

ESSAYS

Becoming With, in Life and Death

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Figure 1: Laika and I  
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# Becoming With, in Life and Death

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*Based on a life-long relationship between trust and domination of human and horse, this essay is a personal reflection on how perceptions and relationships shape the way we (as humans and other-than-humans in shared relationships) deal with implemented mercy deaths. What can we learn from each other when it comes to the decision of putting our companions down? This contribution explores, on one hand, the relation between domination and compassion as a way of dealing with an animal's life and death. On the other hand it investigates trust and correspondence beyond borders of human exceptionalism as a different, more open way of becoming with each other, focussing on the transformative potential of co-responding relationships.*

It was a rainy day in autumn 2014, when my father called, telling me that my sister Laika was diagnosed with a tumour in her left jaw. Living in Scotland, I booked the next available flight to Germany, feeling sick of life and afraid of death. Arriving at home, there was not much to do. The tumour grew within days and the only thing left was to say goodbye. When the specialists arrived with the syringe to put her down, it felt as if a part of me died with her.

A lifelong bond entangled Laika with her family, but especially her sister Larissa. They met when they were young and always stayed together. They slept next to each other, shared their food, supported each other and were afraid without each other. It seemed always clear: as they lived, they would die. Both would leave this world together one day. The day the decision was made to put Laika to sleep, Larissa proved me wrong, raising questions that inform this essay.

Most people would consider Laika and Larissa as quite ordinary horses. Their bodily features reveal them as animals, with a tail, a mane, four hooves on the ground and three different gaits. They carry us around, eat hay and grass and don't speak. For me, they were different. They were my siblings, trusted friends who influenced my becoming in this world. When I had to put Laika down, it struck me how we humans, who often consider ourselves as friends or companions, family members, or even teachers or pupils of non-human animals (Sanders 1995, Despret 2004, Birke 2007, Maurstad et al 2013), also consider ourselves as able to decide about life and death of these fellow beings. Informed by the life and death of Laika and Larissa, and supported by literature from the field of social anthropology and human animal studies, this essay is a personal reflection on how perceptions and relationships shape the way we (as humans and non-humans in shared relationships) deal with implemented mercy deaths. I will investigate this topic in respect to what Despret, in her study about everyday practices of cattle and pig breeders, calls the "difference which matters" (2008: 133). In the first part, I will examine human approaches which render "modes of subjectivity" (ibid) impossible, exploring domination and compassion as ways of dealing with an animal's life and death. Does an act of mercy killing, based on a compassionate decision, arise from a bond based on mutual understanding? What does this indicate about relationships between us humans and our non-human companions? Guided by Larissa, the second part will consider relationships "where humans and animals talk to each other, make each other propositions, get on and present modes of subjectivity to each other" (ibid), concentrating on the transformative potential of co-responding relationships between humans and non-humans, inquiring trust and mutual understanding as an alternative way of becoming together.

## **Domination and Compassion**

The term *euthanasia* originates from Greek, meaning 'good death' (*eu* – 'good/well' + *thanatos* – 'death', Online Etymology Dictionary 2001 - 2014). According to Mosterín (2006) and others (Pool and Geissler 2005, Richards 2012), setting a date for a 'good death' derives from a desire to control the departure from this word as painless and calmly as possible. Although humans are seen as having, in contrast to other species, the ability not only to reflect upon their lives and decisions but also actively decide for their lives to end, it paradoxically seems to be less controversial to control an animal's death than to plan one's own passing away (McMahan 2002, Sanders 1995, Warren 1997).

As mentioned above, Laika and Larissa were inseparable. If I would go on a walk or ride with only one of them I never got far. Laika or Larissa would only walk a few meters and then just stop. There is no way you can move a 400 kg horse unless it wants to move (or you belong to the riders who use whips). Thus, from being two years old, both were together day and night, creating in our minds the idea that if one horse would die the other would somehow follow soon. Consequently, when Laika was diagnosed with her tumour,





Figure 2: Laika and Larissa, inseparably



Figure 3: Becoming with. Larissa and I

no one questioned putting Larissa down, especially as she had arthritis (a joint disease) for years. What if her illness would get worse? What if the grief about the death of her sister would break her and we would have to put her down shortly thereafter? Regarding the fact that horses are herd animals and should never live alone, would it not be an act of compassion to save her from living a life full of pain, even worse without her sister? Our compassionate conclusion was driven by the fear of the consequences and the unexpected, but it was agreed: as in life so in death! Both horses would be put down together. Although our decision was not an easy one, it was certainly something my family could live with. For most of us it felt sad, but all right. That is the way life goes, is it not? At some point you just have to put most animals down and after all, the reasoning goes, it is luckily not your 'real' sister. In trying to understand this relative lack of discomfort surrounding the death of animals in contemporary western society (Sanders 1995), and to comprehend, in this context, my family's straight-forward decision, I consulted the Bible, as a well-pronounced account of our society's still pervasive Judeo-Christian roots. In the Genesis, God creates mankind in his likeness "so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (Holy Bible, Genesis 1:26). As Martin (1992), in his comprehensive discussion of Genesis 1:26 analyses, humans seem to be defined superior, created in God's image. We alone are seen to possess a soul, made to rule over all other creatures, belonging to the realm of culture. Animals, Martin further reflects, seem to be mainly created for humans' use and enjoyment. They have not been built in God's likeness, lack soul, and belong to the realm of nature (Ingold 2000). Due to their "limited cognitive and emotional capacities" animals seem to be "not responsible agents", incapable of deep relations and unable to engage in "complex and skilled activities" (McMahan 2002: 8). These themes were all reflected in my family's lived experience when deciding for Larissa to die: We took the decision in our hands as a matter of course. Larissa, on her part, did not seem to comprehend the complex intellectual decision-making process we were engaged in for days. And how could she? She was, after all, just an animal. This deep dichotomy between humans as superior, controlling, and responsible and the inferior, controlled animal relegated Larissa to the category of property: she was, after all, in our possession and as 'caring' humans it was our right and responsibility to make a final decision. Just as Ducos (in Ingold 2000: 64) states, "Human beings, as social persons, can own; animals, as natural objects, are only ownable". The decision we took, and how we took it, revealed the unquestioned ambivalence that characterised our relationships with Larissa and Laika. I was only ten years old when I first saw them, and felt immediately a strong love and affection for 'my' horses. The thought of them dying one day worried me my whole life. But why, then, did I still use the whip if I wanted them to 'learn' something they would not do right in a particular moment? Why did I still force them to work even if they wanted to stay in their field? And why did I still try to persuade them to jump over obstacles if they did not want to? Surprisingly, they still called me when I walked by their field. They rubbed their heads gently on my arm or shoulder when I stopped by and welcomed me after a period away from them. This highly ambiguous relationship, what in previous literature has been theorised as that of *trust and domination* (Ingold 2000), was reflected in the decision about Larissa's death: Deciding *for* her to die made us treat her as a non-person, almost as an object, as a being without a separate will or intentionality for us to take into account. Feeling the responsibility for our protégé, we decided *for* her death in order to save her from pain, perceiving the decision as compassionate act of 'mercy killing'.

How does deciding *for* a non-human animal on the basis of compassion compare and relate to the notion of domination seen above? In order to more fully understand the contemporary use of the word compassion, I consulted the Oxford Dictionary (2014). Compassion is here translated as "sympathetic pity and concern *for* [emphasis added] the sufferings or misfortunes of others" and one example cites that "the victims should be treated with compassion". This definition, in combination with the example, seems to function well in a hierarchical order between a merciful master and his subordinate. Our decision about Larissa's death was a compassionate, sympathetic one. Taken by us, her 'masters', *for* her, the animal. Deciding *for* someone else, then, no matter whether with compassion or cruelty, implies a control over the other, who is not able or allowed to decide or participate in a decision. The concept of compassion *for* someone, thus, seems to correspond with the treatment of animals as non-persons, or objects, in a relationship of dependency. If we take a closer look at the etymological roots of sympathy and compassion however, a different picture opens up: both expressions speak about an affinity, a *shared* feeling between certain parties. Originating from the Latin word *compati*, compassion means to suffer *with* (Online Etymology Dictionary 2001 - 2014) – *sharing* the suffering of someone else, building a bridge between different levels. Sympathy, likewise, stems from feeling *together* (*syn* – 'together' + *pathos* – 'feeling', Online Etymology Dictionary 2001 - 2015). Thus, if a master *shares* something *with* his subordinate, a relationship is more likely to meet at eye level and mutuality is possible. Compassionately *sharing* life and death *with* the non-humans we live with seems, then, rooted in a different way of being together which I will further examine below.



## Trust and Correspondence

While discussing the issue of Larissa's life and death with my family, sitting inside the house with a coffee, I *thought* about all these questions. I could understand the arguments put forward and agreed to put both horses down together. However, when spending time with Laika and Larissa, or even when I was alone at night, something kept me alert or awake. I therefore decided to spend more time with the horses, to understand where my conflicting feelings originate. Slowly, over the following days, our relationship deepened. And it did not only change Larissa, or me, but my entire family and our decision.

But let's go back and try to understand what happened: When I decided to involve myself not only in a decision making process around the coffee table, but to spend more and more time with the horses, I suddenly experienced what Tim Ingold (2000: 69) calls a "[...] deep, personal and affectionate involvement... [an] involvement not just of mind or body but of one's entire, undivided being". Boundaries, which made Larissa, in our eyes, 'animal' and us 'human', started to blur step-by-step as I got to know her better. Yes, she was limping, but I noticed that her eyes were clear and full of life, her posture was energetic, and her movements showed her highest spirit in years. Every part of her body told me how she relished the warm sun on her coat, how flexibly the soil supported her painful hooves and how much she enjoyed the grass she wallowed in. Her strong movements, her liveliness, her good appetite, and her contentment told me, undoubtedly, that she wanted to live. The undivided presence and 'availability' of both, Larissa and me, created openness within the other, produced a body and mind open to become with the other, allowing a particular, personal communication of body-, sign-, and spoken language to unfold between us. Just as Despret (2004) in her work about 'Anthropo-zoo-genesis' found out: if human and horse start to attentively focus on each other, to get involved with each other, their bodies become more sensitive, start to speak to each other and embody each other's minds. When I felt how far I could enter Larissa's world through openness and attentiveness, through letting her be my teacher, I understood that she could teach me as much about death as she did about life. I was not only myself, alone with a frightening decision anymore, I was a 'becoming Larissa-Hannah', not only thinking about her life, but suddenly experiencing life *with* her. And as I understood in that moment, she, too, was not Larissa anymore, but 'becoming Hannah-Larissa'. We both shared our lives, opened up for each other and started to trust in our relationship. We were not merely agents of different species anymore, but beings *becoming with* the other. And as Donna Haraway states so strikingly, only if we enter into relationships based on mutuality and correspondence between *persons* who *transform* each other, are we able to "*become* when species meet" (2008: 5, emphasis added). Our involvement, our being-with-each-other, told us to trust each other. I 'made' a Larissa which wanted to be with me and vice versa. This process of 'making-each-other-up' through close and attentive interactions changed our entire (body-) language. Along with her showing me how much she enjoyed being alive, my body language became more self-confident. I was more and more able to express the changing relationship between Larissa and me and to tell my family what I experienced. Instead of seeking to convince my fellow humans, based upon my own engagement with Larissa, I asked them to *get involved* on their own. Not being familiar with this degree of trust and openness towards a non-human animal, my family was initially sceptical. But as they sensed how much this deep involvement had changed my appearance, body language and conviction, my father soon began to take time with Larissa too, and eventually got his answers concerning her life or death *from herself*. Not having to carry the weight of this decision alone anymore, I saw that everyone's closeness with Larissa now put her in the centre of focus and discussion. No one was discussing *for* or *against* her life anymore. Everyone became aware of her particular way of being in the world, and her personal way of joining the discussion related to her future. "Relationships based on *trust*", as Ingold (2000: 70) states, build the contrast to "those based on *domination*". Trusting Larissa as responsible agent allowed us to recognize her personal autonomy, understanding the redundancy of control (Ingold 2000). The deep, affectionate, growing relationship with her took the weight off everyone's shoulders, as she joined the discussion and taught us in these days that a decision for or against euthanasia is not a decision to be carried by the 'animals owner' alone, but that it could, and perhaps should, evolve from an open and attentive communicative engagement with each other.

Trusting our joint *becoming with*, we finally decided not to put Larissa down but to let life unfold. The first weeks after her sister's death were tough but soon after we found a new companion for her. She is now walking more than she did during the last couple of years. She is full of life and energy and shows us every day that our joint decision was the right one.

Our experiences seemed to resonate, in many ways, with Ingold's notion of the meshwork and the entanglement of humans, animals and environment, where "[...] the organism (animal or human) should be understood not as a bounded entity surrounded by an environment but as an unbounded entanglement of lines in fluid space" (2011: 64). Spending time and attentive engagement with Larissa enabled us to understand life in a different way. It emphasised what we shared as living beings, as opposed to what separated us. Our

shared process showed us that beings, as entangled lines of interaction, and their relationships in life and death, evoke living knots of mutual understanding. It reflected how shared, open decisions about life and death beyond the limits of human exceptionalism, that posit strict boundaries between ‘humans’ or ‘animals’, can potentially allow fearless, creative decisions to reveal themselves.

### **Concluding Reflections**

Initially, neither my family nor I were able to perceive Larissa as anything other than an animal, hence it was our task to care, to decide what was best for her. As her human ‘masters’ and owners we felt the heavy weight of responsibility on our shoulders when it came to her death. Driven by fear of an uncertain future, we decided to take it in our hands and *compassionately* decide *for* the animal to die. As explored above, the predicament that we found ourselves in, and our reactions to it, echoes a wider discourse of human-animal relationships related to human mastery and control. Counteracting this notion, and our initial decision, the final result, I argue, was a shared decisions based upon growing relationships of trust. The new level of trust connecting Larissa with myself and the rest of my family based itself not upon a hierarchy of difference, but instead emphasised what was *shared* through an experientially grounded *compassionate* engagement *with* each other.

Through closely interacting with Larissa at this crucial moment in both of our lives, and the ensuing process of open, reflective thought and decision-making, I came to realise the potential of the animal’s ability to be part of defining its own time for departure (through euthanasia or ‘on time’). Putting *beings* in the centre, both humans and non-humans, and learning from their sensations towards life opens the way for *becoming with*, experiencing that we are “constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh” (Haraway, 2008: 16).

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