**How Animals Mourn their Dead** Adapted from an article by Barbara King - April 28, 2013



*Photograph: An elephant at the Emmen, Netherlands, zoo stands at the edge of a ditch in 2009, a day after another elephant fell into the ditch and died.*

To mourn means to feel or show great sorrow after the loss of someone or something. We know humans are capable of mourning, but are animals able to express this emotion as well?

For two years, a professor named Barbara J. King has studied how animals react to death. She argues that many creatures including dogs and cats feel the pain of losing a loved one. **Grief** is deep sorrow, especially after one’s death. Here, she explains why grief may be an emotion many animals share.

Wild elephants sometimes stand silently at the bodies of dead companions and, later, stroke their sun-bleached bones as if embracing a memory.

Dolphin mothers may refuse to part with the bodies of their babies who die, ignoring food and keeping their child floating in the water day after day.

Jane Goodall famously reported that a young chimpanzee, even though mature enough to feed on his own, could not recover emotionally from the death of his mother, and soon passed on himself.

It’s not only the animals in the wilderness who grieve, it’s often animals right here on our farms, or in our back yards, or cuddling next to us every night as we go to sleep.

Although animals are different from humans in many ways, we are connected in how we feel.

**Grieving Animals**

Storm Warning was a horse who injured his hind leg in an accident on the farm where he lived. He was buried in a field after he passed away. That evening, the woman who rode him and cared for him, walked alone to his grave. She placed flowers on his grave. She was grieving — and saw that she wasn’t alone.

Six horses who had bonded with Storm Warning during his life, stood in a circle around the grave. They stopped grazing, showed no interest in the flowers, and simply looked, with a heads-down gaze, straight at the grave. Other nearby horses, who were not part of Storm Warning’s herd, did not join in. The next morning, the horses were still there, standing watch.

Two Siamese cat sisters named Willa and Carson who lived in Virginia were inseparable for 14 years. They ate, slept and relaxed together, at times fitting their bodies tightly into a circle to soak up the sun’s warmth.

As she grew old, Carson developed some health problems. One day her human family took her to the veterinarian. Carson died that night in her sleep. At first, Willa acted somewhat upset at her sister’s absence. Within two or three days, however, she started to wail, searching the house for her sister. It took Willa many months to return to her normal behavior.

**Skeptics** may raise questions in each of these two cases. Could Willa have just been stressed by the change in her environment, or might her distress have been caused by her owners’ own sadness at losing Carson? Could the horses who stood at Storm Warning’s grave have acted that way for a similar reason?

But consider: Willa repeatedly searched specific spots in the house that she had shared with her sister. The horses involved were friends of Storm Warning’s.

Scientists and animal caretakers know for certain: Animals feel their lives. They experience joy and sorrow. Why wouldn’t they grieve?

**Elephant Research**

Elephants are a focus of animal-grief research.

**Matriarch** Eleanor died in Kenya in 2003. The female leader had been suffering with a swollen trunk and bruised body, and she collapsed one evening on the ground. Two minutes later, Grace, a matriarch of a different family, used her tusks to lift Eleanor back onto her feet. It wasn’t long before Eleanor fell again — she was just too sick to go on.

Grace became quite distressed. While making noises, she continued to push Eleanor with her trunk. For at least another hour, she stayed with Eleanor even as her own family moved off.

By morning, Eleanor had passed away. On that day, a female called Maui from a third family approached the body. With trunk extended, she sniffed and touched the body, then put her trunk into her mouth to assess the taste. She moved her right foot in order to hover over Eleanor, then pulled on the body with her left foot and trunk. When this failed to wake Eleanor, Maui stood over her, and rocked back and forth.

Elephants came to Eleanor’s body, some to explore and some to grieve, for a full week after her death. Grace returned to Eleanor, but unlike during her first approach, this time she made no attempt to lift Eleanor up and only stood quietly.

Members of Eleanor’s own family came back to visit her. Eleanor’s youngest daughter, a calf of about five months, nuzzled her mother. She kept returning to her mother’s body.

**What Animals Feel**

One elephant has even become famous for expressing what scientists call **cross-species** grief. Tarra lives in the Elephant Sanctuary in Tennessee. Her eight-year friendship with the little stray dog Bella who appeared at the sanctuary became popular on the Internet. It was fun to watch the great gray, bulky animal walk and play together with the much smaller white one. Then, Bella went missing. Sanctuary staff noticed that Tarra began to eat less and appeared to be depressed.

Unfortunately, Bella passed away. Animal caretakers offered Tarra a chance to attend her little friend’s burial, but she stayed about 100 yards away. The next morning, however, the caretakers noticed a footprint atop the grave. They believe the elephant had made a short journey to visit her friend’s final resting place.

Though these stories of animal grief are sad, they are stories of love and friendship.