



The "Walt-Disnification" of Farm Animals



As only .005% of our society now has direct daily contact with farm animals while the other 99.995% obtains exposure via the media, it was inevitable: Too many people now project human values and emotions onto animals. After all, the human voice-overs, lip synced to friendly-faced animals, are hard not to like. But they are just movies. Unlike Run Chick-

en Run or a host of other movies, when a member of a flock or herd dies, there is no mourning period. The reality associated with omnivores like chickens and hogs is that if the victim is not removed by the farmer, the body will soon be devoured. Because farming involves the full cycle of life and death many observations are readily witnessed. What follows are this farmer's observations, thoughts and feelings about the emotions of domesticated farm animals, as they live their lives, and ultimately at the moment their life ends.

Before I provide specific examples of witnessed animal behavior, it is beneficial to recognize a response that is common to cattle, hogs and chickens. This common behavior involves the fight or flight response which is inherent in all animals, including us. This is to recognize that fear is contagious. If one animal feels threatened, the body language of that one animal is instantly transmitted, received and reacted to by every other animal- even across species. It can also be observed that the animal that does not respond to this chain reaction can more readily become lunch for the perpetrator of this fear episode. And these are indeed episodes, for as quickly as the alarm is sounded, the atmosphere can revert back to business as usual.

Chickens We keep a rooster with the hens. Even though he eats more than a hen and never gives us a single egg in return, his contribution is significant. When he talks, the hens listen. It's not a paternal type of dominion as it might sound, but rather, a survival mechanism. Here's a short story of my most prized animal emotion event involving the chickens:

We feed the hawks here too. They are our #1 predator of the hens, capable of depleting one hen a day. One morning, I heard the rooster sound the distress call, I look out to witness an attack. The ten second warning the rooster provided gave enough time for all the hens to scramble for cover. The hawk lost round one. Still, all the chickens now stayed close to the hen house. The rooster went inside. Sometimes, he let's his guard down, just smoozing with the ladies in the henhouse. For all I know, maybe he was officially "on break". Regardless, that hawk was still hungry and returned when the "air raid siren" wasn't able to sound. This time, I became aware of the attack due to the sound of a hen in distress. The hawk had her pinned down as it began to strangle her. It was pure pandemonium in the field. The more the victim vocalized distress, the more the others instantly responded, first with a run towards their downed flockmate, then a rapid retreat. (For the first few moments of distress, other hens will provide aid, only to quickly retreat as they experience direct danger.)

Then, out from the door of the henhouse fly's, (yes, he was flying), SUPERrrrrROOSTER to the rescue. (Que the Mighty Mouse music: "Here I come to save the day".) It was almost as if he had thought "not on my watch" and out he came with a vengeance. His squawking was as aggressive as his speed as he charged the hawk, risking his life in the process. I couldn't help but apply a sense of chivalry to his valiant response. But the hawk somehow knew something the rooster did not. Even though, pound for pound the rooster outweighed him, the hawk held his grip on that hen while lashing out and screaming at the rooster. The rooster retreated, screaming at the hens to do the same. This time, the hawk won.

If I end the story right here, clearly, we would all recognize human-type emotions in these birds. We feel that they think about each other and care about each other. But, as Paul Harvey would say, it's time for... the rest of the story.

To you and I, it is a morbid thought to think of a predator eating one of our own kind directly in front of us. But there that hawk sat, ripping the feathers and flesh from the head and neck first, (hawks always eat the head and neck meat first), as the entire flock of hens watched nervously from a distance. But the nervousness didn't prevail, not like you or I would think. Instead, the hens gradually released their fear and ventured out cautiously close to the hawk, still feeding on their flockmate. Now the behavior I began to notice was similar to the "you've got something and I want it too" that is innate in chickens. Because the hawk was feeding, it was content with the kill that it had. The hens not only demonstrated less fear of the hawk, they now wanted the hawk to share. A bit later, after the hawk was gone, the balance of the carcass was fought over by the hens - each ripping off a piece of flesh and running with the prize as a line of others chased in close pursuit.

Similar behavior is observed on chicken process days. As I reach for the next victim, for a brief moment, the flock panics. However, as long as the predator, (me) is not directly threatening them, they go about their business of pecking the ground or drinking, - this within direct sight of the previous victim. Inevitably, a few chickens sneak out of the shelters and begin wandering around the yard. It is not uncommon for them to sneak a snoot of blood or other scraps from the work area. Without burdening you with further examples, I will say that, after many years of reflecting on their behavior, I am confident that they know nothing of their fate and have no comprehension whatsoever of death. Their behavior demonstrates that they will instinctively respond in fear as a survival mechanism without actually knowing what it means to "survive". Certainly, their fear is turned on and off by the behavior of their flockmates. If the animals did not vocalize or otherwise transmit fear, there would therefore be no contagion of fear. As in the case involving the hawk, as soon as the victim was no longer capable of vocalizing and transmitting distress signals, the remaining chicken's fear was eliminated - even in the direct presence of the predator.

Cattle & Hogs Sometimes, for our own consumption only, we'll hire a mobile slaughter facility to butcher a beeve or hog here at the farm. (In spite of the fact that this is by far the best for the animal, the farmer, the customer and the butcher, it is illegal to sell the meat from beeves or hogs killed on the farm - but that's a topic for another time). In each case of the many I have witnessed, the following animal behavior is observed: First of all, it should be known that the animal is killed in it's pasture, amongst it's herdmates. One second, the animal is grazing contently, the next second it is dead before it hits the ground - this by way of a carefully placed .22 caliber bullet slightly above and between the eyes. In the case of a beeve, the only sound after the report of the bullet is a rapid exhalation that sounds like "umphh" followed by instant collapse. Death occurred painlessly between these two reports. Hogs make no sound or exhalation, they just drop. The butcher then bleeds the animal - this in and amongst the herdmates that these animals had been living with for months, if not years. Some cattle will come over and smell the victim, then casually walk away to graze. Others appear indifferent and simply continue grazing. Hogs will also smell the victim. Because we quickly remove the animal from the paddock, I won't say I've witnessed it, but I'm certain hogs would eventually begin feeding on their former herdmate.

Slaughter facilities are certainly different from slaughter on the farm. The animal is out of it's element. It has been loaded on a trailer, bounced around on the highway and unloaded into an unfamiliar, often noisy area that virtually overwhelms it's hyperactive senses. While it would certainly escape if it saw the means, it's reason for escaping is fear itself, not death. If these animals understood the concept of death, their behavior during the on-the-farm slaughter events would reflect this, as they had ample room to greatly distance themselves from death yet they chose to do nothing.

I have witnessed many other incidents that draw the same conclusion: Farm animals have no concept of death. Their behavior at abattoirs is a result of being deprived of their comfort zone as well as being deprived of routine, natural actions.