a place of refuge or safety. There is an implication in our use of the word, sanctuary, though, that those who need it can



come and go at will.

For our coyote a “sanctuary” would be just another jail.

It is one of the fiercest joys of my days lately, to announce that soon she will be free. She gets to choose not-so-safe, maybe hungry, maybe shortened life. She gets to LEAVE the sanctuary, choose where to travel, who to hang with, where and when to rest. She will be in charge of her own life.

Now my focus is figuring out how and how much to help. A Coyote rescue organization from a neighboring state tells me that since she is a baby I should supplement her food 4 days a week until September.

Holy cow!

I guess I'll be scrounging for roadkill and buying chicken for a couple of months.

We'll set up a trail camera and see if we can catch her in her new life.

There are a lot of people rooting for you, Song Dog.

RELEASE JULY 15, 2016

Our good Samaritan, whose son rescued Song Dog, has had a horrible week: his father died and his dog got hit by a car and killed.



Nevertheless, anticipating Song Dog's release, he bush hogged a swath of overgrown farm field that we might be able to drive to a suitable place, and later, feed her intermittently for the next month or so.

I couldn't imagine a better location: far from the road, heavy cover, deep forest, a

hollow, water nearby.

The whole drive here she has been alert and excited, ears up for the first time since I've gotten her. We put the cage on the ground and open the door. Of course I had hoped to video the release,



but my finger fumbled. It is as you would imagine.... Once the door opens, she takes a few hesitant steps, then bolts into the woods.

She is free! Master of her own destiny, free to find her family, with any luck, free to travel. For this short moment in time, the universe itself sighs – all is as it should be.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH....

The day Song Dog came to us, another lovely creature came to our home, also.

I take it as a sign from the universe that both came the same day, that I might compare and contrast their lives and realize that Molly's story is really part of Song Dog's story also.

Molly is a young Golden Retriever. She was much loved by her former family, but they found her to be too much for that time in their life, so she was spending most of her time alone in the back yard. They wanted a better life for her so she came to be a part of our family.



Song Dog, the coyote pup may want to be master of her own destiny, but Molly, the Golden Retriever pup most definitely does not. Molly wants to be loved, to be with you, to greet you effusively when you come home and lay on the bed.

It doesn't really occur to her to grow up and move out. That's what we have selected for in dogs: a willingness to stay with us into their adulthood, to just....stay with us...for their whole lives.

The important thing is that we can love both kinds of animals. I dearly love dogs, I surround myself with them all day, every day and become dog-deprived while on vacation. I appreciate their individuality including each dog's needs, likes, dislikes, fears, skills, potential.

And, of course, I love with unbridled devotion, the animals that are wild: the coyotes, wolves, and also bears, cougars, foxesall of them. I respect their independence, I am, in fact, in awe of their determination to make their own way in life.

The domesticated and the wild are profoundly different, and we can love them all. Keep the cats safe from the coyotes by feeding them in the day and cleaning up their feeding stations, keep the pet dogs safe from wolves by leashing them in wolf country and keeping them in (where they want to be anyway!) at other times.

We can love, and we can coexist.

THE VILLAIN AND THE HERO

The people involved in Song Dog's story are interesting, too. If ever there was a villain, it is the "mean" grandfather who shot her. And if ever there were heroes it would be the granddaughter who called a friend, who picked her up without any gloves ("kind of a little nerve wracking, he admitted to me as we released her – she DOES have teeth, you know") and his father who brought her to me and took her back once healed.

But is it really that simple?

I had spent hardly any time with the "heroes" until yesterday when we released Song Dog.

"I understand", Greg (the father) said, "why he shot her". "He's got chickens. They are those 'beauty pageant chickens (made me laugh)', but I understand why he gets worried that the coyotes will kill them. "

Greg then told me the story of having ducks when he was actively farming the land, and how one at a time they would disappear as the clever raccoons found their way in.

"I was ready to kill all the raccoons in sight" he laughed.

I didn't find out whether he did. I didn't really want to know.

But it got me to thinking: if he had killed the raccoons, we would have called him villain. He saves the coyote and we call him hero.

Today Greg is actively supporting another kind of predator, bush hogging (mowing) swaths of land so he can access it to feed her, offering to cut up the 2 yearold deer in his freezer into chunks for the task.

Maybe the villain and the hero is within both of us. Maybe the “mean” grandfather was just protecting his flock and is otherwise a hero in another story. If I get the nerve, I will go talk to him and hear HIS side of the story.

In any case, I think listening and trying to understand the other sides to the story are important, as well as realizing that villains may not always be villains, and heroes aren’t always heroes. There is a little of both in all of us.

IMAGINING THE REST OF THE STORY

Someone famous in wildlife rescue and release (maybe George Adamson of “Born Free” fame) once noted that the best possible outcome in a wildlife release story is that you just don’t know.

But we can IMAGINE a happy story.

There is a saying that I paraphrase here – “thoughts become words, words become deeds, deeds become character”. Maybe if we think about what a “good outcome” for Song Dog looks like, we can each play a part in making other good outcomes, and make the world a little better.

So...here is what I imagine: (and I invite you to imagine your own happy story...)

Upon release, Song Dog flees into the woods, away from the pain and fear and dungeon of the past month. Her foot has healed and works well, though it is sore still and she can’t run for a long time at once. She has not even had a chance to run for the past month, so it is a delight to do so!

She spends the afternoon getting her bearings, beginning to remember her surroundings, learning some things anew: here is water (she stops for a drink), here is shelter where she can choose to rest. It is not cold but thunderstorms pop up and she doesn’t really want to get wet.

At night she hears other coyotes call and it piques her interest. Is it her family? Still too far away to smell exactly, she is not sure. She will travel carefully and cautiously to see.

Meanwhile, she is hungry. During her month in captivity she grew from 8 to 12 pounds. She needs a lot of fuel to grow and continue to heal. Fortunately, she circles back and finds the squirrel that was left for her. For tonight she is fed.

Like other canids, Song Dog sleeps some, and wakes some. Tonight she has the sounds of crickets, and the smell of the earth, instead of the hum of air conditioner and the close quarters of the shop. It is familiar and satisfying, and she sleeps well and contentedly.

Morning brings intermittent drizzle – a relief from the heat, and a gift to Song Dog since moisture amplifies scent. She will practice hunting again, though even if she were strong and had practiced this month she would only be successful in hunting 10% of the time.

She is unpracticed and clumsy, and misses. But she has a little help – according to best practices her captors will supply food intermittently as she learns to hunt again.

There are a few other benefits to her captivity time: she was vaccinated for the common canid diseases – distemper, parvo, rabies. And just before she left, her veterinarian slipped a pill that kills fleas and ticks for three months into an rabbit carcass – for the rest of the summer the ticks may get on her, but they won't stay. She had been covered with them after she was shot, it will be a little bit in her favor that she doesn't have to deal with them now.

In the evening the songs start again, and she creeps closer. Once close enough to see, she wiggles and submits and yaps, moving into this pack of wild coyotes. It is her family! Do they recognize her? Of course! Wild canids recognize their human caregivers years after they have left, why wouldn't they recognize their own.

Will they reject her because of the human scent all over her? No. It is just information. They will glean lots of information from the scents that have clung to her.

Mama licks Song Dog's paw. Song Dog licks her mother's face. They are a family again. And though the dangers to coyotes are myriad, they are a family together again, and free.

A MONTH LATER...

A text appears on my phone from Greg: "I saw our coyote pup today. She came to the backyard and just looked at me for a second, then took off."

How do you know it was her? I texted back

He doesn't, of course. But he had never seen a wild coyote near the house before, much less one that stopped for a second.

We ponder whether it is good or bad. We are, of course, thrilled to see signs that she is doing well. We are also anxiously hoping that she doesn't think that people are good after all.

Maybe she was just saying "thanks", we decide. That's enough. It made us smile.