

DISCUSSION POINT

PEOPLE AND PETS

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Dedicated to the memory of my cat Ints and the guinea-pig of my daughter Marie.

One Sunday in April 1999 I went to wander in the nearby woods. There I met a lizard, who gave up after a lengthy besiege and let me take some photographs. I remembered seeing a lizard for the first time in my life when I was four, “Father, look, a small crocodile!”. The next day Mare Kõiva asked me to write an article to the spring conference of young researchers. I did, but not for the sake of the conference. I did it because of the lizard. As I was not so young any more, the only way I could participate in the conference was virtually, i.e. the article was put up in the internet. I got no feedback on the discussions on it.

We are all concerned with the central events in one’s life – birth, marriage and death. But the beginning and end of life has become a medical matter these days, a taboo, with which only the ones relevant to the event and the medical people are in direct contact. And even in this case, within the walls of a hospital.¹ More often the wonder of the beginning and the end of life can be experienced with pets. Many of us can tell a story of the loss of our four-legged friend and the real bereavement it brings along. Nowadays it may touch a person more painfully than the death of a distant relative. The contacts that children have with funerals are first and foremost connected with pets, I have heard many people tell stories of funerals they arranged in their childhood for a dead mouse or a bird they had found. But if the late one was a beloved pet, the ceremony is probably more methodical and more solemn.

DEATH

Once someone called me from the *Maaleht* newspaper and asked me as a researcher of funeral traditions to give an interview on

cremation burial, e.g. on its advantages, on the occasion of the opening of the Tallinn crematorium. Actually, for me like for many others, funeral is an unpleasant topic. I replied that I could not say anything for or against it – for example we arranged a cremation for my son’s stuffed dog, but a burial seemed more appropriate for the hamsters. I explained my son that the broken toy would give a beautiful flame and smoke that would reach the heaven. It would definitely have been wrong simply to throw the kid’s toy in the rubbish bin. The hamsters, however, found their last resting place at the dog rose under the window. Their burial caused problems, because it was cold outside and the ground was frozen. I also suggested the dead hamster, in a solemn package, could be taken to the garbage container, but children thought it inappropriate. So the remains of the animal had to wait for milder weather in the deep freezer. At that, our elderly nanny scolded: how can you do so, why don’t you throw the corpse in the garbage container?

Finally the funeral day arrived – the coffin was a beautiful tea carton lined with moss. We put a piece of bread, cheese, carrot and oat-flakes in the coffin with the deceased. Not because in the old times the human dead were provided with food for the afterlife,² but because we ourselves felt better this way. We felt the seemingly sleeping animal did not lack anything this way. The tea carton was wrapped in beautiful paper and tied with a ribbon. At last the package was so beautiful that the children forgot about the funereal gloom and started to quarrel about who could keep it longer.

Unfortunately, later we have had to arrange similar funerals for one more hamster and a guinea-pig. The guinea-pig fell ill with an unknown disease. The vet gave it some vitamin injections, which were to make the animal get better. While the expected effect was not achieved, the vet recommended to continue with injections for a few months, as the vet’s husband had also had injections for two months after pneumonia. Then we gave up torturing the animal and the guinea-pig passed away silently in its cage, next to its partner. The vet told us to separate the other animal at once, which we did not do either. The healthy guinea-pig nuzzled the sick one gently and warmed its side, and did not fall ill. Most people today are not allowed the ‘luxury’ of dying in their home.



Photo 1. Arne and the mother guinea pig with the litter. Photo by Marika Mikkor 1997.

At the same time our neighbours' guinea-pig fell ill, too. The children next door asked their parents to take away that sick animal, they did not want to see it any more! The parents took the guinea-pig to the clinic to make a lethal injection, but that turned out to be too expensive in their opinion. I do not know if they threw the pet in the garbage container alive or killed it before that.

Yet it seems that the grief over the death of a pet may often be really devastating.

MARRIAGE

Our hamsters were both female, although I had asked the nature shop assistant for animals of different sex, so the animals could have more fun in their imprisonment. After they died we had a feeling of regret because the animals had not had the possibility of becoming a mothers and had to die infertile spinsters. I also heard a neighbour having had a similar feeling for her guinea-pigs. We – people – design the fate of our pets, being better or worse prison guards.

When I bought the guinea-pigs, I again asked for animals of both sexes and this time I got them. Now it seemed that the basic needs of the animals in the cage were satisfied. It was most important for the female to have lots of good food, the male one's main interest

was focused on his companion. Besides, it seemed that the behaviour of the guinea-pigs was in some respects similar to that of people. The advances of the male were met by blunt rebuff of the clawing and biting female. As soon as the hopeless male had left her alone, the other one started to provoke him furtively, step by step, sneaking closer and nibbling just at the same blade of grass etc. It was a surprise to me that the behaviour that is commonly regarded as womanly hypocrisy is biological. Or maybe the guinea-pigs were behaving socially? I immediately found an excuse for women with similar behaviour – what can you do if the nature calls? Mare Kõiva, the folklorist, thought that it was quite the opposite, too sad that some people behave like guinea-pigs.

So I planned a monogamous marriage for our pets. Although later on there were cases of polygamy, too.

BIRTH

In different stages of life the guinea-pigs lay either side by side or in the opposite ends of the cage, and where they lay was the decided by the female. When the future mother was already so big that the



Photo 2. Golden Bell in her young age. Photo by Marika Mikkor 1996.



Photo 3. Golden Bell feeding a month-old son. Photo by Marika Mikkor 1997.

young ones inside her were easily detectable and palpable, she preferred to lay especially close to her partner.

The first wonder of birth was at Easter 1996. Coming home, we found that while we had been away, a wonderful fur ball had appeared in the cage. The children called it Golden Bell. Later, on a few occasions we have been able to watch the delivery.

In the neighbourhood our children were nearly the only ones who knew 'where children came from'. As the neighbours' children declared they were not born of their mother, they were brought from the hospital instead, I suggested that my son and daughter tell others that the guinea-pig got her son from the hospital, too. Why on earth should I damage the foundations of others' education – anyway, I had been many times sharply criticised because my children told others that elves did not exist.

The female guinea-pig is a natural born mother whose parturition is simple and esthetic. The first-born is suckling, mother is licking and relieving the second one from the membrane and the third is just being born. Even if there are more young ones, half an hour later the babies are clean and dry and running about. In a couple of hours they not only suckle milk but also nibble hay.

It is interesting to note that the guinea-pig's placentas (each baby has its own) are disk-shaped, similar in shape to that of humans. (The placenta is the nourishing, respiratory, internal secretory and excretory organ, which contains lots of activators, vitamins, hormones etc). Today in hospital women do not know what is done with their placentas, for instance in 1980s there were rumors that these were sold abroad as raw material for highly expensive hormone face creams (Mikkor 2000). The guinea-pig, on the other hand, is the master of its placentas and eats one or several of them, and it presumably works favourably towards recovery from childbirth. Women who give birth in hospitals these days do not sometimes know at all what happens at childbirth, often they have not even heard the medical or the popular names of the placenta. Many country women, however, when asked about the placenta, can speak of the calving of cows, which they know better. It has been observed that cows also try to eat the placenta if people did not prevent them to. It is believed that the cow will fall ill from eating placenta. I

doubt that because the cow cannot be more stupid than the keeper. If the cow eats placenta, the hormone content of which is high, the milk of the cow will presumably become undrinkable for people, which does not mean that it could not be highly beneficial for the calf. The Erza-Mordvinians remembered even in the 1980s that it was possible to cure infertility by eating placenta. In folk medicine raw, cooked or dried placenta has been used for the treatment of various problems. Also people in modern Europe have eaten it.³

Guinea-pigs are extremely careful mothers. Even in the cage they do not abandon their young ones, but clean them from morning till night. Suckling is also an interesting matter. The guinea-pig has two long slender dugs per 1 to 6 descendants and that is why the young ones in a larger family have to be patient and wait for their turn. However, they do not fight. The guinea-pig feeds her offspring for a month, followed by a quick and harsh weaning period. For that purpose she uses her nails and teeth, biting or clawing the approaching young ones. Again it may be mentioned that people are no better. In old times women smeared their breasts with mustard, pepper or coal, put furry things into their bosom to scare the baby, or just whipped the baby.⁴

Finally, it is true that by keeping pets and watching them we learn something about ourselves and in many cases pets may even set a good example for us. We plan the funeral customs of our pets. Probably the way how we do it will largely determine the attitude our children have to such phenomena in future. When I see the gentleness with which my son and daughter approach the guinea-pig mother who is pregnant with babies – it seems that the guinea-pig's motherhood shapes the attitude of the children as well. Modern children often have not seen that descendants are breast-fed, on the other hand even first-grade children know that breasts can be filled with plastic implants and schoolboys discuss whether such filled breasts will rise to the surface when diving or not.

FEEDBACK TO THE STORY OF GUINEA-PIGS

For me it was not the writing of the story that was important, but the reactions it caused. The writing was virtually accessible on the net during the conference. I got no feedback. Then I gave this story

to several acquaintances and colleagues to read. What did they think of it? I thought that in this story some might be offended by the reference to hamsters dying 'infertile spinsters'. Just the opposite – many found it moving that I was concerned about the marital status of the pets. This was the passage that was pointed out while treating me to a cup of coffee. However, one of the male readers commented, "Do not think that your male guinea-pig is happy – in the wild he would have a troop of females!"

Many were upset by the ridicule of the so-called the elf business. From time to time these days the need for the study of religion at schools is discussed. In fact religion in the form of elf studies is comprehensive and compulsory – the ABC-book, reading textbooks and workbooks all deal with it. Children go to excursions with their teachers and classmates to the "elf land" (theme parks), which like in nature study classes show them how elves live. I could study the most intimate life of my acquaintances, it would not be a taboo and no one would refuse to provide information. But elf study is highly sacred and inviolable and in no way could I ask any of my acquaintances or neighbours' children what exactly they do believe in. I have heard some and take it or leave it! One second-grade kid, a 'non-believer', was disgraced in front of his classmates, he was told that it is only bad children to whom elves do not come.

Some people were irritated that I had put the dead hamster in the deep freezer. 'No doubt you also had some cutlets there!' they nagged. No, I had no cutlets in the freezer, but look again, maybe you have a whole bloody pig's head or feet there, in other words, a corpse cut in pieces. Our hamster had clean fur and was nicely packed. On the meat counter in the local shop there are pigs' heads and other meats, just above the counter there are biscuits and rolls. That is not a problem for anyone.

Furthermore, I asked what they thought of people eating placenta. This is considered complete perversity. At the same time, for example, abortion is a more common medical procedure than the extraction of a tooth.

The comments reveal how culture determines what is regarded normal and what is not. Hamsters in the deep freezer and eating

the placenta are unnatural – whereas a pig's head next to confectionery and abortion are natural phenomena.

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Comments

¹ About the change of birth and death into medical phenomena see Mikkor 1999, 2000a ja 2000b

² About items put into the grave with the deceased see Mikkor 1994: 1482–1485; 1994a: 170–171; 1995: 1906–1908; 1997: 68–70; 1999b: 107–108.

³ About the use of placenta in folk medicine see Mikkor 1998: 57–58; 2000: 117–118; 2000a: 32–33; 2000b: 843–846.

⁴ About weaning customs see Mikkor 1999a: 154–155.

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